

Der Sammelband richtet sich primär an ein Expertenpublikum und liefert interessante Aspekte für die aktuelle entwicklungspolitische Diskussion. Leider fehlt in der Betrachtung das entwicklungspolitische Fokusland Kambodscha. Zudem kommen nicht alle Beiträge der eigenen Forderung nach einer stärkeren empirischen Fundierung der Debatten gleichermaßen nach.

Daniel Bultmann

**Georg Noack: Local Traditions, Global Modernities. Dress, Identity and the Creation of Public Self-Images in Contemporary Urban Myanmar**

Berlin: regiopectra, 2011. 280 S., EUR 29,90

This is a delightful book, not only or even primarily because of the numerous beautiful photos and illustrations, but because of its topic and the way the author organises and presents his material – in an easy-to-read but nevertheless thorough manner. In the face of numerous pained studies about the admissibility or otherwise of dress as a statement of religious affiliation or a sign of female oppression, this study is refreshing in its clear understanding of contemporary Myanmar and the multiple ways dress plays a role as a political, social, generational or, indeed, religious statement; dress as a way of “being-in-the-world.”

Georg Noack enquires into the history, type and role of dress in Myanmar and what it says about status, identity, and society. A theoretical chapter interrogates the meaning of dress in various contexts. Dress as ideology is touched upon, where government or political movements demand a certain dress code over and beyond peer pressure. This discussion is followed by a survey of the history of dress in Myanmar (which shows, like in many other cases, that “traditional dress” is often an invented tradition), which leads to a discussion of dress as a political or

social statement. This is particularly interesting in the Myanmar context. The author then discusses occasions of showing dress in public, like weddings or photo studios, and the place of “fashion” in Myanmar. He concludes with a contemplation of the significance of (traditional) dress in rapidly changing Myanmar.

The introduction investigates the role of dress, dressing and fashion for indicating one’s identity and place in the world and the literature on dress. He sees considerable differences between Myanmar and Europe or the “West.” In Myanmar, dress is not extrinsic to status and identity as e.g. in Europe but a vital part of both. While this is certainly true for Myanmar, the dismissal of the significance of dress for other parts of the world is somewhat exaggerated. While dress in Europe does not indicate professional or social status to the same extent, it is definitely a statement of individual choice and thus of identity. It would be more accurate to say that dress in Myanmar is much more an indication of social and professional status and belonging in a collective, which is equally true for other countries in South and Southeast Asia. India is a particularly illuminating example where until fairly recently, dress denoted, among other things, caste and was therefore often the cause of violent conflict. Myanmar is not unique here.

The author’s strength lies in the detailed and thoughtful description of how exactly this works in different social, professional and public contexts and the interplay of social pressure and individual choice. This description and analysis constitutes the immense value of the study for the reader. It effortlessly ranges across a vast range of topics: starting with the production of cloth via the history of dress in Myanmar during pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence times and its Indian and Chinese borrowings extending to modern imports of fabric and the methods of tailoring. The author clearly knows what he is talking about and has a close association with “dress” (as he himself

states, both personal and professional) in all its facets. He presents the questionable interest of European anthropologists of the 19th and 20th centuries in “native dress” and demonstrates how the “exotic” was often created by the observers themselves. He then discusses the “ideology of dress” during and after the independence struggle. While during colonial times this was a question of national resistance, it became a statement of nationalism and national unity after independence. Alongside, however, he presents photos and texts to show that in some astonishing contexts (skimpy) western dress was a sales argument for government magazines. Only later the junta prescribed mandatory dress for government servants. Subtle resistance against army rule was then manifested in the dress style of youth that did not conform to these codes.

The chapter on dressing codes in everyday life, in various social – private and public – contexts like home, neighbourhood, office and university, and for various events is stunning in its detail. A casual – or not so casual – visitor to Myanmar who has some experience of dress codes in India or Southeast Asia is able to distinguish some of them, but the subtler shades would escape her, e.g. the meaning of the Batik blouse and *lungi* worn by many elderly women. The author emphasises the unique and very visible colour coding for different professions (in India e.g., subtle codes for professional dress are not so much tied to colour as to fabric and style). Particularly remarkable is his description of implicit or silent dress codes for girls and women that must conform not only to standards of modesty, but also of inconspicuousness.

The third chapter deals with presentations of dress for special occasions like weddings and graduation as well as the fixation of these in the photo studio: here the elegance and pride that cannot be manifested in daily life are poignantly kept for posterity.

The chapter on the influence of the stage and TV is enlightening. While TV in some

respects may be said to take the place of fashion shows where establishing new fashions is concerned, seasonal fashion and fashion shows are comparatively recent and little patronised. It seems that the author subscribes to rather narrow definitions of fashion and its implications (see p. 147). Fashion is admittedly less of a performance here than in Europe, and while due to the climate seasonal fashion would be impossible that does surely not mean that styles, cuts and fabrics do not change subtly with the rainy and hot seasons. The author describes this himself and also, that the change of fashion is due to other factors as well: available fabrics and imports, TV programmes and most intriguingly the Korean soaps so popular now in Myanmar. Through these soaps dress styles like jeans and t-shirts, formerly deemed “Western” and reprehensible, have become acceptable for young people because they are no longer seen as of Western origin.

It might be churlish to criticise a study like this, but some points should be mentioned.

The quote from the Lonely Planet that of all countries in Southeast Asia only in Myanmar one sees mainly traditional dress being worn is to say the least, astonishing. In Malaysia or Cambodia or, indeed, India, traditional dress is the everyday costume of choice for most females and many males. The significance of dress codes is, however, different: in Malaysia, dress denotes religious and ethnic affiliation, in India traditional dress is a matter of course mostly without political or ideological overtones, whereas in Myanmar it is a manifestation of quite varying affiliations simultaneously.

These are, however, minor criticisms and especially the last remarks could serve to encourage a broadening of this study to South and Southeast Asia and its discussion in a comparative way. This reviewer would eagerly await it.

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