

Commitments of Debt: Temporality and the Meanings of Aid Work in a Japanese NGO in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT The rise of debt as a mechanism of development troubles many scholars and aid practitioners. Contrary to these concerns, however, ethnographic research at a Japanese NGO in Myanmar showed that Japanese and Burmese aid workers found value in moral and monetary debt relations. In this article, I argue that these aid workers viewed indebtedness as a precondition for the making of voluntary actors, willing and committed to aid work. What they problematized was not indebtedness but, rather, competing understandings of the appropriate temporality of a debt's repayment. The fault lines did not appear along cultural or moral-monetary boundaries; they existed in the ways that people conceptualized voluntary actors as emerging from either long-term forms of indebted gratitude or sequences of short-term contractual agreements. While the entrapment of the poor in cycles of debt remains an increasing concern in the world, I here ask how we might understand local aid workers' professional commitments when they do not question indebtedness as a moral framework. [*NGO, debt, gratitude, temporality, commitment, Myanmar*]

RESUMEN El aumento de la deuda como un mecanismo de desarrollo preocupa a muchos investigadores y profesionales humanitarios. Contrario a estas preocupaciones, sin embargo, la investigación etnográfica en una ONG Japonesa en Myanmar mostró que trabajadores humanitarios encontraron valor en las relaciones de deuda moral y monetaria. En este artículo, argumento que estos trabajadores humanitarios vieron el endeudamiento como una precondition para el proceso de hacerse actores voluntarios, dispuestos y comprometidos con el trabajo humanitario. Lo que ellos problematizaron no fue el endeudamiento, sino, más bien, entendimientos conflictivos de la temporalidad apropiada del repago de una deuda. Las líneas de la falla no aparecen a lo largo de límites culturales o monetarios-morales; ellas existían en las maneras en que las personas conceptualizaron actores voluntarios como emergiendo bien sea de formas de largo plazo de gratitud por deudas o de secuencias de acuerdos contractuales de corto plazo. Mientras el atrapamiento del pobre en ciclos de deuda permanece como una preocupación creciente en el mundo, aquí pregunto cómo podemos entender el compromiso profesional de trabajadores humanitarios cuando ellos no cuestionan el endeudamiento como un marco moral. [*ONG, deuda, gratitud, temporalidad, compromiso, Myanmar*]

In May 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Abe pledged over US\$500 million in new loans to Myanmar, which would include infrastructure development projects in the newly reformed country (BBC 2013). Loans in foreign aid

packages are a long-held trend in Japanese policies, particularly in Asia where the former colonial power has sought to create new kinds of relations through aid after World War II (Arase 2005). In Myanmar, the amount of bilateral

loans constituted over 3.5 times more than other kinds of Japanese aid between 1968 and 1988 (MOFA 1999). Resuming the relationship between the two countries through the form of aid loans in this new era of Myanmar's history was in many ways a continuation of existing paradigms of debt relations.

Although the structure of Japan's loans has been discussed in news outlets and from the macro perspectives of political economy and international relations, few observers have studied how debt relations operate on the level of everyday ideologies, relations, and practices of Japanese aid in Asia. In this article, I examine how Burmese and Japanese staff members of one of the most prominent Japanese NGOs with projects in Myanmar called the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA), an environmental and development organization derived from a Shinto-based new religion, conceptualized monetary and moral indebtedness as a defining characteristic of their commitments to aid work. The research is based on 20 months of fieldwork that I conducted between 2009 and 2011 in Japan and Myanmar, where I followed OISCA's training activities for rural youth in sustainable agriculture and what Japanese staffers called spiritual cultivation (*seishin ikusei*) through a communal lifestyle. The training centers in Japan hosted trainees from around the world, whereas the training centers overseas targeted local youth—in the case of the Myanmar training center, young people of various ethnic backgrounds from around Myanmar. All training programs lasted for about a year, and learning to live communally during this time was as important as acquiring skills in sustainable farming. In addition to volunteering at the Tokyo headquarters office, I participated in OISCA's training programs, first in Japan and then in Myanmar, living closely with the staffers and trainees at both sites. I woke up at dawn with the others, took part in the collective cleaning and cooking duties, joined in the agricultural trainings and tasks, and took on other translation, documentation, and writing duties as Japanese and Burmese staff members assigned to me.

Although the predominance of loans in Japanese foreign aid policies does not necessarily indicate that debt relations dictate practices on the ground, during my fieldwork at OISCA's Myanmar training center, both moral and monetary debts appeared frequently as a central mode of relations between Japanese and Burmese aid workers. This is not to say that a neatly causal relationship binds aid policies and practices together, but in this article my aim is to orient analytical attention to aid workers' moral reasoning (Sykes 2009)—that is, the ways that Burmese and Japanese aid workers navigate different values around debt to discern what is good. Development scholars have examined relations of debt in aid activities, especially in the growth of microcredit projects in the last couple of decades (Karim 2011; Rankin 2001). Various called "empowerment debt" (Elyachar 2005) or "poverty capital" (Roy 2010), researchers have shown that this trend promotes financial indebtedness as a way to improve the self, the family, and the nation.

Through microcredit initiatives, the poor around the world now have access to loans that they can use to, for instance, jumpstart their own businesses. While this strategy might democratize capital, analyses indicate that it also reproduces inequalities in a chain of dependencies that put vulnerable persons at the mercy of larger and more powerful structures such as the global market. As Ananya Roy (2010) describes, the poor in microcredit projects are not so much "empowered" as they are made into investment opportunities for microlending institutions. These studies show that indebtedness has increasingly become a way for the poor to participate in global capital—but as exploited subjects.

