

CHAPTER 5

THE ETHNICITY OF INTIMACY

The Trouble with “Mixed” Marriages

Unions between Burmese women and foreign men have existed since at least the nineteenth century but became a problem in the 1920s and the 1930s. Temporary liaisons between British men and Burmese women and Burmese women’s “miscegenation” with Indian men became a topic of public discussion in the 1920s and the 1930s. The critics portrayed both types of intimacy as dangerous liaisons which ended in misery for the Burmese women. The former, however, also offered a means of socio-economic advancement, albeit fleeting, for the Burmese woman whereas the latter represented the Burmese woman’s decline and socio-cultural oppression. The public discourse on intermarriage furthermore was marked by a complete absence of discussions about relations between Burmese men and “foreign” women.

Why did respective mixed unions become a topic of public discussion at the time that they did? Why did they emerge in the public imagination as morally and culturally reprehensible practices? Why were Burmese-Muslim relationships popularly represented as more reprehensible than those between Anglo-Burmese? Why were Burmese men invisible in discussions of the miscegenating Burmese female?

My analysis of the public discourse on intermarriage and miscegenating Burmese women shows the Burmese public displayed concerns about the changing position of Burmese women in heterosexual relationships in general, not just in their relations to foreign men. It reveals that the discourse on Burmese women’s various relationships to “foreign” and “indigenous” men alike articulated concerns about

colonial Burma's changing gender order, not only ethnic, religious, and political order: namely, the fact that men unlike women were in general unable to partake in mixed unions as an avenue for social advancement or to escape from Burmese cultural norms through marriage. It unravels the link between ethnicity and gender that is embedded in the discourse on Burmese women's shifting practices of intimate relations and sheds light on what specific roles articulations of ethnic hierarchies played in challenging or preserving the gender hierarchy in Burma.

Campaigning for Moral and Social Hygiene: Burma's "Loose Marriage Laws"

Intermarriage between Burmese women and foreign men represented a common practice since at least the nineteenth-century.²⁹⁰ By the 1920s, it had become a popular topic of public discussion, but it referred not to a relationship between a Burmese woman and an Indian man but to one between a European man (predominantly British) and a Burmese woman.²⁹¹ While no scholarship exists on relations between Burmese women and British men and historical studies of Burma make practically no mention of such relations, period records show that a considerable number of British men and Burmese women entered into a range of intimate relations.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ According to John C. Koop's *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, mentioned in Chapter One, the children of Burmese women and European men first appeared in Burma in as early as the sixteenth century in the maritime districts of Mergui, Tavoy, Martaban, Pegu, and Akyab where early Portuguese traders, explorers, and navigators settled. For a brief historical account of the Eurasian population in Burma, see Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, 17-20.

²⁹¹ According to the 1931 *Census of India*, ninety-one percent of the total number of Europeans recorded were British subjects—that is to say, English, Irish, Scotch, or Welsh (India, *Census of India, 1931: Part One*, 232). Records show, however, that other European men (i.e. French, Dutch, and Portuguese) resided in Burma (Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, 17).

²⁹² Thant Myint-U, however, notes in his study of eighteenth century Burma that "foreign men visiting the country were encouraged to take local wives or mistresses" (U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 244).

The Eurasian²⁹³ population in colonial Burma provides some indication of the extent to which Burmese women and British men were sexually involved. Table 14 shows that Burma's Eurasian population expanded despite the fact that British administrators issued circulars from 1870 to 1910 prohibiting European officials from conjugal liaisons with indigenous women.²⁹⁴ Penny Edwards accurately points out in her analysis of colonial policies towards the children of temporary liaisons between Europeans and Burmese women that when the Eurasian population in Burma grew in spite of government warnings, colonial administrators took steps to educate and thus Europeanize "the mixed-race population."²⁹⁵ From the end of the 1860s until the 1920s, the colonial government ran approximately twenty-eight to thirty-four "European" or "English" schools, "specially intended for Europeans of particular Christian denominations," which capped the enrollment of "non-European" students at ten percent of the total student population. These schools regarded Eurasian students as "Europeans" as part of their effort "to bring Anglo-Indian children into European schools."²⁹⁶

Table 14: Eurasian Population in Burma, 1891 – 1931

Year	# of Eurasians			% Increase Over Preceding Decade
	Total	Male	Female	
1891	7,132	NA	NA	NA
1901	9,974	NA	NA	40
1911	11,106	6,039	5,067	11
1921	16,688	8,458	8,230	50
1931	19,200	9,844	9,316	15

Source: Census of India (1931), 232; Koop, *Eurasian Population in Burma* (1960) ??

²⁹³ As explained in Chapter One, I use the term "Eurasian" to refer to a person the British classified as "Anglo-Indian" or "Anglo-Burman," who is partly of European and partly of Burmese or Indian descent. See India, *Census of India, 1931: Part One*, 232.

²⁹⁴ Penny Edwards, "Half-Cast: Staging Race in British Burma," *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 3 (2002): 285.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Burma, *Fifth Quinquennial Report on Public Instruction in Burma*, 24; Burma, *Sixth Quinquennial Report on Public Instruction in Burma*, 64.

Administrative records concerning prostitution in Rangoon in the 1910s offer another picture of the nature of Eurasian relationships in colonial Burma, classified variously as concubinage, cohabitation, and prostitution. During the 1910s, Burma witnessed an upsurge in activities by international “abolitionist” groups committed to the abolition of prostitution: the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH), the International Bureau for Suppression of Traffic in Persons, and the National Vigilance Association (The Vigilance Association). Such groups represented successors of abolitionist bodies that developed originally in response to popular concerns over prostitution and public health prevalent in late nineteenth century Britain.²⁹⁷ In particular, the abolitionist movement campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Acts (hereafter referred to as the CD Acts): a legislation that sought to protect members of the British armed forces from sexually transmitted diseases by the compulsory medical examinations of prostitutes.²⁹⁸ While the CD

²⁹⁷ Late nineteenth century Britain witnessed an upsurge in popular concern over prostitution. The concern over prostitution, which became fused with contemporary concerns over public health, resulted in two distinct developments: first, the enactment of three decrees during the 1860s known collectively as the Contagious Diseases Acts; second, the establishment of international bodies such as the International Abolitionist Federation, International Bureau for Suppression of Traffic in Persons, and the National Vigilance Association committed to addressing concerns about the international aspect of prostitution and working towards the abolition of the trade. A large section of the British public opposed the CD Acts as representing tacit state permission of vice and legalization of violence against women through the treatment of alleged prostitutes. Such societies as the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act and the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts were formed. The latter maintained its independence as a female organization focused on moral rather than statistical arguments, and when the CD Acts were repealed in 1886, the organization went on to fight for equal moral standards between the sexes as the Ladies National Association for the Abolition of the State Regulation of Vice and for the Promotion of Social Purity. In this incarnation, the body campaigned for the repeal of the CD Acts remaining in force in British India (when the CD Acts were repealed in British India is uncertain). In 1915, they combined with the British Branch of the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution to become the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH).

²⁹⁸ Briefly summarized, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, formed in response to the overwhelming public concern about venereal disease, were intended to protect members of the British armed forces—who were not permitted to marry anyone—from sexually transmitted diseases. The legislation permitted policemen to arrest prostitutes, a term left undefined, in ports and army towns for the purpose of compulsory examinations for venereal disease. If found to be suffering from venereal disease, then the “prostitute” could be detained in a hospital for a period of up to three months. If she resisted examination or refused to obey the hospital rules, she could be charged with one month’s

Acts showed the government's concern for the health of their army personnel, they at the same time revealed that the government tacitly condoned, if not encouraged, prostitution. With the repeal of the CD Acts, the abolitionist efforts in Britain turned overseas, especially to British India—including the Province of Burma—where the CD Acts remained in force.

By the mid-1910s, various supporters of the abolitionist movement in Burma—i.e. AMSH, the Vigilance Association, YMCA, Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the American Baptist Mission—accused the administration of regulating and thus sanctioning prostitution.²⁹⁹ The administration was concerned in particular with the activities of John Cowen, a close affiliate of the AMSH, YMCA, and the American Baptist Mission, who was employed as a teacher at the Rangoon Baptist College from April 1914 until May 1915.³⁰⁰ Cowen's criticism of the colonial administration concerned not only the CD Acts but what was then referred to as the

imprisonment for the first offense and two months for any subsequent offense. The obvious problem with the CD Acts was that because it did not distinguish between prostitutes and other women, they permitted the police to detain and inspect any woman the police suspected of venereal infection. If the priority had been to fight venereal disease, furthermore, then the Acts should have also required inspection of the prostitutes' clients. Accordingly, opponents of the CD Acts not only condemned the state recognition of vice but also argued against the Acts on the basis that the Acts violated women while they left men entirely untouched (Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 95-96).

²⁹⁹ W. J. Paylight Wright, *Regulated Vice and the Traffic in Women* (London: The British Branch of the International Abolitionist Federation, 1914), 2.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Correspondence between the Government of Burma and the Government of India, as well as the abolitionist pamphlets that Cowen published during his stay in Burma, offer insights into Cowen's activities in Rangoon and their reception by the colonial administration. Shortly after his arrival in Rangoon, Cowen addressed a letter to the Lieutenant Governor, dated 16 April 1914, declaring that the Christian teaching is clear and emphatic on the fact that no compromise with prostitution is possible, that brothels are completely mischievous and unnecessary, and therefore, all known brothels should be immediately closed, every foreign prostitute deported, and every Indian, Burmese or other British subject prostitute should be dealt with as seems appropriate. The Commissioner of Police, prompted by Cowen's letter, began investigation into the situation while Cowen himself embarked on what Rice states was "an active campaign on the streets and in brothels, attempting to prevent persons from entering such houses or from remaining therein" (W. F. Rice, 25 May 1915, "A Confidential Letter from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma to the Secretary to The Government of India, Home Department (Rangoon)," IOR L/PJ/6/1448, 1). He continues to describe Cowen's strategy as "more zealous than discrete" and that rather than interfere with his tactics, the police had to take special measures to both protect Cowen and to prevent serious disturbances "which his methods were apt to arouse" (*Ibid.*, 2).

