

# Circulating in difference: performances of publicity on and beyond a Yangon train

MICHAEL EDWARDS *University of Cambridge*

Amid Myanmar's fraught democratic transition, some local Pentecostals took up new opportunities to publicly evangelize to Buddhists, efforts that were met mostly with indifference. This article explores the role of indifference in mediating encounters across difference. Drawing together scholarship on recognition and sincerity, it argues that these evangelists were occupied not just with the challenges of hailing an audience in a tentatively more open public sphere, albeit one shot through with heightened tension around religious belonging; they were also concerned with what I call the performance of publicity: the ways in which publicity is itself publicized, celebrated, circulated, and received – especially online.

It was hard to ignore Mungpi.<sup>1</sup> Or at least it seemed that way the first time I heard him preach the gospel. That was on Yangon's circular train in June 2015, five months out from the election that would bring Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to power in Myanmar, symbolically drawing over fifty years of dictatorship to an end. The carriage rattled along, leaving the downtown on its journey out towards the city's northern fringe. As the passing landscape grew lush and green, Mungpi rose from his seat and began to preach in a voice that immediately stood out against a crowded sonic backdrop: the heavy rumbling of the train's engine; the Pali chanting broadcast from the crackling loudspeakers of Buddhist monasteries we passed; the melodious cries of hawkers selling cigarettes, peanuts, and a selection of newspapers whose range had expanded with the recent easing of censorship. Not only could Mungpi project his voice at a volume the hawkers seemed unable to match. He also spoke with undeniable conviction, something fellow Christians would later describe as the fire for preaching with which God had blessed him. Wondering what this moment said about Myanmar's nascent democratization – and the more open public sphere expected to emerge in its wake – I quickly gave Mungpi my attention (Fig. 1).

In this, I soon discovered, I was alone. My fellow passengers seemed indifferent to Mungpi's passionate oratory. Some scrolled through Facebook feeds. Others gazed out

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Figure 1. Mungpi preaching the gospel. (Photo by the author. Face blurred for anonymity. See coda.)

the window. When I asked the man next to me what Mungpi was preaching about, he peered up from his phone, looked over, and told me the message was about the importance of donating to the construction of Buddhist pagodas. He hadn't recognized that Mungpi was Christian. Nor had he recognized that Mungpi's point was, as closer listening would reveal, almost the exact opposite: that it's impossible for humans to accumulate enough merit – through donations or other good deeds – to secure their salvation. That goal can only be reached with the grace that comes through Jesus. The only people whose attention to Mungpi matched my own were the young Christians assisting him. As the train continued its loop back round to Yangon's central station, they handed out pamphlets to commuters, most of whom politely accepted, then quietly discarded them upon reaching their stop. The group also used their smartphones to document the encounter between Mungpi and his indifferent audience.

What constitutes success for evangelists is not always straightforward. Conversions need not result for the activity to be considered worthwhile (Coleman 2015: 295). Evangelism affords believers opportunities to act on their commitments to God, thereby shortening the distance between themselves and him (Handman 2018: 152). For Christians in Myanmar, such opportunities had not been forthcoming. Restrictions on expression and assembly had combined with decades of religious persecution to render evangelism a fraught and often risky endeavour. Foreign missionaries had been expelled by the military government soon after it seized power in 1962. Now, however, with the signs of tentative democratization – the easing of censorship, the release of political prisoners, the holding of elections – believers like Mungpi were experimenting with new, more public methods for sharing the gospel in Myanmar, a country whose

population remained about 90 per cent Buddhist. Holding outdoor revival meetings, distributing pamphlets, preaching on trains: these were novel activities that brought Jesus into a public sphere whose contours had long been shaped by state regimes of surveillance and censorship. The hope was that Myanmar's political salvation – its transition from dictatorship to democracy – would be accompanied by a spiritual salvation that would deliver its population to Christ (Edwards 2021a).

Seeing the reaction to Mungpi, this wasn't looking likely. While democracy might have afforded Christians greater freedom to preach in public, it could do little to guarantee that audiences would listen. In this regard, Mungpi's experience was not altogether new. When Adoniram Judson, the pioneering American Baptist missionary, first landed in Burma in 1813, he, too, encountered a largely indifferent audience (Sarkisyanz 1965: 226). A frequently awkward and often unequal encounter, evangelism elicits a variety of reactions, but indifference looms large in the historical and ethnographic record. Anthropologists have begun to turn their gaze not only towards attention (e.g. Cook 2018; Pedersen, Albris & Seaver 2021), but also to the place of inattention and indifference in a range of encounters across difference. Inattention can be a 'technique' people cultivate in order to navigate tense spaces of inter-religious contact in which the presence of recent violence is keenly felt (Larkin 2014). Indifference might be a 'right' that minority communities claim in the hope of having their difference go unremarked in the public sphere (Fernando 2019). The 'indifference to difference' can also be the ground for an 'ethics' independent of an attachment to either sameness or difference (Dave 2015). In each, it is the productivity of indifference – as a technique, a right, or an ethics – that is foregrounded (see also Bailey 1996), in contrast to the phenomenon's more familiar associations with coldness, cruelty, and apathy (e.g. Herzfeld 1992).

Indifference and inattention have long been considered part of repertoires on which a person might draw to cope with the demanding sensorial burden of modern urban life – 'those rapidly shifting stimulations of his nerves' (Simmel 1971 [1903]: 329) generated by the deluge of images and sounds encountered in such spaces as a Yangon train carriage. But what these recent anthropological interventions also provide, alongside other work (Dagtas 2020; Simpson 2014), is an opening for rethinking the question of recognition and the premium placed on visibility in the politics of difference (see also Napolitano 2017). Indifference, for Fernando (2019), offers possible alternative paths to equality and justice, ones that bypass the state, denying it the sovereignty it secures in the course of granting – or withholding – recognition to minorities. This article builds on these recent insights through an analysis of the evangelism performed by Christians belonging to a network of small Pentecostal churches in Yangon, where I conducted eighteen months of fieldwork between 2014 and 2016, on either side of the NLD's landslide electoral win. This was a moment when a set of reforms which were affording new opportunities for evangelism were accompanied by the rise of a Buddhist nationalist politics which was rendering the status of minorities increasingly precarious and raising the stakes of their visibility (Cheeseman 2017; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016). Soon after I met Mungpi, nationalist organizations such as MaBaTha successfully lobbied the government to introduce a package of four 'Protection of Race and Religion' laws, which focused on regulating religious conversion and inter-religious marriage. The worsening Rohingya crisis further amplified long-standing questions about the recognition that Myanmar's religious and ethnic minorities are accorded or refused (MacLean 2019; Prasse-Freeman 2022). Taking the moment of Mungpi's misrecognition as a point of

departure, this article analyses how evangelists navigated this shifting terrain – inviting attention in some ways while benefiting from inattention in others – in order to shed some light on the relationship between indifference, recognition, and publicity.

