
The Vernacular Mobilization of Human Rights in Myanmar's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Movement

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This article examines how activists build a movement for sexual orientation and gender identity minorities in Myanmar, a country that is known for violent suppression of protests and is undergoing political reform. Based on original fieldwork, it finds that activists deploy a strategy of “vernacular mobilization of human rights” to persuade others to join their cause despite the risks to personal safety and to get around political constraints on collective organizing. Conceptualized at the intersection of the cultural study of human rights and social movements scholarship, “vernacular mobilization of human rights” theorizes the relationship between vernacularization—the translation and local adaptation of human rights—and movement micromobilization, specifying how the former unfolds as collective action framing processes. Through vernacularization activities, such as human rights workshops, movement leaders reframe grievances and shift the attribution of blame to empower and recruit new activists. Furthermore, with these framing processes, they generate a political community with a collective identity and social networks that they use to continue expanding the movement. The article enriches debates about the implications of implementing human rights and understandings of the relationship between human rights and movement mobilization, especially under repressive or uncertain political conditions.

How do activists form a social movement and mobilize under repressive and uncertain political conditions? They would have to overcome stiff political constraints just to be able to persuade others to join their cause at great personal risks, and innovate strategies and tactics to avoid state retaliation as they make

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demands for rights or mount other forms of resistance (Chua 2012; Johnston 2006). In Myanmar,¹ a group of activists are navigating such challenges to build a movement for sexual orientation and gender identity minorities (“SOGI movement”). They began mobilizing even when Myanmar was ruled by a military junta known for violent suppression of dissent. Although Myanmar started transitioning to civilian governance after the 2010 elections, political conditions for collective organizing remain dubious. Alongside legal reforms and signs of liberalization, the government still arrests activists, abuse of power persists, and human rights violations continue (Cheesman 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014). Yet the SOGI movement is growing. It is becoming a part of post-2010 politics in which marginalized groups increasingly demand for rights recognition, and its human rights strategy is attracting international support. Burmese SOGI activists hold publicly visible gatherings, and engage government officials and politicians. They speak out against social norms that regard SOGI minorities as immoral and deviant, and advocate for legal reform of sexual regulation.

In this article, I focus on the question of how SOGI activists build their movement and mobilize in Myanmar under military rule and as the country currently undergoes political changes. Based on fieldwork on Myanmar, a site understudied by law and society scholars, I find that activists deploy a strategy that I call “vernacular mobilization of human rights” to carry out recruitment and expand to grassroots locations across the country: they vernacularize human rights—translate and adapt them for local practice (Merry 2006)—so that these global norms resonate with people who live in a society where human rights discourse was brutally suppressed and largely unfamiliar to them (see, e.g., Dale 2011). Through vernacularization activities, such as human rights workshops, movement leaders cultivate oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) and empowerment, and produce a sense of efficacy among participants, increasing their willingness to take up collective action despite difficult political conditions and risks. Furthermore, through vernacularization, they generate a new political community of Burmese SOGI minorities and a set of social networks of which they make use to get around restrictions on collective organizing.

“Vernacular mobilization of human rights” is conceptualized at the intersection of law and society’s cultural study of human

¹ I use “Myanmar,” the country’s official name since 1989, to refer to the state, “Burmese” as the adjectival form for the state, society, and its citizens, and “Burman” when referring to the dominant ethnic group. I use these terms with the understanding that they are contested; for example, opponents of the military dictatorship rejected “Myanmar.”

rights and social movements scholarship. According to law and society research, human rights have the potential to achieve social justice (Merry 2006) and actualize human dignity (Massoud 2013); however, they often lack cultural resonance (Engel 2012; Munger 2006) and political legitimacy, especially under repressive conditions (see, e.g., Chua 2014; Massoud 2011; Stern and O'Brien 2011). Nevertheless, local activists frequently turn to human rights' ideas of dignity, respect, and equality to persuade others to join their cause or recognize their claims (see, e.g., Mujica and Meza 2009; Rajaram and Zararia 2009), and construct their claims as human rights to secure funding and other assistance from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and foreign governments (Bob 2005, 2009). To understand the complex interplay between the universalism of human rights and their local mobilizations, law and society scholars have begun to examine vernacularization as cultural processes (Levitt and Merry 2009; Merry 2006).

I advance this line of research by developing "vernacular mobilization of human rights" to theorize vernacularization's relationship to movement micromobilization. In short, vernacular mobilization of human rights is a mobilization strategy that consists of collective action framing processes (Snow et al. 1986) through which activists translate and put human rights into local practice. Building on extant scholarship, I specify how vernacularization unfolds as these framing processes. In addition, I go further using the strategy of vernacular mobilization of human rights to emphasize the importance of vernacularization's social nature to movement mobilization. I show how a social movement and vernacularization mutually construct each other and produce multiple and varied practices of human rights (Cowan et al. 2001; Goodale 2007).

Unpacking vernacular mobilization speaks to debates about the implications of implementing human rights. Despite the promise and allure of human rights, critics argue that human rights are Western hegemonic impositions (De Sousa Santo and Rodriguez-Garavito 2005; Nader 2007) and that their local adaptations reinforce unequal global distribution of power (Wilson 1997). They fear that Western funders pressure domestic activists into engaging human rights, thus jeopardizing their safety (Massoud 2013). On SOGI issues, human rights claims attract accusations of promoting undesirable Western culture and heighten backlash from the state and other opponents (see, e.g., Boyd 2013; Currier 2009; Lee 2012). Others worry that human rights discourse obliterates indigenous sexual identities (Kollman and Waites 2009; Seckinelgin 2009), and obscures alternative interpretations of social experiences and modes of conflict resolution (Merry 2001).

The plural practices of human rights emerging from vernacular mobilization bring nuances into these debates. Although Myanmar's SOGI activists receive funding from Western donors, they do not simply reproduce global norms. Consistent with other vernacularization studies (see, e.g., Cheng 2011; Merry and Stern 2005; Rajaram and Zararia 2009), Burmese activists in my study imbue human rights with local sensitivities. Their intra-movement contestations also reveal the fluidity and openness of human rights to grassroots mobilization (Levitt and Merry 2009). Similarly, my findings suggest that mobilizing human rights does not necessarily threaten local sexual identities. Although leaders of Myanmar's SOGI movement introduce "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" (LGBT) identities and associate them with human rights, they also invent a new Burmese identity term to accompany their rights discourse. Both movement leaders and grassroots organizers demonstrate strategic astuteness, alternating between rights-based identity categories and longstanding Burmese terms, depending on their context, communication needs, and political targets.

Furthermore, this article offers insights to scholars as well as international funders, INGOs, and local activists interested in human rights. As I will elaborate in the article's conclusion, it underscores an important feature of human rights mobilization under repressive or uncertain political conditions. Contrary to studies that doubt the impact of human rights on marginalized populations, its conceptual framework of vernacular mobilization suggests a different way of understanding the potentiality of human rights for domestic movements.

First, in the next section of this article, I draw from law and society's cultural study of human rights and social movements literature to elaborate on "vernacular mobilization of human rights." Next, I explain my fieldwork. Then I examine Myanmar's political conditions for activism, as well as the sociolegal conditions and identities of Burmese SOGI minorities. Subsequently, I analyze how SOGI activists build their movement through vernacular mobilization of human rights. In the conclusion, I discuss the broader relevance of my findings to understanding the relationship between human rights and movement mobilization.

