Myanmar’s hidden-in-plain-sight social infrastructure:
*nalehmu* through multiple ruptures

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**ABSTRACT**
This article examines n*alehmu*, a set of informal relational practices for negotiating power across scales which have facilitated access and enforced accountability through mutually recognized norms and social sanctions in Myanmar. Like Asef Bayat’s “quiet encroachment” in the Middle East, *nalehmu* is Myanmar’s discreet and prolonged practice of agency that has enabled ordinary people to survive and better their lives despite the multiple ruptures in Myanmar’s history, as seen most recently in the February 2021 coup d’état. The paper analyzes how *nalehmu* serves as a hidden-in-plain-sight social infrastructure across three different scales: relations of mutuality, obligation, and reciprocity between individuals; implicit connections for accessing goods, services, and recognition; and a means of interacting with the state via the *nalehmu* economy. This analysis seeks to do more than add a different case to studies of urban Southeast Asia, but also to help produce further theorization that takes seriously the actually existing contexts and practices in the global South.

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**Introduction**

In April 2021, three months into the most recent and increasingly more violent coup d’état in Myanmar, local residents managed to obstruct the junta by refusing to cooperate with military appointed officials. Following the February 1, 2021 coup, the junta attempted to replace all local level administrators with those loyal to the military.\(^1\) In one town in Shan State, the junta-appointed administrators were socially ostracized by the community to the point of resigning. With no one daring to take their place, every ward administrator position in town went unfilled.\(^2\) Across the country, residents\(^3\) supported each other and striking civil servants by donating basic foodstuffs such as rice, oil, and onions. From small roadside tables to large-scale donations for thousands
of households, residents organized bags of food under signs marked *po yin hlu, lo yin yu* (*“donate if you have extra, take if you have need”*).\(^4\)

These locally initiated direct actions are part and parcel of the ordinary practices of everyday life in Myanmar.\(^5\) Myanmar people\(^6\) have not relied on formal institutional channels to access goods and services or assert their rights but use informal networks and personal relationships to exercise agency and ensure mutual accountability. The brief decade of institutional reform from 2011 to 2021 saw greater reliance on formal institutions and donor-driven support for institution-building; however, access to institutions varies widely across geographic, religious, and ethnic divides.\(^7\)

This article examines *nalehmu*,\(^8\) a set of informal relational practices for negotiating power across scales which have facilitated access and enforced accountability through mutually recognized norms and social sanctions. Translated as “understanding” (of a situation), “understanding” (between persons or sides), and based “(on the) understanding,”\(^9\) *nalehmu* is the noun form of the verb *nale*, which translates as “to understand, know, and comprehend.” This concept of understanding is situated and achieved between actors, not independent of context. It is a way of negotiating power that establishes relations of mutuality, obligation, and reciprocity between individuals and groups; enables access to goods, services, and recognition either through commonly accepted norms or by bypassing state regulations; and facilitates interaction with the state, even during times when the state has seen its people as potential enemies.\(^10\) It is a dynamic set of practices that works across different scales – from the intimate to the public – which can produce social and economic value horizontally through rhizomatic decentralized networks\(^11\) and vertically through hierarchies.\(^12\) The scalar range of *nalehmu* might seem surprising but it is this very range and agility that makes it a hidden-in-plain-sight social infrastructure.\(^13\)

*Nalehmu*, like what Asef Bayat has called “quiet encroachment,”\(^14\) is a discreet and prolonged way in which Myanmar people have struggled to survive and better their lives through grassroots tactics. Both are enabling strategies that operate through “a mix of individual and collective direct action [which] is accentuated under the sociopolitical circumstance characterized by authoritarian states, populist ideology, and strong family ties.”\(^15\) Myanmar’s military has ruled the country for fifty-six out of...
seventy-three years since the country gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Under Generals Ne Win (1958–1960 and 1962–1988), Saw Maung (1988–1992), Than Shwe (1992–2011), and now Min Aung Hlaing, the instigator of the 2021 coup, authoritarianism has been the norm. Everyday Myanmar people, like marginalized populations in the Middle East, “tend to function as much as possible outside of the boundaries of the state and modern bureaucratic institutions, basing their relationships on reciprocity, trust, and negotiation rather than on the modern notions of individual self-interest, fixed rules, and contracts.”

The brief five-year interlude of a civilian government led by the popularly elected Aung San Suu Kyi (2016–2021) preceded by the self-proclaimed civilian government led by former general Thein Sein (2011–2016) were framed as a period of transition to bring forth a modern democratic Myanmar. The promise of modernity, however, is once again called into question as the 2021 coup d’état reveals how processes of formalization and rationalization have rendered the people of Myanmar more legible to the state, and thus more vulnerable to surveillance and other forms of state violence.

Following a period of colonial rule (1824–1948), Myanmar underwent four coup d’états (1958, 1962, 1988, and 2021), with each new government bringing new political, economic, and even naming systems. Episodic change has been the norm, rather than the exception. To explain how nalehm has worked through these multiple ruptures, we draw from postcolonial scholarship that approaches local and historical differences as generative sites for theorizing, not as a catalogue of idiosyncratic particularities to be examined through universal theories. Our analysis has emerged through itineraries of recognition, wherein the multi-scalar operations of nalehm remained largely illegible to us until we were forced to negotiate its subtleties. We had entered the ethnographic field separately to study how the Sino-Burmese made a place for themselves and how Myanmar’s urban property system adapted to shifting authority. In 2007, while volunteering with the Myanmar Women’s Development Association, we learned that implicit nalehm agreements were preferred over explicit written contracts. Indeed, written consent is not seen as empowering but is rather an object of suspicion. The puzzle of nalehm compelled us to make sense of it from the ground up without the armature of pre-selected concepts. This article is the result of an inductive process that prioritizes lived empirical complexity observed through a combined five years of fieldwork and residence between 2007 and 2020. We seek to do more than add another case to studies of urban Southeast Asia, but to help produce further theorization that takes seriously actually existing contexts and practices in the global South.