What are we to make of Mungpi's misrecognition as a Buddhist? This article joins recent moves in claiming that there is much to gain from situating such moments in the broader fields of intricately overlapping and mediated publics in which they circulate (e.g. Strassler 2020). Recognition is often approached in the terms of a dyadic encounter, calling to mind the master-slave dialectic from which discussions of the concept frequently emerge (Taylor 1994). How is one seen, or not seen, by another? For Pentecostals in Myanmar, the country's transition brought this question to the fore. As evangelism drew them into streets and parks, onto buses and trains, it compelled Christians to consider how their faith was seen and heard in a public sphere where the limits of acceptable speech were in the process of being redrawn. But in order to fully grasp what is at stake in such encounters, we need to pay attention to what I call the performance of publicity.

The performance of publicity gets at the fact that the encounter between the evangelist and the immediate audience is rarely the end of the line. Mungpi's preaching, as the train completed its three-hour circumnavigation of Yangon, was implicated in a second circulation of texts and images, stories and selfies, that documented and celebrated his evangelism, especially on Facebook. Evangelists like him were not only occupied with the question of how to add their voices to a public sphere marked by a greater degree of openness, even as it was shot through with heightened tensions around religious belonging. They were also concerned with how their evangelism was recognized – not by the state or by Buddhist listeners, but by other audiences made up of God and fellow Christians in Myanmar and abroad. The question, then, is not just how and why religion goes public (Elisha 2017; Engelke 2013), or how certain media technologies make that possible (Hirschkind 2006; Meyer 2015), but when and how the achievement of publicity is itself publicized, circulated, and received, and how the matter of recognition might, in that process, be deferred or repositioned.

I suggest that the performance of publicity is observable across a range of settings. But its workings are particularly evident in the ethnography that follows. This is, on the one hand, because of evangelism's dependence on some degree of publicity and its embeddedness in the circulation of discourse (Handman 2018), and, on the other, because of how the contours of Myanmar's public sphere have been so radically redrawn in recent years. Many of the most dramatic changes have occurred online. Where Myanmar once had one of the world's lowest rates of internet access, the rapid uptake of smartphones and Facebook (Aung Thin 2020) afforded Pentecostals platforms upon which their newfound publicity could be performed, even as social media were also linked to the rise of hate speech and anti-Muslim violence (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019). In what follows, I return to the scene on the train, before situating the encounter in relation to heightened tensions around religious difference, and then tracking what happens when performances of publicity circulate beyond the circular line – especially on Facebook.

Thinking through the relationship between indifference, recognition, and publicity also requires returning to a central issue in the anthropology of Christianity: sincerity. According to Keane's (2002) oft-cited definition, sincerity entails the unmediated congruity between interior thoughts and feelings and exterior words and deeds. Protestantism, in this reading, places a premium on sincerity particularly evident in moments of mission encounter. Recent efforts to think sincerity comparatively have

shown how it and its attendant concepts – interiority, transparency, accountability – are also at play in other traditions (e.g. Haeri 2017). But there has been less said about what happens to sincerity in encounters across difference. This is unfortunate because, notwithstanding its entanglement with a certain kind of liberal personhood, sincerity is not just individual, nor does it only concern one's relationship with God. It is also intersubjective, or, as Keane put it, 'interactive', entailing 'public accountability to others for one's words with reference to one's self' (2002: 75). But if this is so, to which publics are evangelists like Mungpi making themselves accountable, and with what consequences? Tracking their performances of publicity can reveal the ways in which expressions of – and anxieties about – sincerity shift as they travel across different publics, on- and offline. But first, back on the circle train.

### The publicity of circulation

In the Pentecostal networks in which I did fieldwork – small churches, bible colleges, orphanages, preschools, and prayer groups – Mungpi was a minor celebrity. There were other Christians for whom the circular train was not simply a mode of public transport but an infrastructure appropriated for spiritual ends. One friend rode it regularly in order to direct his silent prayer at the neighbourhoods it passed on its journey through the city. But he wasn't brave enough, he said, to attempt to preach out loud. Noise complaints had often been the premise for state persecution, memories of which remained fresh: churches shuttered, pastors arrested, employment denied. The political reforms, starting around 2011, were not enough to convince many Christians that it was now safe to evangelize publicly. But they did suggest that things might, at last, be heading in the right direction.

Mungpi thought so. He had been preaching on the train for two years by the time I met him, having taken over from another evangelist who began in 2011. That preacher, the son of the senior pastor at a Pentecostal church I call Life, located in an apartment northeast of Yangon's downtown, had watched the early reforms – the release of political prisoners, the partial easing of censorship, the relaxation of restrictions on assembly – and decided that the train's 46 km round-trip journey offered an opportunity to reach a fairly captive audience, all at the relatively low cost of 200 kyat (15 cents) a ticket. One of the city's cheapest forms of public transport, the train, with its loop of thirty-nine stations, was used by roughly 100,000 people each day (Fig. 2). Small-scale farmers bringing goods to market accompanied students, office workers, monks, and a handful of foreign backpackers; the trip was recommended in guidebooks for the growing number of tourists arriving with Myanmar's opening up.

Mungpi, who was 48 when I met him, took over when the other preacher moved to Singapore in 2013 to run a church ministering to a community of migrant workers from Myanmar. Though his parents came from the Chin Hills, Mungpi was born in Shan State, where his father had been stationed as a soldier. As a young man, he worked in the jade mines at Hpakant, in Myanmar's north, before moving to Yangon in his early thirties to attend bible college. It was there, he said, that he chose to become an evangelist, after reading what God had told Paul in Acts 18: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent'. He now lived, with his wife and four children, in a neighbourhood on the city's eastern outskirts. From there, he regularly travelled into downtown Yangon, to the central train station, usually dressed in a crisp white shirt and longyi. On the platform, he would meet a small group of Christians from a rotating







Figure 3. Train evangelism. (Photo by the author.)

compelled her to support Mungpi's ministry from afar. Not only was Mungpi admired for his bravery, he was also, fellow Christians felt, a gifted and energetic orator. He would work his way down the train, preaching for about ten minutes in each of the carriages, punctuating his speech with jokes, helping passengers with their heavy bags, his assistants following closely behind and handing out tracts (Fig. 3).