Vernacular Mobilization of Human Rights

Deploying a strategy of vernacular mobilization of human rights, Myanmar's SOGI activists form a movement, recruit new activists, and mobilize collectively in spite of repressive rule and

uncertain conditions. They resist political constraints on activism and human rights, while participating in Myanmar's post-2010 political discourse on legal reform. In this section, I elaborate on the concept of vernacular mobilization of human rights by building on law and society's cultural study of human rights, especially works on vernacularization, and drawing from social movements scholarship on micromobilization.

As highlighted in the introduction, law and society scholarship shows that human rights are paradoxically enabling and constraining (Cowan 2006) and evoke contestations when deployed in domestic struggles for social change (Cowan 2003; Merry 2003). Differences, thus, appear between the universal notions of human rights and their local formulations (Cowan et al. 2001; Wilson 1997). In particular, they surface where human rights lack resonance, or when the claims, such as gender violence (Cheng 2011; Merry 2006) and SOGI issues (Mertus 2009; Petchesky 2000), are still relatively new to human rights discourse. To realize human rights domestically, activists have to mediate the tension between global norms on one hand, and local conditions on the other (Levitt and Merry 2009).

Recently, law and society scholars further the cultural study of human rights by analyzing these mediations as cultural patterns in and of themselves. In processes called vernacularization, or translation and adaptation of human rights into the vernacular, "translators" (Merry and Stern 2005) appropriate and adopt the globally produced ideas and practices of human rights for a domestic context by modifying them to suit local conditions and relating them to familiar images, symbols, and narratives to achieve cultural resonance (Levitt and Merry 2009). Vernacularization studies, therefore, explore the subjective meaning making of social actors and depart from abstract theoretical discussions about human rights (Goodale 2006) or top-down perspectives (Goodale 2007) that privilege the role of formal institutions (see, e.g., Risse et al. 1999).

I extend law and society's research on vernacularization to SOGI issues and advance it by developing the concept of "vernacular mobilization of human rights" to theorize its connections to social movements literature. My study more than confirms that vernacularization helps activists cultivate oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge and Morris 2001), create shared grievances, and empower potential recruits to take up collective action (see, e.g., Liu et al. 2009; Mujica and Meza 2009; Rosen and Yoon 2009). With "vernacular mobilization of human rights," it articulates and examines the relationship between vernacularization processes and movement micromobilization.

Vernacular mobilization of human rights is a movement mobilization strategy that comprises collective action framing

processes, which are, in turn, vernacularization. Existing law and society studies acknowledge vernacularization's affinity with framing (Levitt and Merry 2009; Merry 2006), even though they do not unpack the relationship in detail (but see Stern 2005²). Vernacular mobilization expands on these references and illuminates an important strategy with which activists could navigate difficult political conditions to organize and make claims collectively.

First, the collective action framing processes of vernacular mobilization—vernacularization—produce oppositional consciousness. Activists working as translators of human rights draw from extant cultural materials, such as meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, and narratives (Benford and Snow 2000; citing Swidler 1986), to reshape the way their audience “assign(s) meaning to, and interpret(s) relevant events and conditions” (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). To be clear, they do not simply align new ideas with local practices or beliefs. As is the case with Myanmar's SOGI movement, translators also jettison existing meanings that are incongruent with the movement's espoused norms (Snow et al. 1986); and, they selectively use other cultural materials to transform interpretations of problems into the blaming of structural conditions and social forces (Benford and Snow 2000).

At the same time, translators leverage on the symbolic effects of human rights (Merry et al. 2010) to associate the transformed attribution of blame with systemic human rights violations. Using what is also known as the cultural power of rights (see, e.g., McCann 1994; Silverstein 1996), they persuade potential recruits to think of their grievances, identities, and social relations in terms of rights, and motivate political action (Merry et al. 2010). If they achieve these transformative effects of framing, they could generate cognitive liberation (McAdam 1999), a political consciousness that empowers and inspires others to change their circumstances by joining the movement in spite of risks to their personal safety.

Activities or actions amount to vernacularization if they are intended for that very purpose. They could be human rights workshops, movement strategy meetings, rallies, and other movement events. Or, they could take place less formally and on a smaller scale. For instance, especially at founding stages of a movement or organization, leaders might have informal conversations about the movement's ideology and human rights with

² Stern (2005) does not explicitly discuss vernacularization, but she uses the same case study in Merry and Stern (2005) about translation processes to examine the use of collective action framing by translators.

people they want to recruit and groom into leadership positions. They also include producing and distributing movement paraphernalia about human rights norms, such as posters, magazines, and audio-visual materials.

Second, vernacular mobilization involves creating a movement community with mobilizing structures (McAdam 1999) that enable further movement expansion and mobilization. A new community emerges from its collective action framing processes of vernacularization, as they also construct new collective identities (Hunt et al. 1994) by reframing the social positions of movement constituents in relation to structural discrimination (Taylor and Whittier 1992). In my study, translators connect human rights to LGBT identity categories and a Burmese term that they invented to refer collectively to SOGI minorities so as to depart from longstanding, derogatory labels.

Additionally, the inherently social nature of vernacularization fosters relationships that provide the movement community with a set of social networks conducive for communicating with and galvanizing recruitment targets. This point resonates with social movement studies on the relevance of social ties to recruitment and mobilization (see, e.g., Diani 2004; Krinsky and Crossley 2014; McAdam 2003), particularly in high-risk situations (McAdam 1986; McAdam and Paulsen 1993). During vernacularization activities, translators and their audience inevitably interact with one another. For Myanmar's SOGI minority movement, the interactions reconfigure old relationships as well as forge new ones. Together with a newly constructed collective identity, these relationships bind activists together, giving new meaning (also see Jasper and Poulsen 1993; Krinsky and Crossley 2014) to being a SOGI minority person—somebody who belongs to a community of people with shared identities, grievances, and goals. The social ties are vital to movement expansion to the grassroots. Described by Burmese SOGI activists as “multiplier effect,” recruits return from vernacularization activities to their hometowns and begin initiating new movement mobilization processes.

Therefore, vernacular mobilization of human rights as a movement strategy encompasses more than disseminating and adapting human rights. While observations about solidarity and community building do appear in existing literature about vernacularization, what is different about “vernacular mobilization” is that it explicitly articulates how the social nature of vernacularization also crucially contributes to movement mobilization. The analysis enhances understandings of human rights in relation to collective action, differing from studies that question such positive impact on oppressed populations (Englund 2004; Massoud 2011). As I elaborate in the article's conclusion, the case of

Myanmar's SOGI movement contrastingly sheds light on the circumstances under which human rights could be deployed to develop domestic movements, even under repressive or uncertain conditions.

Third, in the vernacular mobilization of human rights, the social movement and vernacularization mutually construct each other. Movement activists use the collective action framing processes of vernacularization to recruit and mobilize newcomers. As the movement expands with new activists increasingly organizing around the country, they further disseminate and adapt human rights norms and practices as they, too, become translators. While these movement processes unfold, activists might dispute about tactics among themselves, differing in the practices of human rights (compare Stern 2005; Wyrod 2008) and deployment of collective identity. Such internal contestations are integral to movement mobilization as they constantly reshape the movement's culture (Ghaziani 2008) of human rights and negotiate the boundaries of its community (Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Consequently, from the mutually constitutive relationship between the movement and vernacularization processes, human rights emerge with multiple, unstable practices (also see Cowan 2006; Goodale 2007) that enrich understandings of their implications on the ground. As I detail in the data analysis below, differently situated translators of Myanmar's SOGI movement negotiate cultural materials differently, and thus adapt and deploy human rights to diverse degrees (also see Stern 2005). They also varyingly subscribe to and modify the collective identities linked to human rights discourse. Hence, contrary to critiques raised in the article's introduction, domestic activists could be more than passive agents of human rights norms (Merry and Stern 2005) or imported identity categories (Currier 2012), and play a role in the meaning making of global norms.

