

Caste and the quest for racial hierarchy in British Burma:  
An analysis of census classifications from 1872-1931

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**Abstract**

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Ethnically-defined conflicts are major concerns in Burma/Myanmar today, particularly as the country navigates the political, economic, and social changes necessary for successful democratic consolidation. ‘Race’ labels and their perceived inherent status used by groups today to justify, legitimate, or demand rights are products of colonial administration; however, race or ethnicity (*lu-myo* in Burmese) remains an ambiguous and fluid identity. How then have race labels been defined and measured and structured into a racial hierarchy during colonial rule? This thesis, through a textual analysis of the definitions and applications of the terms “caste” and “race” in the Census of India from 1872-1931, government documents, and British scholarly publications of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, identifies the emergence of racial hierarchy in British Burma, a province of British India, as an alternative to the caste structure of India and as an attempt to conform local criteria for measuring social and cultural difference, notably language and religion, to British racial theories of inherent and unequal human characteristics.

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## Introduction

It is commonly accepted in the social sciences that concepts of “ethnicity,” “race,” and “nationality” are socially constructed. Social formation occurs through “dynamic processes between actions and reactions across time and space.”<sup>1</sup> Despite acceptance among social scientists, these socially constructed categories are still widely used by governing bodies as exclusive descriptive characteristics to classify populations and “race,” in particular, is often still equated with descent and biological characteristics. Currently in Burma/Myanmar,<sup>2</sup> groups use *lu-myo*<sup>3</sup> (often translated into English as either race or ethnicity<sup>4</sup>) and relevant population sizes to justify, legitimate, or demand political, economic, and territorial rights. Such labels determine political eligibility in the state<sup>5</sup> and are used to consciously or subconsciously justify or deny inclusion and social privilege.<sup>6</sup> The labeling and ranking of different social groups certainly existed in Burma prior to colonial rule; however, these pre-colonial categories were often badges

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Glaeser, “An Ontology for the Ethnographic Analysis of Social Processes: Extending the Extended-Case Method,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 49, no. 3 (2005): 16.

<sup>2</sup> “Myanmar” is currently considered to be the more appropriate name for the country; however, this is still disputed. In this paper, I use Burma, the colonial name, as this paper addresses the period of colonial governance.

<sup>3</sup> The literal English translation is “kind of person.”

<sup>4</sup> The definitions for and differences between the labels “race” and “ethnicity” are often disputed and ambiguous. Race today, however, is often thought of as a label for a socially defined group “on the basis of physical criteria” and ethnicity as a socially defined group “on the basis of cultural criteria.” (Van den Berghe, *Race and Racism* 9-10). As Hirschman argues, ethnicity would today be a more preferable term than race to describe differences in human communities as it “emphasizes ambiguity rather than either/or distinctions” (Hirschman, “The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race,” 410). However, race, particularly during the colonial period, was often used to try and refer to different species or sub-species of humans (Van den Berghe, *Race and Racism*, 9). In this paper, I use “race” for two reasons: 1) for clarity and consistency as this was the term used by the British in British India, and 2) because a crucial component of this paper deals with how the British attempted to employ their understanding and use of race to differentiate biologically different human species to the cultural and social differences between groups within the local populations in their colonies. The use of terminology in this paper is not a political statement.

<sup>5</sup> See: Nick Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–483.

<sup>6</sup> See: Matthew J. Walton, “The ‘Wages of Burman-Ness:’ Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1–27.

of political loyalty<sup>7</sup> and were “labile, porous, and largely artificial.”<sup>8</sup> Studies from historians and anthropologists studying Burma describe how ethnic identity, particularly in the pre-colonial period, was fluid, defined as an identity of strategic choice by individuals or a social organization relative to communities of varying political organization.<sup>9</sup> The construction and communication of race groups as fixed boundaries of intrinsic characteristics is a direct product of colonial administration. As James Scott and Benedict Anderson argue, this was an effort of high modernism to “make society legible”<sup>10</sup> and “create a human landscape of perfect visibility.”<sup>11</sup> Overtime, the categories created and taxonomically ordered by the colonial regime gained political, economic, and social salience and stability<sup>12</sup> and were used by the local populations for political legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> They became the most dominating feature and marker of the population of the modern nation.

These colonial procedures of labeling, defining, measuring, and ranking *race* in Burma cultivated a landscape of contested and overlapping narratives of ethnically-defined rights and racism<sup>14</sup> that emerged in Burma in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To understand how race came to be defined and measured during colonial administration and how such categories were structured into racial hierarchies, colonial censuses provide an ideal window of opportunity through which to observe

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<sup>7</sup> Victor B. Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 458.

<sup>8</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale Agrarian Studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 253.

<sup>9</sup> See: Edmund Ronald Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma; a Study of Kachin Social Structure*. (London, GBell, 1954); Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” 457.

<sup>10</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale ISPS Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 185.

<sup>12</sup> See: Walton, “The ‘Wages of Burman-Ness:’ Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar.”

<sup>13</sup> See: Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, First edition., British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monograph (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2013)

<sup>14</sup> Hirschman defines racism as the “structure of belief that the “other community” is inherently inferior and lacks the capacity to create a society comparable to one’s own” (Hirschman, “The Origins and the Demise of the Concept of Race,” 389).

and analyze these processes and change overtime. This case study of the evolution of colonial census classifications in Burma from 1872 to 1931 contributes to a sociological school of thought that identifies how power relationships create and influence the social categories that constitute present-day human relations. A case study of British Burma is important for two reasons: 1) such a study about Burma has yet to be conducted, even though these labels dominate social relations and development in the modern nation, and 2) Burma's unique colonial position as a province of British India and position between two emerging regions – South and Southeast Asia – reveals the frustrations of categorizing people into a single all-encompassing inherent label understood by both the colonizer and colonized. These complexities became clear as the British determined there was no Burmese local counterpart to caste, but Burma remained part of British India, and that their notion of race did not adequately map onto the social and cultural differences that divided *lu-myo* groups.

Given Burma's unique colonial connection to British India and position at the crossroads of two regions, how have social and cultural differences (represented by race labels) been defined and measured during colonial censuses in Burma? How do the meanings of these categories and attempts to measure race reflect the emerging ideologies of racial hierarchy in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? Through a textual analysis of the definitions and use of census classifications (caste, race, tribe, and nationality) in the relevant reports and tables of the Census of India from 1872-1931, this paper identifies the origins of the race labels in Burma as an alternative to caste – a concept that implied inherent levels of civilization used in India and understood by the British– and argues that religion and language were the dominant social and cultural characteristics used to measure and rank peoples classified by *race* in British Burma. I begin with a discussion of the major theoretical contributions on racial ideology from the 18<sup>th</sup> to

20<sup>th</sup> century and influential literature on power relationships and census classifications, followed by a summary of census taking and population classification in British India. I then provide an overview of my data and methods and indicate how the evidence shows that “race” labels emerged as an alternative to caste and were influenced by linguistic and religious distinctions. I conclude the discussion of my results with a comparison of my empirical findings to the theories of scientific racism emerging in Europe from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to emphasize why the British were concerned with race as a measurement of social order but also to argue how these theories influenced a *meaning* of race that inadequately mapped onto the social and cultural factors contributing to racial *measurements* in Burma.

This study does not intend to defend these ethno-racial labels or perpetuate their use as fixed categories; it simply seeks to explore the conditions under which this human taxonomy originated. In understanding how colonial rule attempted to fix and rank categories onto fluid identities, we can better understand the emergence of modern racism and how these categories of race “create or reproduce structures of domination.”<sup>15</sup> The scope of this study is also limited to the use of race by colonial officials in the Province of Burma and in the general volume for British India. It does not compare the application of race or caste in other provinces and states of the colonial empire or engage changes in popular perceptions of *lu-myo* by the Burmese. This analysis is not an exhaustive study of the origins of the race classification and racial hierarchy in Burma. Future studies will supplement these findings and continue to improve our understanding of racism and ethnic boundaries in Burma.

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant cited in George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

## Theory

### Colonial Administration and Changes in Racial Ideology from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The nineteenth-century racial theory that laid the foundations for modern racism emerged during a time when the Enlightenment opened new opportunities for scientific and secular studies of race and imperial conquest under Queen Victoria exposed the British to a variety of populations different in color, language, and customs.<sup>16</sup> At first, *race* was used to describe a variety of socially-defined communities. Social class was usually implied; however, differences were not biologically determined and “nurture” allowed for individuals to morph between different race groups.<sup>17</sup> Edward Beasley describes how early European notions of race differentiates communities or social orders of varying sizes and descriptions, including the race of London taxi drivers, the race of California professors, the race of chimney sweeps, and the race of trash gatherers.<sup>18</sup> The ideology that dominated the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, referred to as Social Darwinism, scientific racism, or biological determinism, however, institutionalized the belief that racial characteristics were inherent regardless of environmental or social changes.<sup>19</sup>

Environmentalist theories dominated 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century racial thought and provided earlier justifications for the superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks. Scientists argued that climate “promoted or retarded the process of civilization” and that variations in skin

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), x; George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race: New Racisms and the Problem of Grouping in the Human Sciences*, Routledge Studies in Modern British History; 4 (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–2, 19; Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, xvii.

<sup>18</sup> See: Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Franziska Augstein, *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850*, Key Issues (Bristol, England); No. 14 (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1996), x.

color corresponded to different levels of civilization.<sup>20</sup> This justified British theories of the inferiority of non-whites on the basis that these “primitive” and “tribal” groups were in earlier stages of development.<sup>21</sup> However, these variations in civilization were seen as “stages through which societies [could] pass; they were not perceived to be inherent.”<sup>22</sup> As Michael Adas argued, Europeans believed that their dominance was due to their technological advantage and advanced civilization, not genetic preference, and believed that people in the colonies were capable of learning and adopting “Western” technology.<sup>23</sup> Comte de Buffon, like many others, believed that “a savage transported to Europe and fed European food would become both civilized and white.”<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, environmentalism began to lose popularity.<sup>25</sup> As more dark-skinned populations relocated to European countries to work as servants and laborers and Europeans settled in the colonies, evidence indicated that whites continued to produce white offspring and dark-skinned populations continued to produce dark-skinned children, regardless of climate.<sup>26</sup> Monogenism began to give way to polygenism, the idea that there were multiple human origins.<sup>27</sup> This was a shift from the idea of man as an homogenous social being and races as adaptable and changeable products of climate and civilization towards a “belief in the unchangeability of racial ‘natures’” where race was perceived to be a stable entity that prevented civilization and intelligence.<sup>28</sup> Every human being was now presumed to have an undying type.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 79 & 114.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>23</sup> Fredrickson, *Racism*, 61; Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Cornell Studies in Comparative History (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 291.

<sup>24</sup> Augstein, *Race*, xv.

<sup>25</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 38; Augstein, *Race*, xix.

<sup>26</sup> Augstein, *Race*, xix.

<sup>27</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 3, 45; Augstein, *Race*, xiii–xiv; Fredrickson, *Racism*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 4, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xvii, 94.