16Bayat 2010, 59.
17Scott 1998.
18As the result of three Anglo-Burmese Wars, Burma was conquered and incorporated into the British Empire in stages – 1824, 1852 (1852), and 1885 (Mandalay).
19Roy 2016a and 2016b; Yiftachel 2009a and 2009b.
20Roy 2011.
21Roberts 2013 and 2016.
22Rhoads 2019, 2020a and 2020b.
23Brooten and Metro 2014; Metro 2014.
24Roberts was in Myanmar from 2007 to 2009 and 2014 to 2015, then again from 2016 to 2019. Rhoads was in Myanmar for twelve months in 2009 and 2010, made short visits in 2011 and 2012, and then spent a total of sixteen months in the country between 2013 and 2020.
25Lawhon and Truelove 2020; McFarlane 2012; Robinson 2016; Graham and McFarlane 2015.
AbdouMaliq Simone has identified the underlying logic of mutual relations which have and continue to support urban life in Indonesia and Africa. He argues that when people work with each other across different territories, relations, and belonging, these “conjunctions become an infrastructure” which is radically open and often invisible to observers but constitutes more than ephemeral intersections because each action “carries traces of past collaboration and an implicit willingness to interact with one another in ways that draw on multiple social positions.”

Similarly, feminist anthropologist Ara Wilson takes the “infrastructural turn in scholarship” to foreground the infrastructure of intimacy, showing how “intimate relations are already inextricable from, and realized through, larger relays of power,” that is, intimacy is scalar. She challenges the construct of the intimate – private everyday identities and relationships – as non-economic and argues that “economic systems – even corporate capitalism – are composed of social and cultural processes and are lived in daily life.”

These intimate economies, defined by Wilson as the complex interplay between intimate social dimensions and plural economic systems, rely on multiple relationships that stretch from the private home to the global market across gender identities and ethnic ties. In these relations, dichotomous categories of formal versus informal fail to recognize how intimate and public practices are mutually constituted and work with power through repeated negotiations. Both Simone and Wilson have observed that governance is not necessarily centralized in the state but may be distributed across differential relationships to facilitate access to goods, services, and improvised settlement. This relational and intimate economy emphasizes the non-contractual or non-law-bound dimensions of urban life which can serve as platforms “to feel out the possibilities of collaboration that are not yet and need not be visible in the moment.”

This kind of relational negotiation with an eye on the future is also evident in the Han Chinese practice of guanxi (mutual relationships, a connection between people or things, having a concern with something or someone, or having a bearing on something). Guanxi operates through the primary recognition that the parties involved in an encounter see each other as relevant and deem the effort required for building a relationship to be worthwhile. As a form of favor-seeking, guanxi prioritizes personal bonds and long-term obligations. It relies on renqing (acceptable interpersonal behavior) and xinyong (trustworthiness) to enforce mutuality and reciprocity. Trust is integral in this practice because it places the reputation of the relevant parties at stake which can reduce fraud. Renqing engenders an emotional bond and sense of indebtedness, making it difficult for a person to decline a request for help or fail to repay a social debt. Guanxi can also be a form of rent-seeking, however, more focused on material exchange, in which a personal relationship serves as the means, not an end, of exchange. In this form, guanxi can play on power asymmetries to achieve selfish objectives and become a mechanism for corruption, but corruption is not inherent in guanxi. Mayfair Yang, Xiaoying
Qi, and other scholars have shown that conflating guanxi with corruption valorizes modernist rational-legal values while erasing the significant particularities and fluidities of context. According to Yang, guanxi practice eschew “universalistic and transcendental morality … and instead is guided by a set of situational and relational ethics.” By contrasting universal morality with situational ethics, Yang challenges the dichotomy of “moral economy” versus “transactional economy” thereby retheorizing social relations from the Asian periphery. Our analysis of Myanmar practices continues this effort of decentering the metropole by showing how nalehmu transcends the binaries of formal versus informal or moral versus corrupt and works in subtle ways predicated on interdependent relationships across scales.

**Nalehmu across scales**

Nalehmu, like relational and intimate economies, operates across a wide spectrum, from the most intimate to the most public. It is mutually constituted not only between different actors within the three scales discussed below but also transgresses these scalar boundaries to enable access to different levels in the social and political hierarchy. Regardless of scale, the practice is centered on the giving and receiving of nale (understanding) and is usually called nalehmu. One interlocutor said, “Nalehmu is like a bridge between people. A husband and wife need nalehmu. If we don’t have it, we can’t stay together.” Another commented, “In nalehmu, there is money” (Nalehmu te hma, paìgsan shi de) when describing his interactions with government officials. While both speakers specifically used the term nalehmu to refer to these face-to-face negotiations, they held different expectations of nalehmu and judged the practice and the obligations it confers differently in different contexts.

In the interpersonal interactions between a husband and wife, or family members, the giving of nale is seen as a manifestation of empathy and selflessness. An elderly woman in southern Myanmar explained that although she lives in an extended family home with twenty-six other people, they never quarrel, as they have nalehmu. On Myanmar’s...

