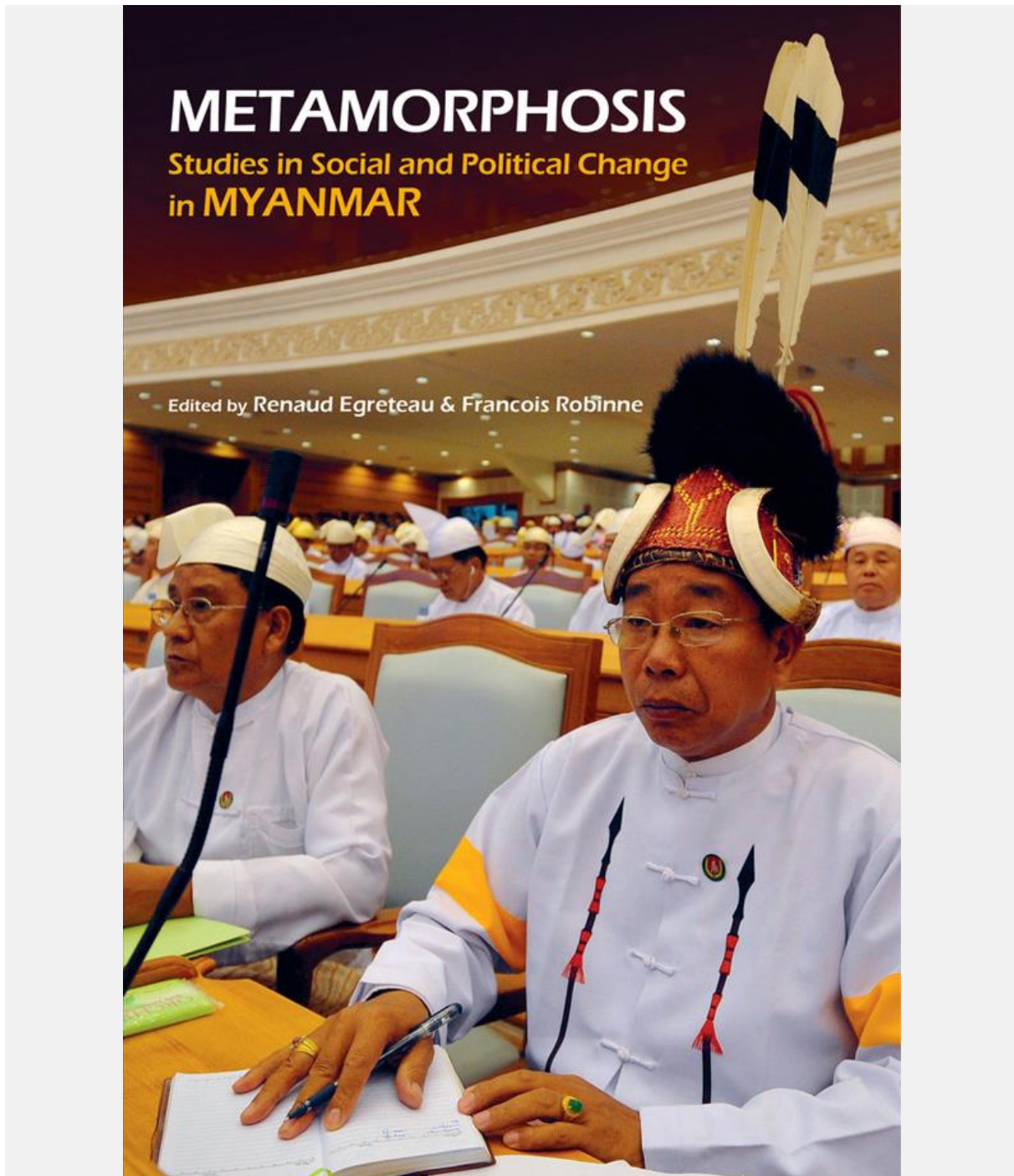


BOOKS

'Metamorphosis': Tracing the Transformation in Burma

By [DAVID SCOTT MATHIESON](#) | Thursday, January 28, 2016 |



Renaud Egreteau and Francois Robinne, editors, *Metamorphosis. Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016.