According to Robert Knox in 1950, “race or hereditary descent [was] everything; it stamp[ed] the man.”<sup>30</sup>

The Enlightenment and the Age of Democratic Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, posed a problem to the idea of an inherent hierarchy of human races. These movements symbolized equality and opportunity for individual improvement.<sup>31</sup> This made exceptions to equality difficult to justify unless such groups “allegedly possess[ed] some extraordinary deficiency that ma[d]e them less than fully human.”<sup>32</sup> Through classifying humans as part of the animal kingdom as opposed to the kingdom of God, scientists could then argue that savages were barely more mentally or morally capable than animals. As opposed to being considered the same species as civilized men, they were classified as a species lesser than man but greater than animal.<sup>33</sup> This allowed Europeans to preserve their superiority and restrict the premise of equality from certain populations.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, anthropology occupied “itself with trying to define or uncover the original types” using skull and brain measurements to accompany the emerging theories of racial inequality.<sup>34</sup> Austrian Anatomist Johann Franz Gall had already argued in the late 1700s that the shape of one’s head indicated their mental ability, and American scientist and physician Samuel George Morton believed that intelligence could be measured by the size of the brain – based on craniological measurements – and that these measurements could establish a ranking of races.<sup>35</sup> These results, however, were not always satisfying and often “refused to clump into races.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4; Augstein, *Race*, xxx.

<sup>31</sup> Augstein, *Race*, xviii; Fredrickson, *Racism*, 11 & 64.

<sup>32</sup> Fredrickson, *Racism*, 11–12, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 45 & 54; Augstein, *Race*, xii; Fredrickson, *Racism*, 56–57.

<sup>34</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 21; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Rev. and expanded. (New York: Norton, 1996), 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 83; Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 21; Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 86.

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Often, the data were manipulated to defend preconceived notions of racial preference.<sup>37</sup> These anthropometric studies were primarily attempts to scientifically justify and therefore legitimate their assumed superiority as Europeans. As the British began to govern their colonies, they not only employed these racial theories to justify their superior position relative to natives, but used such theories to attempt to identify the racial hierarchy of the *indigenous* population.

### **Power, Hierarchy, and Census Classifications**

Census taking and national statistics gathering gained momentum in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a component of modernizing and constructing the sovereign state.<sup>38</sup> In the colonies, social statistics became a way of knowing the social body within a given sovereign territory and censuses were used to “divide national populations into separate identity categories.”<sup>39</sup> The goal was to reflect the social reality of the governing space; however, instead of reflecting a social reality, the census “played a key role in the construction of that reality.”<sup>40</sup> As a research tool, the census provides a window into past processes of labelling and measuring identity in former colonies.<sup>41</sup>

Most nations conduct population censuses and a high percentage classify populations by ethnic, racial, or national differences. In 2003, the United Nations Statistical Divisions found that 63% of 141 collected surveys classified populations by “ethnicity,” “race,” or “nationality.”<sup>42</sup> These categories often follow precedents set by early censuses, usually those of the 19<sup>th</sup> or early

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<sup>37</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 85–86; Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, xv.

<sup>38</sup> David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel, *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Census*, New Perspectives on Anthropological and Social Demography (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Charles Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 557.

<sup>42</sup> Ann Morning, “Ethnic Classification in Global Perspective: A Cross-National Survey of the 2000 Census Round,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 27, no. 2 (2008): 239.

20<sup>th</sup> century, which required officials to “formulate a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive ethnic categories to classify the population.”<sup>43</sup> In the colonies, this process of formulating and presenting categories was conducted by colonial ruling elite and reproduced their perception of racial difference.<sup>44</sup> These categories and their placement on the census often echoed perceptions of local hierarchies or power relations determined by those in charge. For elite, the census became the state instrument to reflect different political or economic subordination or superiority. This was the case in Hawaii as the territory shifted through various political regimes from a kingdom to a U.S. State and Colonial Malaya where categorization in the census reflected the status and power of different groups during political transitions to justify a superior political position.<sup>45</sup>

The meaning of race/ethnicity and the boundaries of these identities are often ambiguous, complex, and situational and colonial officials often admitted to problems in measuring race.<sup>46</sup> Although the definition of race remained uncertain, the term stuck and continued to be used to differentiate populations.<sup>47</sup> This was because “Asians tended to use criteria that differed from European perceptions” and colonial officials had no option but to attempt to define these categories in their own terms.<sup>48</sup> The colonial experience in India, however, was unique. The criteria for caste conformed to European perceptions of racial difference, rendering it easier for colonial officials to measure identities using local criteria. Unlike other colonies where pre-colonial population assessments were not concerned with “rank-ordering localized and

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<sup>43</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 559.

<sup>44</sup> Kertzer and Arel, *Census and Identity*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> William Petersen, “The Classification of Subnations in Hawaii: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *American Sociology Review* 34, no. 6 (December 1, 1969): 863–77; Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia.”

<sup>46</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 555; Kertzer and Arel, *Census and Identity*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 562.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 565; Kertzer and Arel, *Census and Identity*, 10.

overlapping identities,”<sup>49</sup> the caste system in India presented the British with a pre-existing system of rank-ordered classes. Although they could not identify such an existing structure in Burma, they attempted to shape local social and cultural divisions into rank-ordered *races*. The Burma case, however, reveals the complexity of defining race and how the creation of race categories was influenced by both European perceptions of racial difference and local perceptions of hereditary social boundaries in India.

## **Background**

### **A Short Overview of Census Taking and Efforts to Measure Population Characteristics in British India**

In British India, census enumeration began as early as the 1820s.<sup>50</sup> The census of 1872, however, was the first census to collect comparable population statistics in all states and provinces of British India.<sup>51</sup> In India, colonial officials were confounded by the absence of obvious phenotypical differences between groups. They described Indians as a “spectacle of dark-skinned people”<sup>52</sup> exhibiting an extremely small range of phenotypical variances.<sup>53</sup> The classification of groups could therefore not be determined by variances in physical appearance. Religion, however, appeared to be “a factor which cut across nearly all of human existence” and

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<sup>49</sup> Kertzer and Arel, *Census and Identity*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> These were largely individual reports and surveys conducted in specific provinces, states or presidencies. See: Inter Documentation Company, *The Census of India 1872-1951*. (Zug: Inter Documentation Company AG, 1975), 4.

<sup>51</sup> The 1872 census was based on uniform schedules but was, however, not a synchronous effort. See: *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> H.H. Risley and E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*, vol. I, I (Calcutta, India: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903).

the British were acutely aware of the difference between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>54</sup> Thus, religion became the fundamental scheme to differentiate the population for the census.<sup>55</sup>

Although it was clear that the inhabitants of British India could be “classed under [...] the two prevailing religions [Hinduism and Islam],”<sup>56</sup> the British wanted to understand the social boundaries that divided the populations within these religions. They became aware of caste boundaries, particularly the boundaries communicated by Brahmin elite.<sup>57</sup> It was clear to colonial officials that certain groups (Brahmin and Rajput) preserved their superior status through controlling access to knowledge and economic opportunity and restricting mobility through marriage and ceremonial rites.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, following religion as the fundamental classification scheme for the population of British India, caste was a primary element in the social fabric of India, Hindu society in particular, that permitted the British to relate to their colonial society and classify the majority of individuals into rank-ordered social categories.<sup>59</sup>

In earlier census reports, *race* was not limited to describing one specific set of categories with comparable components; it was used to compare the positions of broadly defined people – such as “European,” “Eurasian, and “Native” in categorizing the Christian population<sup>60</sup> – as well

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth W. Jones, “Religious Identity and the Indian Census,” in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 80–81.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Waterfield, *Memorandum on the Census of British India 1871-72* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1875), 19.

<sup>57</sup> J.A. Baines, *Census of India, 1891, General Report* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1893), 182 & 185.

<sup>58</sup> H.H. Risley, “The Study of Ethnology in India,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 20 (1891): 235–263.

<sup>59</sup> Castes were predominantly defined along occupational and marriage boundaries among Hindus; non-Hindu groups or populations defined by political or functional purpose, namely Muslims and animist or aboriginal groups, were classified as tribes; Waterfield, *Memorandum, 1871-72*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> A table for Christians divided by race and sect/denomination with these categories listed and ranked accordingly for the races appears in nearly every decennial census (Census of 1881, *Statistics of Population*, Vol. II, Statement IIIA; Report on the Census of British Burma, 1881, Final Form IIIA; Census of India, 1891, *General Tables*, Vol. I, Supplementary Table A; Government of India, *Census of 1891, Imperial Tables*, Vol. X *Burma Report*, Supplementary Table No. A.2.; Census of India, 1901, Vol I-A, Part II, Table XVII; Census of India, 1901, *Burma*, Vol. XIII Part II, Imperial Table XVII; Census of India, 1911, Vol. I Part II, Imperial Table XVII; Census of India, 1911, *Burma*, Vol IX Part II, Imperial Table XVII; Census of India, 1921, Vol. I Part II, Table XV; Census of India, 1921, *Burma*, Vol. X Part II, Imperial Table XV; Census of India, 1931, *Burma*, Vol. XI, Part II, Provincial Table IV)

as groups of various languages and civilizations down to the lowest social division recognized by the population.<sup>61</sup> The former use of race positioned Europeans as separate and superior to both the ‘mixed’ offspring of European and Asiatics (Eurasians) and the natives of their colony.<sup>62</sup> The latter use of race appeared to differentiate civilizations and communities in the Province of Burma in absence of caste, an endogamous social division inherited at birth with additional restrictions on mobility and opportunity. Edward Beasley argues that categories such as race emerged when colonial officials were unfamiliar with the customs and relative terms used by the population to describe positions of self and other<sup>63</sup> and C.A. Vlieland, author of the 1931 Census of British Malaya argued that race often became a term used to “cover a complex set of ideas” for “lack of a more appropriate term.”<sup>64</sup>

The caste structure in India provided an obvious means for classifying native society, particularly for the census; however, caste boundaries were not understood or used by the Burmese. Burmese society differed drastically from Indian society and the British could not identify a hereditary classification scheme that ranked groups by power and status. Instead, the British encountered a labyrinth of identities. Religion was problematic as Buddhism represented approximately 87% of the population according to statistical returns.<sup>65</sup> Buddhism represented the

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<sup>61</sup> J.J. Bennison, *Census of India, 1931, Burma Report*, vol. XI, I (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationary, 1933), para. 99, pp. 173–74.

<sup>62</sup> William Petersen (1969) in his study of Hawaiian *subnations* and Hirschman (1987) in his study of ethnicity in Malaya both exemplify the use of the census by state elites during political transitions to justify a superior political position. Petersen notes that the shifting political nature of Hawaii caused the “definition of Hawaiian subnations [to be] under continual review” respective to changes of those in power and Hawaii’s position to the U.S. mainland (p. 865). Hirschman highlights how the position of European races shifted from the top of the census list as a major subheading, despite small demographic size, to a list of individual European races under “Other” in the 1957 census, the first census of the independent government. These authors help to understand how European governing elite in British India positioned themselves respective to the native population and then used this position to identify and define further social stratification within native society.

<sup>63</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> C.A. Vlieland quoted in Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 564.