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34Ambler 2006; Qi 2013; Yang 2002.  
35Yang 1994, 104.  
36Qi 2013; Yang 2002.  
37Roy 2016b.  
38We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for recommending that we state our conception of formal versus informal more explicitly. Given the limitations of space, we do not indulge in an extended discussion of the concepts of moral economy or gift economy because our aim is to push forward from the work of scholars like Mayfair Yang who undertook a rigorous and extended discussion on these topics in her book Gifts, Favors, and Banquets (1994). In addition, as we discuss in our conclusion, we are concerned about the globalized practices of international aid and development which have tended to apply universalized definitions of morality and good governance with negligible attention to local practices of ethics. As the concept of “moral economy” has almost become a cliché in Burma-related literature, we have consciously adopted different language to present an alternative analysis.  
39Interview, October 4, 2020.  
40နားလည်မှုထဲမှာပိုက်ဆံရှိတယ်  
41Interview, August 26, 2017.  
42Interview, August 27, 2017. We would like to thank Tharaphi Than for pointing out that although nale is involved in all three scales of interactions, there can be differences in how Burmese people use the word. In the most intimate interactions, the tendency is to talk about the action as in နားလည်ပေးတယ် (to give understanding). In comparison, the more abstract noun form of the word with the suffix hmu is often used to describe more transactional interactions as in doing something through understanding (နားလည်မှု နဲ့ လုပ်တယ်). However, as seen in our interview with an elderly woman, nalehmu is also used to describe familial relationships. Her use of nalehmu could be explained by the fact that she was describing a phenomenon to someone outside of her family.
social media sites, people remind each other that nalehmu is essential for relationships, describing it as the ability to see both sides, to set aside selfishness, to forgive, and to sympathize. On these same platforms, Buddhist monks, who are generally seen as sources of wisdom, offer advice such as, “If one person and another have nalehmu then they have already created a peaceful and easy life.”

In contrast, if the term nalehmu arises in conversations about the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), which was established by the military government in 1990, it implies unauthorized transactions within gray spaces of unclear regulations or sometimes in clear violation of state law. Nalehmu’s protean quality is notable because its foundation is relational negotiations but these negotiations at different scales and in various contexts produce variable outcomes that span the moral spectrum. As an architect remarked while explaining how he navigated between clients, builders, and the government, “Myanmar is based in the personal, not the principle.” The parties involved must see each other as relevant and thereby invest in the relationship through the giving and receiving of nalehmu, even if merely for monetary gain.

Similar to the Chinese concept of guanxi, nalehmu generates mutual obligations and reciprocity in various forms. The giving of understanding (nale pede) produces a debt that must be repaid if one is to maintain one’s standing within local society or continue to exercise power within an institution. These implicit practices are informal, but they are not purely transactional. Much like AbdouMaliq Simone’s concept of “people as infrastructure,” these interactions continually reproduce a system that is coherent enough to enable action and produce possible futures, but the infrastructure is not always visible. Nalehmu is a way of engendering relational understanding that becomes the basis for action. It is the hidden-in-plain-sight social infrastructure in Myanmar. As a Mandalay-based entrepreneur explained, “Rules here are unwritten. It’s working here, but in a different way. The government does things the government way, the people do things the people’s way.”

Scale/Type 1: relations of mutuality, obligation, and reciprocity between people

At the scale of everyday people, nalehmu can establish and reinforce implicit social norms which foster mutual care and encourage collaboration. This type of nalehmu is not free of monetary entanglements but our informants distinguished more selfless or empathetic nalehmu from profit-driven transactions. While the most intimate level of nalehmu within families and between couples is beyond the scope of our analysis, one-on-one personal relationships are central to the practice of nalehmu, serving as the linchpin for cooperation, even in public acts of mutuality.

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43 Many posts in public Facebook groups discuss nalehmu and relationships.
44 A “peaceful life” is seen as a high level of cultivation and an ideal life in Myanmar.
45 Yiftachel 2009a and 2009b. The Yangon municipality was established during the colonial period but in 1990 the SLORC issued a new Yangon City Development Law No. 11/1990, establishing the YCDC as it is currently known.
46 Interview, August 27, 2017.
47 နားလည်ပေးတယ်
48 To do something using or with nalehmu, nalehmu ne louq de (နားလည်မှုနဲ့ လုပ်တယ်).
49 Interview, Mandalay, August 20, 2017.
Kenneth Wong describes how his home in Myanmar became the de facto neighborhood theater in the early 1980s because his family was one of the few on his street with a television set. The whole neighborhood excitedly assisted in bringing the television from the taxi to the house, “counting on the practice of reciprocity, the basic social principle in Burma, to be invited back on movie nights.” Older residents in Yangon speak fondly about the friendly relationships they had with neighbors from the 1960s to 1980s when everyone knew which house to go to for buying necessities such as tea or cooking oil when the government-run People’s Stores ran out of stock. Although most private commerce was officially illegal during the Burma Socialist Program Party period, neighbors reminisce on how they did not report each other, likely because they expected the same in return. Nalehmu is founded on the principles of reciprocity and has been strengthened by decades of living together through mutual hardship. Neighbors and communities made do by relying on layers of long-term reciprocal relationships. This is seen in the lyrics of a popular song: “If you board a bus and you don’t have enough money, you can ride for free.”

On a visit to Yangon’s Hokkien Guanyin Temple, elders on the executive committee apologized for departing so quickly because they had to attend a pwe (celebration or event) at a hpongyikyaung (a Buddhist monastic temple complex). The chairman explained in a mix of Minnan dialect and Burmese that they did not want to go because the committee receives so many invitations and every pwe requires a donation. He added, however, that Buddhist organizations should support each other even if the Hokkien Guanyin Temple and hpongyikyaung practice different kinds of Buddhism, Mahayana and Theravada respectively. Right before leaving, the chairman added, “People must be hōo-siong (mutual). We have to manage our guanxi well, otherwise, if we need help later, it will be hard.” As a long-settled minority population in Myanmar, Hokkien Chinese are careful to build and maintain personal relationships with the dominant Burman population and Burman Buddhist organizations. One could interpret this practice as purely instrumental, but they use the term hōo-siong (mutual) to describe relationships of sympathy and assistance, and tsò bé-bē (to buy and sell or business) to discuss commercial transactions.