It was, in theory, a recipe for success: a captive audience, a charismatic preacher, and a slow-moving train (rarely going above 15 km/h), all at a moment when God

appeared to be saving Myanmar from its authoritarian past. In practice, however, the signs of success were few. Passengers frequently looked away. They gave the tracts a cursory glance at best. There was no indication, during the year I spent riding the train with Mungpi, that a single person had been drawn to Jesus by his efforts. My questions about the impact of his method were usually met with the reply that ‘God works in his own time’: an understanding of the relationship between human and divine agency that applied as much to the matter of religious conversion as to the question of political transition. For believers at churches such as Life, the democratic reforms were read as validating the faith they had maintained during long decades of military rule. My questions about impact, I was reminded, betrayed a secular view of time and agency. Evangelism was not just a dyadic encounter between an evangelist and a listener (nor was democratization just a dyadic encounter between the people and their leaders). Instead, as anthropologists have documented elsewhere, it was one in which agency was more widely distributed and in which God played the pivotal role. Christians could share the good news with Buddhist listeners, but only God could touch their hearts, and he would do so only at a time of his own choosing.

It was in these terms that Christians largely thought about the reaction that their preaching received. But this didn’t stop them also reflecting on the causes and consequences of indifference in less enchanted registers. Even as they sought new ways of engaging Buddhist publics, they were mindful of the dangers of attention, especially at a moment when nationalist discourses of belonging were raising the stakes of visibility (Schober 2017). Believers whose evangelistic impulses were energized by the transition had to balance conflicting pulls to both attract and avoid attention. This dance, which entailed an acknowledgement of the utility of indifference, brought the question of sincerity to the fore in multiple ways.

There was comfort in the fact that Buddhist reactions to the gospel were more likely to be indifferent than they were to be antagonistic. Underlying these reactions, evangelists said, was the work of *anade*. The concept of *anade* has been defined as a desire to avoid offending or insulting another person, a desire thought to be widely held by populations in Myanmar (Bekker 1981; Cole 2020). A commitment to smooth interpersonal relations and others’ emotional well-being, it is said to arise in part from a fear of the consequences of interaction (Keeler 2017: 146). One result, as Bekker notes, is that it risks impeding clear communication. It is for these reasons that evangelists found *anade* both convenient and frustrating. It made it rare for Buddhists to reject their efforts outright. Tracts were rarely refused even if they were also rarely read. But it also made it hard for evangelists to know exactly where they stood and what people might do or say about them after the encounter had ended. In other words, *anade* raised the likelihood that such exchanges might be marked by insincerity, the danger of words not matching up with thoughts, a lack of congruence between the interior and the exterior self (Bekker 1981: 29).

When evangelists spoke about the ambivalence that *anade* engendered, they gestured to a difference between a Christian commitment to sincerity and an opacity that rendered Buddhist audiences difficult to read, a difference that risked complicating what was already a difficult task. ‘Conventional mission,’ writes Coleman in his study of Swedish Pentecostals,

seems, at least in relation to its overt purpose, to be a deeply inefficient activity: almost nobody is ever converted by being approached on the street in Sweden. But from another perspective ... such



a conversionary stance must not be seen as only about turning others to the faith: it also provides opportunities to delve into realms of positive risk. The very act of reaching out therefore provides its own kind of success (2015: 294-5).

What Coleman writes about evangelists in Sweden is perhaps even truer of their Burmese counterparts. Gospel trips, on the train and elsewhere, entailed the novelty of entering into realms of risk in ways that were afforded by the democratic transition. What they involved in particular was the experience of participating in a public sphere from which most Burmese had long been excluded by censorship and other restrictions on expression. God's message to Paul ('keep on speaking, do not be silent') might, in this context, be read not just as a call to evangelize, but also as a command to participate in, and thus help constitute, a new democracy – in an expression of that concept's entanglement with the ideal of the public sphere (Cody 2015).

But when evangelists like Mungpi speak, to whom are they speaking? There is the carriage full of passengers. The obvious effort that Mungpi puts into his preaching, even in the face of persistent indifference and the challenges posed by *anade*, suggests a sincere commitment to connect with this putative public. But in what follows, I show how this is not the end of the story. I pay attention to one route through which these 'acts of reaching out' become their 'own kind of success', one way in which publicity might get recognized by and rendered legible to others in a broader social field – even as it remains ignored by or illegible to those present at the moment of initial broadcast. If publicity is a goal whose realization takes time and effort (Engelke 2013), it is also one that can be captured, framed, circulated, and celebrated beyond the immediate temporal and spatial setting of its initial articulation. It can, in short, be performed.

We are used to thinking of a performance as an act that takes place in a more or less public way. But what happens when we think about how publicity itself gets performed. What happens, in other words, when we think of publicity not as the quality or outcome of performance but as its content? And given the ways in which publicity is so often entangled with the question of recognition (Strassler 2020: 13), what might this move do to our understanding of the processes through which recognition is secured or denied? In what follows, we will see how possibilities for recognition might emerge not necessarily from a reciprocal dialectic between speaker and audience; they can also arise out of a wider set of intersecting infrastructures that circulate bodies, images, and texts across space and time. But before turning to how these performances of publicity take shape and travel, as speech and images from the circular train circulate online, I want to consider how my Pentecostal interlocutors lived the relationship between indifference and religious difference in Yangon, since this forms the background for the discussion of social media that follows.

### **Indifferent to indifference?**

In an article on the ubiquitous use of loudspeakers in Nigeria, Larkin describes an instance of public broadcasting resonant with what we have seen above. A Christian cloth trader in a Jos market takes a short break from work to preach about Jesus, with the aid of a small loudspeaker, to a largely inattentive audience made up, at least in part, of Muslims. Larkin observes that the loudspeaker's main effect was to distort the voice to the extent that the speech was rendered difficult to understand. 'Why use a machine at all', asks Larkin, 'when its main effect seems to prevent the clear comprehension of language rather than facilitate it?' (2014: 990). In an answer that weaves together the technological affordances of the loudspeaker with the cultivation of corporeal religious

dispositions, Larkin argues that the encounter needs to be considered in the context of a city whose inhabitants were living in the aftermath of recent interfaith violence. Inattention in such a setting becomes a ‘virtuosity of daily living’, a technique that helps ease the risk of conflict by allowing people to move through the city while ignoring the amplified voices – broadcast by Christians and Muslims alike – that jostle in the urban soundscape.