“segregation policy,” wherein the government regulated prostitution by allocating sections of towns for prostitution. Cowen claimed that the colonial administration’s “segregation policy” produced an extraordinary prostitution problem in Burma. In a report to the AMSH on prostitution in Rangoon, based on his findings from a one-year inquiry conducted in Rangoon, Cowen describes the condition of prostitution in Rangoon:

At Madras we [Cowen and a colleague] found nothing objectionable, even after seeking for it. At Rangoon, in the heart of the town, in the midst of the district occupied by Government offices, banks, shipping offices, business premises, large stores, and principal churches, six or eight colleges and schools, etc., were five long streets officially marked off as thoroughfares in which brothels might be opened and prostitution carried on under special Government sanction... If it had been desired to select an area from which vice and disease might be disseminated throughout the city, no more commanding position could have been chosen.³⁰¹

Cowen notes that whereas Madras and Colombo were generally free from segregation and from known public brothels of any sort, Rangoon not only had the largest segregation area of public brothels in British India but also the largest number of brothels outside the segregation area.³⁰²

What is striking about Cowen’s detailed report to the AMSH is his conclusion that a great amount of prostitution in Rangoon exists due not so much to the depravity of British regiments as to the colonial administration’s encouragement of sexual relations between colonial officers and indigenous women. In a section titled “Condonement of European Vice,” Cowen states that the attitude of the administration towards European men co-habiting with Burmese women is not only one of leniency

³⁰¹ John Cowen, 9 June 1916, "Public Prostitution in Rangoon: Report to the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene on Brothel-Keeping, Prostitution, Segregation and Immoral Conditions in Rangoon and Other Towns and Stations in Burma," IOR L/PJ/6/1448, 3.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 2-3. The report also documents in detail the abundance of extra-segregation brothels as well as venereal disease in Rangoon and in other major cities in Burma (i.e. Mandalay, Moulmein, and Maymyo).

but of “positive friendliness.”³⁰³ He cites, as evidence, the government grants for illegitimate children of British men by Burmese mothers in the form of orphan stipends, boarder stipends and apprentice stipends. He explains that the grants, while they represent “a merciful arrangement from the point of Burmese mothers who have been abandoned, with their children, by Englishmen temporarily resident in a district,” recklessly release the European father of the responsibility of fatherhood.³⁰⁴ In addition to discussing the widespread practice of concubinage by European men, Cowen points out that the clients of the brothels were British troops and sepoys from the Indian subcontinent, not the local male population.³⁰⁵

Cowen also published a series of pamphlets titled *Tracts for Rangoon*, clearly intended for English-speaking Christian residents in Burma, presumably colonial officials and British male patrons of the brothels whom the pamphlets sought to proselytize.³⁰⁶ The cover of the second *Tracts for Rangoon*, for example, features the following Biblical reference: “Upon her forehead is a name written: BABYLON the great, MOTHER of HARLOTS, and of the abominations of the earth - Rev., 17:5.”³⁰⁷ In the fifth *Tracts for Rangoon*, titled *Rangoon’s Scarlet Sin or, Lust Made Lawful*, Cowen likewise drew on Christian teachings to appeal to his audience: “Lust, when it hath conceived, bringeth forth Sin; and Sin, when it is full-grown, bringeth death - James, I:15.”³⁰⁸ Cowen’s *Tracts* and his public, abolitionist campaign were aimed principally, if not exclusively, at British or European men.

³⁰³ Ibid., 10.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 2, 6-7. This is not to suggest that Burmese men did not visit prostitutes but that they probably visited prostitutes who catered more specifically to Burmese men (as opposed to European and/or Indian men).

³⁰⁶ These pamphlets, two of which were considered libelous and banned by the government, range from 7 to 9 pages each and discuss in general and polemical terms what he covers in his report to the AMSH.

³⁰⁷ John Cowen, *Tracts for Rangoon: 29th Street by Day & Night*, vol. 2 (Rangoon: YMCA, 1914).

³⁰⁸ John Cowen, *Tracts for Rangoon: Rangoon’s Scarlet Sin or, Lust Made Lawful*, vol. 5 (Rangoon: YMCA, 1914).

Cowen's portrayal of the relations between British men and Burmese women—which the colonial state sanctioned yet at the same time deemed illicit—is interesting given the pernicious insistence by the colonial officials that prostitution and concubinage had their roots in local tradition and that men of the East, not the West, partook of such practices. Take, for instance, the “Shuttleworth Report”: an extensive report by the then District Superintendent of Police based on an investigation in 1916 that was written in response to Cowen's campaign. The report, which had become the defining administrative paper on prostitution in British colonial cities (Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and Rangoon), representatively argued that “one of the chief causes leading to prostitution in the East is the religious and social sanctions to polygamy and concubinage, common to all religions and races in the East.”³⁰⁹ The British colonial government thereby absolved themselves of any responsibility. By locating social and moral evils in indigenous practices and displacing the agency onto Indians or “Others,” British administrators sought to elide the role that the colonial state played in what itself had deemed immoral and exploitative.

The conspicuous refusal to address sexual relations between British or European men and Burmese women manifests itself vividly in administrative records predating Cowen's vociferous denunciation of the colonial administration's policy towards prostitution. A 1914 report of the Select Committee of the Imperial Legislative Council provides an illustrative example. The Committee was responsible for reviewing a bill to further amend the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure (1898) for the purpose of affording greater protection to minor girls, principally Burmese, who were commonly enticed into Rangoon on false pretences

³⁰⁹ E. Shuttleworth, 1916, "Extent, Distribution and Regulation of the 'Social Evil' in the Cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and in Rangoon Town," IOR L/PJ/6/1448, 24.

and tricked into a life of prostitution.³¹⁰ The chief objection to the bill, according to the report, was that its definition of the words “illicit intercourse” would lead to extensive abuse due to the prevalent practice by foreign men of taking Burmese girls as mistresses. “It is of course well known,” the report claims, “that many foreigners residing in Burma take Burmese girls as mistresses, paying money to the guardians.”³¹¹ Interestingly, the report only mentions Hindu men when referring to the foreigners responsible for taking young Burmese mistresses. The report furthermore attributes the widespread phenomenon to Burma’s “loose marriage laws” which the report claims freely sanctioned relations between men and women of different race, ethnicity, caste and religion.³¹² British men are thus freed of committing the crime of “illicit intercourse” with Burmese women in their practice of concubinage. The government conspicuously fails to mention the large immigration of unaccompanied (single or married) men from India following the British annexation of Burma, which served as a major cause of and market for prostitution and concubinage. Instead, colonial administrators highlighted Burma’s “loose marriage laws” as the cause of the “illicit intercourse.” They utilized the convenient explanation that the indigenous culture promoted polygyny and concubinage which, in turn, caused prostitution. In other words, they used more or less the same essentialist explanation to account for concubinage and prostitution in Burma.

³¹⁰ Secretary to the Government of Burma, 2 October 1905, "Letter to the Inspector General of Police, Burma," NAD 1/15 (D) 471, 21 - 23.

³¹¹ "Report of the Select Committee of the Imperial Legislative Council," 18 March 1914, NAD 1/15 E 12310.

³¹² Ibid.

Marrying Up: The Bo-Gadaw or The European's Mistress

Colonial officials may have attempted to elide and conceal the fact that British men carried out relationships with Burmese women that closely resembled concubinage. But among the Burmese public, miscegenation had become a publicly acknowledged reality by the mid-1920s. The following cartoon featured in the 10 October 1925 issue of *Deedoke* offers insight into the way contemporary Burmese people perceived Anglo-Burmese unions [Figure 18: read from left to right, top row first].³¹³ The cartoon, entitled “On Being a Foreigner” (“Taing Kya Pyit Tika”), begins with a picture of a Burmese woman flatly rejecting what appears to be a marriage proposal from a European-looking man. She says, “You think you’re worthy of me?”³¹⁴ Her mother, however, entreats her daughter to accept the foreigner’s proposal, which prompts the daughter to ask why. The mother, envisioning the foreigner with his Indian and Chinese servants, replies that marrying him will mean that they get to be chauffeured in cars. The daughter evidently accepts the foreigner’s proposal because, explains the caption next to the couple, “she is opportunistic.”³¹⁵ Just as she gives birth to the foreigner’s child however a servant instructs her: “Go! Go! The wife from the chief country is coming!”³¹⁶ Presumably, the foreigner’s wife in Britain is on her way to Burma to join her husband. The cartoon concludes with the Burmese “wife” in tears and with the following caption: “Oh, the impermanent nature of life.”³¹⁷

³¹³ "တိုင်းခြားဖြစ်နိုင်ကော," *Deedoke*, 10 October 1925.

³¹⁴ 1(A), *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ 2(A), *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ 2(B), *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ 2(C), *Ibid.* The caption refers to the Buddhist law of nature which states that there is no permanent entity underlying human life.



Figure 18: “On Being a Foreigner”

Source: *Deedoke* (October 19th, 1925), 9.

While the cartoon, which is tinged with Buddhist teaching about impermanence, is clearly meant to be a sarcastic *tika* or commentary on “foreign” men, it also sheds light on how some members of the Burmese public understood relationships between a European man and a Burmese woman. The relationship fell short of marriage and ultimately left the woman in grief (according to the cartoonist, at least). Yet it constituted a mutually but not equally exploitative temporary arrangement that presented the woman and her family with socio-economic benefits. The “foreigner’s” car and servants symbolized the luxurious lifestyle of a European man. He represented white prestige. At the same time that the cartoonist warned the audience of the potential dangers of such relationships, he acknowledged their allure and benefits.

An examination of a story entitled “A European’s Mistress” (“Bo-gadaw”), published in the 22 June 1934 issue of *Youq Shin Lan Hnyun* further illustrates this

point [Figure 19].³¹⁸ The title refers to the main character of the story, Ma Mei Thoun, whose mother, Daw Aw Hma, has arranged for her daughter to get married to a *bo* named *Bo-gale* (“a young, European lad”).