Given this body of literature, I was puzzled to find in my fieldwork that the inequality of debt relations, which Japanese and Burmese aid actors acknowledged, was not their point of contention. Rather, Japanese and Burmese aid workers in OISCA agreed on the productive value of debts and, furthermore, on the fact that indebtedness could create committed actors of aid. It is worth noting that, unlike the literature on development and debt, my focus here is on notions of debt among aid workers and not aid recipients. As such, the issue of debts in this article does not refer so much to questions of poverty reduction or even development but, rather, to the values that constitute an aid worker's professional commitments. I suggest that looking at the logics and relations of debt among aid workers can illuminate how debts are not necessarily simply about exploitative relations; they can also play a role in defining aid workers as committed, voluntary actors.

By "voluntary actors," I do not mean unpaid workers or individuals acting on free will but, more generally, persons who are willing and committed to aid work. What proved important was how people defined this commitment, which hinged, counterintuitively, on their willing participation in relations of debt. In other words, both Japanese and Burmese staffers saw their voluntary involvement in debt relations as defining the commitment of aid workers, rather than the spontaneous, impulsive emotions or freedoms unmoored from social obligations that often characterize voluntariness in "doing good" (cf. Bornstein 2012; Muehlebach 2012).

Nevertheless, differences appeared in people's approaches to monetary debt. These distinctions foregrounded not so much the difference between monetary and moral debts, nor the cultural divergence between Japanese and Burmese perceptions of debt; instead they revealed a conflict between contrasting conceptions of the temporality of repayment.¹ Whereas Burmese aid workers and the previous 70-year-old Japanese director of the Myanmar training center saw the commitment of aid workers in their dedication to the long-term repayment of moral and monetary debts, the current Japanese director in his early thirties pushed for sequences of shorter temporalities of fixed repayments that would create entrepreneurial subjects (although not necessarily neoliberal ones). Both views agreed that the unending continuation of debt relations defined voluntary actors of aid—willing and committed to aid work. But there were

differences in the understanding of a voluntary actor of aid: on the one hand, through an approach to aid work as a moral long-term commitment, and on the other hand, based on a series of contractually bounded duties. Ultimately, although aid workers in OISCA did not question the productive value of debt relations, they disagreed over what kinds of debt relations were “good,” which hinged on varying views on the appropriate temporalities of repayment.

My argument in this article proceeds through a comparison between two conflicting but coexisting forms of debt. First, I describe how Burmese staffers in OISCA defined the commitment to their work through the value of *kye:zu:*, which I translate as “indebted gratitude.” *Kye:zu:* is part of the expression that means “thank you” in Burmese—*kye:zu: tin ba te*—but the notion of *kye:zu:* as it appeared in OISCA differed from the English connotations of the phrase. In Myanmar, *kye:zu:* can be used in a variety of contexts to refer to relations of indebted gratitude that are not always the same in magnitude; some forms of *kye:zu:* carry more moral obligations than others. For the Burmese aid workers that I met, *kye:zu:* in OISCA pointed to a sense of indebted gratitude defined by its profusion, a feeling that is usually reserved for one’s parents or teachers. *Kye:zu:* in this sense referred to the fact that what was given had been so great that complete return could never be achieved or even expected. Moreover, Burmese actors stressed that sentiments and acts of *kye:zu:* must be voluntary, not based on external pressures or formalized rules. The importance lay in the efforts to fulfill the obligations of repayment and return the kindness in gratitude out of one’s own volition, all the while knowing that concluding this indebtedness with an equal return would remain impossible. In fact, the disinterested nature of *kye:zu:* hinged on the eternal deferral of repayment—that is, the impossibility of it highlighted the purity of commitment to the obligation to repay and the sincerity of the feelings of gratitude. This was not a case of a pure gift, because the obligation to return the gift remained central (cf. Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986). Rather, one might say that it consisted of a moral value that derived from the mirror image of the pure gift—that is, a “pure return.”

In the second section, I look at the system of monetary loans for Burmese aid workers in OISCA and the changes that the current director, Sakurai, was trying to implement. The difficulty of Sakurai’s task lay in the fact that he moved away from the dependence on the dynamics of indebted gratitude in managing the loans, as the previous director had done, and systematized the scheme so that he could ensure a sequence of precise short-term repayments. This reform, based in many ways on Sakurai’s rejection of religiously driven paradigms and an affinity for business-like models of management, constituted a major part of his goal to instill self-reliance (*jiritsu*) in the Burmese staffers. On a fundamental level, however, Burmese staff members resisted this systematization because they did not understand Sakurai’s reasoning. Ultimately, although Sakurai also believed in the unending continuation of debt relations, he pushed for vis-

ible shorter timeframes of contractual agreements within that eternal indebtedness. This view undercut the affective value of indebted gratitude for the Burmese aid workers, for whom repayments had to remain imprecise.

As elaborated below, development scholars and practitioners are largely concerned with indebtedness as a condition of a neoliberalized world that hinders possibilities of a good life. This is, indeed, an important issue. Nevertheless, the aid workers in Myanmar and Japan that I met indicated that neoliberalization is not necessarily the accurate context for understanding debts and, moreover, that freedom from moral and monetary debts might not be desirable for some people. In particular, following recent literature on “aidnography” (Mosse 2011), what I show is that debts are part of aid workers’ various lifeworlds and cannot always be analyzed as instruments of a global political economy. Ethnography shows that the critiques and conflicts of debt relations could emerge elsewhere in certain cases. Accordingly, I describe how aid workers made sense of debts as socially and morally productive in different ways, adjacent to but differing from the dynamics and issues of neoliberalization and financialization that preoccupies most studies of debt and development.

