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Desacralising Teachers: Inside Myanmar's Educational Capitalism

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Abstract

This study focuses on the changed roles and symbolic identities of Myanmar teachers under the forces of marketisation and the privatisation of education. Private tutoring by mainstream school teachers is used as an example of what society perceives to be the incursion into education of market-oriented values that are incompatible with traditional morals. The theoretical framework draws on Durkheim's concept of the sacred and its interpretations in neo-Durkheimian scholarship, particularly cultural sociology. The main argument presented revolves around the idea that the marketisation of education is profaning the teaching profession.

Based on qualitative empirical evidence from a larger three-year study conducted in eight Yangon schools, combined with textbook and document analysis, the study highlights the patterns of exceptional respect and reverence traditionally afforded to Myanmar teachers. This is then contrasted with the consequences of the growing marketisation of educational values through private tutoring. The study identifies private tutoring as a force polluting into what society perceives to be a sacred profession. Although bringing much-needed economic benefits to teachers, in the eyes of society, it has corrupted the idea of teachers as sacred individuals. In this study, teaching and tutoring are perceived as two distinct domains that operate according to different moral principles. This analysis enables critical reflection on the privatisation of education and its consequences for the lives of teachers, which are still under-researched.

Keywords: Privatisation of education; private tutoring; symbolic identities; sacred-profane classifications

Introduction

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, Durkheim's famous theory of the sacred, and its classification of sacred and profane, stimulated and inspired not only scholars of religion but also social science scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural sociology, political science and psychology. Recently, renewed interest in the notion of the sacred was reported in social sciences (see e.g. Lynch 2012; Lynch & Sheldon, 2013; Kurakin 2013; Inglis 2016; Mast and Alexander 2018). Today, scholars rely on the notion of the sacred to produce sociological explanations of contemporary culture and everyday life, from politics to history, art to economics, and media studies to the technological sciences. The notions of the sacred and profane operate as conceptual categories that can be applied to culturally and historically constructed phenomena. In this study, a cultural sociological approach is taken to examine the theory of the sacred. Building on this, the study explores Myanmar teachers' changed professional identities and experiences of being teachers in a traditional Buddhist society under the conditions of globalisation. By taking a cultural sociological approach to the theory of the sacred, a theoretical framework is created, drawing on Durkheim's original idea in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1915] 2008), and its interpretations in neo-Durkheimian scholarship.

The study focuses on the patterns of exceptional respect and reverence traditionally afforded to teachers in Myanmar. It also shows how this sacred status and moral tradition have become a source of professional identity over many centuries. Based on empirical evidence, the study expounds on how teachers' sacred status has generated symbols, rituals, values, sentiments and beliefs within Myanmar society. It demonstrates how the penetration of Buddhist values into education has facilitated the portrayal of teachers as moral leaders and role models. This is then contrasted with the consequences of the growing privatisation of education and the marketisation of educational values. The study argues that the current trends in marketisation, and specifically teachers' economic interest in teaching, threaten their sacred status, because such tendencies undermine their social identity.

The private tutoring of mainstream school teachers is used as an example of what society regards as an incursion into education of market-oriented values that are incompatible with traditional morals. Thus, the main argument presented in this study is that the marketisation of education is profaning the teaching profession: negatively affecting its status and distorting both public perceptions of the profession and teachers' self-esteem. In some cases, it is even producing teachers' moral qualms.

The study is not concerned with teachers' professional identities and social status as conventionally defined through their pedagogic practices, self-esteem, job motivation and career expectations. Rather, it explores teachers' symbolic identities constructed by the wider society as a collective identity. Drawing inspiration from Durkheim, this study focuses on the sacred and profane dimensions of teachers' identities. It attempts to piece together different aspects of this construct to generate new insights into teachers' identity struggles and value clashes in a highly complex social environment.

In addition to the cultural sociology literature, this study resonates with the literature on privatisation and the marketisation of education, exploring their impact on public education, and especially the roles of teachers. The private tutoring offered by public school teachers, as discussed in this study, is a vivid example of the hidden privatisation of education within public schooling. Some scholars have identified similar patterns of privatisation, such as teachers becoming service providers and students and parents becoming consumers (Ball and Youdell 2008). Attention has also been paid to the privatising tendencies of public schools, which have arguably redefined the 'nature of individuals, and their relationships to each other and to institutions' (Robertson and Dale 2013, 427). Studies of teachers' social status, roles and identities have been at the forefront of academic research for many decades. However, research has been lacking on the outcomes of the privatisation and marketisation of education. Specifically, little is known about what it means to teachers' lives, how such global processes create new roles, positions and identities, and where and why these forces cause dissonance or promote success. By paying attention to teachers' historically constructed symbolic roles, this study contributes to the understanding of teachers' identities in the context of marketisation and the privatisation of education.