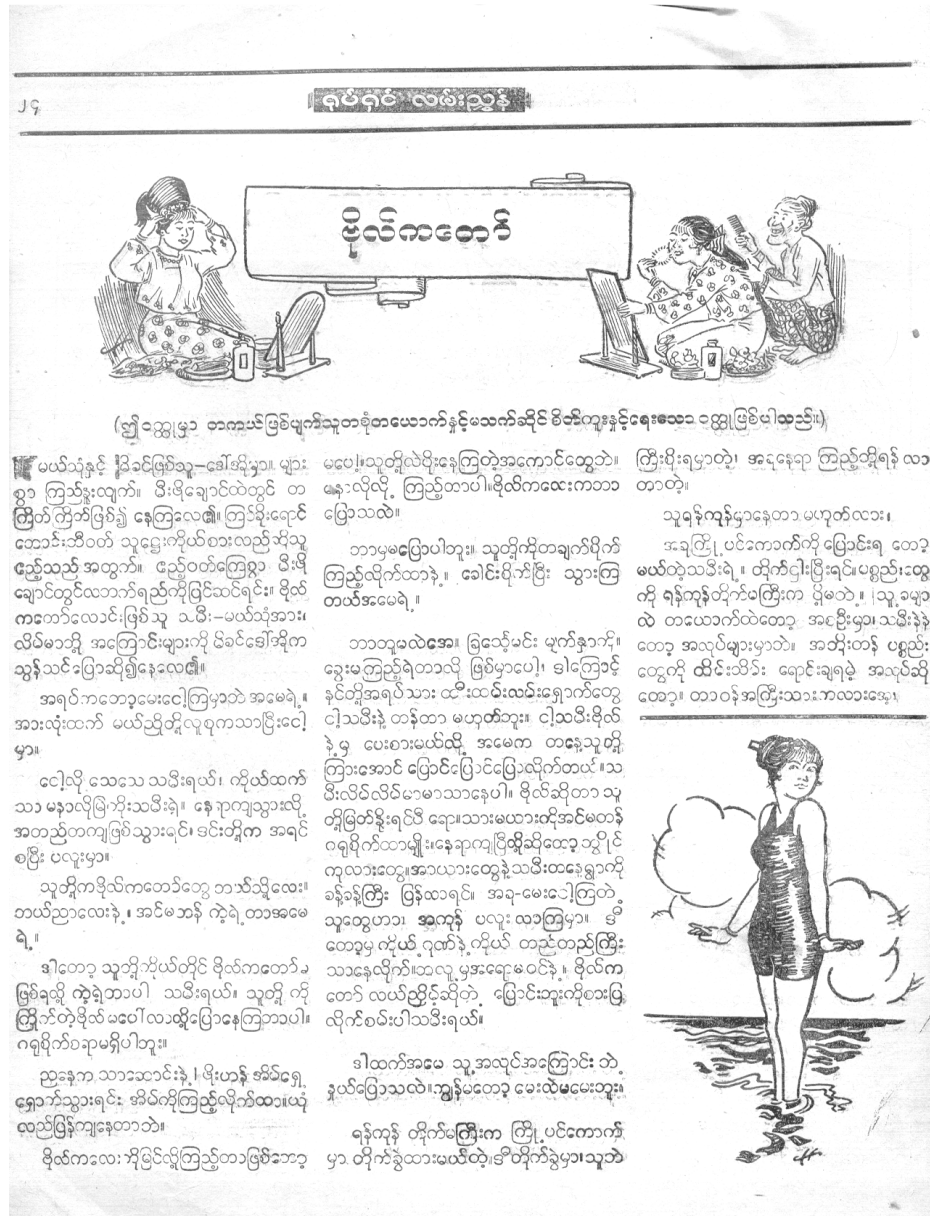


Figure 19: Illustrations from “Bo-Gadaw”
Source: *Youq Shin Lan Hnyun* (June 22nd, 1934), 24.

³¹⁸ Author unknown, "ဗိုလ်ကတော်," in *Youq Shin Lan Hnyun*, 22 June 1934, 24-28.

The story opens with the mother and the daughter in the kitchen, deep in conversation:

Daughter: Mother, the neighbors are going to sneer at me. Everyone's going to make a mockery out of me.

Mother: So what if they sneer at you? It's because they are envious of you. Once the marriage is finalized, they'll be the first to befriend you.

D: They say all sorts of insulting things about *bo-gadaws*... that they're very sly...

M: That's because they themselves haven't found a *bo* who is interested in them. Don't listen to such things.³¹⁹

Daw Aw Hma instructs her daughter to not dwell on the neighbors' apparent scornfulness and to focus, instead, on the glorious life the marriage will bring to her.

She tells her daughter:

You just worry about being a good wife, Mei Thoun. A *bo* cherishes and takes great care of his wife and children... one day, you will make your grand return to the village as a *bo-gadaw* and show off in front of those who now scoff at you.³²⁰

In the ensuing conversation between the mother and the daughter, the reader learns that while neither of them knows for certain the details of Bogale's life (i.e. his family background, occupation, etc.), they presume that he owns a business that handles extremely valuable goods and that he has secretaries working for him. When the daughter points out that she doesn't know how to cook European dishes, Daw Aw Hma tells her not to worry because "a European has chauffeurs, butlers, servants and cooks," and reassures her daughter that she won't have to step into the kitchen.³²¹

Unfortunately, Ma Mei Thoun quickly finds her (and her mother's) dream of living a *bo* life shattered upon her marriage to Bogale who, it turns out, is not really a *bo* but a European-looking Muslim by the name of Yusuf.³²²

³¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid., 25.

³²² Ibid., 26 - 27.

The story, like the cartoon discussed above, cautions Burmese people who view Anglo-Burmese liaisons as socio-economic leverage. But the author renders Daw Aw Hma and her daughter's visions of the life of a *bo-gadaw* ill-conceived not because they erred in their assumptions about Europeans but because Bogale turned out not to be European. The story implied that a genuine *bo-gadaw* was in fact all that Ma May Thoun and her mother had expected, thereby reinforcing the allure of the *bo-gadaw*.

The Burmese popular press displayed no hesitation in circulating such critiques of what were depicted as “temporary” liaisons between European men and Burmese women, and among the Burmese community of journalists, intellectuals, and popular press readers, the term *bo-gadaw* gained currency.³²³ The word *bo* signifies the military ranking of a general. The word *gadaw* literally means wife, but more accurately denotes “madam” for the word is associated only with a wife of a dignitary; the term for the wife of a high-ranking government official, for example, is *min-gadaw*. *Bo-gadaw* thus alludes to the envied status of a military general's wife. During the colonial period, however, *bo* came to mean European, and while *bo-gadaw* could refer simply to the wife of a European man, it also took on a pejorative connotation: “a European's mistress.”³²⁴ The double entendre of the term *bo-gadaw* thus aptly embodied the nuances of the miscegenating Burmese woman's liaison with

³²³ Besides *Deedoke*, *Dagon* also published cartoons and commentaries on liaisons between European men and Burmese women. See, for instance, P. Monin's articles in *Dagon* (P. Monin, *Dagon*, January 1926, 143 - 51 & Monin, 215 - 24). In her discussion of nationalist protests against Burmese women's marriage to foreigners, Naing Naing Maw notes that critics were concerned not only with “intermarriages” between Burmese women and Indian men but British men as well (Maw, “The Role of Myanmar Women in the Nationalist Movement, 1906 - 1942,” 21 - 24).

³²⁴ See Khin Myo Chit's explanation of the phrase in Khin Myo Chit, “မင်္ဂလာနံနက်စာ” in *Zawana*, April 1946, 34 - 36). Interestingly, *Judson's Burmese-English Dictionary*, (Rangoon: Baptist Board of Publications, 1953), 715) provides the former denotation of the phrase, while the Myanmar-English Dictionary published by the Burmese Ministry of Education does not (မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ်အဘိဓာန် (Yangon: Department of the Myanmar Language Commission, Ministry of Education, 1993), 315). See also Masaharu Harada and Toru Ono, *Birumago Jiten [Burmese-Japanese Dictionary]* (Osaka: Nihon Biruma Bunka Kyoukai, 1979), 309.

her *bo*, which was at once prestigious and undignified: her source of prestige was simultaneously the source of her ill repute.

The same may be said of the miscegenating European man. His *bo-gadaw* symbolized a privilege he had gained through his power and status as a European (primarily British) colonizer. Yet his exercise of this privilege mirrored such “uncivilized” practices as concubinage and polygyny which the colonizers purportedly aspired to abolish. The early twentieth-century, in addition, corresponded to an era marked by social Darwinism and preoccupations with racial purity, not only in metropolitan Europe but in the European colonies alike.³²⁵ Take, for example, the following passage from the *Shuttleworth Report*, in which the District Superintendent of Police explains why he has recommended that all European prostitutes in Burma be deported:

[The] white races are at the present time the dominant and governing races of the world and anything that would lower them in the sight of the subject races should, I think, be carefully guarded against, and I do not think there can be any doubt that the sight of European women prostituting themselves is most damaging to the prestige of the white races.³²⁶

European people other than government officials shared the concern over the representation of “white races.” In 1927, the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) was formed in response to a memorandum by the Social Hygiene Council—a society affiliated with the AMSH discussed above and campaigning for similar causes—that claimed that films shown in cinemas in British India misrepresented Western people and culture, thus lowering their prestige.³²⁷ The ICC surveyed dozens of educated

³²⁵ For a study of general colonial anxieties with racial purity in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and its link to the emergence of metis or hybrid communities in European colonies, see Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.

³²⁶ Shuttleworth, "Extent, Distribution and Regulation of the 'Social Evil' in the Cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and in Rangoon Town," 19.