Like Jos, Yangon is a city whose soundscape is marked by the presence of loudspeakers. Deployed by police, politicians, protesters, advertisers, hawkers, monks, and mosques, loudspeakers are everywhere in the city, projecting an overlapping chorus of voices into public space. Also like Jos, Yangon is a city where the spectre of religious violence is felt, if not with quite the same intensity. The scene of violent communal riots in the 1930s, Yangon has also, in decades since, been the site of less spectacular forms of discrimination and persecution targeting religious minorities. Memories of these experiences were fresh for Christians like those at Life: believers recounted stories of prayer services being surveilled by secret police, of churches being arbitrarily closed by authorities, of pastors being denied building permits. Also felt, though geographically more distant, were the multiple conflicts between Myanmar’s military and various ethnic armed groups in predominantly Christian borderland regions. Many in Yangon churches, like Laura, had relatives who had moved abroad on refugee visas granted on the basis of religious persecution suffered in the context of these prolonged conflicts.

Complicating this picture in recent years has been the rise of Buddhist nationalist organizations, such as 969 and MaBaTha. Gaining prominence amidst and in response to Myanmar’s liberalization, these groups came to occupy an increasingly influential place in the country’s political life (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016; Tharaphi Than 2015). The package of the four ‘Protection of Race and Religion’ laws, whose introduction these groups drove, was widely interpreted as targeting the country’s Muslims at a moment of escalating Islamophobia (Crouch 2015). But some Christians also saw themselves as potential targets. There was always the risk, they worried, that nationalist monks and their supporters might one day shift their attention towards them, especially if their evangelism started to deliver a visible windfall of converts from Buddhism, as unlikely as that prospect now seemed.

In the wake of these developments in Myanmar, scholars have begun to attend to the complex ways in which indifference might have served people in the past. Recent research has shed light, for example, on the ways in which Burmese people constructed spaces ‘indifferent’ to the boundaries of religion and ethnicity produced by or reified in the course of the colonial encounter (Turner 2021). Other work has uncovered memories of past periods of coexistence when, in contrast with current widespread beliefs about the supposed irreconcilability of Buddhism and Islam, the otherness – and perceived threat – of Muslims was less visible (Schissler, Walton & Phyu Phyu Thi 2017). Scholars have also pointed to the ways in which, under the military dictatorship, the relationship between the junta and the Burmese people was shot through with its own forms of indifference. ‘The authorities are much more concerned with producing a facsimile of public opinion than with convincing people, affecting their inner lives in some way’, writes Leehey of this period. ‘For the most part ... people pay little attention: newspapers go unread, and TVs are turned down during the news and turned up when the Chinese movies come on afterwards’ (2010: 13, 28). The upshot was a kind of tacit agreement between the government and the people that treated the former’s public

communications – its ‘relentless drone’, in Leehey’s phrasing – as partly a simulation of authority (see also Prasse-Freeman 2021).

Indifference, across these various axes, allows people to preserve or extend distances between themselves and religious others – or between themselves and the state – in circumstances where it might otherwise be threatened by proximity. This is helpful to keep in mind when we consider that, for the Pentecostals here, evangelism entailed an unusually intimate encounter with difference. When not on the train, I would usually find Richard, Joseph, and Laura at their church – playing guitar, scrolling through Facebook, or reading the Bible or a book by a Christian author such as Joyce Meyer or Joel Osteen. Richard and Joseph slept most nights at the church, which occupied the top-floor apartment above a noisy bus stop. Both their families lived some distance away, Joshua’s several hours by bus in Khammu, across the other side of the Yangon River, Richard’s in Kalaymyo, a city at the base of the Chin Hills with a large population of people from the Tedim area. During my fieldwork, much of their time was also spent organizing a revival meeting which was bringing a prominent Argentinian-American evangelist to Yangon. Joseph was doubly occupied with putting together an album of new worship songs that would be launched at the event, which meant long days in a nearby Christian recording studio. Alongside this, he was working on his application to pursue graduate study at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. Hours were also spent sitting around at a teashop a block away from the church, where the group usually spoke amongst themselves in the Tedim language, switching to Burmese only to order a tea or soft drink from one of the young Burmese waiters.

In short, while my friends’ evangelism, on the train and elsewhere, compelled a momentary reaching out across lines of difference, most of their daily lives were spent with fellow believers, many of whom hailed from the same part of the country. They shared classrooms with Buddhists at school, and they continued to encounter Buddhists and Buddhism on public transport, on footpaths, in teashops, and in the soundscape. The content of newspapers, radio, and TV in Myanmar was suffused with Buddhism, with news reports of pagodas being constructed and quotes from prominent monks. But otherwise, the group’s experience of the city was lived at a degree of remove from Buddhist neighbours. One Christian at another Pentecostal church got at this when she described the relationship between Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar as resembling that between the Burmese numerals for 3 (*thoun:*) and 4 (*leh:*), figures that when placed alongside one another appear to be facing away from each other (၃ ၄) – less confrontational or oppositional than indifferent and inattentive, an implicit contrast, perhaps, with the way she understood the relationship between Muslims and Buddhists.

This bears some resemblance to what the colonial administrator and scholar J.S. Furnivall (1948) observed in pre-independence Rangoon. He coined the term ‘the plural society’ to describe a situation where large-scale migration combined with free-wheeling capitalism to produce a city in which different groups, in Furnivall’s oft-quoted phrase, ‘mix but do not combine’, one in which there are ‘different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit’ (1948: 304). This captures something of the way in which the Christians here experienced Yangon in the midst of religious others, the way in which their excursions across the boundaries of difference, entailed by evangelism, were usually the exception rather than the rule. These were moments when difference was foregrounded and when visibility was sought, at least to some degree.

The plural society for Furnivall was an empirical analytic; it did not carry the explicit normative dimension that theories of pluralism have since acquired.<sup>2</sup> In their liberal incarnations, these theories have advanced an understanding of tolerance that mandates a secular separation of public and private – a separation that, as many have argued, is premised on a definition of religion inflected by Protestant legacies, one grounded in the notion of interior belief. An alternative approach to pluralism, with traction amongst anthropologists, rejects the ideal of tolerance in favour of agonism. In developing his model of ‘deep pluralism’, Connolly argues for the importance of ‘agonistic respect’, in which ‘each constituency absorbs the discomfort posed by an alter-identity that challenges some of its own commitments, as it actively contests some assumptions and priorities of the other’ (Connolly & Wenman 2008: 209). Connolly’s sphere of active contestation differs from liberalism’s apparently neutral terrain of tolerance, which, as has been widely shown, exists only by virtue of a set of prior exclusions (Brown 2006). Yet both share something of a more general ‘commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference’ (Bender & Klassen 2010: 2).