This paper first reviews the relevant theoretical grounds, considering the concepts of the sacred and profane and their applicability to the study. After a short overview of Myanmar's historical, socio-economic and educational contexts, the role of Buddhism in Myanmar society is analysed. The paper then turns to the symbolic status of teachers in Myanmar and current reflections on this topic, indicating the desacralisation of teachers' status. The paper concludes by calling attention to the need for more research in this area.

Durkheim and the notion of the sacred

Emile Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), made a fundamental contribution to the theory of the sacred, which for decades inspired influential

thinkers such as Mary Douglas, Mirce Eliade, Edward Shils, Talcott Parsons, Basil Bernstein and Jeffrey Alexander. In theorising the origins of religion based on ethnographic data, Durkheim connected the sacred with the foundations of social life. For Durkheim, sacred forms were revered objects of worship, respect and admiration. He distinguished the sacred from the profane, which he construed as polar opposites. In the context of the hierarchy of beings, Durkheim (1915) treated sacred forms as superior to profane things in their dignity and power. In his view, the profane could threaten the sacred and pollute sacred forms and manifestations (Lynch, 2012, 26). Durkheim asserted that such symbolic polarities had strong analytic power to explain how religion and other cultural systems were organised (Emirbayaer 2003, 12).

Going further, Durkheim used the sacred/profane dichotomy to describe the dual nature of human life ('homo duplex'): both collective and individual (Kurakin 2013; Ross 2017). He contended that sacred forms were an expression of collective morality, whereas the profane drove human beings into individualism and material desires. For Durkheim, the social collective was sacred and the individual was profane. The individual had a utilitarian orientation and the social served as an integrative force (Ross 2017). Durkheim was also concerned that traditional sacred forms were falling away in modern societies, whereas the 'cult of the individual' was being further strengthened by various social and economic forces (Emirbayaer 2003, 8). On these grounds, Durkheim asked bigger questions. For example, he wondered what the basis would be for social solidarity in modern life (Lynch 2012, 2) and what the symbolic meanings of the sacred and profane were in this process.

Since Durkheim, the theory of the sacred (from the Latin *sacrum* – that which belongs to gods) has mostly been discussed in relation to religion and the context of gods and the divine. Many scholars have argued that the sacred must be kept separate from religion (Fujiwara 2001; Demerath 2002; Lynch, 2012, 4). From the sociological perspective, sacred forms and their symbolic meanings go far beyond the conceptual boundaries of traditional religions and are used to analyse society more broadly (Lynch and Sheldon 2013). For example, Alexander et al. (2012), widely known for their 'strong programme in cultural sociology' and 'cultural pragmatics', described the sacred and profane as core binary classifications around which contemporary culture is structured. In a 1990 paper, he found that the notion of the sacred was a useful framework that could be used to explain both the powerful penetration of computers into everyday life, and public attitudes towards Hollywood celebrities.

Similar to Alexander et al., other cultural sociologists have aimed to study the symbolic structure of social life by exploring the boundaries between what is considered sacred and profane (Kurakin 2013). Some authors have looked at contemporary secular ideas and practices such as gender, human rights and the care of children, and discussed the ways in which they have attained sacred status in modern life (Lynch 2012). Such sacred forms have cultural significance. They are associated with and generate symbols, sentiments, experiences and practices. Often, multiple sacred forms (with varied degrees of sacredness) have been circulated by the contemporary media through images, symbols, stories and sounds. Thus, the sacred is not an old notion primarily used in religious studies, but a well-established communicative structure for societies across the globe.

Notwithstanding their prominence, Durkheim's legacy and theorising have been criticised. Some of his ideas have been challenged and problematised, and some have been developed further. The criticism has mainly related to his use of the sacred and profane as binary opposites, or a dichotomy. Contrary to Durkheim, Bernstein (2000), for example, suggested that sacred and profane forms could co-exist within same individual as a different modality of same identity (Beck 2002). Regardless of the disagreements or further development, Durkheim's theory of the sacred has remained a useful analytical tool for scholars in various disciplines. Nonetheless, to my knowledge, this study is the first attempt to apply Durkheim's theory to the privatisation of education. Accordingly, its conceptualisations may make a useful theoretical contribution.

The research context and methods

Since its democratic elections in 2010, Myanmar has been engaged in a series of reforms, envisioning a new path to its development. The high speed and fluidity of these reforms have been distinguished from the political isolation and stagnation of the past (Lall 2016). For example, in 2016, the Myanmar government initiated a comprehensive five year (2016-2021) plan, known as the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). This plan covers all sectors of Myanmar education (Myanmar 2016). It aims to modernise the entire education system, with a special emphasis on curriculum development, and to improve the quality of teacher training and qualification. In the plan, teachers are put forward as the key drivers of this social transformation. However, Myanmar teachers are located in a changing economic reality in which they often struggle with more than one job to survive and support their families. The

government has made some positive adjustments to teacher remuneration policies in recent years. Even so, teacher salaries are considered to be low and inadequate (Buske 2016; Lall 2016). Poor working conditions, low pay and limited opportunities for professional development present serious challenges to teachers' efforts to become agents of change. Thus, teachers (sometimes reluctantly, but believing that they have no other choice) often provide private tutoring to students to meet their financial needs.