³²⁷ India, *Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28, Evidence*.

respondents of diverse backgrounds—ranging from headmasters of high schools, police commissioners, to entrepreneurs and managers of local theaters—to consider the perception of the local cinema by both Burmese and British people in Burma. The majority of British interviewees and interviewees working in the education sector, both Burmese and British, responded that the local cinemas did in fact misrepresent or lower “Western civilization.”³²⁸ Representatives of the National Council of Women, another affiliate of the AMSH, claimed during the oral interview that films shown in Burma not only displayed damaging portrayals of Western civilization but, in so doing, also undermined the authority of the colonial government:

The majority of films of the Los Angeles type depicting scenes of extravagance and luxury must tend to misrepresent normal Western civilization and lower it in the eyes of Indians and Burmans... It is very natural that they should object to political subordination to a people whom they believe to resemble those depicted in such films.³²⁹

In 1920s Burma, a liaison between a European man and a Burmese woman potentially damaged his prestige and destabilized colonial rule, whereas the filmic “extravagance and luxury” reinforced the idea that the *bo-gadaw* married into wealth. The offspring of a *bo-gadaw*, furthermore, threatened to blemish not only the European father’s reputation but, as Edwards points out, the alleged civilizational hierarchy of “English” and indigenous races and cultures:

As the physical incarnation of carnal knowledge between colonizer and colonized, a classificatory anomaly which upset the colonial

³²⁸ See the following responses in the ICC report: Written Statement, Mrs. Bulkeley, date missing, 1928, 616; Written Statement, Lieutenant Colonel E. Bisset, Director of Public Health, Burma, 4 January 1928, 504; Oral Evidence of Mr. L. K. Mitter, Assistant Public Prosecutor, Mandalay, 24 January 1928, 673-678. For the responses by school masters and mistresses, see the following: Written Statement of the Rev. H. V. Shepherd, Principal Wesleyan Methodist Boys’ High School, Mandalay, 706-707; Oral Evidence of Mr. J. S. Augustine, Schoolmaster, Skelly High School, Mandalay, 24 January 1928, 716-717; Mr. F. G. French, Headmaster of the Government High School, Rangoon, 491-494, Oral Evidence of 17 January 1928, 494-500; Oral Evidence of Ma Lay Khin, Mistress, Pegu Karen School, Rangoon, 19 January 1928, 585-590.

³²⁹ Oral Evidence of Mrs. M. Fraser and Mrs. E. Martin-Jones, Representing the National Council of Women, Burma, 20 January 1928, India, *Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28, Evidence*, 616.

bureaucracy's careful racial categories, [the progeny of Europeans and Burmese] functioned as a metonym for the fragility and ephemerality of 'white' minority rule, and tapped deep-seated psychological anxieties about racial degeneration and political fears about the demise of European control.³³⁰

The British community in Burma considered miscegenation to be completely harmful to "white prestige" and to British colonial rule.

The Burmese community, likewise, found Anglo-Burmese liaisons problematic, but at the same time, viewed it as less objectionable. To be sure, a *bo-gadaw* could never escape the unequal relations of power within which her relationship to her *bo* was firmly located. The public representations of the *bo-gadaw* criticized precisely this fact: that socio-economic disparity had become, under colonial rule, an increasingly dominant determining factor in such intimate and fundamental relations as marriage and kinship. Although they do not make explicit the implications of the *bo-gadaw* for the status of Burmese men, the very exclusion of Burmese men from representations of the *bo-gadaw* is telling: the *bo* had stripped Burmese men of their prior status, privilege and power. The *bo* not only possessed officialdom, wealth, and such modern accoutrements of power and prestige as a car, a chauffeur, and a secretary, but he had also implemented a policy of encouraging the immigration of single men from the metropole and from other British colonies. The large influx of single and male immigrants which I discussed in Chapter Two resulted in the demographic shortage of adult women. The decreasing demand by Burmese women for Burmese men thus accompanied the converse rise in the demand by foreign men for Burmese women.

Yet the *bo-gadaw* was conflictual because the Burmese public in the 1920s and the early 1930s regarded relations with Europeans to be a way to access power and status, and an expression of white prestige. And while representations of the *bo-*

³³⁰ Edwards, "Half-Cast: Staging Race in British Burma," 284-85.

gadaw often imply that young Burmese women functioned merely as pawns for their opportunistic families—families that, incidentally, were always represented by the mother—they suggest that mothers and daughters alike reckoned knowingly with the practice of *bo-gadaw* as a means of socio-economic advancement. This, furthermore, was a culturally accepted practice wherein the parents often played a central role in arranging their daughter’s marriage.

Marrying Down: The “Burmese-Muslim” Marriage

Towards the late 1930s, however, the “mixed,” heterosexual liaison discussed predominantly in the Burmese popular press was a relationship between a Buddhist, Burmese woman and an Indian (often Muslim) man—or what the British administration referred to as a “Burmese-Muslim” marriage. The Burmese-Muslim marriage question made its public debut in the early 1920s as an agenda of the leading women’s nationalist organization, *Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin* (hereafter referred to as *Konmaryi*), a subsidiary branch of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA).³³¹ The first public denunciation of Burmese-Muslim marriages by the *Konmaryi* took place on 11 July 1921 at a demonstration organized by the GCBA to protest the imprisonment of U Ottama, a nationalist monk and a leading member of the GCBA known as “the Gandhi of Burma.”³³² Addressing those who were gathered at a park in downtown Rangoon for the protest, members of the *Konmaryi* declared that

³³¹ For information on the *Konmaryi*, refer back to my discussion of the Burmese Women’s Association in chapter three.

³³² U Ottama was famous for his inflammatory anti-colonial speeches which he gave throughout small towns and villages in Burma. The colonial government arrested him for one of these speeches, tried him for sedition, and sentenced him to eighteen months imprisonment—the first time in colonial Burmese history that a prison term was handed out for making a political speech. The GCBA organized a day of mourning for U Ottama on 11 July 1921, accompanied by a public demonstration at the Bandoola Park (Mu, “မြန်မာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးကြိုးပမ်းမှု တွင်ပါဝင်သော အမျိုးသမီးများ၏ တက္ကရာ,” 27-28). For brief biographies of U Ottama, see Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 199-206; Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*, 14-16.

Burmese women should not marry men of a religious faith other than Buddhism.³³³

The purported problem underlying Buddhist-Muslim marriages concerned the loss by the Burmese woman of her culturally inherited conjugal rights, especially those pertaining to divorce and inheritance, through the marriage. The colonial administration summarized the problem as follows:

First, it is said that a Burmese Buddhist woman who has contracted an alliance with an Indian and has cohabited with him openly in the belief that she is married to him, often discovers, when the question of her status arises, that, by reason of the operation of the personal law of the man, she is not his wife. Secondly, in order to contract a valid marriage, she is bound to renounce her own Buddhist religion and to adopt that of her Muslim husband. And, thirdly, it is said that, even if she is recognized as the wife of the man, she does not obtain the benefit of the status of a married woman under Burmese Buddhist Law. Burmese Buddhist Law allots to a wife an equal share in the properties acquired by her and her husband or, in certain circumstances, either of them during the marriage and gives her the whole estate as a survivor on the death of the husband.³³⁴

A Burmese woman lost her “high status,” discussed in the previous chapter, through her intermarriage specifically to Muslim men whose customary law permitted polygyny (thus, the problem also applied to Buddhist-Confucian marriages but not to Christian marriages).

The *Konmari* members continued to speak publicly against Buddhist-Muslim marriages in Rangoon and in Mandalay, as a result of which the colonial government drafted the *Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill*, a precursor to the *Women’s Special*

³³³ Gale, ကပြားပြသောနာ, 128. The word “*Kabya*,” in its most basic meaning, refers to people of mixed ancestry. The etymology of the word, however, is uncertain. Some argue that *Kabya* is a derivative of the word “*Kaq-Pa*,” which refers to a person who has taken up residence, temporarily or permanently, in a locality which is not his native place. *Kaq-pa* also means parasite. Others claim that *Kabya* derived from the word “*Kwe-Bya*,” which means to be divided or to become various, a word especially applicable to living beings. See Gale, ကပြားပြသောနာ, 7; မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ်အဘိဓာန်, 4, 22; *Judson’s Burmese-English Dictionary*, 174, 250.

³³⁴ See Chapter Five of the Interim Riot Inquiry Report for a more detailed version of the conventional account of the marriage question (Riot Inquiry Committee, *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 28-33).

Marriage and Succession Act, in 1927. The act decreed that Burmese customary law be applied to marriages involving Buddhist women who belong to any of the indigenous races of Burma, given the following conditions: first, that the man was at least eighteen years of age and the woman at least sixteen (with the consent of both parents if either was below twenty); second, that the woman had no subsisting marriage tie; and third, that the marriage was solemnized and recorded by the registrar or the village headman. If the couple co-habited without marriage and without being registered thus, the woman or her parents, guardians, and siblings, could inform the village registrar of it, at which time both parties were to be summoned and urged to legalize the union. If the man refused to legalize the union, a suit for breach of promise to marry or for seduction could be brought against him. If the union was legalized, Burmese Customary Law applied to all matters related to divorce, inheritance, succession and ownership of properties. In addition, any child born before legalization of the union also gained “legitimate” status.³³⁵

The bill, however, failed to pass until 1939,³³⁶ and the *Konmariyi*'s public criticism had failed to muster a popular following until the mid- to late 1930s when articles that highlighted the supposed contrast in the status of Buddhist Burmese women and Muslim Indian women began to appear in the popular press. An article by U Ka, entitled “Muslim Women” (“Muslim Amyothamimya”), in the April 1936 New Year's Edition of *Myanmar Alin* outlines what he identifies as “a Muslim custom of hiding women at home,” or “*purdah*.”³³⁷ U Ka describes *purdah* as a customary

³³⁵ The 1927 draft outlawed polygamy, recognized adultery and cruelty as matrimonial faults to justify divorce, and defined divorce to be the only means (aside from death) of breaking marital ties, thus safeguarding against hasty divorces. As Daw Mi Mi Khaing points out, however, Burmese customary law still failed to apply to marriages involving Buddhist women (Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, 42-43). See *Buddhists Marriage and Divorce Bill* (Draft of, 20 July 1927) in “Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill, Protest Against,” 1927, IOR L/PJ/6/1944 (P&J 2398).

³³⁶ *The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act* (Burma Act XXIV, 1939) came into effect on 1 April 1939 (*The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act*).