Similarly, people distinguish between nalehmu and sibwaye-seiq ne (with a business mind, meaning purely commercial) transactions. We first encountered this distinction when a Mandalay tour guide and micro-scale entrepreneur complained about the unforgiving attitude of a Yangon shipping agent. He was trying to deliver some handmade robes to a Vipassana meditation center in the United States but transportation from Mandalay to Yangon had been delayed due to difficulty obtaining a large truck. In addition, he understood this job as partially a practice of dana, the giving of alms to

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50Wong 2007.
51Wong 2007, 134.
52Interviews with Sino-Burmese, 2008 and 2009.
53de Certeau 1988.
54Conversation with a Yangon public intellectual, April 26, 2017.
55Minnan is the dialect spoken by Han Chinese people in Fujian province. The people who speak this dialect are commonly known as Hokkien throughout Southeast Asia.
56November 4, 2008. In the Romanized vernacular, “Lan ài hōo-siong la. Lan ê kuan-hê ai tsò hô bô àu-bai ná su-iàu yin lâi tau-sann-kâng tó phàii-ng-kong.”
57For an in-depth discussion of the Sino-Burmese in Yangon, please see Roberts 2016.
58စီးပွားရေးစိတ်နဲ့.
support the propagation of Buddhist teachings. The American center that was the intended recipient teaches Vipassana in the tradition of Ledi Sayadaw, one of the most venerated monks in Myanmar’s history.\textsuperscript{59} The tour guide assumed the agent would be understanding because the guide was doing good works and had a relationship with the shipping agent. The agent, however, insisted on payment of storage fees based on their original agreement despite the fact that the storage space was empty and available for other use. The tour guide said, “Thuka sibwaye-seiq ne louq de, nale ma pe bu” (“She does it with a business mind and does not give any understanding”).\textsuperscript{60} In his assessment, the shipping agent only cared about money and failed to value their relationship. Her insistence on the fixed rules of business without accommodating circumstances revealed an absence of \textit{ nalehmu}.

Since the above encounter, we have heard many Myanmar people disparage \textit{sibwaye-seiq ne} as an unfeeling profit-driven way of interacting with others. We have also been compelled to negotiate the subtleties and entanglement of \textit{nalehmu} in many situations such as when drivers resist providing an exact quote for long fieldwork trips and reply with “\textit{sayama thebaw pe}” ([give] based on [your] the teacher’s wish).\textsuperscript{61} The indeterminant quality of this interaction demands a locally nuanced understanding of the driver’s financial situation, the cost of operating a taxi business, and the cultural expectations of someone who is seen as a teacher. This \textit{nalehmu}-based negotiation process also assumed that we shared a concern for each other and anticipated a future relationship.

\textit{Nalehmu}, however, is also seen as a burden because it demands reciprocity. Failure to meet this relational obligation weighs heavily on Burmese people.\textsuperscript{62} For example, when one of the authors offered to request a donation of teaching materials and educational support for a Mandalay university, the professors were concerned about incurring a debt of gratitude that would have to be repaid in the future to people they did not know well. They questioned the wisdom of investing in a relationship that might not be relevant for them.

**Scale/Type 2: implicit connections to access goods, services, recognition, and economic exchange**

Periodic political upheavals have left Myanmar without a consistent system of governance, non-personalistic arbitration, or reliable public services. Individuals and groups have instead established mutual relationships as safeguards and avenues for accessing goods, services, and social recognition. Or, as succinctly stated by a Myanmar public intellectual, “When the official system does not work, you use \textit{nalehmu}.”\textsuperscript{63} Increasing mutual accountability through networks of individuals is a reasonable long-term strategy when official systems of governance repeatedly prove unpredictable. Through personal networks often supported by kinship, religious, friendship, or ethnic connections,

\textsuperscript{59}Braun 2013.
\textsuperscript{60}စီးပွားရေးစိတ်နဲ့ လုပ်တယ်၊ နားလည်းမပေးဘူး။ December 11, 2007. One of the authors volunteered to design the robes and work as a local liaison for the meditation center in Washington, USA.
\textsuperscript{61}ဆရာမသဘောပေး၊. This translation is awkward because Burmese people do not usually say “you” but address people based on their social status or profession. As researchers with advanced degrees, we were usually called \textit{sayama} (“female teacher”) as a sign of respect.
\textsuperscript{62}Wong 2007 illustrates an example of the burden of reciprocity.
\textsuperscript{63}Conversation with Yangon public intellectual, April 26, 2017.
Myanmar people have built up mutual understanding and trust to secure their personal property and other agreements. Such agreements may be supported by laws but are not formal legal agreements, or may be in contravention of official law. Jesse Ribot and Nancy Peluso have argued that rather than framing access as “rights,” we should think about it as “the ability to derive benefit from things” based on all sorts of social relationships better thought of as “bundle of powers.” These dynamics of power can produce access through both legal and extra-legal means that are situated within, between or outside of formal institutions, operating through social identity, trust, patronage, friendship, obligation, and reciprocity, as well as law and coercion. An “ability to benefit” is the focus of analysis rather than formal rules or rights. While often used in studies focused on agricultural land or natural resources, Ribot and Peluso’s definition of access, and in particular the social relationships that create access, are key to understanding nalehmu as an infrastructure of access in rural and urban contexts.

Nalehmu is found in places where the reality on the ground does not align with the law on the books. Many laws from the colonial era remain on record but these are written in English, while older case law was published in English (in some cases until the 1970s). As a result, these texts are mostly unknown to the general public, are often not applied or applied inconsistently, and sometimes have been vernacularized as a form of custom, a “Burmese way” of doing things. Regulations over time have morphed into norms, often making it unclear from where a practice is derived or which entity is responsible for implementing a regulation. As Derek Hall, Phillip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li have noted, such inconsistencies and fuzzy boundaries allow for flexible accommodation. Residents use property access arrangements based on nalehmu in the context of a deregulated system wherein the populace is forced to contend with the “constant negotiability of value.”