Ultimately, I suggest that the importance of the prolonged temporalities of indebted gratitude among Burmese aid workers has significant implications in Myanmar today. In the last few years, the number of aid agencies has increased, especially since the cyclone of 2008 and the recent political reforms. Perhaps, in light of the fact that Burmese aid actors see debt relations as meaningful, promoting the empowerment and self-reliance of local aid workers, as aid agencies are wont to do in an increasingly NGO-ized society, might not simply be ineffective but, rather, counterproductive to the constitution of aid work as a worthwhile profession in the eyes of Burmese aid workers.

THE POTENTIALITY OF DEBTS

Scholars of development describe how aid institutions today believe in the poor’s participation in global markets as a solution to poverty and, thus, enthusiastically embrace microfinance projects. Many development workers and other commentators have promoted microcredit initiatives as a way to foster self-reliant individuals rather than persons dependent on charity (Austin 2007; Robinson 2001). These initiatives provide people with small loans with which, theoretically, they can start up income-generating activities. The ability to take out loans and repay them becomes central to this vision of empowered, responsible individuals and improved communities. In recent years, however, development scholars, anti-debt activists, and even aid organizations themselves have shown that these programs actually often turn the poor into forever-indebted consumers of financial products who are at the mercy of the global market, with little impact on poverty reduction (Bateman 2011; Fridell 2013; Rahman 1999; Rankin 2001). Moreover, anthropologists have described how cultural values such as shame and mutual aid are instrumentalized in microcredit

schemes in ways that pressure vulnerable participants to conform to a neoliberal, market-led system of development, transforming forms of sociality into objects of quantification and management (Elyachar 2005; Karim 2011). Research indicates that such microcredit programs entangle people into cycles of indebtedness, as their “improvement” and even daily survival becomes tied to totalizing debt relations with providers of capital such as moneylenders, NGOs, and microfinance institutions (for the case of Myanmar, see Dapice et al. 2011; Kyaw 2009). Ultimately, what is produced through development by debt is an individual who adheres to neoliberal principles of market entrepreneurialism and self-help, unmoored from social binds of relationality and usually not better off than before they were indebted.²

In a general way, this transformation of human sociality to monetary and quantifiable calculations echoes David Graeber’s (2011) monumental narrative of the history of debt. He explains how “human economies . . . in which what is considered really important about human beings is the fact that they are each a unique nexus of relations with others” (2011 : 208) were historically turned into economies of monetary calculation, as if a human life could be quantified with an equivalent financial value and repaid as debt. He argues that this transformation, observed repeatedly around the world, has been possible only with the use of violence. Development scholars concerned with the rise of debts as forms of aid would probably agree with Graeber that debts become possible only “when people have been forcibly severed from their contexts, so much so that they can be treated as identical to something else” (Graeber 2011:386): namely, money. Debts impose calculations on lives that are valued according to the logics of the global market.

The transformation of human sociality and cultural values into monetary computations of debt, thereby imprisoning the poor in inescapable systems of dependency as if this were a solution to poverty, is indeed a serious problem. However, what I encountered among OISCA’s aid workers in Japan and Myanmar indicated a prevailing sense of meaningfulness in responding to the obligations to return moral and monetary debts. This view departs from Graeber and development scholars’ stories in three ways. First, their studies are concerned with forms of debt among aid recipients, but I shift attention to a rarer and less studied topic: debts among local aid workers. Second, their observations cannot explain the fact that the aid workers whom I met embraced and even valued indebtedness and the obligation to repay. In this sense, the case of OISCA is more akin to ethnographies that have captured how monetary and moral debt relations can be socially productive (Han 2004; Moodie 2008; Peebles 2010; Roitman 2005). Third, a number of anthropologists have also illustrated how debts are not only about monetary values and the subjugation of the poor in systems of global capital but also nodes of social and cosmological relations that are imbued with various forms of morality (Chu 2010; Kar 2013). These studies diverge from the distinction that Graeber (2011:13–14) makes between

moral obligations and debts because they show that the two cannot be disentangled in practice.

Japanese and Burmese aid workers’ embrace of the obligation to repay debts is not surprising given the importance of reciprocity in gift exchange in Japan, as anthropologists have recorded for decades (Befu 1968; Hendry 1993). It is also congruent with general understandings of the value of reciprocity in social relations in Myanmar (Bekker 1981). Yet, despite these commonly known characteristics of gift exchange and indebtedness in the two countries, as well as the above anthropological literature on the social productivity of debts, when it comes to the study of development aid, scholars have tended to overlook the sociological role of debts.³ It seems to me that, in the rush to criticize the neoliberal industry around financial debts, even anthropologists have not paid enough attention to the cultural and moral potentiality of debts in development aid. This is not to say that predatory neoliberal-like frameworks are absent in relations of debt in development aid. My point is that studies have not given due credit to how aid actors can theorize debts as meaningful and problematic for different reasons, thereby demanding alternative anthropological critiques.⁴ In the end, the aid workers whom I encountered did not contest the market logic of debts in light of some other cultural system but instead saw a conflict of moral reasoning over the temporality of repayments and its significance to their professional commitments.

