For by art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State (in Latin, Civitas), which is but an artificial man ... To describe the nature of this artificial man, I will consider – First, the matter thereof, and the artificer; both of which is man.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

### State power and subordinate officials

The relationship between the colonial state and its subordinate employees was a complex one. Part of the complexity is neatly captured in Hobbes’s phrase, quoted in the epigraph above, that subordinate officials were ‘the matter thereof, and the artificer’ of the colonial state.¹ In other words, subordinate officials were not only employed by the colonial state, but also they made the state. This was apparent in the banal sense that the vast majority of state employees were indigenous subordinate officials. British members of the Indian Civil Service made up a tiny minority of colonial state officials across British India.² Additionally, the army in Burma contained indigenous Burmese soldiers and was predominantly made up of Indian subordinates.³ There would have been no colonial state but for its overwhelmingly Burmese and Indian subordinate employees. But the proposition that the colonial state was made by its subordinate officials also has a more sophisticated implication. Subordinate officials through their everyday acts performed and enacted the colonial state.⁴ Hobbes’s notion of the state being created through art is apt for characterising this role of subordinate officials in making the colonial state. There was a theatrical and creative aspect to subordinate officials’ everyday practices through which the colonial...
state was enacted. It is the nature of this performative enactment of the colonial state by subordinate officials that is being explored in this chapter.

The relationship between subordinate employees and the colonial state in Burma has been depicted more simplistically in the existing historiography. The prevailing metaphor has not been corporeal (like Hobbes) or theatrical (like mine) but mechanical. Robert Taylor applied such a metaphor when he depicted the position of village headmen in post-‘Pacification’ Burma, describing them as ‘cogs in the machine’. He argued that their influence was significantly diminished and what was once a position of local, personal authority, and prestige under pre-colonial rule had become the emasculated role of a bureaucratic functionary as powers were siphoned off to specialised branches of the state. Although it was perhaps not Taylor’s intention, the implication of this argument is that all subordinate officials can be characterised as cogs in the machine, although cogs of differing size and importance, since clockwork machines operate through the interaction of interlocking cogs. Taylor was not the first one to make this argument or apply this metaphor. An earlier canonical text concerning the history of colonial Burma, John Cady’s *A History of Modern Burma*, also described subordinate employees, paraphrasing a British official, as ‘interchangeable cogs in a vast machine’. Before Cady, one of the founding scholars of Burma studies, John Sydenham Furnivall, characterised the village in colonial Burma as a ‘cog-wheel in the machinery’. This longstanding, reductive, mechanical metaphor diminishes to the point of obliteration the notion of subordinate officials having any creative capacity. They were simply the products of a rational, bureaucratic state. While this may have been an accurate portrayal of how some high-ranking British officials envisioned subordinate employees, it is a characterisation that leaves no room to explore the motives and intentions of subordinate employees on their own terms. Subordinate officials were simply cogs turned by the machine.

Recent scholarship on subordinate officials in colonial Africa has attempted to address precisely this gap in the history of colonialism. Much of this work successfully breaks from the dominating binary of the coloniser and colonised in colonial history by refusing to categorise these African subordinate employees as simply collaborators. Rather it has been emphasised that they were ‘intermediaries’ with the ability to use their positions ‘to pursue their own agendas even as they served their employers’. A recent edited collection of work on this topic referred to this negotiated intermediary position of subordinate officials