<sup>65</sup> The percentage of those returned as Buddhist varied between 85% and 90% of the provincial total between 1872 and 1921: 89% (1872, Table XVII), 87% (1881, Table VI), 90% (1891, Table VI), 89% (1901, Table VI), 86% (1911, Table VI), 85% (1921, Provincial Table II)

majority of the indigenous population and individuals pledging membership to a specific *lu-myo* community crossed and combined different religions. Buddhism was an important symbol of identity and status in pre-colonial Burma but Buddhists were “free from prejudices of caste”<sup>66</sup> and colonial officials were “not aware of any social [hereditary] distinctions among [them].”<sup>67</sup> Buddhism “created a new boundary between ‘civilized’ lowlanders and ‘savage’ highlanders” but Burman<sup>68</sup> elite did not enforce the same restrictions to economic opportunity, ceremonial rites, and marriage as the Brahmins through caste; assimilation into civilized society through religious conversion and changed agricultural practices in Burma was relatively easy and welcomed.<sup>69</sup> According to C.C. Lewis, “[...] the Burmese nature is so essentially democratic<sup>70</sup> and regardless of social distinctions, that the Indian caste system has never been able to gain a foothold here.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the British quickly realized that “caste [was] an exotic institution” and inapplicable in Burma.<sup>72</sup>

When inquiring among the local population for a term used to differentiate social communities, the British encountered the Burmese term *lu-myo* (kind of person). The British needed to understand *lu-myo* in their own terminology and comparative to social relations in

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<sup>66</sup> Charles James Forbes Smith Forbes, *British Burma and Its People: Being Sketches of Native Manners, Customs, and Religion*. (London: JMurray, 1878), 44; Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads*, Blackwell History of the World (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 35.

<sup>67</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report Appendix VI, I*: 314.; Buddhism was determined to be the main indigenous religion of the Province of Burma and was often used, particularly in earlier censuses, to refer to the Burmese (Bama/Burman).

<sup>68</sup> Burmans, or Bama, is the name used to refer to the major ethnic group in the country. In the colonial period, it was often used interchangeable with ‘Burmese.’ Today, however, Burmese would primarily be used to describe anyone considered a citizen of Burma/Myanmar and Burman/Bama would represent the specific majority ethnic group. I will use Burman in this paper as this was the name used by the British to refer to this specific group.

<sup>69</sup> Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 114.

<sup>70</sup> The use of the term “democratic” here likely refers to the principle of social equality, not the modern form of governance.

<sup>71</sup> C.C. Lewis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Report*, vol. XII, I (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 109.

<sup>72</sup> H.L. Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, vol. IX (Rangoon, Burma: Government Printing, 1892), 187.

India and Europe. Thus, the British translated *lu-myo* as *race* in English, intending it to mean “genus or species.”<sup>73</sup> This enabled them to define social communities in Burma through a familiar lens. The British, however, appeared rather perplexed by the apparent absence of rigid boundaries between social groups and the ease with which *lu-myo* identification “changed and transformed, separated and amalgamated, and members transfer[red] themselves from one to another with the greatest facility.” (1911, Burma, p. 250). Colonial officials argued “there [was] possible no country in the world whose inhabitants [were] more varied in race, custom, and language than those of Burma.”<sup>74</sup> According to officials, “race in Burma [was] not a fixed definite phenomenon capable of presentation in a set of tabular statements. It [was] vague and indeterminate, and in a stage of constant fluctuation.” (1911, Burma, p. 250) The social situation in Burma did not mirror caste where the Brahmins restricted social mobility between the upper and lower classes.

The British, however, were determined to decipher this labyrinth of identities. The colonial government wanted to “create [...] a human landscape of perfect visibility [where] everyone [...] had [...] a serial number.”<sup>75</sup> In India, they found boundaries of visibility: caste. Burma, however, was the outlier in the South Asian colony where the landscape remained uncultivated according to British standards. In erecting racial boundaries, the British navigated religious and linguistic differences, using these characteristics to label and measure groups in Burma. They labeled the exhaustive categories as *races*, which, like caste in India, were intended to indicate the origin of an individual - despite linguistic and religious differences or adaptation - and their position among a fixed social hierarchy.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., IX:193.

<sup>74</sup> H.T. Duncan, *Report on the Census of British Burma, Taken in August 1872* (Government Press, 1875), 26.

<sup>75</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 185.

The earlier censuses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflect the practices the British employed to create and define these categories. The censuses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasize the frustration the British experienced attempting to compress these social and cultural differences into exhaustive categories that reflected their notion of stable biological races. By 1921, “race” was “in the absence of any suitable term capable of exact definition [...] finally adopted as a general term to be defined by the units to which it ha[d] been applied”<sup>76</sup> and by 1931 was the official classification of the Province of Burma.<sup>77</sup> As will become evident through this study, the definitions for race, particularly the earlier definitions, indicate that the British intended and expected *race* to be a characteristic that measured and ranked differences in origin and blood lineage, but that *race* is clearly a characteristic measurable only by social and cultural differences. Ethnographic surveys and historical studies attempted to define race biologically in British Burma, influenced by the racial ideologies of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe; however, the British insistence on documenting and tabulating race in a population census necessitated racial divisions to be socially and culturally defined. The census clearly reflects the frustration and inability to box races into single all-encompassing entities and craft social groups into biologically unequal species.

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<sup>76</sup> L.H. Taylor, “Appendix B (Indigenous Languages and Races),” in *Census of India, 1921, Burma Report*, by S.G. Grantham, vol. X, I (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1923), 283.

<sup>77</sup> Recall that religion was the fundamental classification for all British India, which included Burma. For every census return, the population was classified and displayed under a religious group. For example, the returns for education or infirmities broke down population returns by religion. For some tables, further divisions were provided by further sub-divisions, such as caste or race. This meant that all exhaustive ethnic sub-divisions of populations (caste, race, etc.) had to be classified under a religious division. As will become clear in a later section of this paper, this was problematic in Burma as social divisions crossed religious boundaries. This contributed to the rise of race as the official fundamental classification.

## Research Methods

This study is a textual analysis of government reports, particularly the census tabulations by race, caste, tribe, nationality, religion, language, and other criteria of the population of British Burma from 1872 to 1931. For this period, Burma was a province in the British colony of India and thus the primary sources are the seven censuses of India in 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901 1911, 1921, and 1931. I examined the contents and arrangements of census tables with particular attention to titles and labels of population characteristics. I also examined the relevant chapters of both the general India volumes and the Province of Burma volumes in each census report to understand how colonial administrators defined ethnographic terminology in each census, used specific terminology to classify different populations, compared terminology, and altered definitions with each subsequent decennial census.

In addition to the census reports, I also examined other colonial documents, including the government report in 1926 that outlines the official discussion surrounding the preference for using race to measure popular difference for the census in British Burma. Other key references included 1) *A New English Dictionary*, the precursor to the Oxford English Dictionary published in nine volumes between 1888 and 1928, and 2) 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century journal articles from the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Ethnological Society of London, and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

In this study, I analyze how race and other related terms were used in the titles of the report chapters and statistical tables and compare these findings with the headings of question 8 – the question pertaining to an individual’s religious and ethnic affiliation – for each census enumeration schedule. I compare these definitions and applications with relevant definitions in *A New English Dictionary*, which allowed me to compare definitions used specifically in the

census to the official British definitions for these terms in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I analyze articles on race, caste, and social structures in India and Burma written by British intellectuals and colonial officials in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to compare how the British communicated these concepts to a larger European intellectual community. To support evidence from these primary sources, I engage arguments and comparative studies from several secondary sources on race/ethnic classification and census categorization, colonialism and caste in India, emerging racial theories in Europe from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the relevant historical and anthropological literature on ethnicity in Burma.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the relevant census questions and tabulation and Tables 3 and 4 summarize the provided definitions and descriptions for “race” and “caste” from each census from 1872 to 1931 to provide a summary of the core materials from each census report:

**Table 1: Questions for column 8 as they appear on the census schedule for 1872-1931**

Census year	Census Questionnaire	Questions:
1872	House Register	1. Religion 2. Caste or Class 3. Race or Nationality or Country of Birth
1881	Census Schedule	1. Religion 2. Caste, if Hindu, sect, if of other religion, language of birth and place of birth*
1891	Census Schedule	1. Main religion 2. Sect of Religion 3. Caste or race; Main caste & sub-division of caste or race
1901	Census Schedule	1. Religion 2. Caste of Hindus & Jains, Tribe, or race of others
1911	Census Schedule	1. Census Schedule Religion (and sect of Christians) 2. Caste of Hindu and Jains, tribe or race of those of other religions
1921	Census Schedule	1. Religion 2. Caste, Tribe or Race
1931	Census Schedule	1. Religion and Sect 2. Race, Tribe or Caste <sup>78</sup>

\* “language of birth and place of birth” do not appear in the table provided by Mukherjee but were added based a copy of the Census Schedule for 1881 provided in the Appendix of the 1881 Census.

<sup>78</sup> In 1931, however, colonial officials approved a separate classification scheme for Burma and only one question was asked in the census schedule for column 8: Race.

**Table 2: Compilation of the chapter and table titles for ethnographic representation in both the Burma provincial volume and general India volume in each census (1872-1931)**

1872	India	Chapter title	Nationality, Language, and Caste
		Table Title	(several): Table 23: Population of British India, classified according to Caste and Nationality; Table 24-26: Asiatic Non-Indian Population, Mixed Races of British India, Non-Asiatic Population of British India, classified according to Nationality
	Burma	Chapter title	Ch XI: Nationalities and Races of the People
		Table Title	General Statement V.B: Statement of Nationalities, Races, Tribes, and Castes
1881	India	Chapter title	Ch XII: Caste Statistics
		Table Title	Statement XVII – Abstract Hindu population according to caste
	Burma	Chapter title	None specifically but there are two relevant chapters: CH XI: The Mixed Races Chapter X: Languages of the People (the last sub-header is “the number belonging to the different races”)
		Table Title	None specifically; distribution for all shown by religion
1891	India	Chapter title	Chapter V: Ethnographic Distribution of the Population (Section C: Caste, Tribe or Race)
		Table Title	Table CVII – Caste, Race, etc.
	Burma	Chapter title	CH X: Caste or Race
		Table Title	Imperial Table No. XVI: Castes, Tribes, Races by Nationality or Traditional Occupation
1901	India	Chapter title	Ch XI: Caste, Tribe and Race
		Table Title	Table XIII – Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality
	Burma	Chapter title	Ch VIII: Caste, Tribe, and Race
		Table Title	Imperial Table XIII – Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality
1911	India	Chapter title	Ch XI: Caste, Tribe and Race
		Table Title	Imperial Table XIII – Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality
	Burma	Chapter title	Ch XI: Caste, Tribe and Race
		Table Title	Imperial Table XIII – Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality
1921	India	Chapter title	Ch XI: Caste, Tribe, Race and Nationality
		Table Title	Table XIII – Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality
	Burma	Chapter title	Ch XI: Race and Caste
		Table Title	Imperial Table XIII: Race
1931	India	Chapter title	Ch XII: Caste, Tribe and Race
		Table Title	Table XVII – Race, Caste, or Tribe
	Burma	Chapter title	Ch XII: Race
		Table Title	Imperial Table XVII – Race

\* The table separates the titles by year, respective section, or volume,<sup>79</sup> and if the title is the title for a report chapter or statistical table.

<sup>79</sup> Beginning in 1881, the Census of India was divided into different volumes for each province or state. Volume I, however, was always a general report for ‘India,’ implying the British colony as a whole; Inter Documentation Company, *The Census of India 1872-1951.*, 7.