KYE:ZU:

OISCA is one of the oldest development NGOs in Japan, established in 1961, and it derives from a Shinto-based new religion called Ananaikyō, although staffers identify the organization as nonreligious, neither religious nor secular (Watanabe 2015). OISCA’s mission statement speaks of the interconnected nature of the universe and the organization’s purpose to promote the coexistence of all life on earth. A Japanese official at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) invited OISCA to begin projects in Myanmar in 1996, becoming one of the first Japanese NGOs to work in what has been called Asia’s final frontier.⁵ Since then, OISCA’s staffers have been conducting training courses in sustainable agriculture and environmental education in the semiarid region of Yesagyo Township in central Myanmar. Serving as a training center as well as a model farm for nearby villagers, it has expansive rice paddies, vegetable fields, chicken corrals, pig sheds, and a food-processing center. Officially, OISCA and the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS), a department of the Myanmar government, operate the training center, but OISCA is responsible for daily operations.

Every year OISCA accepts 20 rural youth from around the country as trainees. The young men and women spend 11 months living and working together in the training center, learning not only techniques in organic farming but also values of communal living such as a disciplinary lifestyle. The Japanese director, the Burmese staff, and the trainees

clean the grounds together every morning before dispersing to fulfill their respective responsibilities throughout the day. During my time there, I found that these first few hours of the day were precious moments of relief before the day's scorching sun. Someone would sound the gong by the cafeteria at 5:00 a.m. sharp, and I would take a moment, then slip out of bed, blurry-eyed but thankful for the nip in the air. I would quickly change into the morning uniform, navy blue jersey pants and a white shirt, and join the other staff and trainees in the courtyard. The sun would not be up yet. We would shuffle around quietly in the dark doing our respective cleaning duties, some people sweeping the classrooms, others scrubbing the floors on their hands and knees. By the time that we lined up in the middle of the dusty courtyard for the disciplinary routines of roll call and physical exercise, a pale yellow hue would be spreading across the sky, and we would know that another day of labor had begun.

Although this was not an easy life, a handful of trainees applied to become staff members every year. If selected, they would remain at the training center for a year as provisional staff and would then be sent to OISCA's training centers in Japan for another year. On returning to Myanmar, they would become full-time staffers. Hence, by the time that people became staff members, they would have been with OISCA for at least three years, and many of them stayed for several more. The oldest Burmese staff members whom I met had been at the NGO for over a decade—an impressively long employment record given the high turnover of local staffers in international NGOs in Myanmar. At the time of my research, there were approximately 40 Burmese staffers and one Japanese staff member: the director, Sakurai.

I spent most of my days and evenings in the training center with the Burmese aid workers, especially the women who were around my age. One of them, Ma Khaing, had been with OISCA for nearly five years. A staff member in her late twenties, she became one of my closest confidantes at the training center. She had a warm, comforting demeanor, and I could see that the trainees and her colleagues respected her for that, as well as for her conscientious approach to her work. Every evening after dinner, we strolled along the unpaved road outside the training center. During one of these walks on a moonless night on October 21, 2010, I asked her why she had been at OISCA for so many years, hundreds of miles away from her home in southern Myanmar. After all, the training center stood in an isolated place in a rural region and revolved around a regimented schedule of arduous agricultural labor under a sweltering sun—not a particularly comfortable life. Moreover, unlike in other international NGOs, OISCA staff did not earn much money. It was dark, but I heard her laugh. She told me that she stayed in OISCA because she felt *kye:zu:* for the rare opportunity that OISCA gave her to go to Japan, become involved in the development of her country, and make friends with people from around the world through the training course that she attended in Japan. For her, the sense of indebted

gratitude did not simply point to an obligation; it constituted a meaningful motivation in her commitment to the work.

Most of the Burmese staffers similarly described the *kye:zu:* that they felt for OISCA as a sentiment and act of gratitude that carried value because of its abundant and incalculable character. Ma Phyo was another young woman who joined Ma Khaing and me on our evening walks. Because OISCA and MAS, the government agency, ran the Myanmar training center as a joint project, the latter institution sent a few staff to work at the OISCA training center. Ma Phyo was the most recent MAS employee in OISCA.

Along with Ma Khaing, Ma Phyo became one of my closest interlocutors. While Ma Khaing seemed like a motherly, gentle figure, Ma Phyo was an opinionated and outspoken person. One night on October 22, 2010, Ma Khaing could not come to our evening walk, and Ma Phyo and I took a stroll on our own. Instead of going out to the paved road by ourselves, we decided to walk next to the classroom building, where trainees were watching a Korean soap opera. As we slowly paced back and forth underneath a yellow light bulb, Ma Phyo told me that she joined MAS in 2001 after graduating from Yezin Agricultural University, and in 2008, MAS chose her to go to Japan with OISCA. When she came back to Myanmar in 2010, her bosses at MAS asked her if she wanted to return to MAS or stay at the OISCA training center in Yesagyo. She chose the latter. I asked her why. She replied that she felt grateful (*kye:zu: shí te*) for the opportunity that OISCA gave her to go to Japan. She wanted to work in OISCA out of a sense of indebted gratitude.