Fieldwork

I conducted qualitative fieldwork that consists of semistructured interviews, observations, organizational and legal documents, and photographs. I began in September 2012 with a 2-week trip to establish connections with the movement's founder, officers of the national organization, VIVID, and other contacts familiar with SOGI minorities' issues. After that, I took monthly, 5 to 7-day trips in January–April 2013, September 2013, and November 2014, and month-long ones in May–June of 2013 and 2014 to conduct interviews and observe movement activities. For the rest of the time from July 2013 through December 2014, a



Figure 1. The locations of Myanmar's SOGI movement.

Myanmar-based, Burmese research assistant stayed in constant communication with informants and movement organizations, conducted follow-up interviews and field observations, and collected documents on my behalf.

My fieldwork tracked the movement's recruitment and micro-mobilization pathways, which reach three Thai and 16 Burmese towns and cities (see Figure 1). I started in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in September 2012, where VIVID used to be headquartered. It was the center where the movement initially implemented

vernacular mobilization of human rights, organizing the first movement meetings and human rights workshops. As explained in the data analysis below, their focus, however, was not on Thailand. Rather, because human rights organizations had difficulties accessing Myanmar during the military regime, they tried to organize from Thailand first. During this time, they brought Myanmar-based SOGI minorities over to Thailand to participate in vernacularization activities. They also cultivated grassroots activists from among Thai-based migrants in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Ranong, who would later return to and organize in their hometowns. After 2010, VIVID leaders determined that they should relocate to Yangon and did so in March 2013. Therefore, I started fieldwork with the movement's original base in Thailand, but, in tracing its development, I gradually shifted attention entirely to locations inside Myanmar where the movement is currently based.

As of December 2014, I interviewed 65 informants, each between 60 and 90 minutes, and 31 others with shorter conversations of approximately 20 minutes each.³ Because I focus on how activists build and mobilize the movement, my informants are primarily the movement founder, 10 former and current VIVID officers, and 68 leaders of grassroots movement organizations from the 16 Burmese locations indicated in Figure 1, making up more than 90 percent of the movement's activists. To better understand the reasons for joining the movement, I located two people who attended the movement's workshops but did not stay with the movement. I also included two HIV/AIDS INGO staff who helped VIVID initiate contact with potential recruits inside Myanmar (explained in the data section), and six unaffiliated individuals who provided support to movement activists on different occasions. In addition, when I was trying to gain access on my first trip in September 2012, I visited Yangon and Mandalay briefly to interview seven other INGO contacts familiar with SOGI issues to gain some preliminary understanding. I identified informants by meeting them at movement activities, such as the workshops, checking organizational documents, such as events' attendance records and minutes of meetings, and asking other informants for suggestions.

My informants come from the diverse spectrum of SOGI identities explained in the next section. With the exception of 19 informants who identify as heterosexual, they include *a-pwint*, *a-pone*, *homo*, *lesbians*, and *tomboys*. The majority of them practice

³ According to human subjects research protocol at my institution, I obtained approval to conduct the fieldwork and sought informed consent from informants.

Buddhism, the dominant religion in Myanmar. Others identify as Muslim or Christian. Besides Burmans, there are people of Karen, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and Chinese ethnicities. Together they represent the movement's presence in 16 Burmese locations (see Figure 1). Their interviews were conducted at movement events where they met my research assistant or me, or places to which we travelled—Yangon, Mandalay, Pyi, Bago, Ranong, Mae Sot, Chiang Mai, and Bangkok.

I was aware that Burmese living in Myanmar might not speak to researchers due to fear (Dale 2011), one of the obstacles that hindered fieldwork during the military dictatorship (Aspinall and Farrelly 2014). To gain access, I first contacted VIVID's leaders, who are visible in Burmese exile media and willing to talk to me. Through VIVID, I met other activists based in various grassroots locations in Myanmar. Although I am not Burmese, as somebody who grew up in Malaysia and works in Singapore, two of Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbors, and does research on Singapore's SOGI movement, I come across as less distant compared to a researcher visibly identified as "Western." Perhaps fear is also lessening as Myanmar shows signs of liberalization. In any case, informants were generous with their time and willing to provide access. To protect their confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for informants and their organizations, and deliberately keep certain parts of their narratives vague.

Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in Burmese using interpretation.⁴ The rest were carried out in English. I asked informants how they became SOGI activists, whether and how they attended and conducted human rights training, what they learned, what other SOGI movement activities they organize, and what they think about human rights and various SOGI terms—patterns that I analyzed.

Similarly, I paid attention to these patterns in the field observations, which concentrate on movement vernacularization activities. The observations include those of human rights workshops and advocacy trainings for new activists in Chiang Mai and Yangon, regular meetings involving VIVID and grassroots movement activists in Yangon, and International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) celebrations. Additionally, I accompanied movement representatives to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA)-Asia 2013 conference in Bangkok to observe how they communicate with one another and with non-Burmese activists on the international stage about their movement. All of the observed activities, except ILGA-Asia,

⁴ Where quoted, these interviews are indicated with "*".

were in Burmese. ILGA-Asia 2013 proceedings were in English, but informants communicated among themselves in Burmese.

To supplement interview and observational data, I collected and analyzed photographs and documentary archives. They include reports and proposals for international donors, internal documentation, correspondence between VIVID and grassroots organizations, training materials, and publications, both in English and Burmese (which was translated for me). I also examined legislation, executive directives, and legal briefs to understand the structural conditions that affect SOGI minorities and activists in Myanmar.

Political Context and Sociolegal Conditions of Myanmar's SOGI Movement

SOGI activists set their strategy and goals in response to Myanmar's political context and the sociolegal conditions for SOGI minorities. They carry out vernacular mobilization of human rights to navigate repressive conditions of the military regime as well as the uncertainties that follow the post-2010 political transition. When translating human rights into local practice, they discuss the sociolegal conditions that oppress SOGI minorities, and introduce a new collective identity. To contextualize the movement's implementation of vernacular mobilization, I examine in this section Myanmar's political conditions for collective organizing, and the identities and sociolegal context of SOGI minorities.

Political Conditions for Collective Organizing

In 1948, the Union of Burma gained independence from the British but was soon embroiled in civil war and ethnic strife. The military seized control first as caretakers in 1958 and then by coup in 1962. The regime became notorious for human rights violations. Well-known examples include violent suppressions of the 1988 student-led protests and the 2007 monk-led demonstrations, the detention of Aung San Su Kyi following the 1990 electorate victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD), imprisonment of political opponents, displacement of ethnic minorities, systemic rape, and forced labor and relocation.

Human rights – many people saw rights as a crime. It could send you to prison. (Interview, Tun Tun, January 2013)

The regime also employed draconian laws to suppress civil-political liberties, human rights discourse, and activism. Among

the multitude of restrictions were requirements on organizations to apply for registration, effectively banning formal domestic associations except for those that were purely economic or religious in nature, or had military connections (but see Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; South 2004). Unsurprisingly, activist organizations usually did not register. Moreover, irrespective of any specific legal provision, the regime's abuse of power heightened fear of persecution (also see Dale 2011; Holzmeyer 2009) and discouraged political action. As Tun Tun put it, being associated with human rights was sufficient to invoke fear.