When brought into direct contact with the formal legal system, property access arrangements based on nalehmu can become excuses for dispossession due to a lack of contracts or deeds, tax arrears, as well as “grounds for opposition,” not so much through electoral politics but via face-to-face negotiations between individuals who see each other as relevant. People in possession of property, sometimes for generations without legal documentation, may make claims to adverse possession, join civil society movements against dispossession, or appeal to their neighbors and local authorities by evoking nalehmu based on their long-term relationship to their property.

In downtown Yangon, long-time residents of flats in buildings owned by Indian or European evacuees who fled the country during the Second World War or following Ne Win’s 1962 coup d’état, have used nalehmu to lease or transfer property. Through the use of legal documents such as powers of attorney, adoption of adults as heirs, and household lists to prove inheritance, negotiated transfers are made without formally

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64Campbell 2019; Rhoads 2020a; Simone 2018.
65Ribot and Peluso 2003.
66Ribot and Peluso 2003.
67Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011.
68AlSayyad and Roy 2003, 5. See also Roy 2009.
69Blomley 2016, 594.
70Roberts 2018a. Elections have been a rare occurrence in Myanmar, with no municipal elections held between 1962 and 2014.
registering leases and deeds. This informal way of transferring property supported by relationships rather than law, and brokered by middlemen when the two parties do not have a pre-existing relationship, has proven useful for staying under the radar of the state. But it also allows people with vulnerable or insecure property rights to continue living in their homes and make use of their properties.

A significant percentage of downtown Yangon properties are owned by ethnic South Asians and Chinese, populations formally excluded from citizenship by birth under Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law. Because legislation prohibits property transfers involving foreigners (meaning anyone without a valid Citizenship Scrutiny Card [CSC], Myanmar’s national identity card), nalehmu arrangements provide a sense of belonging, even when this conflicts with national and religious belonging. Burmans occupying a foreign-owned building, or Burmese Indians whose citizenship documentation is pending or whose proof of ownership or inheritance was lost in the Second World War, can use personal relationships and informal transactions based on nalehmu as a way to safeguard their housing rights and livelihoods. Nalehmu has thus become the mechanism for building bounded circles of accountability in a situation in which the state-sanctioned formal channels have largely produced precarity. In the absence of emigrant landlords, tenants in Yangon band together to pay their property taxes in the name of the absent owner, ensuring their building does not fall into arrears and become at risk of confiscation by the government or attract other unwanted attention from authorities. In situations in which tenants wish to remodel but the owner of a pre-Second World War building is unknown, tenants arrange amongst themselves to demolish or remodel their building, keeping the likely long-deceased owner’s name as the official owner on paper.

Nalehmu has created diffuse networks that contend with but are not centered on the state, allowing for groups and individuals to use nalehmu to both bypass and interact with state agents. These informal tactics also produce value through a relational economy. For example, property sales deeds from the colonial period to the present often go unregistered. Yet, in 1954, the High Court held that a property transfer could only occur if the deed is registered, so without registration no transfer has officially occurred. This ruling successfully limited property transfers to foreign companies or foreign landowners barred from buying, selling, and gifting land under the 1947 Transfer of Immoveable Property (Restriction) Act, but allowed local nalehmu transfers based on mutual understanding between buyer and seller to continue unabated. These transfers have involved unregistered sales contracts, oral commitments rather than formal transfers, or simply unchallenged cases of adverse possession, meaning the registered deed remains in the name of the original owner rather than the current occupant. Defining a transfer as only occurring after deed registration has meant that the shadow market of negotiated land and housing access based on nalehmu remains illegible to the state. For those happy with the security of property relations based on nalehmu, without a legally registered deed, informal transfers can continue regardless of the civil documentation or citizenship status of the buyer or seller. Furthermore, nalehmu can be used to

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71Rhoads 2020b.  
72Rhoads 2020a.  
73Rhoads 2020b.  
74Rhoads 2020b.  
75U Khin Maung and one other vs. The Union of Burma (HC Criminal Appeal No. 604 of 1954, 1951 B.L.R., 1 S.C.).
transfer assets that are unregistrable and thus legally non-transferable, such as individual apartment units, property whose formal owner is unknown or deceased without heirs, properties where the current owner has no registered deed, or self-built housing on government land.\textsuperscript{76} Transactions based on \textit{nalehmu} can also in some cases produce legal tenure security as Myanmar law allows for part performance of a sales contract if the buyer is in possession of the property – meaning that the purchaser of a property via an unregistered \textit{nalehmu} transaction has protection from eviction by the seller.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, those involved in \textit{nalehmu} relationships with neighbors or authorities to access property of an absentee owner or other vacant property may claim adverse possession after twelve years of continuous residence.\textsuperscript{78}

### Scale/Type 3: the nalehmu economy as a means of interacting with the state

The above ways of working around official regulations through horizontal mutual networks are also employed to access state hierarchies. When the state becomes involved, \textit{nalehmu} appears less relational and more transactional with bribery becoming more notable, and fear playing a larger role than trust. Myanmar’s various attempts at governance reform since 2011 have tried to establish clearer lines of power and accountability at the local, regional, and national levels of governance but state operations remain largely opaque to most residents and even members of Yangon’s municipal and regional governments.\textsuperscript{79} Under these circumstances, \textit{nalehmu} is not an aberration from a universal moral-legal order but a productive and often necessary means of interacting with the state. In \textit{nalehmu} types one and two, money may change hands between individuals and groups, or through brokerage, but the power differential is less unequal and therefore negotiated through relational ethics. In this third type, \textit{nalehmu} as an infrastructure of access shifts from “people as infrastructure”\textsuperscript{80} established through collaborative tactics to produce potentialities, to “corruption as infrastructure.”\textsuperscript{81}