This study draws from a larger mixed-methods study that grew out of three years of work in Yangon, Myanmar. Quantitative data were collected from schools, and qualitative data were collected through a variety of interesting conversations with Myanmar people outside the school setting (Bray Kobakhidze and Kwo 2020). This part of the study reports on the qualitative findings. They enrich the statistical information and provide a more contextual picture.

The larger project took place from 2016 to 2018. It originated with an institutional partnership between the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong, the UNESCO office in Myanmar and Yangon University of Education's methodology department. Three teams from each institution worked closely together to secure access to schools, determine the best ways to approach school principals and schedule data collection from various groups. Quantitative data were collected from 1,637 students and 331 teachers. Qualitative data were obtained from 32 students, 26 teachers, 7 school principals, 17 parents and 9 personnel from several non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some informal interviews were also conducted with government personnel, outside-school tutors and members of teachers' professional bodies.

To understand the different dimensions and perspectives, the methodology included multi-site participant observation, the exploration of various media sources, document reviews and textbook analyses. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Myanmar language except when the teachers, principals or NGO staff were English-speaking. The translations and transcriptions of the audio-recorded materials were carried out by individuals who spoke the Myanmar language. Permission to enter the research sites was obtained at multiple levels, and ethical guidelines for conducting research were followed strictly. Some of the interviews were repeated to increase the accuracy and quality of the reporting. The findings of this study were shared with the participant schools and other stakeholders through knowledge exchange workshops. These follow up activities added depth to the data, and allowed the researchers to obtain further comments to triangulate the findings.

Overview of private tutoring in Myanmar

In Myanmar, private tutoring is popular among students in both the public and private schools. In the context of completing secondary education, approximately three decades ago, a report by the Myanmar Education Research Bureau characterised private tutoring as 'virtually indispensable' (MERB 1992, 24). Later, other reports recognised its importance and widespread nature. The most recent Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), for example, referred to the need to address tutoring 'as a critical policy issue' (Myanmar 2015, 26). This study found that 83.4% of the Grade 9 students and 86.2% of the Grade 11 students in Yangon had received some type of private tutoring within the previous 12 months.

School teachers are among the main providers of private tutoring in Myanmar, together with commercial companies, university students, boarding tutorial institutions and freelance tutors. Some teachers tutor their own students, and some tutor the students of other teachers in the same or another school. In this study, 47.7% of the 331 teachers surveyed admitted that they had engaged in private tutoring. Those who reported that they had not cited family reasons, ethical considerations and lack of time. Tutoring was not an easy topic for the teachers to discuss, given the official policy that prohibits it. In policy announcements, government officials have openly discouraged tutoring, and the sanctions imposed on teachers for violations have appeared to be quite harsh. Nonetheless, some studies have found that the policy has been largely ignored by teachers and tolerated by school administrators (Bray Kobakhidze and Kwo 2020). The overall attitude expressed by multiple persons in this study suggests that tutoring has become an 'open secret'. According to them, tutoring is a normal activity in the daily lives of both teachers and students. However, political party leaders, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, have publicly addressed the issue, explaining that the aim should be to 'stop private tuition' and 'raise teacher salaries' to enable them to fully commit to teaching in schools (Aung San Suu Kyi 2017).

Buddhism and educational values in Myanmar

Buddhism has deep roots in Myanmar. Over the centuries, it has not only played an important role as a religion, but also become the dominant social and cultural force (Spiro 1982). Buddhist ethics and morality have deeply penetrated aspects of Myanmar society. Its values and ideas are visible in daily relationships and social institutions (Nang Thingi Maw 2016). Buddhism has sometimes been treated as a fundamental ingredient of Burmese identity. It is

more than a religion; it is a way of life (Khin Saw Myint 2016). According to the 2014 national census, the majority of the Myanmar population is Buddhist (87.9%), followed by Christian (6.2%), Muslim (4.3%), Animist (0.8%), Hindu (0.5%) and other (CIA Factbook, 2019). Although Buddhism does not have the status of an official state religion and there are many other religions associated with ethnic minorities living in Myanmar, the government openly supports Theravada Buddhism (UNHCR 2010).