The obvious peril of trying to pen any analysis of Burma's political transition is that publication will render any insight redundant or dated. This is especially true for notoriously slow academic collections. A new collection of essays edited by Renaud Egreteau and Francois Robinne, *Metamorphosis*, is a welcome exception. The chapters overviewing an array of political, social, religious and ethnic issues is a fine compendium of sound research and argument that serve to deepen our understanding of the complex events of the past five years, and with historical framing that gives them a deeper currency.

The first part on evolving political ecologies is mercifully free of the speculation and surface description that marks much analysis. Egreteau's chapter on military lawmakers and their voting behavior in the national Parliament is a great way to start such a volume, and is followed by an illuminating profile of the Arakan politician U Maung Nyo against the backdrop of vexed Arakan State's political and conflict dynamics. Elliot Prasse-Freeman's work on grassroots movements, their concepts of the political and struggles for justice—viewed through the tactics and narratives of land protestors, especially those involved in the Letpadaung demonstrations—is an important and eloquently argued addition to one of Burma's major political fault lines between aggrieved communities and authorities.

A section on identity politics is one of the best recent collections on various ethnic perspectives, many of them either lamentably overlooked or hotly contested, including a study of contesting identities and work in the Myiek Archipeligo, a detailed overview of the Kachin and their experiences during the brutal civil war that has raged since 2011, and Jacques P. Leider's deeply researched and meticulously argued overview of the history of Rohingya Muslims.

Jane Ferguson's chapter on ethnicity in Shan State is a standout in the volume, traversing not just the ethnic-Burman divisions that characterize much center-periphery relations, but divisions between ethnic groups within Shan State. The chapter also closely examines Shan communities in exile or displaced along the Thailand-Burma border, and the multiple challenges they face for development and peacemaking that is not well understood in either Rangoon or Naypyidaw. As Ferguson clearly states, “[g]iven the long history of contested sovereignty, war, strife and poverty, residents of Shan State stand at a complex crossroads for their political and economic future. Few local people exhibit the optimism that some international observers seem to expect of them.”

Social issues are presented through captivating chapters on transnational activism, Burmese actors in exile and those who have returned, and a fascinating overview of medical services in Thandwe in Arakan State. Rosalie Metro's excellent essay on the education system is worth the price of the book in itself. In her overview of the poor state of national education standards, one of the major crimes that successive military regimes wrought on Burmese society through neglect and paranoia, Metro presents through closely observed ethnographic research some of the innovative approaches to education reform that some teachers and students are engaging in as first steps in a long journey of redressing poor standards. As she argues, “Burmese students and

teachers are neither unaware of nor helpless in the face of the problems of the education system. Some of them, in particular those on the system's peripheries where governmental oversight is minimal or non-existent, are actively seeking solutions by themselves...(t)heir priorities include ameliorating ethnic discrimination, addressing language barriers, rethinking teaching methods based on rote memorization and reducing corruption. These efforts support the process of democratization and national reconciliation that government and civil society representatives have highlighted as crucial in building the country's future." This chapter should be required reading for anyone working on Burma, whether they work on education or not.

The final part on religion is both timely and fine reading. Hiroko Kawanami's chapter on Buddhist nuns is a welcome exploration of the often maligned role of the *thilashin* in contemporary society. Benedicte Brac de la Perriere's detailed history of the Buddhist Sangha's role in democratic transitions is solid background to anyone seeking to understand where the current religious ultra-nationalism of the Ma Ba Tha is coming from. The concluding chapter by one of the editors on ethnicity and religion is a sound companion, especially in its exploration of relations between Buddhists, Christians and Muslims.

The most glaringly obvious and utterly perplexing shortcoming of the book, acknowledged by the editors, is the absence of academics from Burma amongst the contributors. More open research and collaboration between scholars from Burma and the outside world, unfettered by security concerns, has been a significant marker of progress during Burma's metamorphosis, and it is a real pity this book fails to show how fruitful that has been.

Nevertheless, many of the issues this book analyzes will be important markers of change to understand in Burma's near future. Any attempt to do so will be immeasurably assisted by reading these illuminating essays before you start.

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