Hun Kim’s study of urban development in Ho Chi Minh City reveals how anti-corruption policies have failed to produce more equality or transparency because international experts presume a coherent legal and administrative framework exists that could “differentiate actions that violate societal norms from those that do not; a presupposition that in itself assumes that social norms and legal code are always in harmony.”\textsuperscript{82} In actual practice, actors within and outside of Ho Chi Minh City’s municipal government have utilized conflicting regulations and vagaries of enforcement to facilitate property development while publicly promoting a discourse of better governance through transparency.\textsuperscript{83} As Ward Berenschot and Gerry van Klinken highlight in their work on Indonesia, cultural norms of mutual obligation exist within the state and informality can be

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\textsuperscript{76}See Boutry et al. 2017; Scherer 2015.
\textsuperscript{77}Section 53a, 1882 Transfer of Property Act.
\textsuperscript{78}Limitation Act. India Act IX of 1908.
\textsuperscript{79}Roberts 2018b and 2020.
\textsuperscript{80}Simone 2004.
\textsuperscript{81}Kim 2020.
\textsuperscript{82}Kim 2020, 1059.
\textsuperscript{83}Kim 2020.
produced by the state. In cases where the state is personalistic and informal, using personal connections and mutual obligations to interact with state actors is a response to the workings of the state itself, and a form of agency on the part of citizens. Sapana Doshi and Malani Ranganathan characterize corruption as the “abuse of entrusted power,” but when there is little trust in state institutions, *nalehmu* is seen as both a euphemism for bribes as well as a means of negotiating and securing personal access or resolutions to specific problems, particularly for people facing multiple forms of exclusion.

This section focuses on the experience of Myanmar minority communities perceived and categorized as “non-native” in Myanmar’s legal framework, and subject to both increased surveillance and exclusion. It addresses how such communities use *nalehmu* as a basis for interaction with state officials to claim services and recognition. Oftentimes this involves monetary exchange, as one of the only means of interacting with an authoritarian state. As Hall, Hirsch, and Li have noted, the flexible accommodation provided by inconsistent laws also allows a lack of clarity to be used by state officials to intimidate, impose fines, and extract bribes.

**Nalehmu economies of recognition**

Religious minorities in Myanmar often describe themselves as stuck in a “*nalehmu* economy,” in which *nalehmu* is assumed to require a bribe for permits or services. Minority places of worship built before and during the colonial period have been deteriorating, and necessary maintenance requires permission from local authorities. But since the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) came to power in 1988, the authorities have rarely, if ever, granted permission for renovations. Rather than forgoing formal approval and risking fines or arrest, local communities proactively seek out *nalehmu* with a government official before submitting any formal applications. This personal relationship and mutual recognition provides more security than no acknowledgement at all. In some cases, this may have some formal trappings, such as a meeting with a ward official to request a letter of support for building renovations be sent to township, district, or regional authorities. But this form of *nalehmu* may not work, as the letters could be thrown out or ignored at the township or district levels. The second utilization of *nalehmu* is to make an arrangement directly with a ward official to undertake the renovations, which requires a large payment to secure the official’s understanding because the administrator could lose his position if township or regional government authorities learned of the unauthorized construction. In contrast, if a community were to repair their buildings without attempting *nalehmu*-based permission, this could lead to police involvement and even arrests, necessitating *nalehmu* (in the form of a bribe) for the community members’ release. This informal negotiation with the state is therefore

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84 Berenschot and van Klinken 2018; See also: Roy 2003.
85 Berenschot and van Klinken 2018, 107.
86 Doshi and Ranganathan 2019.
87 Cheesman 2017.
88 Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011.
89 Interview, Southern Myanmar, August 26, 2017.
90 It is not only places of worship that require official permission for renovations. Christina Fink describes a homeowner in Mon State routinely renovating his house without permission from local authorities but prepared to make a payment of “tea money” if they came to inspect his activities. Fink 2001, 137–138.
91 Interview, Southern Myanmar, 26 August 2017.
necessary whether one attempts *nalehmu* at the beginning or at the end of the extended transaction. The currency of this form of *nalehmu* is cash but is compelled by necessity and often, fear. To access the state, members of ethnic and religious minority communities face a clear dilemma: government authorities at various levels of the state have the power to extract bribes while minorities fear what may occur if they refuse to pay, trapping them in a transactional, not relational, *nalehmu* economy.

*Nalehmu* as a euphemism for a bribe or other sort of quid-pro-quo transaction is frequently used in these encounters between state officials and ethnic or religious minorities. In our research, non-Burmans and religious minorities often discussed the necessity of *nalehmu* when interacting with immigration officials to procure civil documentation such as citizenship scrutiny cards (CSCs), household registrations, and passports. Myanmar has a tiered citizenship system, with three categories of citizenship, all with different color-coded cards assigning different rights to the holder. Pink cards are for “full” citizens, blue for “associate” citizens, and green for “naturalized” citizens. Blue and green cards are reserved for people who are perceived by the Myanmar state as having “foreign” ancestry, often Chinese, British, or South Asian, and carry some *de jure* and *de facto* restrictions on political participation, employment, education, and crucially, passing citizenship to their children. Most importantly, the state has the power to grant and revoke associate and naturalized citizenship status at will, leaving citizenship scrutiny card applicants with little recourse should their status be revoked, their applications left pending indefinitely, or their applications denied.