Theravada Buddhism became an official religion in Myanmar in the eleventh century, during the era of King Anawrahta, founder of the Kingdom of Bagan (Khin Saw Myint 2016; Spiro 1982, 18). From the 11th century until the colonial era, in all parts of Myanmar, children were educated in Buddhist monasteries. The monastic curriculum was based on Buddhist teachings and scripture. It strongly emphasised the cultivation of moral character and reinforced respect for tradition, culture and hierarchy (Cheesman 2003). British colonial rule brought drastic changes to schooling in Myanmar. Under it, the role of monastic education was supressed and secular schools were opened (Treadwell 2013). Educated citizens worried about the extreme modifications to the curriculum (especially the de-emphasis on moral education). Some even called it a 'national calamity'. Others linked it to rising crime in upper Myanmar (Thant Myint-U 2001). Scholars have maintained that Buddhism persisted throughout British rule as a predominant social force that affected all aspects of everyday life, including the education system (Spiro 1982). Evidence of this is the special recognition Buddhism received from both the civilian and the military governments after Burma gained independence in 1948. The Constitution of the Union of Burma, enacted in 1947, also recognised the special position of Buddhism 'as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union' (Article 21, 1), despite acknowledging Burma's diverse religious community.

Various academic sources have shown that Myanmar's secular school textbooks are full of excerpts from Buddhist teachings (see, e.g., Cheesman 2002; Treadwell 2013). Treadwell (2013) analysed the 'Myanmar readers' (from kindergarten to Grade 4) mandated for use in all government-run schools, and found mottos of a civic and moral nature that had been copied from the famous Buddhist text, the Mangala Sutta (p. 105).

The Mangala Sutta (38 blessings) is sometimes called the 'foundation of Myanmar culture' (Nang Theingi Maw 2016, 5) and 'one of the first lessons a child in Burma learns by heart' (Soni 2018, 10). From a very young age, Myanmar children memorise the Mangala Sutta, and recite or chant its strophes until they are perfect. The word 'mangala' ('blessing') and its variations (for example, *Mangalaba*, a formal greeting) is by far the most frequently

used word in Myanmar. The Mangala Sutta, similar to many other Buddhist texts, was originally written in the Pali language. Although it was subsequently translated into the Myanmar language, it still contains Pali terms and it is hard for students to understand. Treadwell (2013) found that although some teachers could fluently sing the Mangala Sutta, many of them could not explain what the verses meant. Many books in the Myanmar language explain to children what the Sutta is and the practical meanings of its messages.

This study shows that Buddhism not only permeates education in Myanmar, but also influences wider social perceptions of teachers' roles and identities. Even in declared secular schooling and among the various ethnic and religious minorities residing in Myanmar, Buddhist texts have shaped social and cultural values for generations. The following section explains how symbolic identity of teachers in Myanmar was anchored in Buddhism, and especially, drawn on the Mangala Sutta.

Teachers' symbolic identities

> *Myanmar society is probably one of the few societies in the world that show such high esteem for their teachers. Teachers are regarded as being on the same plane as the Buddha, the greatest of all teachers, the Dhamma, the path leading to the cessation of suffering, the Sangha, our mentors on the path to Nirvana, and one's parents who have brought us into this world, nourished and educated us to be able to stand on our own feet.*
>
> *(Myo Myint 2015, 149-150)*

Historically, teachers as a social group have been highly valued by Myanmar society. The Myanmar words 'Saya' (for male) and 'Sayama' (for female) are terms used for teachers, which, as the locals say, are equal to 'respect'. Teachers are not only seen as moral authorities, but also enjoy the same status as what Myanmar people call spiritual (Buddha and his teachings) and material (parents) benefactors (Myo Myint 2015, 150). Almost everyone in Myanmar knows the strophe from the Mangala Sutta that highlights the importance of teachers: the 'triple gems (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha), parents and teachers should be worshipped'. Treadwell (2013) described the strophe as 'a well-known and often repeated saying in Burma' (107). When pronounced, the triple gems strophe has an organised sound like a rhythm and people often chant it to a specific tune. In conversations with teachers and other respondents in the course of this study, I found that everyone knew it by heart. It was

even included in kindergarten textbooks, demonstrating that generations have been brought up with high esteem for teachers. The triple gems, parents and teachers have often been referred to as the five infinite venerables (Spiro 1982).

Myanmar people are proud that their teachers have such a high symbolic status, as shown in the opening lines of this section. Teaching is considered to be an ethically charged profession. People often express moral sentiments towards teachers. Teaching is much more than providing young people with an education; teachers are part of the wider moral community and act as role models. Phwar (2011, as cited in Roi Seng Hkum 2018) explained that Myanmar teachers try to live by high moral standards and follow virtues such as goodwill and self-sacrifice. The relationship between teachers and students goes beyond formal education, because teachers provide civic guidance for better citizenship and eventually become 'life mentors' for their students (Thein 2009). Teachers are often regarded as 'role models of morality, humility and self-discipline' (Myo Myint 2015, 159). It has often been mentioned that teaching is not an easy profession. It is hard to maintain the status of a teacher, which sometimes requires sacrifice. Thein (2009) remarked as follows:

> *It is hard to live up to the title of teacher because this profession is a benevolent one… but for those people who have the generosity, empathy and sense of sacrifice needed to be a good teacher, they can earn incomparable happiness in life.* (2)

From the semiotic point of view, it is interesting to note that the word 'sacrifice' has often been linked to teachers in the Myanmar context (note that 'sacred' and 'sacrifice' come from the same Latin word, *sacrere*). Sacrifice is said to be one of the three core qualities of teachers, which are 'benevolence, spirit of sacrifice and fascination for teaching' (Myo Myint 2015, 130). Various books in the Myanmar language that are designed for teacher training encourage teachers to strengthen their spirit and morale and be ready to sacrifice (see, e.g., Gyi U Thaung Htut 2014). In personal communication, some of the respondent teachers told me that they had not married because their profession required so much time and energy. In Myanmar, similar to many other countries, teaching is a highly feminised profession. In this study, 94.9% of the teachers were women. This is in line with official statistics on gender composition, according to which 86.7% of secondary school teachers in Myanmar are female (Sail 2016).