Before the post-2010 transition, SOGI activists had to contend with these restrictions. Although the SOGI movement was founded in Thailand, its aims were always to mobilize inside Myanmar and eventually relocate there. The restrictions controlled the freedoms and physical movement and threatened the safety of people they were trying to mobilize *inside* their homeland. Having Tun Tun as the movement founder, a known leader of the 1988 protests, also exacerbated the difficulties and risks.

After the 2010 elections orchestrated by the military regime, a civilian government presided by former general Thein Sein came into power. Contrary to pessimistic predictions (Aspinall and Farrelly 2014), the new government implemented reforms that included releasing political prisoners, allowing Aung San Su Kyi and NLD to participate in Parliament, and relaxing censorship and assembly rules. It also passed new laws to allow voluntary registration of organizations, lifting criminal sanctions on non-registration.

These developments have generally lessened the obstacles for the SOGI movement to mobilize inside Myanmar. My informants interpret them positively and perceive less fear and control over collective organizing and political discourse since 2010. Tun Tun returned safely to Myanmar from exile in 2012, VIVID, the national movement organization, relocated from Thailand to Yangon in March 2013 without trouble, and movement activities inside the country have so far not encountered state repression.

Nevertheless, my informants are aware that the new government still arrests activists and suppresses protests, human rights violations and abuse of authority remain (also see Human Rights Watch 2014), and that the military retains political influence.⁵ In practical terms for their movement, the uncertainties of post-2010 politics most directly affect mobilization at the local level.

⁵ The military is guaranteed 25 percent of the seats in Parliament's Lower House. For analysis of the military's relationship with the post-2010 government, please refer to Maung Aung Myoe 2014.

High-level government has changed ... The lower and mid-level still keep their old practices. They cannot adapt yet. (Field notes of movement meeting, Cho Cho, March 2013*)

As Cho Cho reminds fellow activists, the national government's reforms are slow to trickle down to the small towns and other grassroots locations where the movement is expanding. Dealing with the arbitrariness, corruption, and entrenched practices of local officials is commonplace for these activists. Although the situation varies from place to place, informants consistently emphasize the importance of knowing how to handle local authorities.

Yet, in the midst of Myanmar's persistent record of violations, political uncertainties, and constraints, human rights are becoming familiar discourse to the government (Cheesman 2014), thus enabling the SOGI movement to gain some legitimate foothold in post-transition politics. Activists from a variety of fields, including health, women, children, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, engage officials and parliamentarians about legal reform. Meanwhile, INGOs and foreign governments scrutinize and bring attention to Myanmar's human rights record (see, e.g., Human Rights Watch 2014; United Nations General Assembly 2013). Since 2010, INGOs as well as domestic NGOs, and government-affiliated bodies have also openly held workshops and meetings in Myanmar to raise awareness about human rights, sometimes with the government's involvement. International funders increasingly provide financial assistance to domestic NGOs, including SOGI movement groups, which have human rights-related agenda. Even though SOGI activists adopted their human rights strategy not simply because of funding availability and *before* the political transition, these recent developments are encouraging signs for them.

Identities and Sociolegal Conditions of Burmese SOGI Minorities⁶

Embedded in a complicated political context, the SOGI movement tackles issues that arise from the sociolegal conditions of Burmese SOGI minorities, who have unique categories for different forms of non-heteronormativity and gender non-conformity. For those who are biologically male by birth, the main categories are: *a-pwint*, who act as and appear feminine and

⁶ For more details on the sociolegal conditions of Burmese SOGI minorities, please refer to Chua and Gilbert 2015; Gilbert 2013.

are attracted to men, *a-pone*, who identify internally as feminine and desire sexual relations with men, but outwardly maintain masculinity in all or most spheres of life; and *homo*, gay men who do not identify as *a-pwint* or *a-pone*.⁷ For those who are biologically female by birth, the core identity categories are: *tomboys*, who act as and appear masculine and are attracted to gender conforming women; *lesbians*, a term that refers generally to women who are attracted to other women, and, depending on the user, sometimes also specifically to those who appear gender conforming.

The unique identities of Burmese SOGI minorities are, unsurprisingly, situated in a society that adheres strongly to heteronormativity and gender conformity. The above Burmese references and English loanwords are terms that informants generally consider to be neutral, in contrast to other traditional Burmese words that deride SOGI minorities and reflect social prejudices. These prejudices stem from popular religious and moral beliefs that condemn non-heteronormativity and gender non-conformity.⁸

It is such a deeply, deeply, deeply internalized understanding that if you're LGBT, you're bad karma. (Interview, Sandy, May 2013)

According to populist Burmese Buddhist thought on reincarnation, people are reborn as SOGI minorities due to their sexual transgressions, such as adultery, in their past lives. This means that the sufferings of SOGI minorities, the result of deviating from accepted norms, are to be expected in this lifetime (compare Jackson 1998). For men, because they are superior than women according to traditional Burmese social hierarchy, being the “feminine” partner in same-sex sexual relations is also seen

⁷ Some *a-pwint* informants use the English words of “gay” and “transgender” interchangeably to describe themselves; in Burmese HIV/AIDS parlance, they are included under “men who have sex with men. *A-pone* should not be equated with closeted gay men, though some informants use the English word, “gay,” to describe them. Another identity category is *tha-nge*, gender-conforming men with whom *a-pwint* and *a-pone* have sexual relations. Although *tha-nge* also have sexual relations with women, it is not accurate to regard them as “bisexual”; oftentimes, *tha-nge* exploit their relationships with *a-pwint* or *a-pone* for material gain, or eventually leave them to enter into heterosexual marriages. According to SOGI activists, *tha-nge* do not join their movement—and, thus, are not among my informants—because they align themselves with heterosexual privilege and do not identify with SOGI minorities’ issues.

⁸ Indigenous terms for SOGI minorities in other societies also reflect their dominant gender and sexual norms (see, e.g., Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005; Jackson 2000; Sinnott 2004).

as degrading and renders one less worthy of respect. Meanwhile, among Christian and Muslim minorities, homosexuality—which they conflate with gender non-conformity—is generally regarded as sinful.

The social prejudices manifest in various forms of discrimination. In contrast to popular Western portrayals that romanticize the celebrity of *nat kadaw* or traditional spirit mediums (Ho 2009), the majority of whom are *a-pwint*, the reality for most SOGI minorities is much grimmer. Police use their wide arrest powers to persecute *a-pwint*, compounding the endemic abuse of authority in Myanmar (see, e.g., Cheesman 2009) with the stereotypes of *a-pwint* as sexually deviant and criminally suspect. They sexually assault *a-pwint*, extort bribes, or threaten to escalate charges to Section 377 of the Penal Code, a law inherited from colonial rule that criminalizes “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.”⁹

Besides police abuse, *a-pwint*, *tomboys*, and other SOGI minorities encounter sexual violence and other forms of physical assaults by family members and strangers. They usually do not file police reports, as they distrust the police, who are known not to take their cases seriously and to side with the perpetrators. At school, it is common for SOGI minorities to be bullied by peers and for teachers to ostracize them.

The discrimination and prejudice extend to employment and limit SOGI minorities’ livelihoods. While *a-pwint* have managed to carve out self-employment as entertainers, beauticians, and spirit mediums (also see Chua and Gilbert 2015; Ho 2009), except for a small number who achieve fame and fortune, they largely struggle with irregular work and income even in these niche occupations. Others turn to sex work, making them even easier targets of police persecution.