I wanted to know if there was an end to this return, if there would come a time when she would be finished repaying that *kye:zu:*. She shook her head, explaining that *kye:zu:* did not work like that. "For example," she continued, "if you were to help me with something, whether for a big problem or a small favor, I would help you in return at some point, for whatever reason it may be." She paused. "In Japan, it seemed to me that the concept of gratitude was different in that once you say 'thank you,' the interaction is finished. But in Myanmar, the giving back of *kye:zu:* is forever." For Ma Phyo, the return of indebted gratitude proved valuable for its abundant endlessness. The obligation to repay was not a weight that she wanted to cast off with an equalizing return but, rather, a call that she wanted to fulfill without calculation, potentially for the rest of her life. Ma Khaing told me once through a proverb: "If you have ever taken a bite from him, he will always be your benefactor" (*tit louk sa: hpu:, thu kye:zu:*). Burmese staffers saw the repayment of *kye:zu:* as impossible and therefore limitless, and they accepted the hierarchical relationship of this exchange as part of this principle of moral debt. Marcel Mauss described conditions in which the recipient is unable to repay as "slavery" (1990:42), but the condition of eternal indebtedness in an expression of gratitude appeared meaningful for Burmese aid workers (see also Appadurai 1985).

This emphasis on the eternal nature of *kye:zu:* reflected the importance of disinterestedness in the obligation to

repay. Burmese staffers repeated to me that neither the intention nor the content of kye:zu: should be determined by an obvious sense of duty or restraint.⁶ They saw kye:zu: as a logic of abundance not about meeting a prescriptive duty or reaching a precise quantitative equilibrium. Their understanding of being committed and voluntary actors rested on the obligation to repay, but it had to appear in an excessive and therefore abstract form—that is, in a commitment to repay that went above and beyond explicit rules and expectations. Being a voluntary actor meant a commitment to the potential incompleteness of acts of repayment that could continue forever.

This emphasis on intentionality resonates with concepts of *dāna*. Understood as forms of charity or alms giving in Asian religions, it is an example of a “pure gift,” contra Mauss, that denies reciprocity (Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986). Erica Bornstein (2012:28) explains in her study of philanthropy in India that, unlike *zakat* in Islam, *dāna* is “not a reciprocal gift”; it is based on the renunciation of the material world, including social relations. Similarly in Burmese Buddhism, the ultimate goal of *dāna* “is to transcend dependence on worldly material and social circumstances” (Jordt 2007:100; see also Schober 2011). Ingrid Jordt demonstrates in her ethnographic study of lay Buddhist meditation movements in Myanmar that, for this transcendence to occur and therefore for the person to achieve *nibbana* (Pali for “enlightenment” or literally “to extinguish” the roots of suffering), “intention is the single most important criterion” (Jordt 2007:102). The evaluation of the giver’s intention is a fraught process but nonetheless critical in the moral and spiritual value of *dāna*. Despite the similar concerns with intention, however, kye:zu: differs from *dāna* in that the value of the former derives from being enmeshed in this-worldly relations and not in an aspiration for transcendence. The “purity” of kye:zu:’s return derives from a complete embrace of the moral demand to repay the debt to the benefactor, potentially forever. This proved to differ substantially from Sakurai’s views on the importance of systematizing loans.

LOANS

One afternoon on October 29, 2010, Ma Phyö and I sat chatting over lunch. As we were wrapping up our meals, she asked me how I arrived at my doctoral program in the United States. She hoped to get an advanced degree in agriculture, hopefully overseas, and wanted to know about the process. She told me that MAS had a program through which employees could go to a master’s program in another country for a year, and she had found one that she liked in Korea. But when she asked Sakurai if she could apply to this program, he denied her request. He told her that OISCA had invested a lot of money and time in her and that she needed to work in OISCA for at least a few years, presumably as a form of repayment. Ma Phyö was visibly upset about this. She told me that she would not stay in OISCA forever and would one day go to a master’s program.

This was the same Ma Phyö who had talked about her sense of kye:zu: to OISCA as limitless. But marking an explicit timeframe for the repayment of the debt clearly undermined her commitment. Sakurai’s overt declaration of the obligation to repay within a determined amount of time rendered kye:zu: part of an instrumental and almost contractual structure in which the act of return became simply a way to fulfill a formal duty. For the Burmese staff, kye:zu: had to remain as an undefined obligation of repayment to which one would commit without other people’s expectations to do so. Sakurai’s precision of the debt’s return undercut this voluntary commitment, as if a certain amount of time and labor could constitute an equivalence and therefore an end to the relation. This time constraint was not intended to end all debts and, as such, shared an affinity with kye:zu: for unending debt relations. However, Sakurai had made the debt precise, revealing specific duties and shorter timeframes of repayment, even within eternal cycles of debt.⁷ Thus, by highlighting the need to repay debts within a visible future, Sakurai had challenged a fundamental aspect of Ma Phyö’s sense of an eternal and imprecise indebted gratitude.

On a fundamental level, Sakurai introduced reforms to the loans because he wanted to shift OISCA’s organizational form from the religiously driven paradigm of previous eras to a more bureaucratic and technical one.⁸ Anthropologists of Christian aid organizations have depicted how first-generation “religious” approaches to development and humanitarian aid come into conflict with second-generation “secular,” rational techniques of aid and how aid actors caught in the middle negotiate this friction (Barnett 2012; Halvorson 2012; Scherz 2013). Although OISCA is a Shinto-based organization that defines itself as nonreligious, and the issue of debts in the Myanmar training center was not explicitly tied to questions of religion or secularism, I suggest that a similar conflict existed. Kawaguchi, the previous director of the Myanmar training center, and other senior Japanese staffers in OISCA, mostly in their sixties and seventies, who were all Ananikyō members, supported the value of indebted gratitude. These senior Japanese staff members often complained to me that they had to now run the organization like “a project” rather than “a movement,” creating formalized budgets, project plans, and exit strategies that they perceived to be superfluous to their greater spiritual goals of creating harmony with the universe. In particular, they believed in the value of long-term relations with local aid recipients and aid workers, and they tended to stay in overseas project sites for decades. In contrast, Sakurai represented a new generation of Japanese staffers who were not members of Ananikyō and who spoke admiringly of, for instance, the technicality of United Nations programs and the importance of eventually withdrawing international (Japanese) presence from local projects. As much as both generations agreed on the mission to help people around Asia improve their livelihoods, they thought differently about the timeframes and endpoints of their relations with local communities. One does not have to see these differences as questions of

religion and secularism for the purposes of this article, but the point helps us appreciate the dynamics of generational conflict and its intersection with differences over questions of debt, professional commitment, and temporality that shaped Sakurai's motivations for reform.