Anthropologists working in religiously plural contexts, especially across the ‘split publics’ of South Asia (Rajagopal 2001), have been drawn to agonism (e.g. Singh 2011). In an apt example, Mahadev turns to it in her study of the ‘rivalry’ between Pentecostals and Buddhists in contemporary Sri Lanka, arguing that the two religions have entered into an ‘agonistic and anxious encounter’ (2016: 128). Mahadev describes a situation of ‘competitive theologizing’ in which Pentecostals offer Jesus as a ‘shortcut’ for Buddhists wanting to escape their endless cycle of rebirths. She focuses on how one particular monk offers a direct rejoinder, claiming to be able to hasten the arrival of Maitreya, the future Buddha, thereby rendering Jesus redundant. In presenting Maitreya’s arrival as a kind of Buddhist ‘second coming’, this monk engages in a polemical and agonistic interplay between Pentecostals and Buddhists – a ‘dialogics of religious rivalry’ (2016: 142).

At first glance, there is much in Mahadev’s analysis that resonates with what we have seen above. By distinguishing between grace and merit, and by asserting that Jesus is the only way to attain salvation, evangelists like Mungpi might be seen as engaging in a similar ‘competitive theologizing’ with Buddhists in Myanmar. But a theoretical language of agonism also leaves something out: that what also happens in these plural settings (on the train, for instance) is often marked less by contestation than by indifference; can be less a case of rivals speaking to each other than strangers speaking past each other; can be less a dialogue than a monologue seemingly ignored by the other actors on the stage.

In her study of Muslim women navigating the conditions of French secularism, Fernando (2014) shows how her informants attempt to assert a ‘right to indifference’: that is, to have their cultural and religious difference sometimes go unremarked and unrecognized in the public sphere (see also Tambar 2014). For Fernando, the ‘right to indifference’ promises to open up an alternative terrain for the pursuit of equality and justice, one that exists outside of the politics of recognition. It would be going too far to say that evangelists like Mungpi sought to claim a ‘right to indifference’ actively or consistently; such a claim is untenable in light of the commitment and energy he brought to his preaching. Still, like Larkin’s Christian preacher in Jos, it might be fair to say that evangelists like him benefited from the distance that indifference afforded – a distance from Buddhists and Buddhism that otherwise characterized much of their

experience of urban life. This distance, which *anade* also helped to extend, speaks to a pluralism that is perhaps more shallow than deep. That these Christians benefited from this distance even as they also claimed a new, 'democratic' right to preach the gospel in public – 'keep on speaking, do not be silent' – raises the question of how to reconcile these seemingly competing pulls.

One way, I suggest in the next section, is by turning to a wider sphere of circulation extending beyond the frame analysed in Larkin's article, a sphere in which acts of evangelism are situated and for which publicity is performed. For if Mungpi's preaching is a monologue, it is also a soliloquy in which the offstage audience is made up both of God and of a Christian counterpublic that exists increasingly online. My aim is not to restate familiar arguments about how something approximating Furnivall's plural society emerges in the split publics and silos of the digital sphere, with the attendant anxieties about the hollowing out of what gets called the public conversation (Slotta 2019). Rather, I want to show how tracking performances of publicity can reveal something of the dynamics through which online and offline publics operate interdependently, joined at oblique angles with the smartphone acting as a hinge.

### The circulation of publicity

It was pointed out a few years ago that the number of people on Facebook – about 2.2 billion – corresponded roughly with the number of Christians worldwide (Osnos 2018). In the years since, the growth of the former has outpaced that of the latter. Some of Facebook's fastest uptake has been in Myanmar, about which it is often remarked that 'Facebook is the internet', meaning that few people access the web outside of the frame of its timeline and associated features (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019). This is part of the broader transformation of the country's media landscape since 2011. At that time, 1 per cent of the population was thought to have access to the internet. By 2015, when I was doing fieldwork, that figure had shot up to 25 per cent (Osnos 2018). Over the same period, according to some estimates, the proportion of the population with a mobile phone went from 2.6 per cent – only North Korea had fewer phones – to over 80 per cent (McCarthy 2018). Where SIM cards had once cost over \$2,000 each, it was, by the time of my research, possible to buy one for just \$1.50 from Ooredoo, one of two foreign telecommunications companies awarded contracts in 2014 to begin rolling out a mobile network (an advert for this provider is visible in Figs 1, 3, and 4).

In an echo of narratives surrounding the Arab Spring, social media were framed as central to Myanmar's democratization process, at least in the initial phase of the transition. They were also apparent evidence of Facebook's ability to realize its mission statement: to make the world more 'open and connected'. What has happened in the years since to this narrative is well known: fake news, Russian hacking, Cambridge Analytica. The worsening crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State made plain how Facebook was being used to incite violence against the Rohingya in particular and the country's Muslims in general (cf. Prasse-Freeman 2021). In many ways, this shifting narrative around Facebook tracked the arc of the narrative around Myanmar's promised democratization: from excitement to disappointment in a remarkably short period.

Scholars of social media have cautioned that this kind of approach to the digital, oscillating between all-encompassing utopian or dystopian visions, risks eliding the ways that the affordances of media technologies are domesticated in particular settings. For evangelists in Myanmar like Mungpi, one thing Facebook provided is a new venue for the recognition and circulation of the publicity increasingly being performed on the





Figure 4. Laura documenting Mungpi's preaching. (Photo by the author. Faces blurred for anonymity.)

train and elsewhere. Few gospel trips were complete without their being documented and uploaded (Fig. 4). Consider one of Laura's Facebook posts from March 2016. It features a montage of images from a day evangelizing on the train, including photos of Mungpi preaching with Laura holding the images behind him; of her folding tracts; of both of them handing them out; and of the train itself (Fig. 5). It quickly received over 100 likes. Its caption reads:



Figure 5. Laura’s Facebook post. (Screenshot by the author. Faces blurred for anonymity.)

Participating in the harvest (*yeik thein: bweh*) during the Last Days (*nauk soun: thaw kala*) isn’t just about preaching in front of thousands of people. It’s also about faithfully participating in a seemingly insignificant place, even if your work goes unrecognized ...