In the Myanmar culture, there are different sayings about teachers. Teachers are often compared to 'a grinding stone used to sharpen knives' (Myo Myint, 2015, 151). Various mottos about the roles and duties of teachers are also included in school textbooks, such as

'teachers mould students like they mould a pot' or 'teachers are like water, as they enable students to bloom'. As Treadwell (2012) recounted, some participant teachers in her study tried to explain the teacher's role poetically.

> *In order for the life of the pupils to be beautiful, pupils accept that the teachers play a big role. Teachers also know that they have a duty to beautify the life of their pupils…In order for our lotus flower to be able to bloom beautifully, it needs water. So teachers are like water. In order for the life of the pupil to be new, fresh and beautiful, the honourable teachers fed the milk of education.* (211)

Teachers also portray themselves as authority figures, and these images have been depicted in poems, stories and visual illustrations in textbooks. For example, in Myanmar, reading teachers are always shown looking down at their students when they are giving advice, holding their hands and especially their index fingers up. Students are expected to listen carefully, with their eyes downwards, arms folded at the chest, and heads slightly bowed (Treadwell 2013, 164).

Ways to respect teachers

Exhibiting respect for teachers is a ritualised practice in Myanmar, expressed by a special word, 'gadaw'. Again, this is borrowed from Pali. Gadaw is an act of obeisance, with hands joined (as in prayer) and a posture of bowing towards a person with higher status. It shows gratitude and reverence (Treadwell 2013, 78-79). Gadaw is a sign of profound respect for elders, and students often use it in relation to teachers. In general, respecting elders is the most common theme in Myanmar textbooks. Most often, the textbooks feature teachers and parents as special categories towards which students should express respect (p. 118). In the third grade Myanmar reader, Treadwell (2013) found special references to the ways respect should be paid to teachers.

> *At our school we gadaw our teacher the day before the school closes for Tha din jut holiday. All the students gadaw the headmaster and all the teachers politely and respectfully. When gadawing teachers we understand more about our gratitude toward our teachers.* (116)

Gadaw can be an individual act or a collective ritual. There are times when students collectively gadaw teachers. For example, this is done during the month of Thadingyut

(Festival of Lights) to mark the end of the Buddhist Lent, which is in October. In an article entitled 'Thadingyut, a time to honour teachers', Thein (2009) explained the tradition according to which current students and graduates pay homage to their teachers throughout the country. Treadwell (2013) called such collective gadawing 'a highly choreographed ceremony' (191), which again indicates its ritualistic nature.

Respecting teachers includes not only acts of obeisance, but also prostration or worship. There is even a prayer that goes back to Myanmar's Buddhist roots. Nang Theingi Maw (2016) reminded readers that Buddha himself was a teacher and 'taught us to pay respect and learn from those who are older and wiser' (p. 4). He went even further to say that respect is a virtue that distinguishes humans from animals and is a source of reverence (ibid.).

In Myanmar, there is a special formulaic prayer called 'Okāsa', which explicitly refers to the five infinite venerables (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, parents and teachers) (Spiro 1982, 210). Most Buddhist ceremonies proceed with Okāsa. The English translation reads as follows:

> *I request! I request! I request!…I raise my joined hands in reverence to the forehead and worship, honour, look at and humbly pay homage to the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha (with my parents and teachers) once, twice, and three times.* (Facts and Details 2008)

Okāsa is a Pali term that means 'permission'. The prayer is used to request permission to pay homage and seek forgiveness for past transgressions. It is often offered during the Thadingkyut festival (Myo Myint 2015, 165), when people express their gratitude to honourable others, including teachers, by reconnecting with them. Prayers are also performed during World Teachers' Day on the 5th of October, during which students pray for teachers' physical and mental well-being (Myo Myint 2015, 160). During such ceremonies, students not only pay special attention to teachers by visiting them and offering prayers, but some even give them generous gifts.