If the surroundings said something bad or did something bad to me, I just thought that they could treat me like this as I am *a-pwint*. I always felt guilty, as I am *a-pwint*. (Interview, Min Min, March 2013*)

In sum, while Burmese SOGI minorities suffer grievances tied to a combination of social prejudices, unjust laws, and abuse of authority, the conventional response is to do what Min Min did—put up with the situation and not take action to redress the

⁹ Section 377 states: “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with transportation for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to a fine.”

wrong.¹⁰ Stigmatized as immoral or bearing the karmic consequences of their past lives, SOGI minorities, as well as people around them, expect and commonly accept their ill treatment. Put differently, SOGI minorities are to be “blamed” for their misfortune. For those who do not believe they deserve to be discriminated, they nevertheless emphasize not wanting to bring “shame” to their family because of who they are. Others, despite feeling wronged, resign to their fate. Having lived under repressive rule and abusive authority, they saw little possibility for change for stigmatized people like them.

Vernacular Mobilization of Human Rights by Myanmar’s SOGI Movement

Overcoming stigmatization and improving the sociolegal conditions, therefore, form the objectives of Myanmar’s SOGI movement. The movement started in Chiang Mai, a Thai hub for Burmese exiles and activists, in the mid-2000s when founder Tun Tun created VIVID as a group dedicated to the human rights of SOGI minorities, obtained international funding, and recruited a few young leaders to run its daily operations. They started laying the foundation to extend the movement into Myanmar eventually. From the mid-2000s to early 2013, when VIVID operated as the movement’s headquarters out of Chiang Mai, activists conducted up to three human rights training workshops a year, each with anywhere between 10 and 20 participants. The workshops are the most staple and elaborate form of vernacularization activity that recruits and socializes people into the movement. In conjunction with the workshops, activists often hold movement strategy meetings and celebrate events such as IDAHOT, which are also vernacularization activities that circulate similarly adapted ideas of human rights. However, the movement’s vernacularization work also occurs more informally as dialogues and small-group conversations, for example, when Tun Tun trained the pioneering batch of VIVID leaders and when grassroots activists first attempt to mobilize in their hometowns. Initially, the participants of vernacularization activities were Burmese migrants in Thailand. Later, however, they came from far and wide inside Myanmar. After 2010, the Thai-based migrants who became activists gradually moved home and shifted their movement organizations to their respective grassroots communities in Myanmar.

After relocating its headquarters, VIVID, to Yangon in March 2013, the movement continues to hold multiple human rights

¹⁰ HIV/AIDS organizations do provide assistance to some SOGI minorities, but they typically avoid openly engaging in human rights or challenging the government, especially during the pre-transition days.

workshops every year and up to three strategy meetings annually, each with about 20 member activists around the country. It continues to receive funding from international donors, as well as assists grassroots organizations to apply for their own grants and administer them. For nationwide events, such as IDAHOT, VIVID disburses funds to grassroots organizers and coordinates with them to maintain a similar theme across the venues. Additionally, movement leaders travel to new locations around the country to conduct outreach, human rights training workshops, and recruitment. To date, member activists represent 16 towns and cities in Myanmar (see Figure 1). At the national level, they work with legal aid lawyers, educate local media, and engage parliamentarians to raise awareness about discrimination against SOGI minorities and police abuse, and advocate for legal reform. Since 2007, VIVID has also been publishing a Burmese-language magazine that features news about SOGI minorities, educates readers about human rights, and informs them about the movement. At the grassroots, activists not only organize the annual IDAHOT events but also run groups that offer social services and small-scale activities that further vernacularize human rights and mobilize fellow SOGI minorities.

Burmese SOGI activists, thus, build and expand their movement in face of the challenges set out in the previous section—the political challenges both before and after the 2010 transition, and the related problem of motivating participants who are stigmatized but depoliticized. In the rest of this section, I analyze how SOGI activists do so by deploying vernacular mobilization of human rights. I explain the processes of vernacular mobilization—reframing grievances, forging a political community, continuous grassroots expansion or “multiplier effect,” and internal contestations.

Reframing Grievances

Given the political conditions prior to 2010 and prevailing social prejudices against SOGI minorities, one of the first and crucial steps of vernacular mobilization is to reframe grievances for potential recruits and cultivate their opposition consciousness to encourage collective action. SOGI minorities who are asked by trusted contacts to attend the movement’s vernacularization activities, such as human rights workshops, usually do so because they were eager to learn about the movement and remedies for their problems. Some went out of curiosity or desire to meet other SOGI minorities. However, they usually had little prior knowledge of human rights. Most of my informants had either not heard of human rights before coming into contact with the movement, or knew little of its applicability to SOGI minorities.

During the vernacularization activities, movement activists who act as translators ask participants to reject popular Burmese ideologies about the immorality and moral transgression of SOGI minorities. They persuade participants to shift from resignation, even acceptance, of SOGI minorities' plight toward the blaming of structural conditions and social norms. At the beginning, they encourage them to share their stories about discrimination. Sometimes they watch a film together. Although the films—such as *The Wedding Banquet* and *Boys Don't Cry*—are non-Burmese, the participants see past their ostensible foreignness. They find similarity in the experiences of gender and sexual diversity (also see Currier 2012), particularly the prejudices encountered by the films' protagonists. After watching the film, translators ask questions such as, “Have you had this kind of experience?” to elicit personal narratives. Then the translators explain why there is “nothing wrong” with being SOGI minorities, and how their grievances are caused by social forces of heteronormativity and gender conformity.

They go on to empower SOGI minorities to think of themselves as rights-bearing persons whose grievances are violations of human rights to which they are entitled and of which they are deprived. To achieve this, translators simultaneously draw from other shared cultural narratives—those of oppression and human suffering in the lives of ordinary Burmese.

Our people know human rights from their suffering ... The human rights concept comes from their lives ... It comes from their real life, real suffering. (Interview, Tun Tun, May 2013)

Framing shared cultural experiences of oppression as the *absence* of human rights, Tun Tun and other activists creatively turn rights impoverishment into a rich cultural source for framing (also see Baxi 2012). They render human rights relevant to people who are unfamiliar with the concept and whose lives reflect their very antithesis. It was why Tun Tun was first drawn to human rights activism, after fleeing the 1988 crackdown and then fighting guerilla warfare against the military junta for several years. In the SOGI movement, he and other translators introduce basic concepts of human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), emphasizing that everybody is entitled to human rights and deserve dignity and equality. They point to the 2006 Yogyakarta Principles, which extend the UDHR to SOGI minorities, to explain that the rights of SOGI minorities are human rights. Then they elaborate on each of the 29 principles, such as the right to equality, life, personal security, fair trial, and education. They ask participants to relate each principle to a personal experience to illustrate how the

grievance arises from the violation of a right. Their aim is to convey the message of what it entails, on the contrary, to have human rights.

Encouraging Collective Action

Furthermore, by framing shared cultural experiences of oppression as the result of deprivation of human rights, translators try to inspire attainment of the opposite, a social reality in which SOGI minorities enjoy human rights. Hence, their reframing of grievances is also aimed at empowering SOGI minorities to believe they could change their circumstances by joining the movement.