One way of reading this post is as a disavowal of the desire for recognition that it simultaneously seeks to acquire; a kind of paradoxical meta-commentary in which the

veracity of Laura's claim is thrown into doubt by the very act of publicly making it. 'Recognize that I'm not interested in seeking recognition', it seems to say. But another reading is to see in it the real-time navigation, across various publics, of different registers of recognition. When Laura posts that it does not matter whether her efforts are recognized, we might ask: recognized by whom and in what way? To whom is her publicity directed? Here is one public presentation couched inside another, a kind of fractal publicity in which a broader public sphere is framed – and its representation put to work – in the terms and service of a Christian public that is both wider and narrower than the audience assembled on the train.

We also see this paradoxical publicity – this dance between attracting and avoiding attention – playing out in Laura's use of language. When I showed her post to a Burmese Buddhist friend, he said he found the text confusing and weird, unsure of what to make of the words for 'harvest' and 'Last Days'. But this only goes to show that the public to which the post is directed is not one for whom these formulations would come across as alien. Within this Christian public, the strangeness of this language ceases to be a problem; on the contrary, its circulation therein becomes one of that public's constitutive features (Warner 2002: 86). The Buddhist friend to whom I showed the post, then, might stand here for the broader public that is presented in, but not addressed by Laura's post – a public that fails, like the man who mistook Mungpi for a Buddhist, to recognize both the meaning of its content and the importance of the work that it depicts, even as the need for this recognition is also what the post claims to renounce.

Selfies featured prominently here, 'a type of self-representation ... [that] allows you to imagine a time-space that you compose, create, curate, caption, and adorn, with the self as the main protagonist' (Shipley 2015: 405). The selfies of evangelists captured the time-space of evangelism and the publicity it entailed. But just as they became a medium for the performance of publicity, they also became a medium for the performance of sincerity, which, as Keane argues, is always dependent on it being publicly recognized, especially in Protestant contexts that demand that 'adults must confirm their true faith in a public performance' (2002: 79). This is evident in Laura's post, in her commitment to 'faithfully' sharing the gospel, thereby aligning her interior beliefs with her exterior speech and actions in the world. That she does so in the absence of recognition only reinforces her sincerity insofar as it indexes the autonomy of her speech and actions as independent of any constraints imposed by the society in which she is embedded.

The performance of publicity, however, can also sit awkwardly with the performance of sincerity. We have already seen one potential hazard entailed by the public mediation of sincerity in that Laura's post might prompt the question of whether her disavowal of recognition is in fact sincere. But a further hazard stems from the fact that these socially mediated performances circulate across various intersecting publics. Recall that in Keane's foundational article, the ethnographic examples on which he draws to discuss the public performance of sincerity take place in person, in the context of a church congregation, for a public of fellow believers (2002: 79-84): that is, for a fairly *private* public, relatively speaking. The expressions of – and anxieties about – sincerity found in the Facebook posts discussed here circulate across a more complex terrain, all the more complex because they often concern the sincerity not just of the self but also of the other.

Consider one of Richard's posts from May 2016 (Fig. 6). It featured a selfie he took with a man at the bus stop on the busy street downstairs from Life. Richard and the man are seated next to one another, staring straight into the camera. The caption reads:





Figure 6. Richard’s Facebook post. (Screenshot by the author. Faces blurred for anonymity.)

Everything happens according to God’s (*paya*) plan. I was disappointed earlier today because I had to wait over an hour to get the bus to Hlaing Tharyar. But I started speaking with U Than Zaw, who sells drinks just beside the bus stop, and I got a chance to talk and witness to him about Jesus (*yeshu*). He very easily (*lwan lwan ne*) said, ‘I believe in Jesus’. But let’s pray for him to really convert (*tageh pyaun*).

Here, in witnessing Richard’s witnessing, we see the presentation and circulation of multiple expressions of sincerity. At one level, as in Laura’s post, the selfie allows him to compose and curate the time-space of his impromptu evangelism and broadcast it to a wider, though circumscribed, audience. In doing so, he conveys his sincerity to the

extent that his witnessing is an expression of his own faith and the commitment this faith entails to share it with others. The spontaneity of his evangelism further reinforces this image, in line with a Protestant privileging of spontaneous and improvisational speech over formulaic modes of address (Haeri 2017: 129). But we also see a concern with the sincerity of Richard's interlocutor, U Than Zaw: 'Let's pray for him to *really* convert'. Richard tells us that U Than Zaw was able to express his belief in Jesus 'very easily', which understandably prompts Richard's doubt as to whether this new belief is genuine; there is always the risk that U Than Zaw's *anade* has made him capitulate so as to avoid any awkwardness. But in expressing this doubt about the sincerity of U Than Zaw's expression of belief, Richard is also able to further underscore his own sincerity, by presenting himself as the kind of evangelist to whom such a thing would really matter, as someone who is not indifferent to the potential indifference of those to whom he is witnessing.

The potential hazards produced by the relationship between publicity and sincerity were made especially clear one evening in June 2016 when I attended a baptism ceremony conducted by Pastor Khai, the founder of an affiliated Pentecostal church. Four women and one man were baptized: two of the women had Buddhist backgrounds; the others were born-again believers from 'nominal' Christian families. About twenty people first gathered for a short Bible study session at the church, which the pastor had started in a small downtown apartment in 2013. He gave each of the five people a bible as a gift, and spoke to them about Adoniram Judson, how he translated the Bible into Burmese, and how he had been jailed after he was accused of being a spy during the first Anglo-Burmese war.<sup>3</sup> Because Pastor Khai's church lacked the facilities, he organized for a minibus to take us to another Pentecostal church about twenty minutes away where he could perform the five baptisms. Here was a version of public recognition, for an audience of fellow believers, analogous to what Keane discusses in his article. The mother of one of the two Buddhist women took many photos; the father, I was told, had not been informed that his daughter was being baptized. Afterwards, standing before the tank of water, Pastor Khai told us that he was happy for everyone to be taking photos but asked us not to post any on Facebook. 'Please keep them just on your phone', he said. 'Because, for some other people, when it comes to religion (*bathaye*), it's sensitive'. He continued,

I could create unnecessary problems if I post on Facebook ... You've proven in front of people and God that you really believe and accept God. You've done that by your mouth. People see that, people hear that. God sees that, God hears that.