The tension between Sakurai's approach and the values among Burmese staffers, echoed by senior Japanese staff members, appeared most clearly regarding the monetary loans to staff and alumni. From the outset, I found OISCA's system of loans for local staff and former trainees intriguing. Microcredit projects for aid recipients were ubiquitous in the development literature, but I had never encountered instances of internal loans within an aid organization. Later, I heard anecdotal stories of informal loans that international aid workers gave to local staff members in Japanese and other NGOs in Myanmar, but as far as I know, this is not a phenomenon that has been examined by scholars. Despite this paucity of research on the subject, it was clear that the loans dovetailed Burmese staffers' explanations of *kye:zu:*. Thus, I spent many afternoons asking Sakurai about it. He always eagerly explained the system for me and, in particular, his plans to reform it.

According to Sakurai, the topic of loans to local staff and alumni came up every year at OISCA's annual overseas directors' meeting in Tokyo. It seemed that, in other countries, local staff also asked the Japanese directors if they could borrow money for various family or personal reasons. Sakurai explained that villagers and trainees were not the only people who needed OISCA's assistance; the staffers who were themselves former trainees and villagers with families were also in need of aid. He stressed that it was difficult to say who did not need help at the training centers. Everyone faced difficulties, and although OISCA's staffers did not have to pay for living expenses because they lived in the training center, they could not afford much beyond that. Given this situation, the Japanese directors in OISCA's overseas training centers, including Kawaguchi, lent money to local staff out of the project funds, usually based on their discretion. "So," he explained, "the [Japanese] directors in OISCA's training centers have been managing the loans to local staff through a sense of *on-gaeshi*" (conversation with author, November 10, 2010).

On-gaeshi is the Japanese equivalent of *kye:zu:*. Just as with the Burmese concept, *on-gaeshi* refers to sentiments and acts of repayment for a moral debt that are greater than normal, such as toward parents and great teachers (see Lebra 1969). OISCA workers and other Japanese aid actors referred to *on-gaeshi* at multiple scales of aid. Some people, including government officials, told me that Japan's development aid represented a repayment for the kindness that the country received from other governments after World War II; others in OISCA specifically referred to *on-gaeshi* as a feeling that aid recipients expressed, or should express, for the organization.⁹

Sakurai saw the directors' references to the values of *on-gaeshi* as something that could not be condemned outright,

but he did not believe that they were appropriate. Kawaguchi also gave out loans based on *on-gaeshi*, without interest on the loans or strict deadlines for repayment. Sakurai was concerned that Kawaguchi had not kept enough of a close eye on these loans. The new director feared that this lack of systematization would lead to financial problems in the future. "If OISCA were to continue lending money based on *on-gaeshi*, the projects will eventually go bankrupt!" he told me. Thus, one of the first changes that he sought to implement when he became the director in 2008 constituted the reform of loan systems so that the obligations to repay would be specified.

Yet, this was not an easy task. For most of the history of the OISCA Myanmar training center, Kawaguchi had been the director. He belonged to OISCA's founding religion, Ananaikyō, and had been working in OISCA since the 1960s. He had spent years working at training centers in the Philippines, Bangladesh, and, for the last decade, in Myanmar. He came from a farming family in rural Japan and everybody who came in contact with him spoke highly of his knowledge of agriculture and strength of character. Burmese staffers and nearby villagers revered his decade-long commitment to the country and his dedication to working in the agricultural fields every day. One young Burmese staff member explained that he had immense respect for Kawaguchi because an ordinary person would not be able to stay for so many years in Yesagyo Township, a place that even Burmese people from other regions considered to be extremely poor, hot, and difficult for agriculture. He said, "It is thanks to him [Kawaguchi] that the training center is such a nice place to live in." He pointed to the green trees around us. "We are grateful and indebted to him (*kye:zu: tin te*)."

Thus, as much as Burmese staffers felt *kye:zu:* toward OISCA as an organization, an important basis for this sentiment focused on the figure of Kawaguchi and their shared value of indebted gratitude.

In contrast, Sakurai made it clear to the Burmese staffers that he did not want to engage in relationships of indebted gratitude. Burmese staff members told me that, before Sakurai became the director, while he still worked under Kawaguchi, he used to be more affable and would even sometimes participate in the everyday debt relations with staff, treating each other to tea in the nearby teashop. But as soon as he became the director, he assumed a distance from the staff. Listening to Sakurai talk about his vision of reforms, I knew that he made this transformation because he wanted to create a self-sufficient training center with self-reliant Burmese staffers who would not need the intervention of a Japanese director. He believed that to achieve this, he had to systematize and rationalize every aspect of the organization, including his role. Whereas Kawaguchi had spent every day in the fields and granted various forms of favors and generosity to the Burmese staff, Sakurai poured over paperwork and stressed that Burmese staffers needed to learn budget systems and record-keeping practices. By the time that I arrived, two years into his directorship, the

friction between Sakurai and Burmese staffers was palpable. Burmese staff members seemed puzzled whenever Sakurai talked to them about the importance of accounting methods, for example, and in the worst moments, they openly resented him for imposing his own ways. This conflict was not simply personal but derived largely from a clash between different logics of indebtedness. The disagreement rested on Sakurai's aspirations to follow contractual models of debt management and self-reliance, which collided with Burmese aid workers' notions of indebted gratitude.¹⁰ This was ultimately a contention about varying understandings of what constituted a voluntary and committed aid worker.