**Table 3: Definitions and descriptions of "race" in the census reports from 1872-1931**

1872	India	Not defined; used in reference to <i>races and tribes</i> of Burma
	Burma	Not defined; described as common stock, origin, class, conquering ability, and blood lineage (p. 26-28) and as the cultivating valley civilization comparative to hill tribes (p. 26)
1881	India	Not defined; "aboriginal races" mentioned with regard to caste groups
	Burma	Not defined because not enumerated; described with regards to the purity of English blood (Ch. VI, p. 40), a Mongolian type (Ch. X, p. 64 & 67), Eastern race (Ch. VI, p. 40), indigenous races, Indian races, and European races (Ch. XI, p. 71); measurable by the same characteristics as nationality (mother-tongue and birthplace) (Ch. X, p. 64)
1891	India	Not defined; described historically as an alternative interpretation to caste or order (Ch. V, p. 127), and referring to the Aryas (particularly their purity of blood), Mongols, foreign races, and dark races (p. 122-124)
	Burma	"The terms "Race" and "Nationality" are used in the sense of genus and species" and are grouped by ethnic affinities (Ch. X, p. 188)
1901	India	Race "rests on foundation of fact scientific methods can confirm" (Ch. XI, p. 489) and refers to the primary divisions, or "types," of mankind (p. 497, 514).
	Burma	Race is defined as "Amyo" in Burmese (Ch. VIII, p. 107) and refers to origin and diffusion of civilization (p. 112), stock (Mongolian specifically) (p. 114), and the European races, for example the English race (p. 132)
1911	India	Not defined; describes the Aryan blood and ancestry that influences rank (Ch. XI, p. 380) and also the Mongolian race, measured by birthmarks (p. 384)
	Burma	Defined as civilized (Ch. XI, p. 250) and dependent on historical, linguistic, and geographic considerations (p. 250); measured by birthmarks in the Mongolian race, and referred to as the ethnical classification in Burma that, along with tribe, takes the place of caste (p. 241)
1921	India	Race (in the anthropological sense) is "a main division of mankind the numbers of which have important physical characters in common and is usually applied to stocks of considerable antiquity" and corresponds to differences in cultural or economic progress (Ch. XI, p. 221)
	Burma	1) "For the purposes of the census [race] is narrowed down to a consideration of the extent to which tribal or local subdivisions of groups of kindred people are to be separately tabulated" (Ch. XI, p. 206); 2) "race in the census tables is not a purely biological matter; it is rather a matter of culture, in determining which descent is generally the most powerful but is not the sole factor" (p. 208); 3) "the races corresponding to each indigenous language group" (Appendix B, p. 282); 4) "in the anthropological sense "race" denotes "a main division of mankind, the members of which have important physical characters in common" and are of respectable antiquity" (p. 283); 5) "in the absence of any suitable term capable of exact definition, the word "race" was finally adopted as a general term to be defined by the units to which it has been applied" (p. 283); 6) "a group of a simple kind who at one time occupied a circumscribed area and had a common language, common government and a common action in warfare" (p. 283) 7) "a conglomerate composed by the fusion of such groups" (p. 283) 8) "the elements into which such a group has disintegrated" (p. 283)
1931	India	"[Race] was likewise determinate enough, and no attempt was made to define the term 'race,' which is generally used so loosely as almost to defy definition...in the census schedule its very looseness enabled it to cover returns which, though not strictly referable all to the same category, were quite adequate for the purpose intended" (Ch. XII, p. 425); if a definition is required: "a group of human beings, whose type has become unified by their rate of assimilation's exceeding the rate of change produced by foreign elements." (p. 425)
	Burma	Race is based on the same classification scheme as language (Ch. XII, p. 223)

**Table 4: Definitions and descriptions for "caste" in the census reports from 1872-1931**

1872	India	Caste is arranged by class and theoretical occupation (p. 28)
	Burma	N/A
1881	India	Not defined; described as classifications of social position (Ch. XII, p. 277), class, hereditary occupations (p. 322), origin or stock (p. 287), restrictions on education (p. 322)
	Burma	N/A
1891	India	Caste is “the perpetuation of status or function, by inheritance and endogamy” (Ch. V, p. 182); it is the badge of Hinduism that “evolved from race and function” (p. 185)
	Burma	“Castes are treated on an equality with nationalities” in Table XVI, but “such an arrangement is not suitable in Burma” (Ch. X, p. 187); caste is “exotic” to Burma (p. 187)
1901	India	Caste is “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with a specific occupation; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional calling, and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community” (Ch. XI, p. 517); caste “implies purity of blood” (p. 517) and is “rigorously hereditary” (p. 557)
	Burma	The Burman has no ‘caste’ vernacular in his own language (Ch. VIII, p. 107); reference to Indian castes (p. 109)
1911	India	Caste is “an endogamous groups or collection of such groups bearing a common name and having the same traditional occupation, who are so linked together by these and other ties, such as the tradition of a common origin and the possession of the same tutelary deity, and the same social status, ceremonial observances and family priests, that they regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as forming a single homogenous community (Ch. XI, p. 367)
	Burma	Caste is unimportant in Burma but defined [for India], compared to race, as “a grouping of communities which can be tested by actual existing facts and beliefs” (Ch. XI, p. 250) that is endogamous, bears a common name that usually denotes an occupation, and claims common descent from a mythical ancestor (p. 241)
1921	India	Caste “refers to the racial, tribal, or social groups, and is always understood by the individual” (Ch. XI, p. 221); caste is hereditary and determines an individual’s place in the social structure and religious, social, economic, and domestic life (p. 221-222)
	Burma	N/A
1931	India	“The term ‘caste’ needs no definition in India” (Ch. XII, p. 425)
	Burma	N/A

## Discussion of Results

### How has social and cultural difference (*race*) been defined and measured in colonial censuses in Burma?

#### Caste is a master concept for India, but not Burma

Caste is the fundamental form of social organization in India.<sup>80</sup> The caste structure rigidified during the last decades of the East India Company<sup>81</sup> and these rigid boundaries were intended to preserve the *purity* of the upper ranks, largely Brahmins and Rajputs. As observed by the British through encounters with Brahmin elite, the caste structure in India represented a higher level of civilization among “darker-skinned peoples” that colonial officials thought only akin to light-skinned Europeans.<sup>82</sup> The British observed caste as “a hereditary class [of] inherent exclusive privileges” among Hindus<sup>83</sup> and “the perpetuation of status or function, by inheritance and endogamy.”<sup>84</sup> A person’s caste was determined at birth, implied inherent disabilities and privileges in social position, and determined restrictions for intercourse and marriage.<sup>85</sup>

These colonial observations of caste as endogamous, implying varying levels of civilization and capability, and determined by birth (blood), resonated with European racial theory, making “Indian society familiar” and “alluring.”<sup>86</sup> It allowed the British to compartmentalize Indian caste society in a comparable method to how they categorized

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<sup>80</sup> Baines, *Census of India, 1891, General Report*; Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 5th ed., Popular Library of Indian Sociology and Social Thought (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969), 1; J.A. Baines, “On Certain Features of Social Differentiation in India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, October 1, 1894, 43.

<sup>81</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 2001), 41. Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:187.

<sup>82</sup> Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 3 & 162.

<sup>83</sup> *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Vol. II (1893), s.v. “caste.”

<sup>84</sup> J.A. Baines, *General Report on the Census of India, 1891* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1893), 182.

<sup>85</sup> Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 2–28.

<sup>86</sup> Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*.

themselves, in racial terms, to the populations of their colonies. In Form IIIA of the Burma volume of the 1881 census (shown in Table 5), the British categorized themselves, the ‘pure’ “European British” race, on top, followed by “other Europeans and Americans,” “Eurasians” (mixed breeds), and “Natives” respectively. Similarly, under “Hindoo<sup>87</sup> and Persons of Hindoo Origin” in Table 23 of the 1872 census (shown in Table 6), the “Brahmins” appear listed first, followed by “Kshatriyas and Rajpoots [Rajputs],” “Other Castes,” and the remainder – those considered below or primitive to the caste system – respectively. The rankings are not strictly numerical; they are likely political, reflecting the social hierarchy of these categories communicated by those in charge.

**Table 5: Form No. IIIA, 1881, Burma, Statement showing Christians by race and sect**

European British subjects	Other Europeans or Americans	Eurasians	Natives
6,325	1,541	4,998	71,355

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<sup>87</sup> The British used various spellings for religious and ethnic labels throughout the censuses. I will refer to the main religions discussed by their current spellings: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist.

**Table 6: Table 23 (1872, India): Population of British India classified according to Caste and Nationality<sup>88</sup>**

Hindoos and Persons of Hindoo Origin	Brahmins	10,131,541
	Kshatriyas and Rajpoots	5,641,138
	Other castes	165,345,557
	Caste unspecified	786,311
	Outcastes or not recognizing caste	8,712,998
	Native Christians	595,815
	Aboriginal tribes or semi-hindooised aborigines	17,716,825
	Total	149,130,185
Mahomedans <sup>89</sup> and Persons of Mahomedan origin	Syuds	790,984
	Sheikhs	4,709,329
	Pathans	1,841,693
	Moghuls	219,765
	Other castes, or unspecified	82,674,800
	Total	40,227,552
Asiatics, not Natives of India		540,989
Mixed Races		108,402
Non-Asiatics	British	75,734
	Other Europeans	8,609
	Europeans, unspecified	30,453
	Americans, Africans, and Australians	6,961
	Total	121,148
Unspecified		434,772
Grand Total		190,363,048

The British presumed caste to be the fundamental classification scheme for the entirety of British India, which encompassed the Province of Burma. They initially anticipated caste boundaries between social groups in Burma; however, it quickly became evident to them that the population of Burma was quite different from the rest of India. Caste was clearly the prominent system of social organization in India, but not in Burma.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the Brahmins in India, the

<sup>88</sup> The numbers provided are the total numbers for each category. Due to difficult legibility, a result of wear and tear, some of the digits in the figures may have been copied incorrectly. The exact numbers, however, are not of importance. The numbers are provided to show that the ordering of these categories is not numerical, given as they are neither descending nor ascending, but that they are likely political, reflecting social positionality within each group.

<sup>89</sup> An older spelling of Muslim that the British used in earlier census reports

<sup>90</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:187.

Burmans did not restrict marriage or knowledge to preserve a ‘purity of blood’ within the more civilized groups.<sup>91</sup>

The British, however, needed a category of social comparison. The British formulated a set of names from “existing repertoires of cultural and geographical markers” (*lu-myo*) and defined these entities using their own terminology and ideology: race.<sup>92</sup> Colonial officials working in Burma argued that “tribal and racial divisions, in Burma matters of the utmost complexity, naturally t[ook] the place of a consideration of caste.”<sup>93</sup> In the 1872 census, race was not clearly defined, but was used with tribe to classify the population in Burma. Referring to Table 3, race was used in reference to the races and tribes of Burma and described as a civilized valley group of common stock, origin, class, or ability comparative to hill tribes. Social groups considered to be more civilized, typically defined by habitation in the plains, structured agriculture, strong political organization, the practice of Buddhism, and histories of conquest, were considered the main races of Burma [the Burmese (Burmans), Shans, Karens, Mon, and Arakanese]. Those groups residing in the highlands, given derogatory names by lowlanders, speaking what was defined as a dialect of a lowland language, practicing animism (or increasingly Christianity), residing in groups of limited political structure, and practicing swidden agriculture were considered less civilized *tribes*.<sup>94</sup>

The headings for the reports or tables in the general India and the Province of Burma volumes further allude to the use of race to divide the indigenous population of Burma as a

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<sup>91</sup> Lowis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Report*, XII:109.