³³⁷ Ka, “မူဝလင်အမျိုးသမီးများ,” *Myanmar Alin*, April 1936, 43 - 45, 52.

practice whereby a Muslim woman secludes herself from public sight by wearing a veil and a cloth that cover her from head to toe, and confines herself to her home. He explains that the custom, intended to protect a Muslim woman from moral and social adulteration, also prevents her from tempting a Muslim man to be lustful and immoral.³³⁸ U Ka then points out that a Muslim woman appears to be deprived of numerous privileges. He claims that while she is virtually locked up at home to perform domestic duties, when there is a war, she must accompany men to nurse the injured.³³⁹ “What is this belief,” deplures U Ka, “that a Muslim woman should undertake a *Haj*³⁴⁰ when she is prohibited from entering a mosque?”³⁴¹ He adds that Muslim women in Burma cannot read religious texts, newspapers, or anything written in English.³⁴² U Ka contrasts the desolate account he has presented of the life of a Muslim woman with the uplifting portrayal of Buddhist women in Burma:

Young Buddhist women graduate with [sic] bachelor and master degrees. They run companies and stores. They become doctors, administrators, teachers, municipal representatives, and editors for newspapers and magazines.³⁴³

“In view of the fact that women abroad are equally progressive,” he concludes that Muslim women alone seem unable to move forward.³⁴⁴

The Burmese-Muslim marriage thus represented a moral and physical oppression of Burmese women, as suggested by a report published in the 21 April 1939 issue of the *Toetetyei*. The report, entitled “Burmese women meet with

³³⁸ Ibid., 43-45.

³³⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁴⁰ An annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The fifth of the “Five Pillars of Islam” stipulates that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. The first four pillars, in brief, are: faith or belief in the oneness of God and the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad; establishment of the daily prayers, concern for and almsgiving to the needy; and self-purification through fasting.

³⁴¹ Ka, “မူဝလင်အမျိုးသမီးများ,” 45.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

troubles,” gave an account of a Burmese woman, Ma May Myit, who married an Indian man about fourteen years ago. According to the report, Ma May Myit was taken to India by her husband in November 1938. Upon her arrival, she found herself ill-treated at the hands of her husband and his first wife before she was ultimately kicked out of the house. Ma May Myit went to Calcutta where she found Burmese residents who financed her passage back to Burma.³⁴⁵ Unlike the temporary liaison between a *bo* and a *bo-gadaw*, which symbolized the Burmese woman’s movement up the social ladder, the Burmese-Muslim union signified the Burmese woman’s decline in status.

A Burmese woman who married a Muslim not only dragged herself down, but more generally, she denigrated Burmese society at large. The 25 July 1938 issue of *Thuriya* featured an article that accused immigrants to Burma who professed other religions of “seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives, causing dissension in order to create such communities as *Dobama Muslim* (We Burmese Muslim).”³⁴⁶ The critics of Burmese women’s liaisons with Muslims echoed the colonialist Darwinian discourse on racial degeneration. A Burmese woman was likewise destined to damage Burmese culture because she had to adopt her husband’s religion and custom. She thus destroyed her “*amyo*” (အမျိုး): i.e. her race, ancestors and kin, religion, and culture.³⁴⁷ The author of *The Half-Caste Problem* (Kabya Pyattana) summed up the discourse against the Burmese-Muslim marriage: “A Burmese woman who marries [an Indian Muslim man] hurts both her *amyo* and her cultural heritage.”³⁴⁸ Just as the British community in Burma regarded the European,

³⁴⁵ *Toeteyei* (29 April 1939) in “Burma Press Abstract.”

³⁴⁶ The passage from the letter, written and published in Burmese in the 25 July issue of *Thuriya*, was cited in English translation in *Riot Inquiry Committee, Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 11.

³⁴⁷ The word “*amyo*” is often translated into English as “race,” although race is only one of its meanings. The word also means “kind” or “species,” and refers to a person’s lineage, heredity, family, relative, and class.

³⁴⁸ Gale, ကြေးငြိသာနာ, 126.

female prostitute as “most damaging to the prestige of white races,” a Burmese wife of a Muslim damaged the prestige of the Burmese *amyo*. Her choice to marry a Muslim was especially demeaning because unlike that of the *bo-gadaw*, it involved no apparent cultural or social incentive. Similarly, while critics of both Anglo-Burmese and Burmese-Muslim unions alleged that the intermingling of Burmese women with men from another religion or culture fueled imperialism, the latter represented a more demeaning relationship. Unlike the *bo-gadaw* who was represented as abiding by her mother’s wish, a Burmese woman’s decision to marry a Muslim defied the request by monks and elite nationalist women to abstain from relationships with foreign men.

Where nationalists and feminists once highlighted the “traditional” progressiveness of women in Burma to encourage women to challenge their status quo, the high status of Burmese women in this context represented an imperative to conform to Burmese customs. Government officials, politicians, writers, and intellectuals persisted in accentuating the exceptionally liberated status of a Burmese woman but no longer to discuss its enhancement through modern institutions and expertise but rather to speak of its loss under colonial modernity. Although the high status of the Burmese female still served as an essential political strategy, it justified the nationalist movement for different reasons. Resolutions dealing with the Buddhist-Muslim marriage appeared as important agenda at nationalist meetings throughout the country and the colonial state cited the Buddhist-Muslim marriage as one chief cause of a series of anti-Indian riots—referred to as the “1938 Burma Riots”—that broke out in Rangoon on 26 July 1938.

The riots began when a mass meeting of Burmese Buddhist monks and laymen at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda turned into a violent assault on Indians. The meeting, chaired by a respected Buddhist monk, had been organized to protest against an anti-Buddhist book by a Maung Shwe Hpi that was first published seven years ago and

then republished a few months prior to the riots. Those gathered for the meeting marched to the Soortee Bara Bazaar and upon arrival at the bazaar, began throwing stones and attacking Indians. The police stepped in, as a result of which a monk was injured by an Indian policeman. Similar riots spread throughout Burma immediately following the unrest at the bazaar, protracting into September of 1938 and resulting in 220 dead and 926 injured. The British administration attributed the riots to several other factors, besides Maung Shwe Hpi's book, including the 1930s economic depression, the sensationalist and inflammatory coverage of the riots by the popular press, and intermarriage between Buddhist Burmese women and Muslim Indian men. The report nonetheless underscored, perhaps exaggerated, the link between Indo-Burmese marriages and the riots, asserting that in the majority of organized protests against Maung Shwe Hpi's book, the marriage question was raised although it bore no actual relation to the book. "It became evident to us," states the *Riot Inquiry Interim Report* (1939), "that one of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of [Burmese] was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular."³⁴⁹

But the public castigation of the Buddhist-Muslim marriage furthermore embodied a direct attack on the Burmese woman who transgressed cultural norms and customs. The fact that public representations of marriage patterns in colonial Burma were not confined to intermarriage per se but addressed more generally the conduct of intimate relations by Burmese women reinforces this point. Take, for instance, an article entitled "If Wives Should Receive Salaries!" in the August 1938 issue of *Ngan Hta Lawka* in which the author questions what would happen "if husbands were to

³⁴⁹ Riot Inquiry Committee, *Interim Riot Report*. For details, see Riot Inquiry Committee, *Final Riot Report* and "Minute Paper, Burma Office."

give monthly salaries to their wives.”³⁵⁰ He first claims that “there would be less [sic] females robbing men of their jobs,” and explains as follows: “As wives they would have less worry and more income for they could exploit their personal charms and blandishments with greater success than as clerks and typists in offices...”³⁵¹ The author then posits that a potential wife would haggle with her suitor over her salary:

If she were just a plain woman with a high school qualification and very few other attainments, she would not demand much. Whereas, if she were a [university graduate] with honors in some subject like Pali, and knew how to play the [piano] and cook delicious dishes and had Diana-like face with a stream-lined figure, then she would demand a very high salary.³⁵²

The author also imagines the wife demanding “an increment after a year’s service” or a raise “with the coming-in of every newcomer into the family.”³⁵³ Having conjured up such various exacting ways in which a wife may behave, the author concludes:

Such, in short, are few of the incidents which... are apt to create domestic strife and discord if husbands should, in a spirit of generosity and because of the strike of wives who will no longer hold their portfolios without salaries, grant salaries to their better halves!³⁵⁴

According to the author of this article, nineteenth-century transformations in Burmese women’s education and employment had clear repercussions on gender dynamics both inside and outside of matrimony. In his representation of modern gender relations, men and women competed against one another, rather than complemented and loved each other, in a relationship overdetermined by capitalistic concerns. More importantly, the women were calculating and materialistic, unlike the men who were

³⁵⁰ Albert Ainley Auzam, "If Wives Should Receive Salaries!" *Ngan Hta Lawka*, August 1938, 308. As explained in an earlier chapter, *Ngan Hta Lawka* was a bilingual journal that published their articles in both Burmese and English. Although I was unable to obtain the Burmese version of this article, it would have been published, presumably, in another issue of the journal.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

“generous.” Modern and empowered women who had attained numerous “qualifications” robbed men of their jobs, salaries, and domestic bliss.

In this article, changes in gender relations through women’s education and employment threatened to redefine conjugal relations. Marriage functioned as a metaphor for relations between the sexes, particularly, for the interdependence of a heterosexual relationship (or of the wife’s dependence on her husband): to discuss a Burmese woman’s marriage to a “foreigner,” however, was to talk about her autonomy from Burmese men; to denigrate the ways in which she challenged conventional notions of marriage was to criticize her independence from prevailing norms of gender relations.

Various articles in the popular press like the one just described and P. Monin’s short story “*Kyunouq Amyothami Go Pyaw Pe Ba*,” [“Please Tell My Wife”] about a village headman who pleads with his wife not to take a young lover,³⁵⁵ commented on Burmese women’s transgressive behaviors in their relationships to men as an indirect means of discussing what the authors portrayed as Burmese men’s emasculation. In other words, the public castigation of Burmese women’s ideas and practices of intimate relations signified concerns about the changing gender order in colonial Burma: namely, Burmese men’s disempowerment.

Intimate Connections of Gender, Sexual and Ethic Relations

In the late 1930s, Burmese women’s relationships with men in general, not only to foreign men, came under attack. Representations and discussions of Burmese women’s various relationships to men, “foreign” and “indigenous” alike, articulated concerns about colonial Burma’s changing gender order, not only ethnic, religious, and political order. It is no coincidence that public spotlight turned on Burmese

³⁵⁵ P. Monin, “ကျွန်ုပ်မိန်းမကိုပြောပေပါ,” *Thuriya* 1940, 55-60.

women and their relationship to men at a time when Burmese women were becoming noticeably more self-sufficient as earlier chapters have shown. Women in Burma actively utilized such modern developments as female education, the popular print media, and women's political organizations, and sought access to professional careers and government offices to represent themselves in public. Precisely at this historical moment when Burmese women appeared to have "modernized," they became the target of critics who sought to illustrate to the Burmese public the pernicious effects of colonial rule on the Burmese *amyo* through the figure of the miscegenating modern Burmese female.