These differences were evident in Sakurai's introduction of reforms to the loan schemes. The system of loans for Burmese staff allowed loans for up to 300,000 kyats per year (about US\$300 as of 2010), with an interest rate of five percent. The Burmese accounting staff member told me that about three-fourths of the Burmese staffers were taking out loans at the time. The second and larger loan scheme existed for alumni—that is, former trainees. Ma Khaing managed this scheme, and she had records of these alumni loans from 2001. Her handwritten records were meticulously organized in a large notebook with names, loan amounts, and repayment records. 161 alumni out of 264 had used the loan system in the last nine years. The loans were meant to help former trainees begin their own agricultural projects, applying what they learned in OISCA to their own communities. Some of them took out loans several times, starting at 50,000 kyats (about US\$50 as of 2010) the first year, then up to 300,000 kyats per year (about US\$300 as of 2010), with an interest rate of five percent the first year on the principal, ten percent up to a year and a half, and 20 percent after that.

To encourage an entrepreneurial spirit, Sakurai established a system in which alumni had to present "Action Plans" if they wanted the first-year loan. A committee of five Burmese staff and Sakurai assessed the Action Plans and made the decision on the loan. In 2010, the training center also began requiring borrowers to send a six-month report describing how they were using the money, specifically in light of the Action Plans that they had proposed. In this sense, the Action Plans made it clear that the loans were a form of contract in which the borrowing alumni were held responsible for their own actions.

Contractual agreements were important in Sakurai's reforms, and he required all borrowers to sign a document. Ma Khaing showed me the agreement for alumni loans. The text set the maximum amounts allowed and repeated in several places the importance of repaying the loan on time if the person wanted to apply for another loan. Borrowers had to demonstrate their participation in this debt relation through their signatures on the document. This reflected a specific understanding of voluntariness as "responsibility" and "accountability," one defined by a person's commitment to short-term debts, made precise through the deadlines and the signature on the agreement. If a commitment to

sentiments of abundance and deferred repayment shaped the voluntary actor of indebted gratitude and the informal loans during Kawaguchi's directorship, the making of a voluntary actor in Sakurai's loan agreements depended on a settling of accounts: a precise promise would be made and kept within a short timeframe, even as a prerequisite for continuing cycles of debt.

As Ma Phyto's anger indicated, making the endpoints of debt relations visible undermined Burmese aid workers' fundamental form of commitment. Burmese staffers did see the importance of ensuring repayments from alumni and staff so that the training center would be financially viable. The problem derived from Sakurai's insistence on precise short-term debts—without a similar validation of long-term relations of indebted gratitude—that undercut Burmese staffers' sense of commitment and willingness to work as voluntary, grateful actors of aid.

ORDERS OF AID

Much of the literature on development voices a concern over the entrapment of people in debts that leaves them vulnerable. This is certainly a serious problem in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, the Burmese and Japanese aid workers that I met often articulated their professional commitments and relations to each other in terms of indebtedness, which they did not necessarily portray as negative. Based on this ethnographic observation, I have argued that, first, neither Japanese nor Burmese aid workers were striving toward freedom from indebtedness. Accordingly, my second claim has been that both Sakurai and Burmese staffers agreed that a voluntary actor—someone willingly committed to aid work—emerged from an engagement with debt relations, rather than terms of an individual free of social constraints.

My third point indicated that, despite this agreement on the value of indebtedness, there were different views on the appropriate temporality of repayments, and this affected how different aid actors understood professional commitments of aid work. On the one hand, Burmese aid workers and older generations of Japanese staffers believed in the value of long-term and undefined repayments. The lack of an endpoint testified to the purity of the gratitude and the intention behind the repayment and ensured a long-term commitment to the organization. Sakurai's introduction of shorter and more definite timeframes of debt undermined Burmese aid workers' sense of voluntariness and therefore their commitment to their work. The young Japanese director understood the voluntary actor as someone who would engage in unending debt relations but who would do so by following sequences of agreements for short timeframes of repayment. This view resonated with international trends in the bureaucratization of aid practices, although not necessarily neoliberalization; Sakurai's position represented more a new generation of Japanese aid workers in OISCA who sought to move away from religiously driven motivations but not necessarily toward neoliberal systems.