<sup>92</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 565; Kertzer and Arel, *Census and Identity*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> C. Morgan Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, vol. IX, 1, Report (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1912), 240.

<sup>94</sup> Duncan, *Report on the Census of British Burma, Taken in August 1872*, 27–28; C. C. Lowis, *The Tribes of Burma* (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1919), Preparatory note; J. Annan Bryce, “Burma: The Country and People,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 8, no. 8 (1886): 486.

comparative entity to caste in India. The scheme of classification used for Imperial Table XIII (Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality) in the Burma volume of the 1911 census is a key example. The headings and their order appear as: *indigenous tribes and races, non-indigenous Buddhist and Animist races, Hindu castes, Musalman [Muslim] tribes, other races*.<sup>95</sup> The *non-indigenous races* group is divided into *Chinese* and *Other Asiatic Races* and the *other races* category refers largely to Europeans but also to Indian groups that practiced a religion other than Hinduism or Islam.<sup>96</sup> With regards to what was largely perceived to be the *indigenous* populations of India and the province of Burma, caste and race, respectively, are used comparably to classify and order society according to social position.

“Caste” and “Race” were also used in the same manner in parallel tables and chapter sections in India and Burma. Chapter V (Education) in Volume I (India) of the 1901 Census includes sections for “Education by Religion” and “Education by Caste” and Tables VIII (Education) and IX (Education by Selected Castes, Tribes or Races) present the data on these topics.<sup>97</sup> In Volume XII (Burma), however, Chapter V includes tables and relevant descriptions for “Education by Religion” and “Education by Race.”<sup>98</sup> The table for education in 1911 in both the general India volume and Burma provincial volume shows a similar division. In Table VIII (Education) in India, religion was used to compare the education of populations in British India as religion was the fundamental classification scheme. Table IX, however, shows “Education by

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<sup>95</sup> C. Morgan Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma Tables*, vol. IX, II (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1912), 143.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, IX:144 & 147.

<sup>97</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*, I:248; H.H. Risley and E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Tables*, vol. I-A, II (Calcutta, India: Officer of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903), 104–57.

<sup>98</sup> The races listed, in order as they appear, are: Burmese, Shan, Karen, Chin, Kachin, Talaing (Mon); Lowis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Report*, vol. XII, para. 93; C.C. Lowis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Imperial Tables*, vol. XIA, II (Rangoon, Burma: Officer of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 77–164.

Selected Castes, Tribes or Races.”<sup>99</sup> The intention of this table was to provide statistics “only for a sufficient number of castes to illustrate the degree of education in the various social strata.”<sup>100</sup> Although the heading of the table includes “tribes” and “races” in addition to castes, the primary purpose was to differentiate by selected castes. I infer that tribe and race were included as this table presents data for all populations in British India and must reflect all the terms used across the provinces and states to differentiate populations. In the Burma volume, Table VIIA-B presents the data for “Education by Religion and Age” and Table IX the data for “Education by Ten Selected Tribes and Races.”<sup>101</sup> This breakdown was also used in the table for occupation in 1911. In India, Table XVI presents “Occupations by Selected Castes, Tribes or Races” and Table XVI in Burma “Occupation by Selected Races.”<sup>102</sup>

These trends continued with the 1921 census. In Chapter VIII (Literacy) of the 1921 India volume, the British published two sequential sections for “Literacy by Religion” and “Literacy by Caste” and in Chapter VIII (Literacy) of the Burma section they published sequential sections for “Literacy of Buddhists” and “Literacy by religion and race.” Table VIII (Literacy by Religion and Age) and Table IX (Literacy by Selected Castes, Tribes or Races) in India and Provincial Table VI (Literacy of Buddhists by Townships) and Provincial Table VII (Literacy amongst selected Races in selected Districts and Townships) in Burma present the figures for these topics respectively. The British often conflated Buddhist with Burman. Their intention with these two divisions for literacy statistics in Burma was to differentiate the Burmans from the other groups. The explanatory note to Provincial Table III (Note 5) states that

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<sup>99</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1911, India Tables*, vol. I, II (Calcutta, India: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1913), 70–89.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, I:81.

<sup>101</sup> The ten selected tribes and races presented in Table IX, in the order they appear, are: Talaing (Mon), Karen, Arakanese, Shan, Chin, Kachin, Wa-Palaung, Danu, Taungthu, Chinese; Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma Tables*, IX:63–90.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, IX:257; Gait, *Census of India, 1911, India Tables*, I:358.

the table was intended to represent Buddhists who belonged to the Burmese race, and Note 2 for Provincial Table IV states that statistics were not given for Burmese among the selected races.<sup>103</sup>

These labels are clearly related in their use for statistically dividing and ranking populations; however, how were they defined? The British were concerned with the relative status of different peoples but also their historical origins. Referring to the theories of typologists in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, typologists “believed every human being belonged [...] to an undying essence or type.”<sup>104</sup> This ideology reflects the way that the British defined both race and caste in the reports of the Census of India. The census definitions and descriptions for race and caste are given in tables 3 and 4 of this paper. The common words repeated for race in the Burma volume were common stock, origin, blood, type, civilized, species. The common words repeated for caste in the general India volumes were class, occupation, hereditary, descent/origin. In general, the two are comparable; they were both intended to indicate an individual’s or a group’s origin.

Caste was assumed to be a fundamental division of the Hindu religion, but caste itself is not necessarily religious, it is a social rank.<sup>105</sup> Table 23 of the 1872 census (see Table 6) shows how the use of caste expanded to non-Hindu groups considered to be indigenous to India and how British colonial officials used these religious distinctions to designate the ‘origin’ of a person. In India, this rendered religious and caste distinctions not only social, but also racial

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<sup>103</sup> S.G. Grantham, *Census of India, 1921, Burma Tables*, vol. X, II (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1923), 559 & 565.

<sup>104</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, xviii.

<sup>105</sup> Religions have been practiced for thousands of years in India, but the notion of caste is merely a few hundred years old. Historically, the varnas, four main classes, were the fundamental divisions of the Hindu religion. According to British intellectuals, under the Aryan polity in India, the four *varnas* – Brahmins (priests or scholars), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Sundras (slaves or laborers) emerged with the Brahmins, the priestly class, on top. The *jeti/jati* (“castes” in English) were intended to be separate from the varnas. Overtime, however, distinctions of caste became intertwined with the varnas, creating a rigid and hierarchical caste structure associated with the Hindu religion; See: G. M. Tagore, “On the Formation and Institution of the Caste System-the Aryan Polity,” *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London 2* (1863): 374–76.; Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Complete rev. English (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

designations. In this table, colonial officials first separated “Natives of India” into the two main religious groups – Hindu and Muslim – and secondly into castes. The last sub-classification of Muslims [Mahomedans] is “other castes.” This suggests that although caste is often associated with Hindu society, the British perceived it to be a social classification of Indian society, which includes Muslims.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, under the Hindu category in the table, those groups considered to not recognize caste (outcastes and Native Christians) or outside the civilization of castes (aboriginal tribes) were still sub-categorized as people of Hindu origin and ranked with the Hindu castes. For Native Christians, this indicated that religious conversion could not alter their social position; the association of caste with Hinduism as a way of life and not only a religious practice perpetuated their perceived social position. As Kingsley Davis emphasizes, members of an inferior caste often attempted to “escape inferior complex” through religious conversion. However, this often did not elevate their social status and continued to associate them as an inferior caste, evident through their categorization in the census.<sup>107</sup>

British descriptions of caste boundaries mirrored the popular perceptions of racial divisions emerging in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Caste implied a hereditary social position, indicating that the blood, or genes, of an individual corresponded to their capability and rank in society. In fact, in the 1891 and 1921 census reports and in the official English language definitions for caste and race in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British used *race* to define caste. In 1891, caste was described as “evol[v]ing from race and function” and in 1921 as a “racial, tribal or social group.”<sup>108</sup> *A New English Dictionary* defined race as “a group of persons [...] connected by common descent or origin [...] [or] people of a common stock [...]

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<sup>106</sup> H. A. Rose, “52. On Caste in India,” *Man* 8 (1908): 98–99.

<sup>107</sup> Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968).

<sup>108</sup> Baines, *General Report on the Census of India, 1891*, 185; J.T. Marten, *Census of India, 1921, India Report*, vol. I, I (Calcutta, India: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1924), 221.

[and] a great division of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common,” all of which are “separated by [...] a degree of civilization, and by the indefinable aggregate of inherent differences.”<sup>109</sup> The definition for caste, a “race, stock or breed (of men)” and a hereditary class of India, relies on the definition of race.<sup>110</sup>

Further contributing to the association of caste with racial ideology emerging in Europe was the narrative of a successful Aryan race that conquered and civilized “savage” groups. The British connected themselves to the idea of an Aryan creed, justifying their inherent superiority as the most elite and civilized society. They also believed that the Brahmins in India originated from an Aryan branch that migrated through the Himalayas into India and established a polity through successful conquest and civilization.<sup>111</sup> This connection contributed to the ability of the British to think about castes in terms of racial difference and defend the superior position of the Brahmins on the premise of their inherent racial superiority:

Granting that there is something inherent, as it were, in the conditions of life in India that fosters the sentiment of which the caste system is the expression, and granting again that the form, or collection of forms, that this expression has taken is the outgrowth of the Brahmanic creed, it seems within the bounds of reasonable hypothesis to attribute to its present development an origin distinctly racial. We have seen the origin of that creed in the necessity of keeping the gods on the side of the Arya, in the struggle of the latter with the dark races they found in possession of the tracts they coveted... The Brahman had already developed into a hierarchy, and by their influence over the supernatural, could easily prevail on the Arya laity to exclude the subject races from participation in what seemed to be the peculiar privilege of the superior.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Vol. VIII, Part I (1910), s.v. “race”

<sup>110</sup> *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Vol. II (1893), s.v. “caste.”

<sup>111</sup> Tagore, “On the Formation and Institution of the Caste System-the Aryan Polity”; Baines, “On Certain Features of Social Differentiation in India”; G. Campbell, “On the Races of India as Traced in Existing Tribes and Castes,” *The Journal of the Ethnological Society of London (1869-1870)* 1, no. 2 (1869): 128–140.

<sup>112</sup> Baines, *General Report on the Census of India, 1891*, 183.