If I experienced human rights violation, if I didn't know about human rights, I would just stay quiet ... Now I realize that I am entitled to human rights as a human being, I can fight. (Interview, Khin Kyine, February 2013*)

My interviews with other informants consistently reflect Khin Kyine's sentiments. From the pioneering batch enlisted by Tun Tun to take charge of VIVID to the newcomers of 2014, they explain how learning about human rights and their deprivation in many aspects of their lives inspired them to take action. Khin Kyine, for example, learned to speak up and organize other SOGI minorities in her community.

Of course, joining the movement does not mechanically occur just because informants participated in a workshop, or learned about the ideals of human rights. For vernacular mobilization as a social movement process to play out, translators do more than shift the blame to external causes and create resonance with human rights. They take additional steps that deliberately encourage collective action.

I told [the workshop participants] I don't want only doing training and then finish. I want after their training, they can come up with their idea ... and what they want to do in the future for their community, for their society. (Interview, Duwa, April 2013)

Duwa, VIVID's first leader, and subsequent translators tell potential recruits about the movement and what it does to achieve human rights for sexual minorities. They ask them to think about how they could do their part, usually by dividing them into small groups to brainstorm ideas. Each group is tasked with discussing different scales of action, such as the "personal," "family," "local community," and "national" (Field notes, human rights workshop discussion, May 2013).

Embracing a range of political action, SOGI activists affirm varying levels of action and interest that help to sustain feelings of efficacy. This allows newcomers to embark on a modest scale that feels achievable and less intimidating to them. During the workshops, they often discuss how activists could start by changing their own lives, for example, by becoming financially independent or role models in their local SOGI minority communities so that they could gain respect as leaders. Others want to start with educating their own families and friends about SOGI minorities and human rights.

While these actions do come with personal risks, they do not require the newcomer to assume greater political stakes by directly engaging politicians or government officials; yet, they are acknowledged as contributing to the movement's goals. Eventually, some of these newcomers graduate to bolder tactics. For those who stand out or indicate their interest in taking on more prominent roles, VIVID invites them to advanced workshops. Those sessions focus on advocacy skills, impart organizational and technical knowledge needed to set up and run grassroots organizations, or train them to become human rights educators, that is, translators.

Fostering a Political Community

Besides reframing grievances to translate human rights and empowering individuals to join the movement, vernacular mobilization fosters a new political community, one constituted by a shared identity and social networks that connect activists with one another. Its framing processes of vernacularization construct a collective identity that is inclusive of and holds together diverse SOGI minorities, who make up the movement's base and constituency. They also remake old relations and forge new social ties, which serve as mobilizing structures that activists use to navigate political constraints and expand the movement's reach.

Constructing Collective Identity

The construction of a new collective identity is important to the movement, because Burmese SOGI minorities are used to identifying with the different traditional categories rather than cohering as a single political unit. Misgivings are common among them. *Tomboys*, for example, are suspicious of biologically male SOGI minorities. *A-pwint* often do not get along with *a-pone*, believing that the latter lead an easier life by being able to "pass" as heteronormative men. Meanwhile, *homo* might shun and distance themselves from *a-pwint*, not wanting to be confused with them.

To reduce these barriers and generate a cohesive political community of SOGI minorities, when translating human rights, SOGI activists pair the concept of human rights with two identity terms—"LGBT" and *lein tu chit thu*, meaning "those who love the same sex." According to Tun Tun and other informants, many Burmese words for SOGI minorities are derogatory. Whereas *a-pwint*, *a-pone*, and the other terms I used in the previous section are perceived to be neutral, there is no encompassing reference for all SOGI minorities. Therefore, Tun Tun invented *lein tu chit thu* to refer collectively to SOGI minorities without differentiation among the various Burmese categories described earlier. He and other activists use it as the Burmese alternative to "LGBT" so that those who lack English language skills could associate a positive, collective term with human rights, hence having the option of referring to "LGBT rights" in English or Burmese (commonly expressed as *lein tu chit thu akwint ayay*).

I ask *a-pwint* and *a-pone* to stay in harmony. I explain sexual orientation and gender identity so that they understand they have a shared orientation, so they can understand each other. (Interview, Min Min, June 2014*)

In their vernacularization work, translators emphasize the collective nature of "LGBT" and *lein tu chit thu*, and the common sources of their grievances. They design the human rights workshops to have specific segments during which participants talk about the prejudices they suffer from and harbor against other SOGI minorities. Although the longstanding barriers cannot be easily overcome, these efforts along with the nurturing of social ties—to which I next turn—has helped to replace some degree of distrust and apprehension with friendship and solidarity that I observe in the field and learn from the interviews.

Remaking and Forging Social Ties

Besides the conscientious production of collective identity, vernacularization inherently implicates social interactions, which contribute to the building of political community. Whenever vernacularization activities are conducted to recruit and mobilize SOGI minorities, social actors are intrinsically involved, *and*—even more important to this point—they interact with one another, remaking and forging social relations. This vital aspect of vernacular mobilization emerged as early as the movement's founding days, since activists have had to mitigate the obstacles of collective organizing inside Myanmar.

When Tun Tun established VIVID back in Chiang Mai, he trained the first cohort of VIVID leaders from among Burmese migrants and exiles. Duwa and other VIVID pioneers learned about human rights, became politically conscious of their sexual orientation and gender identities, and found commonality in their grievances through their conversations with Tun Tun—vernacularization in its simplest forms. For the first 2 years, Chiang Mai-based VIVID implemented vernacularization, especially the human rights workshops, among Burmese economic migrants living in Myanmar-Thailand border towns. They were hoping to cultivate grassroots leaders who would mobilize in their Burmese hometowns when they return. However, VIVID leaders also wanted to expedite the reach of their fledging movement into Myanmar and mobilize SOGI minorities there. This meant tackling the constraints imposed by the military regime prior to 2010, such as those discussed in the previous section on association, physical movement, and human rights.

They turned to pre-existing social relations. Tun Tun contacted two fellow “88 generation” protestors who ended up working for an HIV/AIDS INGO. He asked them to identify candidates to invite to Chiang Mai to attend the human rights workshops. Under the military regime, although the ban on associations also affected INGOs, HIV/AIDS was one of the exceptional areas where INGOs were allowed to set up operations (also see Fletcher 2011), as long as they did not engage in “political” activities that contradicted the government. Hence, HIV/AIDS INGOs implemented their programs around the country by partnering informal social networks and grassroots organizations connected to their target populations, which include biologically male SOGI minorities. Despite their lack of legal status, these grassroots organizations were presumably tolerated due to the INGOs’ arrangements with the government.

Tun Tun’s contacts agreed to help. They interviewed and selected some of the SOGI minorities who were organizers of grassroots groups or informal networks affiliated with their INGO’s HIV/AIDS program. These were people whom they thought were potential recruits for the SOGI movement. They seemed street-wise at handling officials’ questions when applying for travel documents and clearing immigration checkpoints to enter Thailand, and courageous and responsible enough to put to use what they had learned.

Consequently, by leveraging on pre-existing social relations, Myanmar’s SOGI movement began to extend the vernacular mobilization of human rights to various grassroots locations in Myanmar by the late 2000s, prior to the political transition. The initial group of participants who traveled from Myanmar to Thailand for VIVID’s human rights workshops and other

vernacularization activities would subsequently help to bring in lesbians—usually neglected by HIV/AIDS INGOs—through their personal friendships and local connections. By 2010, VIVID was conducting three workshops a year, organizing advanced training sessions and strategy meetings, and celebrating IDAHOT with SOGI minorities who traveled from Myanmar to Thailand.