During the data collection for this study, after entering the classrooms, I sometimes came across students gadawing in front of teachers and chanting prayers and triple gems strophe from the Mangala Sutta. The interviewed teachers and students confirmed that in some schools students start and finish the day with a prayer to their teachers, and in more religious families (Buddhist) students may perform a bedtime prayer addressed to teachers among other respected persons and deities. The idea of a teacher as a moral guide and spiritual leader is not unique to Myanmar only; for example, Kale (1970) remarked that the

idea of a teacher as *Guru* began to develop during the Hindu revival period in India after which traditional aspects of the *Guru* image became integral parts of the teacher identity. These aspects included supreme authority of a teacher, sacrifice and disinterest in material wealth – aspects that are relevant to Myanmar context, as well.

The foregoing discussion illustrates the high symbolic status of teachers in Myanmar, which is an indication that teachers belong to a sacred form of classification. Teachers exhibit certain sacred qualities, such as being moral leaders, sacrificing their personal lives to education and being an object of worship and veneration. The next section will show how market values, through private tutoring, have penetrated teachers' status and created related anxieties among the public and the teachers themselves.

Desacralising teachers

Different stakeholders have indicated that teachers' involvement in tutoring has changed societal perceptions, downgrading teachers' social status from being educators and moral leaders to being service providers. Due to their fee-paid relationships with their students, teachers who tutor have lost the social respect that has been historically ingrained in society. Some of the respondents pointed out that the extra income teachers make from tutoring has contributed to a decline in their traditional roles as professionals and harmed their reputation and image. Theorising this process through Durkheimian sociology shows that teachers have lost their sacred status and become profane. Teachers who provide tutoring to students cross the symbolic boundary between the highly esteemed practice of teaching and the market-oriented practice of tutoring. Such value clashes have not only brought dissonance to the public perception of teachers, but also caused internal struggles among the teachers themselves. This has also been linked with a decline in morals and the ethical framework shared by the teaching profession, as explained below.

Myo Myint (2015) published an essay entitled 'Time to wake up, teachers'! in a widely circulated English language online newspaper, *The Global New Light of Myanmar*. The fundamental goal of the essay was to remind teachers of their responsibility to Myanmar society, which considered them to be 'models of honesty, morality, humility and industriousness'. The author asserted that the reminder was necessary because some teachers had forgotten their roles and become 'greedy' through tutoring. Myo Myint also listed various tricks that some teachers play, such as minimising teaching in class then pressuring students to attend tutoring classes; punishing those who cannot afford tutoring; showing

favouritism to tutored students by giving them high scores in examinations; giving preferential access to questions; and forming networks among 'tuition-giving teachers to provided special services'. The author took the position that such 'money-grubbing' teachers were 'bad models' for students, and their behaviours contributed to parents' 'growing loss of confidence in schools and teachers' in Myanmar. He asked teachers to take special care 'not to tarnish this image of compassionate beings' because, as he reported, schools and teachers are beginning to lose their influence over many students. Such behaviours are 'a great disservice not only to their students but also to the country'.

In other, similar essays, Myo Myint (2015) observed that some teachers had already left their jobs in schools because they had 'found more lucrative ones such as providing tuition'. He viewed the situation as alarming, calling the ongoing process 'a decline of awareness of traditional roles of teachers and [a] sharp increase of selfishness in them'. Although he acknowledged that the government should improve teachers' salaries and working conditions, Myo Myint (2016) explained that this did not justify the decline in teacher morale.

> *Teachers lack of interest in their work, with the excuse that they do not receive adequate pay and that students do not care very much about their teaching as they are paying more attention to what is taught at their tuitions. It is true that education now has now became tuition-driven, as many teachers are more interested in the additional income generated from their tuitions, and how to recruit more students for their tuition classes...* (33)

These concerns resonated with sentiments expressed by the interviewed teacher educators and representatives of the Myanmar Teacher Federation. The overall feeling was that in the past, teachers were more dedicated to the profession, treating it as a social service. In the modern world, they have become more driven by money. The representatives called for teachers to be protected from the danger of 'profanity' and the subsequent loss of the status they had previously enjoyed from being the leaders of the nation. They asked what society expects of teachers. Answering this question, they said that teachers should resist the temptation to make money, i.e. by polluting themselves. From a theoretical perspective, one can see that teachers who provide tutoring as a form of the violated sacred are viewed as transgressors. This echoes Douglas' (1966) account of the invasion of the sacred by the profane. Such sentiments also suggest that there is a tension between the sacred and profane dimensions of the teacher identity and that teachers themselves should protect their sacred

status from the profanity of tutoring. Teachers who have failed in their social performance have received less respect and reverence.

Interestingly, such sentiments about teachers' high status have not had much of a direct effect on their economic status. As reported above, regardless of the small incremental increases in their salaries bestowed by the Ministry of Education, they continue to struggle financially in their personal lives and in their work. This is why their sacred status is symbolic. It does not reflect the everyday realities of the world in which they live. Thus, a paradox has been created: teachers are a social group that is worshipped but experiences poor economic status, leading to the need for a second job to survive.