Obtaining a CSC is necessary for buying and selling property, graduating from a tertiary institution, opening a bank account, accessing formal employment, domestic and international travel, and forms of political participation such as serving in a local office or joining a political party. While children deemed members of Myanmar’s officially recognized 135 “national races” are considered citizens by birth and issued CSCs in school at age ten, those suspected of having foreign ancestors must undergo citizenship scrutiny and apply for identity cards at the township level offices of the National Registration and Citizenship Department (NRCD). Children of naturalized or associate citizens must wait until the age of eighteen to become naturalized. Applying for and obtaining a national identity card involves years of interactions with the Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population, whose motto emblazoned on their website and on the walls of their offices roughly translates as: “Being swallowed by the earth will not cause a race to become extinct, only another people will make a race extinct.” This official stance against those perceived as foreign makes applicants vulnerable before they even begin the application process.

Alternative routes provided by *nalehmu* enable access to services or claims to rights that would otherwise be unavailable or require years of delays under discriminatory legal and institutional frameworks. A common experience of minority CSC applicants

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92Naturalized citizens must have been living in Myanmar prior to 1948 or descended from others who were, meaning most were born in Myanmar.

93See Kyaw 2015 for a discussion of how Myanmar’s Muslim minorities have been routinely classified by immigration officials as having foreign ancestry.

94Republic of the Union of Myanmar. မြေမြို ကြွင်းမှာ လူမျိုးမပြုတ် လူမျိုမှလူမျိုပြုတ်မည်။ This phrase plays on the Burmese belief that the earth will open up and swallow those who do bad deeds, sending them straight to hell. Under the coup the ministry has been changed to the Ministry of Immigration and Population.

95Cheesman 2015; Prasse-Freeman 2015; Rhoads 2020b.
is to face frequent delays and requests for bribes from immigration officers, with delays often resulting in requests for higher cash payments to expedite the process. Interviewees of South Asian and Chinese descent bemoaned the process of repeatedly going to the immigration office during business hours only to be turned away or sent to photocopy or collect yet another document. If they can afford to, such applicants often choose to hire a broker to handle the process, which routinely costs hundreds of US dollars per applicant to meet repeated requests for “tea money” by officials, plus the broker’s fee. In most cases, bribes are designed to avoid extensive delays and potentially even more difficulties, even though an applicant is legally eligible for a CSC. The official process, however, is overwhelmingly discriminatory for those considered descendants of foreigners, frequently taking years of document collection and visits to government offices to complete. By using nalehmu to negotiate lesser fines for late registrations, or to expedite the process, applicants carve out some sense of agency in an otherwise opaque and unpredictable bureaucratic encounter.

Those without documentation are continuously susceptible to requests for bribes from state officials. A former market seller from Yangon who applied for a CSC in 1990 but did not receive one until 2010 described the frequent harassment by police and municipal officials he faced. During the twenty years, he waited for his CSC, when he encountered officials at the market without one, he was asked for “alcohol money” and “tea money” – common euphemisms for bribes in Myanmar. Without the CSC, he could not officially own a business or other property, procure a driver’s license, access employment in private companies or the civil service, or engage in cross-border trade, making day labor and petty market trading his only options. This put him at near constant risk of harassment and demands for bribes from officials. He resented the constant requests for bribes, but recognized that without a CSC, he could only resort to petty trading and thus had to make some form of nalehmu arrangements with authorities to continue his business.

**Nalehmu in transition and under the coup d’état**

As with guanxi, nalehmu operates horizontally and vertically through multiple levels guided by situational and relational ethics. Between individuals and groups, these rhizomatic networks enable the sharing of resources such as televisions or the mutually enforced right to occupy, renovate, and sell property. Between individuals and the state, nalehmu is an instrument for accessing and mitigating risk but often with significant costs due to persistent power asymmetries. These discreet and prolonged direct actions have been possible because authoritarian regimes such as in Myanmar, “despite their omnipresent image, preside over states that lack the capacity, consistency, and machinery to impose full control … [leaving] many escapes, spaces, and uncontrolled holes … that can be filled and appropriated by ordinary actors.”

Before the initiation of Myanmar’s heralded political transition in 2011, CSCs were not required for everyday transactions. Although the market vendor mentioned above had to wait twenty years for his CSC, he was able to maintain his business despite the hassle of having to negotiate with local officials or police whenever they requested identification.

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96Bayat 2010, 25.
Most financial transactions – such as sending money through the *hundi* system\(^97\) or collecting remittances from family members working in Yangon or abroad – did not require an identity card, and very few people had bank accounts, making informal transactions the preferred mode of money transfers. After the launch of national reforms and the cancelation of international sanctions, domestic financial transactions, including remittances, became more formalized and more frequently routed through the banking system and mobile money platforms.\(^98\) People without CSCs reported that they used *nalehmu* to borrow or even rent CSCs from friends or family members to start businesses, buy land, obtain loans from microfinance agencies, or create accounts on mobile money platforms.\(^99\) The formalization of Myanmar’s financial system not only has failed to provide more equal access to the disenfranchised, it has further marginalized them.