By giving this warning, Pastor Khai was guiding us across the fraught ground of recognition and sincerity that Christians like him now traversed – a terrain in which social media and a more open public sphere provided new avenues for the performance of publicity, even as they also brought new risks that these performances might circulate too far or in the wrong way. His warning came at a time when a video featuring Thiri Shinn Thant, a famous Buddhist fashion model who had converted to Christianity, had been circulating on Facebook (Fig. 7). The video captures the moment of her sharing her testimony – a supreme performance of Protestant sincerity – for the first time, on stage at a Christian event in Yangon. 'I was a true Buddhist', she begins. 'I was very religious. I practised meditation whenever I had the time'. The video, which drew so many angry comments from Buddhist Facebook users that versions of it were taken down, caused some of my Christian friends to reflect on the dangers of the wrong kind of attention,





Figure 7. Thiri Shinn Thant's testimony. (Screenshot by the author.)

the wrong kind of recognition – the kind of thing Pastor Khai was eager to avoid. ‘You don’t need to advertise it’, was how other friends put it. Such moments were reminders of the value of indifference. It was ‘proof’ enough, for those being baptized, to have it witnessed by God and those in attendance: ‘People see that ... God sees that ...’.

Facebook – with its promise of openness, connection, and transparency – was affording Pentecostals in Myanmar new opportunities through which their faith, and the commitments it entailed, could be recorded and recognized. But this move was also bringing to the fore risks of recognition across lines of difference that might be avoided

in contexts of physical copresence, as on the train. The media theorist John Durham Peters writes that,

There is no site riper with danger and embarrassment than the presence of another person ... [Social media] do not resolve these troubles, though one of their main appeals ... lies in providing a form of social relations that reduces many of the dangers of face-to-face interaction – only for others to pop up instead (2015: 6).

Performances of publicity are both enabled and imperilled by circulations difficult to manage and contain.

### **Conclusion: Full circle**

In this article, I have discussed how a changing set of political, economic, and infrastructural circumstances in Myanmar afforded Christians new freedoms to preach in public – more visibly and vocally – and also new platforms for the documentation and publicization of these emerging performances of publicity. I have explored some of the promises and perils that attended the circulation of these performances. Digital media have forced anthropologists and others to grapple with how to approach the split publics that take shape or whose boundaries are solidified on the internet, even as scholars also question the apparent distinction between the online and the offline, the digital and the ostensibly real (Boelstorff 2016; Willems 2019). Some have shown how digital media facilitate the creation of ‘witnessing publics’ that complexly mediate people’s participation in activist movements (Chua 2018). Others have called attention to the phenomenon of the ‘recursive public’, an entity that is ‘vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical and conceptual means of its own existence as a public’ (Kelty 2008: 3).

While such concepts are helpful in making sense of how evangelists and others in Myanmar used social media during the ‘transition’, my focus in this article has been somewhat different. What interests me here is the ways in which performances of publicity circulate obliquely across multiple publics, and how the stakes of indifference and recognition fluctuate in that movement. If publicity here is ‘fractal’, it is not necessarily in the way Gal (2002) influentially theorized it, with the distinction between public and private recursively nested in ever-smaller units (neighbourhood, house, bedroom, etc.). Nor is this necessarily about the relationship between backstage ‘shadow zones’ of intimacy and mass-mediated sites of display (Shryock 2004). What we have here, rather, is a dynamic in which the smartphone screen acts as a kind of infinity mirror, allowing publicity itself to be performed and reflected back to a public that might be more or less intimate than the one present at the moment of initial address.

In July 2016, the state-owned railway operator announced a \$200 million redevelopment of the circular train funded by the Japanese development agency. The project was set to replace ageing trains and speed up the journey, much to the relief of frustrated daily users. In Myanmar, as elsewhere, such infrastructural improvement programmes had become grounds on which hopes and disappointments of the ‘transition’ were projected; in affording more accelerated and less impeded circulation – like Facebook’s promise of openness and connection – they indexed the mobility now promised in the wake of five decades of apparent stasis and closure. Mungpi responded more ambivalently to the announcement. The train’s unhurried locomotion was kind of the point, providing an audience present for an extended

period. Two months later, I rode the train for the last time with the evangelists. As they moved down through the carriage handing out tracts, Mungpi continued talking to passengers. ‘You might be asking, “Is he promoting a religion? Is he trying to convert (*batha sweh: ta*) people?” No, that’s not what I’m doing. I’m not making comparisons.’ In saying this, Mungpi was perhaps avoiding being drawn into the kind of ‘dialogics of religious rivalry’ that Mahadev observed in Sri Lanka. He was also, like Pastor Khai, mitigating against the risk that he would be recognized as seeking to convert Buddhists to Christianity – a long way from his being misrecognized as a Buddhist preacher by an indifferent listener.

Recent scholarship, especially on indigenous politics in settler colonial contexts, has done much to unsettle straightforward understandings of recognition – especially as it figures in liberal techniques of managing difference through tolerance, techniques premised on those commitments to visibility and transparency discussed above. Simpson speaks of the ‘labor of refusal’ through which her Mohawk interlocutors reject the recognition conferred by the state, as a mechanism through which ‘visibility is produced, creating conditions under which difference becomes apparent’ (2014: 18). In *Bound by recognition*, Markell similarly pushes against an understanding of democracy that depends on ‘mutual transparency’. Why, he asks, do we assume that democracy requires that ‘all people be known and respected as who they really are’ (2003: 7) – in other words, that they make themselves sincerely and transparently visible?

How might this question help us make sense of the work of Mungpi and the other evangelists, taking up new freedoms to preach across lines of difference, freedoms offered them by a democratic transition, albeit one accompanied by an ascendant Buddhist nationalism? By insisting that he was not ‘trying to convert people’, the hazard Mungpi was attempting to avert might lie less in being misrecognized than in being recognized (cf. Keane 1997). Or, to put it differently, there was a risk of being insufficiently misrecognized – of being seen too fully, too transparently. But considering this alongside the sentiment expressed in Richard’s post – broadcasting his hope that U Than Zaw ‘really converts’ – points to how the stakes of publicity and sincerity shift as the evangelists’ performances circulate between a largely inattentive Buddhist audience and a more attentive Christian one. If they seem strangely unperturbed by the indifference they encounter in the former, that might be because ‘God works in his own time’. But it might also be because the recognition they seek comes, at least in part, from the latter.