These coexisting differences over understandings of the commitment to debt relations might have wider implications for aid organizations and local aid workers in Myanmar. In the past few years, there has been an unprecedented growth of aid agencies in the country. Consequently, the few international NGOs that have been working in a relatively uncompetitive milieu for the last decade or more, such as OISCA, have to do more now to attract skilled local staffers. Sakurai and other aid workers in Japanese NGOs often despaired that they could not pay as high a salary as Western and international organizations and were thus losing some of their best staff to other agencies. If Japanese NGOs such as OISCA could not easily increase the pay for Burmese staffers, we might interpret Sakurai's efforts to rationalize and standardize the loan systems as a way to approximate Western counterparts through form, if not money. In contrast to Kawaguchi's discretionary practices that made it difficult for Burmese staff to manage the loans themselves, Sakurai's reforms theoretically enabled the system to be replicable by anyone. If the loans were standardized, anyone could access and maintain the system. This form of standardization is common in development regimes in general, in which program designs are made replicable through normative organizational and technical forms (Ilcan and Phillips 2010). This formalization can enable, in a way, the democratization of development aid, although one must note that this is not an egalitarian relationship. After all, both Sakurai's vision and the principles of indebted gratitude ensured unending debts within which Burmese aid actors remained debtors and the Japanese organization, the creditor. Thus, participation in development processes can enable inclusion but in a differentiated way. Maia Green (2012) has proposed that we might understand local NGOs in Tanzania as enacting practices of anticipatory development, waiting in a position adjacent to development regimes, but we must add that this anticipation does not unfold on a level playing field. These practices include capacity-building activities and project-management techniques, which enable participation in development regimes through the use of standardized forms. It is useful to see Sakurai's efforts to systematize the loan system in a similar way—as an anticipatory development form that aspires to enter aid regimes through the use of standardized and standardizing practices, although this would happen through a hierarchical structure.

However, what my analysis suggests is that standardization does not always help motivate participation in aid regimes; neither does it expel other social forms. Following the growing literature on "aidnography," what is needed might be a better understanding of the moral reasonings that Burmese aid actors employ to make aid work a meaningful profession. Adapting David Lewis and David Mosse's (2006:4) call, I argue that "we need to understand the relationship between . . . diverse interests and logics and the rationalizing representations of development" that attach certain logics to expertise. In their analysis, Lewis and Mosse point out that anthropologists must attend to

how people construct representations of stable and unified policies that conceal the actual contingencies, multiplicity, and disorders of everyday aid work (see also Fechter and Hindman 2011; Mosse 2005, 2011). The governing system and policy of aid regimes are not *a priori* entities but effects of ordering practices. In the case of OISCA, there were competing orders that stipulated different understandings of what debt was "good for": for creating persons in unspecified and eternal relations of indebted gratitude or for making self-reliant individuals in a bureaucratic system of standardized aid regimes. There were, therefore, two divergent ordering practices, and an attempt to systematize loans or even increase salaries would not speak to Burmese staffers' methods of moral reasoning. Even if debt relations are ultimately unequal, I have proposed that it can be analytically productive to take seriously the fact that some aid workers find meaning in conditions of indebtedness. By first acknowledging this fact, we can begin to explore the diverse ways that aid actors formulate orders of aid around debt as well as what values are at stake for each of them.

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NOTES

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1. I thank Yukiko Koga for alerting me to the analytical productivity in thinking of monetary and moral debts together and looking for lines of tension elsewhere. See also Koga 2013.
2. Another approach to understanding indebtedness in aid has been through ideas of the gift, employing Marcel Mauss (1990). Scholars have extended Mauss's analysis to show that gift exchange is inextricably linked to the notion of the "pure gift"—a "disinterested" or selfless gift without expectations of reciprocity—or to processes of time that play with a temporal ambiguity, and hence a potential incompleteness, of the obligations of reciprocity (Bourdieu 1977; Derrida 1992; Laidlaw 2000; Miyazaki 2004; Parry 1986). Drawing on this literature, development scholars have argued that aid imposes impossible obligations on recipients to reciprocate while upholding the presentation of aid as a "pure gift" in the form of charity and untied grants (Bornstein 2012; Hattori 2003; Stirrat and Henkel 1997). They problematize the unequal relationships that aid as gift establishes between

donors and recipients as well as the misrecognition that masks the coercive aspects of aid under the guise of the pure gift.

3. One exception comes from the geographer Emma Mawdsley (2012), who has argued that, unlike Western donor countries, development actors from the Global South, such as China and India, tend to foreground the obligation to reciprocate gifts as a positive quality of their aid programs. My research of OISCA indicates that Japanese aid actors, although not located in the Global South, might also uphold similar values.
4. Scholars and aid practitioners in Myanmar also advocate for an increase in lending schemes for the country's rural poor to help combat food insecurity (e.g., Turnell 2010). However, these validations of credit-debit emerge from concerns different from those in this article.
5. OISCA has projects in eight other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The Myanmar project is one of its newest programs.
6. Relatedly, Burmese staffers also contrasted *kye:zu* with the notion of *a:na-te*. *A:na-te* refers to contexts where a person holds oneself back based on a sense of respect, politeness, humility, or fear of offending other people's feelings (see Bekker 1981; Pye 1962).
7. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this point and for the idea that it is precision that "kills the spirit of the gift."
8. I thank an anonymous reviewer and editor-in-chief for highlighting this dynamic.
9. Japan took out a total of 31 World Bank loans between 1953 and 1966, and the government made the final repayment in July 1990 (World Bank 2011). Government documents and Japanese aid actors mention this history as a reason to see Japan's commitment to development assistance as a form of *on-gaeshi* (e.g., MOFA 2011). In OISCA, *on-gaeshi* also appeared in the idea that humans must feel a sense of indebted gratitude to the great bounty of nature and the universe. This was a central idea in what I call OISCA's Shinto ecology, which I discuss elsewhere.
10. Again, I hesitate to call this "neoliberal" because Sakurai stopped short of promoting free markets, for instance, and an emphasis on self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and contract-based debts do not necessarily constitute neoliberalism.

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