The dominant historical narrative of colonial Burma—what I call the ethno-nationalist model—suggests that the increasingly influential public perception of relations between Burmese women and foreign men as problematic resulted from the Burmese public's heightened awareness of ethnicity, intensifying anti-colonialist sentiments, and the economic crisis triggered by the Great Depression of the 1930s.³⁵⁶ It foregrounds the establishment of a plural society and the production of a matrix of ethnicity, whereby ethnic particularities—namely race, language, religion, and class—constitute the primary indicators of an individual or a collective identity. It places emphasis on the arbitrary colonial classification of the population in Burma by government officials, monks, politicians, and intellectuals that inscribed Buddhism onto modern Burmese subjectivity: arbitrary because there could be no *in-between's* and everyone had to fit into one category or another regardless of how apropos or

³⁵⁶ For the prevalent narratives of the anti-Indian riot, including the Burmese-Muslim marriage question, see Riot Inquiry Committee, *Interim Riot Report*; Adas, *The Burma Delta*; J. S. Furnivall, *The Fashioning of Leviathan: The Beginnings of British Rule in Burma* (Canberra: Economic History of Southeast Asia Project & Thai-Yunnan Project, 1991); Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1972); Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999); Surendra Prasad Singh, *Growth of Nationalism in Burma, 1900-1942* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1980).

inadequate that category might have been. It attributes the development of the notion of *interethnic* marriage as a form of transgression to an intensification of communalist feelings and ethnic hostility in Burma under colonial rule. Another basic leitmotif of the ethno-nationalist model is that the middle-men find themselves beleaguered as the scapegoat in the ethnic struggle:

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of colonial rule is that it so often creates a plural society. Foreigners migrate to take advantage of the colony's commercial opportunities but do not become integrated into the local society. The numerous immigrants who are laborers or middle men are usually more resented than the ruling race.³⁵⁷

Ethnicity consequently develops into an all encompassing instrument for creating communal ties.

Admittedly, the protest against the miscegenating Burmese female provided an outlet for an ethnicized discourse of the impact of colonial rule on Burmese society. By discussing the harmful effects of mixed unions on Burmese women, critics indirectly accused the British colonial state and its middle-men, the Indians, of oppressing Burmese people. By claiming that the Burmese public was concerned chiefly with marriages between Burmese Buddhist women and Indian Muslim men, the British sought to elide the fact that their economic and immigration policies resulted in the disenfranchisement of the indigenous population, a result that Burmese people felt particularly acutely as a consequence of the 1930s' economic depression. Colonizers claimed that Burmese women's temporary liaisons with foreign men represented a traditional Burmese custom while the Burmese critics of such relationships accused the women of transgressing and destroying Burmese norms, values and communities. The colonizer and the colonized in Burma alike deployed ethnicized senses of belonging and exclusion.

³⁵⁷ Guyot, "The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma," 299.

But this ethno-nationalist model, whose explanatory power relies on the parallel intensification of ethnic and nationalist sentiments in 1930s' Burma, fails to address a crucial point that this chapter has begun to raise: the public criticism of interethnic unions was certainly couched in a language of ethno-nationalism but it signified changing gender relations that concerned Burmese women's relationships to both foreign and indigenous men. It sought to contain the impact of colonial modernity on relations among Burmese women and Burmese men as well as on interethnic unions. The ethno-nationalist model also elides the fact that the public discourse on mixed relations was fundamentally gendered. It fails to explain why women, not men, became the targets of public criticism. As the next chapter will show, although Burmese men appropriated and fashioned modern or Westernized habits no less actively than did Burmese women, discussions in the popular press linked the female gender to low-brow consumerism and materialism. The modern Burmese female was portrayed as a willing collaborator with colonial and capitalist Western modernity while the modern Burmese male was depicted as a powerless victim. In addition, critics portrayed Burmese women's growing ability to push the limits of gender norms as directly responsible for Burmese men's disempowerment. The presence of young women, dressed in their modern clothing, in office environments allegedly provoked men to lust; critics likewise professed that the excessive pursuit of fashion by modern women wasted the wealth of their husband and ruined their families.

In the next chapter, I continue to examine censorious representations of the modern Burmese female in the popular press. It further scrutinizes the ways that ethnicized and sexualized contestations over the changing gender dynamics in colonial Burma informed the formulation of Burmese nationalist identities that emerged in the late 1930s. In contrast to this chapter, however, I attend more closely to the ways that

Burmese women responded to disparaging representations of themselves and perceived and discussed changing gender dynamics in colonial Burma. Did the modern development of female education, employment and public activism ultimately make a difference in women's relationship to knowledge, power and authority? Did feminist representations of Burmese women in fact authorize women to speak publicly for themselves and to return the masculine gaze? How profoundly did colonialism, modernization and nationalism affect Burmese women and their relationship to men?

CHAPTER 6

UNPATRIOTIC FASHION, UNFASHIONABLE PATRIOTISM

Problems of the Fashionable Burmese-but-Westernized Female

Beginning in the late 1920s and increasingly through the 1930s, editorials, cartoons, and letters from readers in the popular press criticized various aspects of the women's fashion in vogue called *khitsan*, meaning “new age” (hereafter “khitsan”). Articles in newspapers titled “the crest-hair problem,” for instance, declared that women should stop raising the front section of their hair like a crest; the “nylon problem” likewise referred to the problems of women wearing nylon blouses. The members of the *Konmaryi* (the first association of Burmese women, discussed in the previous chapter), who began to adopt light brown, homespun cotton cloth (*pinni*) and *yaw longyis* (traditional Burmese unisex skirt), accused the khitsan women (*khitsan thami*) of refusing to wear clothing more befitting their national lineage and of betraying their “nation” (*wunthanu*).

The discussions surrounding the “problems” went hand-in-hand with caricatures of the “Westernized” woman: typically an illustration of a wealthy-looking young Burmese woman who, by wearing high-heels, smoking cigarettes, ballroom dancing, and openly cavorting with men, flaunts tradition. The public castigation of modern women's fashion persisted almost a decade after it culminated in the late 1930s, when women who dressed in the khitsan fashion were harassed by groups of young Buddhist monks (*yahanbyo*)³⁵⁸ who attempted to tear blouses off the women

³⁵⁸ As far as I can ascertain, *yahanbyo* (ရဟန္နီယူ) refers to fully ordained monks (*yahan*) and the qualifier (ယူ or “young”) does not refer to the monk's stage of ordination. The Burmese word for a novice Buddhist monk is *ko yin* (ကိုယ်) and a *ko yin* cannot be fully ordained until the age of twenty.

with hooks and scissors.³⁵⁹ The critics of modern women's fashion linked these Burmese women to consumerism and materialism and denounced them for undermining Burmese tradition. Whereas a Burmese man's adoption of modern fashion apparently caused no problem, a similar behavior by a woman was construed as an insult to Burmese nationalist movements and a possible threat to Burmese society.

In this chapter, I examine the public discussions about modern, Westernized women's fashion. Why, despite the fact that Burmese men appropriated modern or Westernized habits no less actively than Burmese women, was a Burmese woman, rather than a man, portrayed as a willing agent of colonial, capitalist, Western modernity? Why boycott women's fashion instead of other widely circulating foreign goods such as men's clothes, belts, and shoes? After all, the "no footwear" campaign (a campaign against the wearing of shoes by foreigners at pagodas) was the source of one of the most publicized disputes between the British colonizers and the Burmese, seen by the colonizers and the colonized alike as emblematic of the anti-colonial struggle.³⁶⁰ I investigate the double standard embedded in the denunciation of modern

³⁵⁹ The yahanbyos' blouse-burning and persecution of women wearing the sheer blouse are striking for a number of reasons. Violence and physical contact between a Buddhist monk and a woman are both contrary to the Buddhist monastic code of conduct outlined by the *Vinaya*, the canonical Buddhist ecclesiastical law, which represents one of three parts of the Pali Theravada canon, or *Tipitaka*, and deals with rules for the *Sangha*. Not only was there little apparent animosity between women and the *sangha* in Burma, there was in fact prevalent cooperation between women and the *sangha* at this time. A primary example of this solidarity was the protest by the leading Burmese women's nationalist organization against the colonial administration's imprisonment of U Ottama which I discussed in Chapter Five (Collis, *Trials in Burma*, 98-99). I also pointed out in the previous chapter that Burmese women nationalists served as the leading supporters of legislative acts to safeguard a Burmese woman's rights as a Buddhist. If Buddhist influence and devotion among the female population in Burma were in fact waning, one would think that writers and publishers would not have chosen to use Buddhist parables to promote female authors, readers, and professionals. Popular Buddhism clearly functioned as a key ideological basis for women's mobilization, politically, intellectually, and socially. These aspects of the incidents involving the yahanbyos and the sheer blouse have been ignored by the mainstream historical narratives of colonial Burma in which the incidents collectively represent an atypical instance of the common anti-colonial boycott of foreign goods that got out of hand (Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*; Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*).

³⁶⁰ On the "shoe question," see Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 197.

women's fashion: modern fashion made a man no less virtuous and patriotic but rendered a woman disloyal and unworthy.