Transgression and the internalised sacred

In this context, it is important to listen to teachers' own voices. The sections below show how the teachers in this study internalised the moral and social components of the teaching profession. Their collective imagined past and the traditional sentiments expressed about their roles were so strong that they influenced the teachers' own perceptions of their profession. Although they benefited financially from having a second job, they struggled morally. They were torn between their economic needs and symbolic satisfaction.

Overall, the respondent teachers acknowledged that tutoring negatively affected their professional and personal lives. They said they felt 'tired', 'exhausted', 'stressed' and 'less productive in school'. Tutoring absorbed a significant portion of their free time. Some of them taught until very late in the evenings, leaving no time for themselves or their families. All of the respondents, including the teachers and other stakeholders, pointed to economic gain as a major factor driving teachers to provide tutoring. One NGO representative noted the following.

> *Almost all of them say that they do not want to continue teaching or tutoring after a long day at school. They are already tired from the workload at school. Only because of the income, they have to tutor during their holidays and their private time in the evenings.*

The teachers who openly admitted tutoring in addition to teaching at school said that they did not like their tutor identity. One high school teacher remarked, 'I feel inferior as a teacher …I like to be a teacher who does not need to provide tuition'. Another expressed a more critical view about the system: 'I want to criticise that system. We all are teachers in the teaching

profession; I want to teach the students happily, freely and openly at school without providing tuition'.

The teachers were asked what aspects made them feel inferior. Probing their responses more deeply revealed that their struggles and uneasiness were often related to money. One English teacher told me, 'Our profession is not for money, right?' From his narrative, he appeared to be quite a popular tutor in downtown Yangon. 'How do you feel when you receive money from students and parents?', I asked. He replied without hesitation, 'I feel a little bit disgusted…awkward'. He then clarified what he meant as follows.

> *Some students… they will think that teachers are fond of money, so they follow the money. We can ask our teachers everything we need because we give them money. It affects the image and respect.*

Another teacher from a semi-urban school similarly remarked that charging money affects teachers' reputations: 'Parents think they can buy teachers. So, the dignity of teachers is crumbling'. As some teachers remarked, respect was fading because students perceived teachers as becoming financially dependent on the parents' contributions. One teacher tried to explain the students' logic as follows: 'my parents are paying you, so I don't really need to respect you. Respect is really important in our culture especially for teachers'.

The logic of marketisation has penetrated student-teacher relationships, resulting in changing attitudes towards teachers. One NGO representative explained this as follows.

> *They [parents] have only a sense of business with teachers. I pay you so I deserve to get this from you. If I am not getting this from you, then I have the right to say anything that I like or my kids also have the right to do things that I am doing. That kind of attitude is there. Teachers are not really happy about that.*

The respondents also noted the different roles played by teachers and tutors in students' lives and the education system. They pursued different aims and educational philosophies. Tutoring was constructed as a profane area that lacked the sacred dimension. Teaching gave rise to a sense of purity (cf Douglas 1999). In tutoring, the teachers' material self-interest was the key to their professional identity, whereas being educators and moral leaders was considered to be central to teaching in schools. Myo Myint (2015) spoke of this insightfully: 'Teachers are providing all round development and nurturing good citizenship, while tuition teachers are oriented to make money, keep students happy in their classes and coach them to pass exams' (p. 31).

On the symbolic level, teachers were accused of transgressing boundaries by bringing a profane economic orientation into a sacred occupation. Such profanation undermined their

professional legitimacy and fragmented their professional identities. Differences were also reported in terms of the reproduction of social relations. For example, students demonstrated friendlier relationships with tutors than with school teachers. They had fun with their tutors, with whom they laughed and ate, whereas a social distance was maintained with their teachers. The respondent teachers noted that traditionally, social distance between school teachers and students is considered appropriate and respectful. Some of the teachers said that de-emphasising the moral and civic subjects at school had contributed to declining respect.

Different voices and the cult of the individual

A few of the teachers were concerned less with social status than with their needs as individuals. They described tutoring as a 'right' and stated that they were entitled to 'freedom of choice'. Some compared teaching to the medical profession, saying that teachers should be allowed to earn extra income just as doctors earn income by providing private services outside public hospitals (Hkum Roi Seng 2018). Unlike doctors and other professionals, teachers in Myanmar are encouraged to treat their profession as a special form of sacrifice, viewed from a different perspective (Myo Myint 2015). This echoes Douglas' (1966) theory of the division between things in society: some are subject to restrictions (i.e. sacred) and others are not (i.e. profane).[1]

This illustrates the clash between the social and the individual. The social is a shared belief about teachers who are expected to obey unwritten societal rules to enjoy high social esteem. In contrast, the logic of individualism drives teachers to make more money to meet their material needs. An increased sense of individuality is considered to be instrumental to this perspective and related to self-interest. Such voices indicate a transition from collective roles and practices to individualism. In this context, social roles are not sacred, but the individual becomes sacred as Durkheim theorised. Given that the teaching profession includes strict restrictions, but the same limitations are not imposed on other professions, a division exists between the sacred and profane professions. This also echoes Durkheim's debate on the sacred and profane as representing the opposition between the social and the individual.