Formalization has also rendered people in Myanmar more legible because bank accounts, mobile phone registrations, association registrations, and other forms of official documentation have increased the state’s surveillance capacity. Non-governmental organizations were highly scrutinized under the SLORC’s Law Relating to Forming Organizations (No. 6/1988) which was repealed and replaced by the 2014 Law on the Registration of Organizations. Following the passage of the 2014 law, most major international donors required their Myanmar partner organizations to be legally registered. Organizations with nationwide activities had to seek approval from the Minister of Home Affairs, where a military appointee headed the official registration committee. CSOs and associations could also register at the state, district, or township level for activities therein. But registration at a lower level, such as a township, did not enable organizations to escape surveillance because the township level registration committees were staffed by police and General Administration Department (GAD) officials – all under the military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs. Thus, following the coup, local-level officials not only had access to documentation on civil society organizations and activists, but were often the same people who had registered these organization and monitored their activities in previous years. Following the February 2021 coup, some INGOs had their accounts frozen and the State Administration Council, the post-coup leadership, issued a directive for all banks to disclose details of all NGO and INGO accounts to the state-run Central Bank.\(^100\) The military government has used a network of CCTVs that had been installed before the coup through internationally funded technology transfer and “smart city” initiatives to identify and capture protesters.\(^101\) The junta has also been able to exert greater control over the populace by issuing directives to telecommunication companies and banks, including limiting the total amount of cash withdrawals per day for individual account holders from ATM machines.\(^102\)

For decades, everyday Burmese people have been able to make gains through the quiet encroachment of *nalehmu*, “not at the cost of their fellow disenfranchised but of the state, the rich, and the general public.”\(^103\) Their tactics, as practices of informality, have been

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\(^{97}\)An informal system of transferring money within Myanmar and across nation-state boundaries based on networks of trust and reputation.

\(^{98}\)Thompson 2019.

\(^{99}\)Interviews, southern Myanmar, 2017.

\(^{100}\)Nikkei Asia 2021.

\(^{101}\)Beech 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021.

\(^{102}\)Frontier Myanmar 2021c.

\(^{103}\)Bayat 2010, 90.
shaped by state-induced social inequalities, and in many cases, have also reproduced inequalities, at least until recently. Since February 2021, local, often fragmented initiatives of quiet encroachment seem to be working across ethnic, religious, and spatial boundaries to form regional and political solidarities in opposition to the military. On Facebook and other social media platforms, some members of the Burman majority have publicly apologized to ethnic minorities such as the Rohingya and Karen because they now have a better understanding of the extent and duration of military abuse endured by minority groups. The more bounded circles of mutuality and reciprocity discussed in the three types of nalehmu above seem to be facilitating “social nonmovements,” the “collective actions of noncollective actors” whose fragmented but similar activities can trigger much social change “even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership or organizations.” How these direct actions as forms of agency in the very zones of exclusion will reshape Myanmar in these difficult times remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Our intention in presenting nalehmu as a hidden-in-plain-sight type of social infrastructure is to highlight its systematic and productive qualities despite its resistance to an external or globalized gaze. As with the Chinese concept of guanxi, nalehmu is all too easily labeled as a form of corruption if its subtle but identifiable structure is not analyzed within its historical and relational context. Nalehmu as a bridge between people and “people as infrastructure” is easily subsumed under the label of corruption without recognizing the work it does horizontally between similar actors and vertically to circumvent or capitalize on power hierarchies and inequalities.

Steven Pierce has described how a universal, globalized understanding of corruption masks the “distinctive local moral field” of specific actions in Nigeria which are concerned with negotiation, reciprocity, and material transactions. Labeling nalehmu practices in Myanmar as corruption does a disservice to understanding the cultural and social embeddedness of nalehmu as an aspect of moral economy, and risks obscuring the work that nalehmu does to expand access to property, goods, and public services for the disenfranchised. In fact, pressure from international donors and Myanmar’s further incorporation into the global financial system initially created increased vulnerabilities for minorities who were substantively and legally excluded by the formal system. Activists and civil society organizations also found that their very inclusion in a culture of transparency and global best practices has put them at additional risk following the 2021 military coup. As scholars of urban informality have argued, informality and formality exist as a kind of “meshwork,” and as “an entanglement between different “bundles

104Berenschot and van Klinken 2018; see also Sanchez and Myat 2021 on Mandalay.
105Public apologies to the Rohingya on social media started within the first two weeks of the February 2021 coup and continue to appear on a regular basis. See Thawnghmung and Noah 2021.
106Bayat 2010, 14.
107For similar findings see Khine Zaw, Bawk, and De Lima Hutchison 2021.
108Pierce 2016.
109For example in the field of global public health, see Khine Zaw, Bawk, and De Lima Hutchison 2021.
110Ingold 2011 cited in McFarlane 2012.
The three types of *nalehmu* we have examined are different lines or scales of flexible practices that interweave to produce Myanmar’s social infrastructure. Globalized authoritative expertise can prematurely gloss the three different types of *nalehmu* as a single amalgamated informal or illegal practice, thereby stripping this social infrastructure of its customary legitimacy, without providing a working alternative and a non-discriminatory solution for minorities. As more people are included in the formal economy, *nalehmu* may move from a shared relational infrastructure that is negotiable across scales and contexts, to the shadow economy of the excluded.

*Nalehmu*’s illegibility to outsiders is critical for Myanmar as discourses of globalized “best practices” all too easily rendered some practices of *nalehmu* illegal or corrupt in the name of transparency. The harm caused by good governance reforms in Myanmar is not only that these efforts could entrench certain forms of exclusion, especially those predicated on race and religion, but also may, in some cases, undermine or even remove the existing social safety net of a local system of mutuality and accountability. As people in Myanmar continue to rise before dawn in order to line up in front of ATMs in the hopes of withdrawing some much needed cash or wait in lines stretching around the block to refill oxygen canisters for their loved ones suffering from Covid-19, they use social media platforms to inform each other about which ATMs still have cash and where oxygen canisters or concentrators are available. Those whose whole family is sick with Covid-19 and cannot leave home hang yellow t-shirts or flags outside their windows, signaling to neighbors and volunteers that they are in need of medical care and food. With the junta’s Covid-19 response at times non-existent or counter-productive, and their continued penalization of healthcare workers, Myanmar’s people are again relying on the social infrastructure of *nalehmu* and mutual aid in this time of crisis.

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111McFarlane 2012, 101.

112Myanmar Now 2021.
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