Anthropologists might not be so different from evangelists in this respect. During a visit to Myanmar in 2019, I met up with Joseph to give him a copy of my recently finished Ph.D dissertation, in which he and his friends feature prominently. As we sat at a café down the road from Life, he posted a photo of us and the dissertation on Facebook (Fig. 8). I can only hope that what Joseph says about my future book is right, that it will indeed be a best-seller. But I also think, more seriously, that his post, and my including it here, raises questions about the ways in which, as anthropologists, we are implicated and invested – in complex and often awkward ways – in performing publicity alongside those with whom we work. What to make of me sharing this screenshot in this article – as part of this performance, to this public? How far do efforts of anthropologists mirror those of evangelists, to the extent that both have an interest not just in how they and their work are seen, but also in how they are seen being seen, how their publicity is publicized to different audiences in and beyond their fieldsites? How much are current questions about our work’s ‘impact’, or about the indifference it might receive from wider publics,

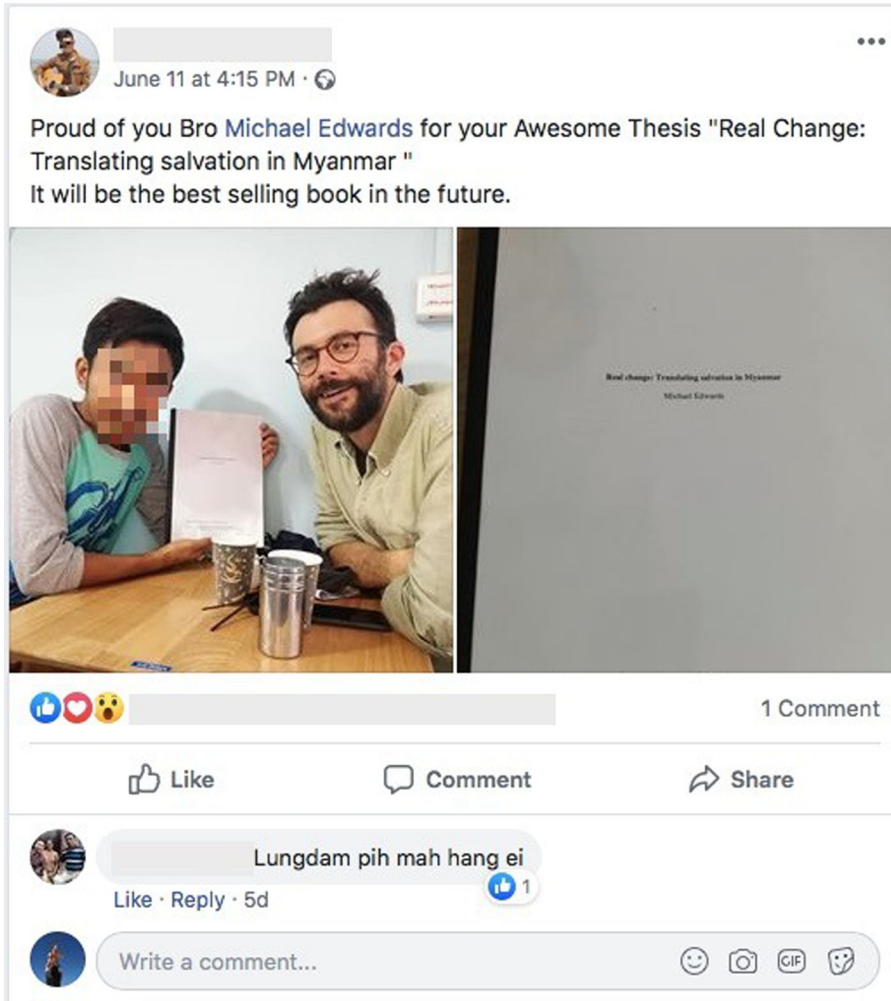


Figure 8. Joseph and the author, June 2019. (Screenshot by the author. Face blurred for anonymity.)

ultimately also questions about performances of publicity that circulate, like Mungpi's preaching on the train, across multiple spaces and times?

### Coda

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military seized power in a coup, sparking massive protests, which were, in turn, met with an increasingly brutal crackdown. While the full implications for questions considered above are not yet clear, it appears that the specific historical moment from which they arose has now passed. It also appears that the unfolding events might point to something of the promises and perils of publicity discussed here, albeit on a different scale: the possibilities and dangers emerging from the entanglement of bodies assembled in public space and the images of those bodies circulating online. Notwithstanding the junta's effort to block the internet, social media have been used to document military violence, to share memes mocking the generals

(Chu May Paing 2021), and to publicly shame their relatives (Sithu Aung Myint 2021). Celebrities, including Thiri Shinn Thant, have gone online to express support for civil disobedience. Stories circulate of police randomly stopping people to check their phones for anti-coup content. Faces that appeared in previous drafts of this article are now blurred – a decision that, like the use of pseudonyms, raises difficult questions about the recognition we afford or deny our interlocutors (Shneiderman 2021). The protest signs that have filled city streets and social media streams appear to be directed, like Mungpi's evangelism, to multiple publics at once. Those written in English, some calling for the UN to 'save Myanmar', seem addressed, at least in part, to a largely indifferent international audience – enjoining it to intervene in a country that, not so long ago, some felt was on the cusp of being saved by God.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Names of persons and churches have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for Furnivall, the 'plural society' was a problem, since he felt it impeded the emergence of a common will necessary for uniting different groups and advancing social progress (Pham 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On the ways in which some legacies of Judson's translation work inflect contemporary evangelism in Myanmar, see Edwards (2021b).

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## **Circuler dans la différence : performances de la publicité sur et au-delà d'un train de Yangon**

### *Résumé*

Dans le contexte de la transition démocratique difficile en Birmanie, des pentecôtistes locaux ont saisi de nouvelles opportunités d'évangéliser publiquement les bouddhistes, mais leurs efforts ont été accueillis dans l'indifférence générale. Cet article explore le rôle de l'indifférence dans la médiation de la différence au cours de rencontres. En s'appuyant sur des travaux menés sur la reconnaissance et la sincérité, l'auteur soutient que ces évangélistes n'étaient pas seulement occupés par le défi de saluer un public dans une sphère publique temporairement plus ouverte, bien que traversée par une tension accrue autour de l'appartenance religieuse. Ils étaient également concernés par ce que l'auteur appelle la performance de la publicité : les manières dont la publicité est elle-même rendue publique, célébrée, diffusée et reçue, notamment en ligne.

Michael Edwards is a Smuts Research Fellow at the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge. Currently writing a book about the encounter between Pentecostalism and Buddhism in Myanmar, he has published articles in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, and the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*.

*Centre of South Asian Studies, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DT, UK.  
me467@cam.ac.uk*