Similar to how the British drew connections between themselves and the Aryans and the Brahmins and the Aryans, they initially searched for similar relations with the Burmans.<sup>113</sup> According to the British, the Burmans occupied “a far higher position in some respect than among any other civilized Eastern race” and narratives of successful Burman migration and civilization mirrored narratives of the Aryans in the Himalayas.<sup>114</sup> According to the British in the 1891 census, the Burmese (Burmans) migrated down the valley of the Irrawaddy encountering no opposition until they met and were driven back by the Mons in the delta. This was a check to their superiority but they went on to conquer nearby Arakan, later repelled Chinese/Shan invaders, and even conquered the Mons after falling to their reign in the 1700s.<sup>115</sup> Comparable to how Europeans perceived the Aryan, the British defined the Burman as the ancestors of a stock that could overcome and conquer, despite facing some other strong “races.”<sup>116</sup>

In Burma, however, migration patterns also appeared to favor Burman dominance. It appeared that all groups, both other civilized lowland groups, such as the Shan and Mon, and the uncivilized hill tribes, assimilated into Burman society through adopting the respective language and religious practices. Buddhism for Burmese kings was a means to centralize and unite the identities of subjects (as opposed to restrict them from identification as Burman).<sup>117</sup> Caste distinctions in India, particularly in distinguishing the elite ranks, conformed to the standards the

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<sup>113</sup> At the time of annexation, a Burmese kingdom reigned the Irrawaddy (from Mandalay) as opposed to a Mon Kingdom at Pegu. Therefore, colonial officials would naturally have encountered Burman elite first and been exposed to stories of Burman civilization and conquering among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon. For the British, this would provide an early indication that they could be identified as a superior race that survived, similar to narratives of a superior Aryan creed.

<sup>114</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:195–96; Forbes, *British Burma and Its People*, 54.

<sup>115</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:195–96.

<sup>116</sup> Initial colonial reports attempted to connect the Burmans to the Aryans; however, they would later come to agreement that they believed the Burmans should be classified as descendants of a Mongolian stock.

<sup>117</sup> Victor B. Lieberman, “Reinterpreting Burmese History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 1 (1987): 179; Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 100; John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), 8.

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British sought in defining groups by endogamous and hereditary barriers with implications for status and capability. In Burma, however, such a local equivalent did not exist and therefore observable levels of civilization as the basis for measuring *lu-myo* were insufficient for measuring race. Nurture, or learned cultural practices, allowed individuals to improve their status. The British needed local criteria they could use to measure differences in the population that they could apply to their meaning of race as a human population defined by inherent characteristics and sharing a common origin.

### The Meaning and Measuring of Race in Burma: The Use of and Problems with Religion and Language

Since the first comprehensive census in 1872, religion had been the fundamental census classification scheme for British India. The British assumed that all individuals could first be distinguished by their religious practices before being further sub-divided into castes, tribes, nationalities, or races. Religion was an important cultural distinguisher of class, status, and identity for the Burmese. Buddhism, as previously discussed, was undoubtedly the most important measurement of status and identity; however, it was clearly not what the British were looking for in their pursuit of *racial* difference in Burma. The first problem with Buddhism was that it represented the majority of the population, providing no useful differentiation among groups considered *indigenous* to the province. As they argued in the 1891 census report on Burma, “the return of Buddhists, which rises to 8,680 out of every 10,000 shows that religion is no test of race.”<sup>118</sup> The British recognize that too many different social groups practice Buddhism. The second issue was that individuals professing membership or origin in a certain *lu-myo* crossed religious boundaries. In India, there did not appear to be individuals proclaiming

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<sup>118</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:186.

membership in a given caste or tribe that spanned religions. In Burma, however, such crossing was particularly the case with the Karen, who were not of one religion but, according to census results, Buddhists, Christians, and “Nat-worshippers.”<sup>119</sup> Third, rank and status among Buddhists did not appear to be hereditary or related to blood lineage, as was the case with the elite castes in India.<sup>120</sup> Forbes argued, unlike “in India [where] the Aryan feudal system [...] established [...] an aristocracy” (hereditary elite class), the social structure under the kings of pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms was bureaucratic. Outside of the royal family, rank was determined by “office” or position, not by “blood,” and “every Burman outside the circle of officialdom [was] socially the equal of another.”<sup>121</sup>

For these reasons, by the 1920s, census officials in Burma were advocating to break from the colony-wide standard of religion as a fundamental classification. They argued *race*, despite lacking a clear and concise definition for the term, was more appropriate for the Province of Burma. It appears *race* labels allowed the British to measure and rank those groups they considered “common stock” but who spanned religious groups. A 1926 report to several census officials in British Burma from M.S. Collis (Deputy Secretary to the Government of Burma, Home and Political Department) provides one example of these colonial demands for the switch:

The basis upon which the census of 1921 was conducted was classification by religion [...] [I]n India the classification by religion appears to give generally a satisfactory basis upon which to construct the Tables, for the great bulk of the population as either Hindu or Mohamedan [Muslim]. In Burma however the case is different [...] it will be observed that no less than 11.2 million [out of a total population of 13.1 million] on this basis of classification of religion are thrown together under the one head of “Buddhists,” while the remaining 1.9 million are divided into eleven classes [...] As a result of placing all Buddhists under one head, less information is available in the Tables in regard to

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Cady, *A History of Modern Burma.*, 10 & 15.

<sup>121</sup> Forbes, *British Burma and Its People*, 46–47.

differences which exist between varieties of Buddhists, *e.g.* between Burmese, Shans, Karens, etc., than would be the case were race made the basis of the census. Indeed, the examination of such differences would appear to be far more important than the differentiations now worked out in detail for the small religions [...] I am now to ask you that in light of the above remarks...your view as to the practicability of substituting in Burma, race for religion as the basis for the census of 1931.<sup>122</sup>

Other colonial officials supported this request on the same basis. H. Shircore Esquire, Subdivisional Officer, was “in entire agreement [...] for [race] would be only such a classification that correct differences between the varieties of Buddhists would be available.”<sup>123</sup> A Sub-divisional Officer of Rangoon<sup>124</sup> argued that race “would be more satisfactory” as “unlike India, Burma has Buddhism as the predominating religion, which embraces amongst its members’ various races such as Shans, Karens, Chins, Talaings (Mon),<sup>125</sup> Taungthus, etc.”<sup>126</sup> It is clear these colonial officials agreed that race would be the best classification scheme for measuring differences in the population of Burma. However, although they argued race was most preferable, they failed to provide a clear and concise definition for how it should be defined and measured, rendering it a common-sense category for communication between colonial elites. In the earlier census reports, colonial officials consistently described race using terminology such as origin, stock, blood, and species. As the British continued to look for an adequate local

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<sup>122</sup> Report No. 9V26, Government of Burma, Miscellaneous Department, by M.S. Collis, 19 January 1926, Accession No. 694, Census for 1931 re-opinion is to the [*sic*] substitution of race for religion, Pre-Independence (01), The National Archives of Myanmar, Yangon, Myanmar.

<sup>123</sup> Correspondence from H. Shircore Esqr. to The Deputy Commissioner, Maubin, 17 April 1926, Accession No. 694, Census for 1931 re-opinion is to the [*sic*] substitution of race for religion, Pre-Independence (01), The National Archives of Myanmar, Yangon, Myanmar.

<sup>124</sup> This is the name given to the city by the British. Today the city is mostly referred to by the name Yangon. I will use Rangoon in this paper in maintaining consistency with using the colonial period names.

<sup>125</sup> The Mons refer to themselves by the name ‘Mon.’ Talaing is the name the British often used, particularly in the earlier census reports as this was the name used by the Burmans to refer to the Mon. I will use ‘Mon’ throughout this paper and will include the name in parenthesis when using a quote that refers to the group as Talaing.

<sup>126</sup> Correspondence from the Sub-Divisional Officer, Yandoon [*sic*], to The Deputy Commissioner, Maubin, 17 April 1926, Accession No. 694, Census for 1931 re-opinion is to the [*sic*] substitution of race for religion, Pre-Independence (01), The National Archives of Myanmar, Yangon, Myanmar.

measurement of *lu-myo* that satisfied their understanding of racial difference and the structures of India, they turned to language.

Deriving race from linguistic studies (formally known as comparative philology and ethnology) was common in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>127</sup> Jean-Baptiste Lamarck first utilized a family tree diagram to show the evolution of species in 1809.<sup>128</sup> This tree diagram then became a feature of linguistic and racial studies after Sir William Jones' used it to show different language branches of the Aryan language group.<sup>129</sup> James Cowles Prichard naturalized ethnological studies of populations using the classification of languages from comparative philologists in Britain in the 1940s.<sup>130</sup> As a result, linguistic migrations and connections became key evidence for British racial arguments.<sup>131</sup>

Deriving *race* from language in Burma for the census began as early as 1881 when, in fact, race was not included as a question in the census schedule but was perceived to be evident through returns for birthplace and language. The census officials argued that “mother tongue and birthplace were the best indicators of nationality or race.”<sup>132</sup> As a result, under religion in the 1881 schedule, there were four key subdivisions: “caste if Hindu,” “sect (denomination)<sup>133</sup> if other religion,” “language of birth,” and “place of birth.”<sup>134</sup> Table 1 shows the headings for question 8 in the census schedules from 1872-1931.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

<sup>128</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 98–99.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

<sup>131</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 98.

<sup>132</sup> Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations, *Report on the Census of British Burma, 1881* (Rangoon: Government Press, 1881), 63.

<sup>133</sup> Sect was used to distinguish different practices of Christianity among both European populations and “native” populations of the Indian Empire.

<sup>134</sup> Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations, *Report on the Census of British Burma, 1881*.

<sup>135</sup> Sumit Mukherjee, “Conceptualisation and Classification of Caste and Tribe by the Census of India,” *Journal of Anthropological Survey of India* 62, no. 2 (2013): 805–20.

The use of mother tongue and birthplace in 1881 to determine an individual's race or nationality followed common European practices. In Europe, these were good indicators of an individual's nationality and worked in differentiating Europeans in the colonies.<sup>136</sup> “The French-speaking section [...] [shows] 1,510; and, as the birthplace statement shows 1,013 born in France, it may be fairly concluded that this figure represents very close the absolute numbers of French persons residing in India.”<sup>137</sup> This practice allowed British colonial officials to differentiate themselves, the ‘pure’ British or British nationals, from individuals who learned to speak English and seemed European in appearance or manners, notably Eurasians or “half-breeds.” In 1881, the English language had the highest number of returns for the European languages with 202,920.<sup>138</sup> For the British, however, “this [number] evidently d[id] not represent the purely British section of the community, but embrace[d] a certain number of Eurasians, who may vary from individuals approaching so closely to Europeans as not to be distinguishable from them, or again, may approach so closely to natives in appearance and habits, though perhaps not in dress, as otherwise to be undistinguishable from them.”<sup>139</sup> This is where birthplace complemented language and permitted the British to differentiate British nationals from Eurasians in the colonies.