Vernacular mobilization, thus, connects potential recruits to the SOGI movement and with one another *through* the movement, reshaping pre-existing relations they might have with one another. Before coming into contact with the movement, SOGI activists, even those with similar nonprofit backgrounds, neither shared a politicized identity or purpose for Burmese LGBT or *lein tu chit thu*. Indeed, consistent with other studies on movement recruitment (Diani 2004; McAdam and Paulsen 1993), my data show that people who end up becoming SOGI activists tend to be those who have worked or volunteered for INGOs or other nonprofit organizations. However, what is significant here is how the strategy of vernacular mobilization remakes old ties by weaving and turning them into the movement's social networks, which, in turn, help its activists to mobilize further.

Moreover, regardless of pre-existing relationships among activists, vernacular mobilization goes on to constitute new social ties among them. When workshop participants gather to learn about human rights, they build emotional bonds as they open up about difficult personal experiences. Crying over one another's stories of abuse and isolation, as Sandy recounts in one incident, is a frequent occurrence at VIVID's human rights workshops.

[P]eople got very, very emotional, telling their stories ... So it was really, really powerful. And in an amazing moment, Tun Tun came in and [one of the trainees] who had started crying, apologized to the group, because it's a huge loss of face to cry ... [Tun Tun said,] "We all have to thank you, because you let yourself cry for things that we've all experienced." (Interview, Sandy, May 2013)

The emotional experiences link them not only with others in the room at the time or those already in the movement but also with the movement's larger constituency of SOGI minorities.

[A]t the training, when I shared (my experiences), I was crying. This is my first time to learn about rights ... So even for a person like me who lives in Yangon, this is the first exposure to these kinds of things. I was thinking about the people from remote areas. So how about them, you know? They also should know about these rights. The information must be spread out. (Interview, Soe Win, May 2013*)

The awareness of being widely interconnected by a newfound political identity further strengthens the sense of collective purpose, in spite of the difficult political conditions. In Soe Win's case, as well as many other informants', after attending a workshop in Chiang Mai, he packed VIVID's human rights training materials into his suitcase and carried them across the border back into Myanmar, running the risk of being caught by authorities at the checkpoints and penalized.

In addition, activists and potential recruits at the human rights workshops and other vernacularization activities make friends and socialize with one another. Whether in Chiang Mai, or Yangon or other Burmese cities, outside the planned sessions, they have meals and go out together for drinks or shopping. Many of them travel together to and from the activities' locations. Before 2010, those going over to Thailand from Myanmar braved the perils as a group.

The emotional bonds and friendships create social networks that SOGI activists draw upon. Activists in one grassroots location would go to another to assist with the organization of a new event or the setting up a new group. Or, they would recall that a fellow activist had mentioned having contacts at a new location where the movement is trying to reach, and make use of those connections. In May 2013, after Mandalay police persecuted 11 *a-pwint* (Asian Human Rights Commission 2013), activists in Mandalay quickly spread the news across the movement; fellow activists from other locations collected signatures for a petition against police abuse and submitted it to the government, while others went to Mandalay to interview the arrestees and conduct their own investigation.¹¹ VIVID also uses these social networks to distribute their magazine around the country. Cho Cho would load stacks of the publication onto long-distance buses that go to activists' hometowns shown in Figure 1, and inform them to collect the packages at the bus stations.

Producing “Multiplier Effects”

Through vernacular mobilization of human rights, new recruits join the movement and subsequently expand its reach by organizing SOGI minorities and implementing its agenda in their grassroots communities within Myanmar. Movement leaders call this the “multiplier effect.” The collective action framing processes

¹¹ With support from movement activists, one of the arrestees is bringing suit against the Mandalay police for abuse of authority. After being dismissed by the lower courts, the case is on special appeal to the Supreme Court.

of vernacularization constitute and grow the movement by producing multiplier effects, which, in turn, perpetuate the former.

Since the military regime, SOGI activists have been relying on the multiplier effects of vernacular mobilization. In spite of the 2010 transition, as explained in the earlier section, recent changes at the national level are slow to trickle down to lower-level governments, and local conditions for activism vary. To extend to grassroots locations across the country, the movement turns to people who understand local politics. During movement meetings and advocacy training sessions as well as in my interviews with them, informants stress that success at the grassroots depends on activists who know how to interact with local officials and are adept at handling their oft corrupt and arbitrary practices.

To date, the movement has established its presence in 16 locations in Myanmar. Some of the activists in these locations found new associations. For instance, Cho Cho set up a group that offers leadership roles for both male and female SOGI minorities in the greater Yangon area. Others shift the focus of their existing groups to human rights. In Pyi, one leader merged informal social networks among *lesbians* to form a larger group that raises human rights awareness among members. The earliest vernacularization efforts among Burmese in Thailand—when VIVID pioneers reached out to Thai-based economic migrants—are also contributing multiplier effects. In 2013–4, key SOGI activists among these migrants finally returned to Myanmar and transferred their movement activities to their hometowns. Across the country where multiplier effects appear, SOGI activists organize discussions, workshops, and other vernacularization activities to translate human rights and recruit more activists, engage local officials about SOGI minorities' problems, and provide social support to SOGI minorities.

Internal Contestations

The collective processes examined in the preceding paragraphs, however, do not unfold in unanimous fashion. Internal contestations among movement activists are part and parcel of vernacular mobilization of human rights by Myanmar's SOGI movement. National (VIVID) and grassroots activists sometimes disagree about its tactics, or vary in their deployment of collective identity terms.

Internal contestations, such as the first incident elaborated below, show that grassroots activists of the movement are more than passive recipients of vernacularization processes and highlight the fluidity of putting human rights into practice. While they correspondingly reveal tensions and power dynamics among national and grassroots activists, they also illustrate their

importance. By disagreeing among themselves, SOGI activists bring themselves to articulate whether and how human rights are relevant and constantly remind themselves of what they want to achieve as a movement (Ghaziani 2008).

“Less partying! More messaging!” In 2013, when movement activists from around the country gathered in Yangon to discuss their preparations for IDAHOT 2013, tension surfaced between VIVID’s leader, Khant Nyar, and grassroots organizers. Unlike Duwa, his predecessor, Khant Nyar comes from an educated, middle-class Yangon family, speaks fluent English, and has overseas graduate qualifications. He had also worked for INGOs in Thailand and the United Nations. Responsible for IDAHOT coordination for the first time in 2013, Khant Nyar asked grassroots organizers not to invest too much of their effort and VIVID’s funds in fashion shows and beauty pageants. By “partying,” Khant Nyar meant the modeling and pageantry on stage that feature *a-pwint* in elaborate feminine costumes. He feared that the event’s human rights messages would be lost in the excitement over the stage performances, which he also worried could perpetuate stereotypes of *a-pwint* as sideshows interested only in their own appearances.

“But it’s our culture!” In response to Khant Nyar, grassroots organizers opined that fashion shows and pageants were part of the culture of Myanmar’s SOGI minorities. They agreed with Khant Nyar that “messaging” was important but argued that it alone would be “too boring” and would fail to attract attendees. Despite being attracted to human rights and the movement, some grassroots activists appeared more interested in putting up an entertaining event. After a passionate discussion, they assured Khant Nyar that they would emphasize “messaging” amidst the performances already planned. Although VIVID determines the allocation of IDAHOT funding, the two sides reached a compromise for 2014: Grassroots organizers who receive 100 percent IDAHOT funding from VIVID would not use the funds to hold any fashion shows or pageants, but they could stage performances, such as “action songs” and skits, that incorporate messages about IDAHOT and human rights.