In contrast to the wearing of *pinni* and *yaw longyi* (hereafter pinni-yaw) by members of the *Konmaryi*, the public castigation of modern women's fashion has appeared in Burmese history only as a side-note to the mainstream, broad interpretations of the anti-colonial boycott campaign of foreign goods that surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the 1930s' economic depression. While mainstream historical accounts have represented the *Konmaryi*'s adoption of pinni-yaw as a "movement" (thus something formulated, structured, serious, and substantial), the pursuit of modern fashion by women has been described as a fashion trend (thus fleeting, unpredictable, immaterial, and superficial). That the pinni-yaw has become one of the most widely known symbols of anti-colonialism in Burma is hardly surprising given the historical currency that Gandhi's non-violent anti-colonial struggle has gained in the historiography of colonialism. But the reduction of contestation over the *khitsan thami* (the modern fashionable female) to a debate over fashion discounts the powerful political stance—no less powerfully political than Gandhi's sartorial choices—taken by these women. The dearth of secondary historical accounts of the protest against modern women's fashion is also peculiar given that even a cursory reading of popular press material from early twentieth century Burma reveals that the protest was a topic of intense confrontations—at times violent— involving both men and women, and monastic and lay communities. Modern women's fashion, after all, attracted the public spotlight intermittently from the 1910s to the end of the 1940s.³⁶¹ If indeed modern women's fashion was merely a transient

³⁶¹ I noted the prevalence of public discussions of modern women's fashion during my own archival research, but other scholars of colonial Burma's popular press material have made similar observations. For instance, in her thesis on an examination of Burma's political, administrative, and socio-economic conditions from 1930 to 1940 based on the author's survey of *Thuriya*, Elma Win notes that there was much debate about Western and Christian missionary influences on Burmese clothing; in particular,

trend, why was Burma's popular press so concerned with it, and why did it remain concerned years after the end of colonial rule?³⁶²

The prevalent discourse on modern women's fashion, which has thus far existed as footnotes to the larger history of Burmese nationalism, warrants a more careful analysis. By giving serious consideration to the material conditions heretofore dismissed as "fashion," this chapter reveals alternative interpretations of modern women's fashion other than that of the nationalists, who castigated it as unpatriotic. The strategy of locating the highly politicized boycott campaign within the extensive web of discourses and representational practices that focused on the bodies of Burmese women shows that there were two underlying claims to the boycott campaign. The first claimed that young Burmese women, because they were overly susceptible to foreign influences and driven by self-interest, acquired only the drawbacks of modernization, the most striking of which was their fixation with fashion—a fixation that deprived Burmese men not only of their wealth but also of meaningful relationships based on true love and respect (and not on their financial status). The second claimed that young Burmese women, therefore, need to be controlled and their modernization guided. These two underlying claims implied a third: that the reason young Burmese women had failed to reap the benefits of modernization lied in the fact that modern colonial rule had oppressed and disempowered Burmese men who would have otherwise kept the women in check. That is, critics who targeted young "modern" Burmese women in their "nationalist" campaigns objected, if circuitously, to what they perceived as Burmese women's

sheer blouses in the case of women and pants in respect to men. See Elma Win, "သူရိယမဂ္ဂဇင်း ပါပြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ နိုင်ငံရေးအုပ်ချုပ်ရေးလူမှုစီးပွားရေးအခြေအနေများကိုစိစစ်လေ့လာခြင်း (1930 - 1940)" (MA thesis, Yangon University, 1999), 76-77.

³⁶² Shwe Khaing Thar, *ဆင်ယင်ထိုးဖွဲ့မှု* (Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yei, 1951), documents the history of the "Pinni Kyaw and Yaw Longyi Battle" from 1917 until 1941. During my research, I have found that this "battle" continued to be a recurrent issue in the popular press well into the early 1950s.

demonstration of agency at a time when Burmese men had little or none. The chapter thus continues to investigate what lies underneath the ethno-nationalist rhetoric in which discourses about modern Burmese women in the 1930s and the 1940s were formulated.

The Clothing Industry in Twentieth-Century Colonial Burma

The twentieth century marked a turning point in the history of the clothing industry in Burma. Under British colonial rule, Burma developed a highly specialized single-product (rice) export economy which, in turn, made Burma rely heavily on the import of manufactured goods as well as of a considerable amount of simple, essential, staples of the Burmese diet such as salt, salted and unsalted-fish, and cooking oil. Of Burma's imported manufactured goods, a strikingly large proportion consisted of commodities related to the apparel industry: cotton yarn, thread, textiles, and finished items of clothing. These commodities comprised approximately twenty-six percent of the total dollar value of imports to Burma during the fiscal year 1936 – 1937, and rose to forty percent during 1940 – 1941.³⁶³ In 1940, there were only fifty-eight factories (out of a total of 1,027) in Burma associated with the textile industry, and their production was chiefly export-oriented.³⁶⁴ Although the local textile industry was not altogether replaced by its foreign competitors, Burma nonetheless depended completely on imports for her cotton textile requirements given that the domestic weaving industry was based on the imported supply of cotton yarns.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ See J. Russel Andrus' discussion of imports under colonial Burma (Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 171-80), and U Aye Hlaing's discussion of colonial Burma's economic trends in his M.A. thesis (Hlaing Aye, *A Study of Economic Development of Burma, 1870-1940* (MA thesis, University of Rangoon, 1964), 5-41).

³⁶⁴ Of the fifty-six factories, fifty-four were export-oriented cotton gins (the largest of these belonged to a British company, Steel Brothers), one cotton-spinning mill owned by a Steel Brothers subsidiary, and an Indian-Muslim owned knitting mill called the Violin Hosiery Works (Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 142 - 43, 47 - 48).

³⁶⁵ Aye, *A Study of Economic Development of Burma, 1870-1940*, 26 - 29.

According to J. R. Andrus, the author of one of the most authoritative texts on Burmese economic patterns under colonialism, the clothing business, like most other businesses of manufactured goods in colonial Burma, was operated by foreigners, for foreigners. The majority of manufactured goods were imported primarily from British Empire countries and companies (India supplied about half of the imported products) and Indian firms handled consumer goods from factory to the ultimate purchasers in Burmese markets.³⁶⁶ Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and Anglo-Burmese were the principal consumers of imported commodities (i.e. condensed milk, clothing apparel, toilet articles, shoes, and so on), and only the small elite of urban and well-to-do Burmese could afford to purchase these goods.³⁶⁷

Yet, imported articles of clothing were by no means luxury goods but rather the norm under British colonial rule. Because the foreign textile industry had begun to take over Burma's domestic weaving industry by the end of the nineteenth century, Burmese people had little choice but to purchase imported items of clothing or textiles. Foreign competition with domestic items not only provided little choice but it also offered incentives by producing higher quality cotton textiles for relatively cheap prices.³⁶⁸ For instance, a government survey of the working-class population of Rangoon—the epicenter of Burma's urban life—indicates that non-privileged Burmese people were regular and noteworthy consumers of the apparel industry. The average monthly expenditure on clothing of an average Burmese family in Rangoon was only slightly less than rent and far exceeded various other expenditures such as

³⁶⁶ The United Kingdom, the second biggest exporter to Burma, supplied twenty percent of consumer goods although European goods were often imported into India and manufactured or assembled there, after which they were re-exported to Burma (Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 171).

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 172. Andrus' *Burmese Economic Life* and Furnivall's *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma* are the two most often cited works on Burmese colonial economy.

³⁶⁸ U Aye Hlaing points out that the cheap labor provided by the rural, female weavers (for whom weaving was a subsidiary/seasonal occupation) allowed the industry of coarse but cheap and strong cotton *longyi* and blanket to survive. But the local cotton industry could not match the foreign competitors in producing cheap and yet higher quality cotton (Aye, *A Study of Economic Development of Burma, 1870-1940*, 26 - 29).

fuel and lighting, household requisites, religious festivals, and education.³⁶⁹ In 1913, the average monthly expenditure on clothing comprised approximately eleven percent of the average monthly income per average, working-class, Burmese family and eight percent of the average monthly income per average single Indian man—figures that remained more or less constant over the following decade.³⁷⁰ In addition, an average Burmese family in Rangoon spent roughly the same portion of its monthly salary on men and women’s clothing.³⁷¹

Moreover, working-class people in Burma in 1921—based on the *Cost of Living (1921) Index*’s definition of “working people”—constituted forty-four percent of the total population in Burma;³⁷² roughly half of the population in Rangoon in 1931 was of working-class background.³⁷³ We can safely assume that another twelve percent of Rangoon’s population in 1931—a population of professionals in law, medicine, and the academia, servants of the public force and public administrations—

³⁶⁹ India, *Cost of Living, Rangoon*, 106-10.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 71, 109, 38, 77, 79, 81. *Cost of Living, Rangoon* documents the variations in the living standard and conditions and estimated cost, on an austerity basis, of one month’s supply of essential foodstuffs and commodities for the principal groups of working people in Rangoon. The “working” groups referred principally to laborers, namely in the following categories: agricultural cultivators, skilled and unskilled factory workers, rice-mill coolies, corporation coolies, wharf coolies, durwans and peons, tramway cokers, cargo boatmen, coal carriers, handcart pullers, rickshaw-pullers, compositors, carpenters, cart drivers, motor mechanics and drivers, sandal and umbrella makers (India, *Cost of Living, Rangoon*, 6). The indices and budgets in the study are calculated for the average Burmese family (a unit of men, women, and children) and for the average single Indian men (further divided into categories of Tamils, Telegus, Uriyas, Hindustanis, and Chittagonians. The reason for using single Indian men as a unit of analysis (as opposed to an average Indian family) was, as mentioned above, that the Indian population in Rangoon was predominantly male (out of a total Indian population of 189,334 in 1921, 154,537 were male and 34,797 female. With the exception of Tamil families, furthermore, the number of children among the Indian population in Rangoon was miniscule (about ninety percent of the male population was fifteen years of age and over the three censuses prior to the 1921 census). That the Indian population in Rangoon comprised the majority of the nearly seventy percent immigrant (and single, male) population of Rangoon also contributed to the use of the single, Indian men category (India, *Census of India, 1921*, 55).

³⁷¹ India, *Cost of Living, Rangoon*, 109.

³⁷² India, *Census of India, 1921*, 246-55.

³⁷³ This figure is the result of adding the number per mille of the total number of earners and working dependants in Rangoon having the principal occupation in the exploitation of animals and vegetation (19/1000), in industry (312/1000), and in transport (191/1000) (India, *Census of India, 1931: Part One*, 142.

would have been likely consumers of the apparel business.³⁷⁴ Clothing, then, was one import commodity that was consumed by foreign and local, urban and rural, prosperous and not-so-prosperous people alike.