This method did not produce the same results for the populations of Burma. Birthplace did little to differentiate the indigenous population as the majority of individuals were born in the provincial boundaries of Burma.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, the British realized that during census enumeration many gave their language as Burmese, despite identifying or being identified by

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<sup>136</sup> W.Chichele Plowden, *Report on the Census of British India, Taken on the 17th February 1881*, vol. I (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1883), 199.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:48.

another as a different *lu-myo* group. This was particularly the case with the Mon and the Karen. As the British argued, “[there was] confusion between people who come from parents of a ‘race’ or persons of the same racial parent but speaking a different language [...] entities in the schedule did not enable compilers to determine whether a man called a Burman-Talaing (Mon) was a Talaing (Mon) who only spoke Burmese or son of Burman and Talaing (Mon) parents.”<sup>141</sup> As a result, in 1891, officials removed “parent tongue” and “birthplace” from question 8 in the schedule and replaced them explicitly with “race” and “nationality.” They argued that “parent tongue and birthplace [were] not satisfactory tests of race and nationality” in Burma.<sup>142</sup>

In India, “the importance attached to the language test may seem unjustified” as language was often irrelevant to caste boundaries.<sup>143</sup> However, “to the resident of Burma nothing is more natural [than language].”<sup>144</sup> Lowis further argued that language “[was] the most obvious and surest criterion of difference” until [colonial officials] could find a “scientific” method to determine the biological, or hereditary, distinctions between groups.<sup>145</sup> Despite acknowledging that language was a cultural trait that was often learned in the process of assimilation, as of 1891, language was key to the British in inferring a biological “blood” distinction and measuring racial difference. The example of the Karen in the 1891 census report for Burma provides clear evidence for this matter:

[...] But the chief cause is, no doubt, the fact that many Karens, especially those who have become Buddhists, desire to sink their despised Karen origin and return themselves as Burmese, but they are betrayed by the language they speak. Here the language return is undoubtedly the truer indication of those of Karen blood [...]<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations, *Report on the Census of British Burma, 1881*, 71.

<sup>142</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, vol. IX, para. 223.

<sup>143</sup> Lowis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Report*, XII:112.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, vol. IX, para. 224.

The Karen, like the Mon, were one of the major groups the British encountered early on in their colonization of the province. The Mon and the Karen were also the two groups where observable assimilation into Burman dominance was most common. For the British, however, despite learned cultural practices and fluctuating *lu-myo* identities, “a people [was] born once in history, with its characteristics already formed for all generations until its blood is diluted away.” It was not “a group of individuals re-creating a civilization in itself as it grows up.”<sup>147</sup> Although the Karen and Mon often learned and conformed to Burman culture and subsequently identified as Burman, the British believed that their Karen or Mon race (“blood”) must be inherent, despite however disguised or hidden this origin was behind cultural adaptation and assimilation.<sup>148</sup>

The classification of languages according to “genealogical” family trees in British India began after the Linguistic Survey of India in 1904.<sup>149</sup> Prior to this, the classification of languages had been geographical for the entirety of British India (Vernaculars of Burma, Vernaculars of India, Vernaculars of Asiatic countries beyond India, and European and other languages).<sup>150</sup> This 1904 Linguistic Survey of India “provided an authoritative scheme” intended to trace each language according to structural affinities “back to some main family from which it has descended and diverged” (a “genealogical” as opposed to geographical classification).<sup>151</sup> This survey, however, did not extend into the Province of Burma as the province was deemed to be home to “too many languages” and thus too “immature for an accurate study.”<sup>152</sup> However, although the province was excluded, the examination of Assam resulted in “a scheme of classification which c[ould] be applied [...] to Burmese linguistic conditions.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, this

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<sup>147</sup> Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 52.

<sup>148</sup> Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, xviii.

<sup>149</sup> Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, IX:184–85.

<sup>150</sup> Eales, *Government of India, Census of 1891, Imperial Series (Burma Report)*, IX:146.

<sup>151</sup> Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, IX:184–85.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, IX:185.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

changed the classification of languages in Burma starting with the 1911 census from previously used classifications that focused on geographical divisions and tonal observations to one that intended to be used to connect these social groups to blood lineages of descent from various language families.<sup>154</sup>

Chapter IX (Language) of the 1911 volume for Burma contains tables for each language group and the individual languages within each group. However, these tables were not only intended to present the data for the number of speakers of each language. They were also intended to compare population returns for those returned as speaking a language and those classified as belonging to that racial group, regardless as to whether they were returned as speaking that language. The indigenous *races* and indigenous languages in Burma share name labels. The British directly derived their race labels for Burma from their surveys of languages. To illustrate this point, select tables from Chapter IX of the 1911 volume for Burma are shown below. These tables continued for each language group and the individual languages within each group.

**Table 7: Burma Group (of languages) (Table from p. 189, 1911, Burma report)**

	1911	1901
Strength of racial group	7,986,327	7,994,167
Number of speakers	8,317,842	7,437,363

**Table 8: Burmese (main language of the Burma group) (Table from p. 189, 1911, Burma report)**

	1911	1901
Strength of race	7,479,433	6,508,682
Number speaking racial language	7,883,299	7,006,495

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<sup>154</sup> Taylor, “Appendix B (Indigenous Languages and Races),” 282.

**Table 9: Taungyo<sup>155</sup> (division of Burma group) (Table from p. 190, 1911, Burma report)**

	1911	1901
Strength of tribe	344,123	405,143
Number speaking tribal language	323,962	383,400

Further evidence from the relevant chapters in the Burma volume reports in the 1921 and 1931 censuses reveals the connection between linguistic differences and racial divisions in Burma, particularly the direct use of linguistic studies to measure the race labels used to differentiate and rank the indigenous population. In 1921, the British in Burma state that “up to the present time language has been the principal basis of classification of the races of Burma and this is true of the present census as it was of the 1911 census” and that the fifteen race groups tabulated for the indigenous races corresponded to the fifteen groups of languages.<sup>156</sup> The British argued that “the races corresponding to each indigenous language group have been regarded as forming a racial group to which the same group name has been assigned.”<sup>157</sup> This continued to be the case in 1931: “the classification scheme for races is the same as that for languages” and “the classification scheme for languages [in 1931] is the same as that adopted at the 1921 census.”<sup>158</sup> Within each race or language group, “race” and “language” subdivisions, using the same name labels, “denote[d] the lowest classes into which the groups have been subdivided.”<sup>159</sup>

The language chapters of the Burma reports for the 1921 and 1931 censuses include tables similar to those published for the linguistic and racial returns of each language group and

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<sup>155</sup> The British argued that the Taungyo were often confused with the Taungthus. Confusing different racial and tribal designations, they also argued, was common when two groups shared a similarity of name and proximity of location, as was the case with the Taungyos and Taungthus. However, in this section, the British stated that “the Taungyos are as essentially Burmese, as the Taungthus are essentially Karen, in their origin. The Taungyos are a Burmese tribe located in the west of the Southern Shan States, isolated from contact with the main branch of the Burmese racial group;” Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, IX:190.

<sup>156</sup> Taylor, “Appendix B (Indigenous Languages and Races),” 207 & 282.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>158</sup> Bennison, *Census of India, 1931, Burma Report*, XI:173 & 223.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, XI:173–74.

individual languages in 1911 (Table 10 and 11 below). Furthermore, Supplementary Table III (Comparison of indigenous races and languages) included at the end of the language chapter in both the 1921 and 1931 Burma reports, shows the parallels the British drew between measuring race with language in Burma (Table 12 below).

**Table 10: Burma Group (1921, Burma, Appendix B, Table from p. 283)**

Burma group in year	Race	Language
1921	8,683,035	9,232,636
1911	7,982,063	8,304,785
Increase	700,972	927,851

**Table 11: Burma Group (Akyab District)<sup>160</sup> (1931, Burma, Ch. X, Table on p. 178)**

Race or Language	Language		Race	
	1931	1921	1931	1921
Burmese	2,445	5,185	1,614	4,172
Arakanese	195,720	211,581	180,069	255,127
Yanbye	98,163	83,357	99,069	2,386
Chaungtha	32,699	7,132	47,120	44,286
Others	1	2	...	...
Total	329,028	307,257	327,872	305,971

**Table 12: Headings of Subsidiary Table III in the 1921 Burma Report (p. 296-298); (p. 202-204 in the 1931 report)**

Race and Language	Racial strength	Persons of speak racial	race who languages	Persons of speak other	race who racial lang.	Persons of who speak	other races racial lang.
		Actual	% of racial strength	Actual	% of racial strength	Actual	% of racial strength

It is important to note that language as a measurement for race was only the means of measuring *racial* boundaries among the *indigenous* population of Burma; the non-indigenous

<sup>160</sup> In the 1931 Burma report Chapter on Language (Ch X), the Burma Group is broken down into districts for different tables.

racés were “not classified ethnologically, but only collected into the five convenient groups of *European, etc., Chinese, Indo-Burman, Indian, and Others.*”<sup>161</sup> In 1931, the group S was added to the indigenous linguistic and racial classifications “to represent the Indo-Burman races, who do not have separate languages.”<sup>162</sup> It is clear that for the purpose of measuring race in the indigenous population of Burma, language was the only adequate local criteria the British could identify that complemented their perceptions of caste and racial boundaries.

**How do the meanings of these categories and attempts to measure race reflect the emerging theories of racial hierarchy in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?**

The use of caste and race to order the native societies of India and Burma is evident in their respective use in the statistical tables of the colonial censuses. The descriptions for both, particularly in the censuses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, indicate that the British perceived both to refer to an individual’s origin or species. This second idea was heavily influenced by the emerging theories of racial hierarchy in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The quest for measuring race and caste among the natives of British India was dominated by theories and methods emerging in Europe to “scientifically” attribute every individual to a racial group to complement pre-existing global and local notions of superiority and inferiority. However, in British India, the census was inevitably a double-edged sword. The quest to conduct one every ten years and continuously provide more detailed information to colonial officials in both the colonies and in England justified the use of these colonies as testing grounds to continuously conduct new ethnographic studies among populations. However, the need to then statistically present these groups in mutually exhaustive categories that could be ranked indicated that,

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<sup>161</sup> S.G. Grantham, *Census of India, 1921, Burma Report*, vol. X, I (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1923), 207.

<sup>162</sup> Bennison, *Census of India, 1931, Burma Report*, XI:173–74.

particularly in Burma, the local criteria needed to measure the smallest ethnographic units of society did not easily map onto European meanings of race.

The earlier pre-20<sup>th</sup> century censuses had had little to do with measurements of physical and biological traits, practices emerging as dominant methods in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These earlier quests looked for physical differences but used observed and inferred social distinctions – notably religion, language, and perceptions of civilization or political organization – to define categories of implied origin and rank. In these initial stages, the colonial government was concerned with “formulating a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive ethnic categories to classify the population” where there were no precedents to follow.<sup>163</sup> Caste boundaries in India quickly provided the British with a roadmap for formulating a classification scheme. Boundaries of caste conformed to popular notions that an individual’s race implied a hereditary level of intelligence and civilizing ability. As was the case with populations in Europe, this pre-existing perception of social difference and rank would become the basis on which to attempt to conform pseudo-scientific or anthropological measurements to justify the social superiority and preference of some groups comparative to others.

The 1901 census, the first census of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the first census to extend throughout the entirety of the Indian empire (not just administrative states and provinces),<sup>164</sup> troubling the British with the task of classifying significantly more people as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century processes of colonization were now complete.<sup>165</sup> However, by 1901, the British colonial officials also had precedents of social rank and ethnic categories to follow. For the first time, an attempt to “scientifically” determine the origins of individuals through physical measurements was made

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<sup>163</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 559.

<sup>164</sup> The only exceptions were the Wa country in Burma and some tracts of Baluchistan

<sup>165</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*, I: xiii–xviii.

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by H.H. Risley, president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Director of Ethnography for India from 1901-1909, and one of the authors of the 1901 Census of India. Risley conducted anthropometric measurements on populations to try and rank these numeric measurements according to the existing social hierarchy.

