



Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear (The Ethnography of Political Violence)

Monique Skidmore

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To come to Burma, one of the few places where despotism still dominates, is to take both a physical and an emotional journey and, like most Burmese, to become caught up in the daily management of fear. Based on Monique Skidmore's experiences living in the capital city of Rangoon, *Karaoke Fascism* is the first ethnography of fear in Burma and provides a sobering look at the psychological strategies employed by the Burmese people in order to survive under a military dictatorship that seeks to invade and dominate every aspect of life.

Skidmore looks at the psychology and politics of fear under the SLORC and SPDC regimes. Encompassing the period of antijunta student street protests, her work describes a project of authoritarian modernity, where Burmese people are conscripted as army porters and must attend mass rallies, chant slogans, construct roads, and engage in other forms of forced labor. In a harrowing portrayal of life deep within an authoritarian state, recovering heroin addicts, psychiatric patients, girl prostitutes, and poor and vulnerable women in forcibly relocated townships speak about fear, hope, and their ongoing resistance to four decades of oppression.

"Karaoke fascism" is a term the author uses to describe the layers of conformity that Burmese people present to each other and, more important, to the military regime. This complex veneer rests on resistance, collaboration, and complicity, and describes not only the Burmese form of oppression but also the Burmese response to a life of domination. Providing an inside look at the madness and the militarization of the city, Skidmore argues that the weight of fear, the anxiety of constant vulnerability, and the numbing demands of the State upon individuals force Burmese people to cast themselves as automata; they deliberately present lifeless hollow bodies for the State's use, while their minds reach out into the cosmos for an array of alternate realities. Skidmore raises ethical and methodological questions about conducting research on fear when doing so evokes the very emotion in question, in both researcher and informant.

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