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[1] Mary Douglas (1966) maintained that even original Latin word 'Sacer' and its equivalent in Hebrew 'k-d-sh', and translated into English as 'holy', included the idea of restriction into the meaning (p.18)

Conclusions

Drawing on Durkheim's original sacred-profane framework as a conceptual resource, this study described the changing roles and identities of Myanmar teachers under the forces of marketisation and the privatisation of education. Teachers' traditional roles, embedded in culture, religion, history and the wider society, were confronted by economic drivers with a utilitarian orientation. The analysis allowed for critical reflection on privatised education and its consequences for the lives of teachers, which are still under-researched.

The empirical evidence suggested that the construction of teachers' sacred identities came from the remote past, generated by strong sentiments within Myanmar society. A review of the previous literature showed that historically, sacralising teachers' identities helped to build, maintain and legitimise their work through beliefs, rituals and the practice of reverence and worship. Prayers and offerings addressed to teachers during festivals are good examples, reflecting the profession's high symbolic status. The occupational origins were informed by Buddhist beliefs of what an ideal teacher should be. Such sentiments created a cultural memory that was widely appreciated. The analysis of kindergarten and primary school textbooks demonstrated the ways in which students, from their early years, were socialised and taught that teachers were objects of veneration and respect.

By identifying the contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes accompanying the identity-changing process, this study took the position that traditionally, the teaching profession (at a symbolic level) was classified as sacred. Various examples from Myanmar and other societies have emphasised the moral importance of the teaching profession, a social practice that contributes to the public good. Tutoring was identified as a commodified version of the teaching profession, which had the subordinated identity of a service provider. Teaching and tutoring were perceived as two distinct domains that operate according to different moral principles. One is driven by a desire to serve the common good, exhibiting solidarity and morality. The other is driven by economic rationality, self-interest and, sometimes, even greed. When these two domains come together in one role (teacher-tutors) they contaminate and pollute each other. This resonates with Douglas' works (1999) on 'pollution beliefs' which she considered as cultural phenomena.

Theorising through neo-Durkheimian scholars, the study identified private tutoring as a polluting force into what society perceives as a sacred profession. Although tutoring has brought much-needed economic benefits to teachers, in the eyes of society it has corrupted the idea of teachers as sacred individuals who are expected (like religious figures) to make

sacrifices in life. When teachers became involved in private tutoring, they lost their sacredness, because they commodified what made them sacred: knowledge, morality and a system of values. Fee-paid relationships with students and parents violate the sanctity of the profession. This lowers their status as educators and moral guides and turns them into business persons and service providers. One might argue, that by being part of economic transactions, teachers have become symbolically involved in profaning themselves.

It is interesting to note that the teachers in this study, as members of the wider society, were also uneasy about their double roles as teachers and tutors. Their own voices, collected through this study, were manifestations of the deeper contradictions relating to status anxiety. 'Our profession is not for money, right?' This was a great example of the moral struggles the teachers experienced. This also showed that the teachers were vulnerable to the public's perception of their roles. They were sensitive to their social roles as historically constructed by their communities. These patterns of their sentiments applied across cultural boundaries, as demonstrated by other Chinese scholars such as Yan (2006), Li (2016), Hao (2019) and Feng (2019). These studies, conducted in the context of mainland China, showed the conceptual and linguistic distinctions made by social actors to classify teachers and tutors. The social perception of tutors was linked to their profit-making role, whereas the dominant discourse promoted school teachers as having higher morals, thereby attracting respect and reverence. Similar sentiments were found in the post-Soviet educational settings where the teacher-tutors reported the sense of discomfort, and even guilt, attached to their mixed identities (Kobakhidze, 2018). This resonates with the works of Gupta (2019) in the Indian context where marketization of educational values in a society eroded the "traditional perceptions of schools as *Mandirs* (temples) or sacred places, and teachers as *Gurus* (8).

This study also showed the value of taking a cultural sociological approach to examining educational phenomena. It demonstrated how morally infused and religiously informed cultural practices impact teachers' identity formation at a symbolic level. The study contributes to the literature by directing scholarly attention to less tangible domains, such as symbolic identities. This joins the discussion on what the marketisation of education means in the Myanmar context and what its consequences are for teachers.

In the modern era, in which the pervasive forces underpinning the marketisation of education and neoliberal ideas have a predominant impact on educational processes, it is important to demonstrate how cultural structures, processes and identity formation have remained resilient. Is the marketisation of education a totalising and hegemonic force? Do

hidden markets in education, such as private tutoring, contribute to alienating teachers from their communities and historically constructed sacred roles? What does the desacralisation of teachers' identities mean? Are teachers loosing moral power? These insights and questions may bring new perspectives to the understanding of teachers' changed identities in relation to culture, history and religion. This is an area that has often been neglected in the current analysis of teachers' identities, the marketisation of education and private tutoring.

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