Risley argued that language and social customs gave indications of race but were often misleading and “wanting in scientific precision.”<sup>166</sup> He argued that physical characteristics were the best and only true tests of race.<sup>167</sup> Referring to my earlier discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century racial theories in Europe, anthropology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was primarily concerned with using physical measurements to accompany theories of race as a biologically unequal characteristic of all human beings. In India, Risley believed that “scientific” measurements would be very applicable because the caste system put “an extravagant value on pride of blood and the idea of ceremonial purity,” ideally removing crossing.<sup>168</sup> Risley argued that such measurements were necessary in an environment where other biological indicators, such as skin, eye, and hair color, were comparatively unstable.<sup>169</sup>

Risley attempted to classify the castes of the Indian population into a total of seven different “stock,” or types.<sup>170</sup> These types, however, are not reflected in the census table for caste.<sup>171</sup> Although he argued these measurements provided satisfactory evidence for the superiority and favorability of higher castes and the inferiority of lower castes,<sup>172</sup> the resulting classifications provided no useful statistical analysis or social comparison. Furthermore, he approached the anthropometric study with some indication of the evidence he wanted the results

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., I: 489

<sup>167</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., I: 496; Risley, “The Study of Ethnology in India.”

<sup>169</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*.

<sup>170</sup> Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Seytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid, Dravidian

<sup>171</sup> Census of India, 1901, Vol. I (India), Part II (Tables), Table XIII, *Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality*

<sup>172</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*, I:496.

to provide. Gould would argue that such studies had an agenda to control an “a priori conviction.”<sup>173</sup> In other words, Risley knew which measurements were more favorable based on previous anthropometric studies in Europe and colonial studies of caste and class in the colony. As was the case with studies in Europe, these results refused to clump into the expected races.

In the subsequent colonial censuses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, commissioners did not continue such anthropometric surveys in defining the racial hierarchy of Indian castes. Risley died in 1911 and other colonial officials did not feel “qualified to venture on this uncertain ground.”<sup>174</sup> The study also did not provide colonial officials adequate results for understanding the social differences between groups in British India. Risley alludes to defeat in recognizing that there were limitations in carrying out “the process of classification further and to differentiate the minor types or sub-types.”<sup>175</sup> In his concluding remarks, he confirmed that “castes can only be classified on the basis of social precedence.”<sup>176</sup> Risley was not the only individual to question his own reasoning. E.A. Gait, census commissioner in India in 1911, considered Risley’s conclusions “uncertain ground” and questioned whether a relationship between caste and race existed given that caste had a functional origin.<sup>177</sup> The author of the 1921 census report on Burma, S.G. Grantham, also questioned Risley’s work, arguing that “entries which are biologically correct many not always give census figures which represent most fairly the constitution of the population from a social view.”<sup>178</sup> Although the results did not contribute to the scheme for measuring race or caste for the census, the motivations and intentions for such studies continued to influence the meaning of these categories.

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<sup>173</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 85.

<sup>174</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1911, India Report*, vol. I, I (Calcutta, India: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1913), 383.

<sup>175</sup> Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901, India Report*, I:496.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, I:557.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, I:381.

<sup>178</sup> Grantham, *Census of India, 1921, Burma Report*, X:208.

Risley's anthropometric studies in the 1901 census did not extend to the province of Burma as "in the East, where religion, law, custom, and morality are all inextricably mixed and jumbled up together, would the attempt to attain any such precision be futile and misleading."<sup>179</sup> However, colonial officials in Burma desired Risley-style pseudo-scientific studies to determine the origin, or genus, of their race groups. C.C. Lowis, Census Commissioner for the Province of Burma in 1901, admitted that the anthropometric data for Burma "[were] so far practically nil" and that "the scientific method ha[d] not yet been applied" with regards to race.<sup>180</sup> However, he also noted that he "hope[d] [his] successor in 1911 [would] have materials for a detailed [...] ethnographical grouping" and believed that their "knowledge of these peoples must of necessity be defective" until such "scientific" methods of study have been applied.<sup>181</sup>

Despite the absence of such measurement attempts in British Burma, colonial officials were still on a quest to determine physical, hereditary features that could defend their established hierarchy of groups. For the 1911 census in Burma, officials attempted to use birthmarks as a test of race because they considered birthmarks "an important criterion for distinguishing members of the Mongolian race."<sup>182</sup> The British considered the Burmese to be descendants of the Mongolian stock.<sup>183</sup> The British were, however, frustrated with the results. They concluded that "the marks var[ied] so much in intensity and colour, and disappear[ed] so gradually."<sup>184</sup> The British wanted to confirm their theory that race was hereditary and objectifiable, however, they had trouble finding pseudo-scientific explanations for these socially defined groups.

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<sup>179</sup> Risley, "The Study of Ethnology in India."

<sup>180</sup> Lowis, *Census of India, 1901, Burma Report*, XII:113.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, XII:112-113.

<sup>182</sup> Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, IX:381.

<sup>183</sup> Duncan, *Report on the Census of British Burma, Taken in August 1872*, 26; Forbes, *British Burma and Its People*, 29; Bryce, "Burma," 486.

<sup>184</sup> Webb, *Census of India, 1911, Burma*, IX:285.

Despite the inability to find a standard pseudo-scientific measurement for a racial classification scheme, the meaning of race continued to be perceived by the British as a characteristic that belonged to every individual, could define differences in groups in any society, and implied unequal hereditary characteristics. In India, caste – which implied hierarchy and endogamous restrictions to mobility – was understood by the local population and complemented British racial ideology; it required “no definition in India” to be understood by both locals and colonists, despite limited physical variances.<sup>185</sup> A definition for race in Burma was not as straight forward. The criteria needed for *measuring* race – language and religion – did not always conform to colonial pre-conceived notions of the *meaning* of race, namely a hereditary origin.

The frustrations that resulted emerged because the British were fixated on conforming social structures in the colonies to the dominant ideologies of Social Darwinism, despite evidence that such social and cultural criteria used among local populations did not easily map on to such assumptions. In Burma, the race label became an amalgamation of local social and cultural criteria for difference – largely religion and language – and European perceptions of different racial origins. As the century turned, it became a label so complex and ambiguous that it required no definition. In 1921, colonial officials made “no attempt to define the term ‘race’, which is generally used so loosely as almost to defy definition.”<sup>186</sup> As Charles Hirschman argues, “although the definition of race remained uncertain, the term itself stuck” and European perception of what it should indicate remained.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> J.H. Hutton, *Census of India, 1931, India Report*, vol. I, I (Delhi, India: Manager of Publications, 1933), 425.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 526.

In the earlier censuses, the British used *race* labels to separate “Europeans” from “Eurasians” and “Natives” practicing Christianity. They did not provide a definition for race here as its meaning and implication was generally understood by those concerned. The later use of *race* in Burma mirrors this practice. It became a commonsense category used to govern that implied the undying essence of every individual and the inherent social position embedded in these different types. By rendering it a commonsense classification, the British could continue to use local criteria for measurement, resulting in divisions understood by the population of Burma, and imply their meaning of the term *race*, which would be understood by British elite, without needing to provide an adequate definition that complemented both ideas.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explained how social and cultural difference was measured and defined in British Burma, particularly regarding British perceptions of caste in India, and how these processes reflected the emerging ideologies of racial hierarchy in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Given that the racism that plagues several modern plural societies today (Burma included) attempts to sustain an established permanent racial order, it is important to understand the historical processes that influenced the creation of the meanings and measurements of these categories. These categories are multifaceted; however, they are often viewed as fixed for political purposes, mirroring the policies and ideologies of the British in constructing rigid political boundaries around these social and cultural entities. This textual analysis of the use of ethnological terminology in the reports and tables of the colonial censuses, government reports, and colonial anthropological journals allowed me to follow the process of formulating and

ordering these categories and identify the local and global influences that contributed to how they were measured and defined by colonial officials in Burma.

As this case study has shown, the absence of obvious and extreme phenotypical variations within the native society rendered it difficult for the British to apply measurements of race in their quest to divide and label the world into a rigid stratification of unequal races. In India, this problem was largely alleviated through the existence of caste – a master hierarchical social scheme that existed prior to colonial rule – that stipulated the groundwork for the British to apply theories of inherent racial difference in lieu of vast phenotypical differences. The caste structure provided them the means to identify relations between higher and lower classes of civilization and supplied a lens of comparability to their own society or their desired society.

Naturally, the British attempted to organize Burmese society through the same lens. However, although they identified a stratification of civilization according to European standards, they could not identify the same barriers to assimilation in the more civilized groups as among Brahmins in India. Buddhism was an important badge of identity and status in Burma; however, it welcomed assimilation, erasing the boundaries that the British perceived to divide the inherent capability of individuals. Religion in general was an important component of local identity but alone inadequate in provided the British with answers to their quest for racial differences among the population of Burma. Groups sharing a common language and narratives of shared ancestry, such as the Karen, spanned religious boundaries, and one religion – Buddhism – represented the overwhelming majority of the population. Religious differences were only important for the British in defining the foreign population from the indigenous population.

Language became the census category that best approximated the European perception of race in Burma and thus the primary means of *measuring* race in Burma. This reflected the comparative philology and ethnology studies used in Europe to use linguistic variations to define ancestry. However, although language was the lowest social divisor the British determined among the Burmese population, rendering it comparable to caste in India, the ambiguity and fluidity of language, and thus *lu-myo*, in Burma puzzled the British. Their *meaning* of race, which continued to imply a hereditary origin, evident in a comparison of the definitions provided in the earlier reports and the “scientific” studies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, did not easily map onto the scheme of measurement in Burma that allowed for the population to be sub-divided and classified down to the lowest social unit available. However, the process of constructing a racial hierarchy in Burma that attempted to frame social groups into biologically unequal species resulted in rigid boundaries of perceived political privilege and entitlement that used these labels and their positions for justification in the post-colonial modern state. Although being ambiguous categories to bring “metropole and colony, colonizer and colonized, British and indigenous peoples into one frame, into a single analytical field [...] an entire interactive system,”<sup>188</sup> they grew to embody the inherent traits the British prescribed to each in their quest to understand, resulting in the racism plaguing Burma both locally and nationally today.

The problem with the creation, measurement, legitimation, and statistical defense of religious or racial/ethnic groups in any society, but particularly so in Southeast Asia, is that these groups are highly fluid. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and particularly early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time in which the British were concerned with dividing the world into races and scientifically measuring and

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<sup>188</sup> P.D. Morgan, “Encounters between British and ‘Indigenous’ Peoples, C. 1500-1800,” in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850*, ed. Martin J. Daunton and Rick Halpern (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 68.

justifying differences in the social practices of different communities. Despite evidence that *race* cannot easily be measured according to theories of inherent and unequal human characteristics, *race* normalized as a marker of inherent privilege or subordination among locals in post-colonial societies. Racism in Burma today is the result of colonial categorization and the quest to define and measure *race* in Burma comparative to both structures of social stratification in India – a result of the territory’s connection to British India – and theories of Social Darwinism popular among British colonial elite. Caste conformed to these theories of race as an inherent master scheme to explain social inequality but *lu-myo* in Burma did not. Thus, race had to be created as an alternative to caste using local criteria for measurement but carrying the same implications as caste as a classification scheme that indicated the inherent hierarchy and inequality of society.

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