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**Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-dissertation Travel Fellowship (2017)**  
**Myanmar**

With the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jensen fellowship, I was able to begin preliminary research on socio-legal constructions of citizenship in Myanmar between June 1<sup>st</sup> and August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. My research focuses on the ways that perceptions of ethnic, religious, and historical belonging within the territories now constituting the state of Myanmar are written into that country's current citizenship laws and how potential biases within these laws potentially affect individuals' or groups' access to social and political resources.

In 1982, Myanmar passed a citizenship law which explicitly groups people by ethno-national belonging. Only groups termed 'native-races' (*dainyinthá*) are afforded full citizenship. This excludes 'non-Burmese' peoples, including those born in Myanmar. As recently as 2013, a minister of the then-president's office justified this law as vital to the protection of the Myanmar race and nation "by [preventing] those with mixed blood from making political decisions."<sup>1</sup> My dissertation research seeks to illuminate the ever-contingent nature of political belonging in Myanmar as it transitions from military rule to an era of greater civic freedoms. The preliminary research I was able to conduct over this ten-week period is currently informing a long-term field research project that I am presently designing as I finish my Ph.D. coursework.

My summer research experience allowed me to reconnect with previously known contacts and develop 'informant' relationships with those working in legal, social, and political fields in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city and the historical center of Burmese activism. While several of my initial contacts were people I already knew through their time in the US, meeting them in Yangon allowed me to better understand the grounded realities, including the contexts, contingencies, possibilities, and limitations of rights-based activism within Myanmar. Further, these initial contacts were able to put me in touch with more and more individuals and organizations working on similar topics through a snowballing research methodology.

Formal and informal interviews among those working in legal fields further revealed how unclarity regarding the current laws limits the potential to challenge discriminatory citizenship legislation in courts. As citizenship is formally considered a matter of national security, the question of whether or not courts have the authority to hear cases related to citizenship is unclear. Discussions with legal professionals and activists revealed limited cases in which citizenship might come under the jurisdiction of the courts, but respondents emphasized their confusion as to why certain cases could be discussed but not others. This picture of a judicial system in disarray contributed to my understanding of why and how people in Myanmar might decide to resolve their citizenship struggles outside of the courts.

While I initially planned to compliment interviews with court observations, difficulties gaining access to court proceedings for research purposes made this planned site impossible on this trip. While courts are theoretically open to the public in Myanmar, in reality informal barriers like scrupulous document checks and police intimidation hinder access. At the advice of friends and informants in Myanmar I

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<sup>1</sup> Aye Nai. 2013. "Suu Kyi Calls on Citizenship Law to Be Revised." *Democratic Voice of Burma*, April 17. <http://www.dvb.no/news/suu-kyi-calls-on-citizenship-law-to-be-revised/27605>.

decided not to attempt to sit in on court proceedings on this trip, while holding out the possibility of such research on future trips as the situation changes.

I would like to once more thank the family of Scott Kloeck-Jensen as well as the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute of Regional and International Studies for their generous support in funding my preliminary summer research. This opportunity has contributed greatly to my future research and academic developments, and will continue to do so over the course of my career. Burmese and foreign friends working in Myanmar always remark on how quickly that country is changing. Since I have been back to the US I have already heard of many more major changes happening back in Myanmar – both positive and, like the further tragic treatment of the Rohingya, sometimes devastating. Having the opportunity to conduct this research early in my career will provide a unique baseline for understanding the further changes Myanmar will continue to experience. The strength and hard work of those I met this summer give me hope for the best possible future of that country.