The varying degrees in their use of “LGBT” and *lein tu chit thu*, the collective identity terms linked to human rights, also demonstrate that domestic activists do not merely import and impose identities and human rights practice wholesale (also see Currier 2012).

“LGBT” needs translation for the local language. It is very difficult. (Interview, Nanda, May 2013)

In order to give message to the people, if I use formal language, sometimes it’s not very easy for normal people to understand. So I just say *a-chauk* ... instead of saying *lein tu chit thu* — it’s big words. (Interview, Thura, March 2013*)

Grassroots activists agree that “LGBT” and *lein tu chit thu* are affirmative in nature and provide political strength by encompassing diverse sexual minorities. However, as Nanda and Thura indicate, they do not fully embrace these terms. They would have to explain to nonurban, non-English speaking Burmese the meaning of each word represented by “LGBT.” The Burmese alternative requires explanation, too, because it is the movement’s invention and not a familiar, everyday phrase. They find such explanations a hindrance to effective communication with local communities.

Instead, they turn to longstanding Burmese references when they carry out vernacularization at the grassroots. In fact, VIVID activists also deploy these terms for the same practical reasons and do not enforce the use of “LGBT” or *lein tu chit thu*. At movement meetings and in their everyday lives, both VIVID and grassroots activists often fall back to the traditional Burmese references, especially when they are in casual conversation or telling jokes. Many of these terms bear negative connotations; for example, *a-chauk*, the popular word for *a-pwint*, means “dry” and is understood to describe the physical quality of having anal sex with *a-pwint*. While acknowledging the derogatory meanings, some informants say they do not mind and even reclaim the words out of endearment. To them, the traditional terms differentiate among the unique SOGI identities, something that “LGBT” and *lein tu chit thu* do not.

Similar to the first episode on staging shows for IDAHOT, these internal differences are integral to the vernacular mobilization of human rights by Myanmar’s SOGI movement. As ongoing negotiations over collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992), the variations continuously reshape the boundaries of the movement’s political community. They remind activists of who they are and, hence, for whom the movement is fighting.

Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed how activists mobilize and build a movement in face of repression and political uncertainty—how they recruit newcomers to take up their cause despite personal jeopardy, and make their claims at the risk of state retaliation. Drawing from fieldwork on Myanmar, I find that Burmese SOGI activists deploy a strategy of vernacular mobilization of human rights to overcome these constraints and challenges. To conclude the article, I briefly review its findings and significance, and then discuss its broader implications for understanding the relationship between human rights and movement mobilization.

Through the vernacular mobilization of human rights, Burmese SOGI activists reframe grievances to cultivate oppositional

consciousness and a sense of efficacy among potential recruits, encouraging them to take up collective action. They also foster a political community by creating a new collective identity linked to human rights discourse; the social interactions intrinsically involved in vernacularization also strengthen old bonds and forge new ties, forming social networks that enable activists to get around the restrictions on collective organizing in Myanmar. As new activists are recruited and mobilized through these processes, they continue to expand the movement across the country as they, too, engage in vernacularization.

This article advanced law and society's cultural study of human rights in the following ways. With the concept of vernacular mobilization of human rights, it elaborated on vernacularization as collective action framing processes, and thus specified the connection to movement micromobilization. Although other studies also observe that vernacularization produces feelings of solidarity and collective belonging (see, e.g., Mujica and Meza 2009; Rosen and Yoon 2009), the conceptual framework of vernacular mobilization emphasized and explained how its social nature—the interactions and nurturing of social bonds—is as important to mobilization as the translation of the substantive meanings of human rights. Using this framework to draw out the mutual constitution of vernacularization and social movements, it enhanced law and society's understanding of how activists defy repressive political conditions and engage in human rights strategies to grow and escalate collective action.

Consistent with existing studies on vernacularization, this article brings nuances into debates concerned with implementing human rights in a society such as Myanmar, where human rights lack cultural resonance. As discussed in the introduction, if domestic activists adopt human rights strategies to secure Western funds, they might attract government hostility. In the efforts to render human rights locally palatable, they could also end up undermining the essential ideals of human rights or reinforcing existing power relations and social structure (Levitt & Merry 2009; Merry 2006, citing Ferree 2003). However, by examining the vernacular mobilization of human rights by Myanmar's SOGI movement, this article highlighted the agency of domestic activists—they are not simply driven by external funding opportunities but find courage and inspiration in human rights to challenge oppressive social norms and authorities. In addition, by elucidating the intramovement disagreements and variations, it demonstrated that domestic activists contribute to the diverse production of human rights practices, and that they do so strategically and flexibly based on their immediate context and needs.

Finally, this article sheds a different light on the relevance of human rights to movement mobilization, particularly in repressive or uncertain political contexts. At the outset, it brings out a

salient feature of human rights mobilization that may be less obvious to studies focused on political contexts that afford greater civil-political liberties to activists. Under illiberal or more restrictive political conditions, activists are confronted with dangers and obstacles that discourage human rights mobilization in the first place (also see Chua 2014). Restrictions on civil political liberties threaten their freedom and safety to carry out the basic activities of collective resistance—speaking out, assembling, and associating freely. Further, some scholars argue that human rights fail to motivate marginalized populations to organize and mount collective resistance even though they generate empowerment and other positive feelings (also see Englund 2004; Massoud 2013; Swidler 2013).

How to overcome these challenges is a question that concerns scholars and practitioners alike. It is a question on which vernacular mobilization of human rights suggests the following alternative perspective: Human rights matter to movement mobilization as cultural processes, going beyond the influence of their substantive ideals on subjective meaning making and decisions to take up collective action. When understood as cultural processes, the social nature of human rights more clearly steps into the fore as a vital element of movement mobilization, too. In so doing, this perspective highlights how human rights influence social movements not only because of their ideas but also because they mold a web of social relations and human connections that enable movement recruitment and expansion.

Flowing from the above, the promise of human rights as cultural processes is intertwined with the capacity and will of human agency to build and innovate social movements, especially under difficult and perilous circumstances. They thrive on activists who astutely navigate local conditions and global norms to galvanize political action, *and* who know how to make use of and cultivate social ties. In addition, they need activists who commit to the movement's cause. These activists' engagement with human rights as their mobilization strategy extends beyond raising awareness among target populations and affirming them with abstract knowledge of human rights. They follow through with new recruits to socialize them into the movement. They take conscientious steps to put them into action, providing further training to hone advocacy and such other skills as grant-writing and organizational planning, and embracing varying levels of activism and tactics to sustain interest and fuel confidence (compare Massoud 2011; Swidler 2013).

Such a relationship between human rights and movement mobilization has to be understood apart from the presence of certain structural conditions or shifts. One might argue that given the current political transition, human rights discourse in Myanmar is

situated at an opportune moment as it garners currency in domestic politics and international support—a situation that might not be readily present in other contexts. However, as vernacular mobilization by the Burmese SOGI movement shows, the potentiality of human rights manifests through collective processes in which social actors strategically mediate national and grassroots-specific conditions. At this juncture, the future of human rights remains distant from their ideals of emancipation in Myanmar. When put into local practice, they are fraught with challenges. Nevertheless, it is through ongoing and intelligent contestations that Burmese SOGI activists challenge the limits to which the post-2010 government will and can recognize the human rights of unpopular minorities who are regarded as immoral or socially deviant. Consequently, they test the vulnerability and promise of human rights for social change at the global-local interface.

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