The fact that consumer goods were imported primarily from British empire countries and companies, furthermore, does not fully explain the production and retail side of the fashion industry. Indian firms that dominated the handling of the import of consumer products from India ultimately sold to large numbers of small shops throughout the markets in Burma. In fact, the 1931 census shows that occupations related to the textile and apparel businesses were held predominantly by the local population.³⁷⁵ Industry-wise, Burmese and other indigenous peoples held fifty-four percent and thirty-eight percent of the occupations respectively (Tables 15 & 16). While Indians born outside Burma comprised a larger proportion of those employed in commerce (thirty-three percent), they still lagged behind the Burmese who represented forty-one percent of the occupation (“other indigenous Burmese” people were the third largest constituent at twelve percent). Industry and trade combined, and without incorporating the number of occupations held by Indo-Burmans or Indians born inside Burma, almost ninety percent of the textile and apparel businesses were operated by the indigenous population.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 141-42.

³⁷⁵ This is not to say that a large local population was involved in the textile and apparel businesses, which comprised only about five percent of total occupations in Burma.

Table 15: Occupations (By Race) in the Textile, Apparel, and Toiletry Industry & Trade

		Textile Industry	Apparel and Toiletry Industry	Trade in Textile	Trade in Apparel and Toiletry	All Occupations Combined
All Races	Total	233,208	76,338	18,784	3,411	331,741
	M	9,801	47,029	13,605	2,084	72,519
	F	223,407	29,309	5,179	1,327	259,222
Burmese	M	7,421	23,650	3,509	1,141	35,721
	F	115,238	19,509	3,346	1,055	139,148
Other Indigenous Races	M	1,410	2,306	1,069	136	4,921
	F	107,107	6,638	1,302	234	115,281
Chinese	M	10	1,818	960	302	3090
	F	69	1,224	142	12	1447
European and Allied Races	M	8	15	34	2	59
	F	0	10	4	3	17
Indians born in Burma	M	69	1,634	467	20	2190
	F	130	545	59	1	735
Indians born outside Burma	M	551	16,862	6,826	379	24,618
	F	23	916	70	3	1,012
Anglo-Indians	M	4	18	12	2	36
	F	0	34	5	2	41
Indo-Burman Races	M	327	702	662	88	1779
	F	840	426	248	17	1531
Other Races	M	1	24	66	29	120
	F	0	7	3	5	15

Source: Compiled from the *Census of India* (1931), Pt. 2, 190 – 193. These figures include earners and working dependants.

Table 16: Occupation or Means of Livelihood for the Province of Burma

Occupation	Total Following Occupation	As Principal Occupation		As Subsidiary to Other Occupation	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
All Occupations	5,647,719	3,778,336	1,417,187	336,609	115,587
Textile Industry	113,812	7,402	54,813	1,337	50,260
Apparel and Toiletry Industry	69,206	44,240	18,928	4,597	1,441
Trade in Textile	18,565	13,202	4,261	883	219
Trade in Apparel and Toiletry	3,529	2,019	1,051	391	68

Source: Compiled from the *Census of India* (1931), Pt. 1, 105 – 111.

The indigenous population appears to have been likewise involved in the retail dimension of the textile and apparel businesses. Indian firms and representatives of other foreign companies left the advertisement of their products, furthermore, entirely to local agents who appear to have relied on the popular press as the major advertising medium.³⁷⁶ As I pointed out in Chapter One, a telling characteristic of the advertisements was that they were almost without exception in Burmese or in both Burmese and English and, as the sample of advertisements illustrates, they conjured a wide range of hypothetical clientele: from urban, European, Burmese, or Anglo-Indian/Anglo-Burmese men and women to agrarian Burmese families. Figure 20 provides an additional example of common advertisements for clothes taken from some of the most prominent newspapers, magazines, and journals in colonial Burma.

Such commercial advertisements that animated the newspapers and magazines suggest that issues related to clothing in colonial Burma were by no means the exclusive concern of the foreigners or the urban, Burmese elite.³⁷⁷ Clothing concerned everyone. The clothing industry in colonial Burma was not simply an import economy run by foreigners for a foreign clientele and for the profit of foreign companies. People in Burma, as retailers and consumers, vigorously partook of the vast trade. Such developments in the clothing industry also help to explain why widespread changes in fashion norms and practices began to materialize noticeably at the turn of the century.

³⁷⁶ According to Andrus, the Indian middlemen, who were based in Rangoon (the only port of entry for such goods), had no advertising staffs, marketing strategies, or “showrooms” (Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 171). My research of the period sources and historical texts on colonial Burma points to the popular press as the primary mechanism of advertisement. But the assessment is admittedly tentative as I have not been able to find sufficient documentation of other potential advertising strategies such as the radio and the cinema.

³⁷⁷ The relatively extensive literature on the numerous presses, including autobiographies and biographies of the owners, commonly attributes the financial backing to contribution made out of the owners’ pockets or by wealthy benefactors. But the copious advertisements in the period newspapers and periodicals that I came across during my research suggest that commerce and the popular press shared a relationship of mutual dependence.

ထွန်းစက်စာ
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အောင်အတိတ်နဲ့ - အောင်နိမိတ်ဆောင်မည့် - အောင်ပွဲဘော်အတွက် - လုံချည်ဆန်း
များရောက်ပါပြီ။

ရိုး တိုက် များ မှား



တိုရှည် လုံချည်။
ဓာတ်လို လျှော်-သွေး၊
ထယ်လိုပွတ်ပွတ်၊ ဝတ်ခြင်
ထလိုဝတ်၊ အဆင် များ၊
ရေသွားသည်အစား၊ မြင်
ယုတ်င်း ငေးနေရမည်။ အ
ဆင်ဆန်းများ။

**ထန်စင်ကလေး-အဖြန့်
ထာရှောင်ရွေးထုတ်ပါ။**

**တ ထည် မှ
၀၈-၀၆။**



တိုရှည်နူးရှင်းထုံရည်။
ထိတ်ဆိန် အောင်ပွဲအတွက်၊ ခေတ်
ဆန်အောင်အထူးအထူးထည်ထိုးခြောက်
အင်္ဂါရှင်ရေရှင်ပေါ်တွင်၊ မော်ထာစင်၊
များ ဝေလောင်းထည်အနံ့ ၄၄ ထက်။
ထရတထည် ၅-၁၅၆။



**နားညီကျော်-
ရိုးအင်အင်-ပသင်နင်းစစ်
လုံချည်များ။**
ထရန်အတွက် အဆင်ပေါင်း
၃၁-ကျော ရောက်နေပါပြီ။
အနံ့ ၄၄ ထက်။
မိန်းမဝတ် တာထည် ၄-၁၃၀။
ထောကျားဝတ် ၂-၀၆။



ကုမ္ပဏီများ
ဆောင်အလိုက် ဝတ်ဆင်ရန်
မွေးစုန်မွေးကတ္တီပါအင်အို။

ဤပုံအတိုင်း
အပဲ၊ သပင်ချောင်း၊ အညို
ရောင်၊ အနီ၊ အဝါ၊ အဖြူ၊
အညို၊ အဖြူ၊ အဝါ၊ အနီ၊
အညို၊ အဖြူ၊ အဝါ၊ အနီ။

**တ ထည် မှ
၀၈-၀၆။**

နေ့စဉ်ထောင်းစား
တစောင်-၅-ဖြာ၊ စတုတ္ထနှိပ်-နောက်ယိုးသတင်းများ တစောင်-၅-ဖြာ။

Figure 20: An Advertisement for Clothing on the Front Cover of Thuriya
Source: *Thuriya* (2 January 1937)

The Sheer Blouse, the New Age Fashion and the Modern Girl

The influence of the British colonial rule on Burmese male fashion style became visible in the few Burmese men of upper-class standing who wore belts with their *longyi* and shoes instead of slippers. The most palpable change in men's fashion, however, was in their hairstyle: from the long-hair, usually coiled into a pile at the top of the head, customary to both men and women, to cropping the hair shortly into hair cut referred to as *bou ke* ("the English cut") or shaving the head altogether [Figure 21].³⁷⁸

Women's fashion did not follow this trend in hairstyle, but witnessed a similar process of trimming. The white extensions of the skirt or *longyi* were altogether cut off and *longyis* in general were shortened so that they reached down roughly to the ankle instead of to the feet. The length of the top, likewise, had decreased and revealed more of the waist-line. The most revolutionary development in women's fashion was the sheer blouse: an extremely sheer, muslin blouse fastened at the neck and down one side with detachable ornate buttons. The signature characteristic of the blouse was its gossamer quality that exposed the corset-like lace-bodice called *zarpawli* which closely resembled European lingerie.³⁷⁹ Figures 22 and 23 show portraits of the proverbial "New Age" or *khit-san* fashionista who wears a lace-bodice underneath the sheer blouse.

³⁷⁸ Thar, *ဆင်ယင်ထိုးဖွဲ့မှု*, 81-84.

³⁷⁹ Shwe Khaing Thar discusses the changes in men's hairstyle as well as the emergence of the *eingyi-pa* in her book on the history of Burmese attires and hairdos (Ibid., 80-90).

ရုပ်ရှင်လမ်းညွှန်

The Screen Show Weekly

[ပဌမတွဲ နံပါတ် ၃၉]။ ၁၂၉၆-ခု၊ ဝါဆိုလပြည့်ကျော် ၄-ရက်-သောကြာနေ့။

FRIDAY 29th JUNE, 1934. [Vol. I. No. 39.]

 	  	  
<p>မောင်တင်အောင် တင်တင်မေကလေးတို့ပါဝင်သည့် ဗဲရေဌာနီ “ လက်မဲကြီး ”</p>	<p>ဆာဘဏ္ဍန်း မောင်ခင်အောင်ခင်ခင်တို့ပါဝင်သည့် ဗဲရေဌာနီ “ အပျိုကြီး ”</p>	<p>မောင်တင်အောင်နှင့် တင်တင်မေကလေးတို့ပါဝင်သည့် ဗဲရေဌာနီ “ င-တထောင် ”</p>

Owned and Managed by Parrot Film Co., Rangoon.

Figure 21: “The English Cut” (Bou Ke)

Source: *The Screen Show Weekly* (29 June 1934), front cover.

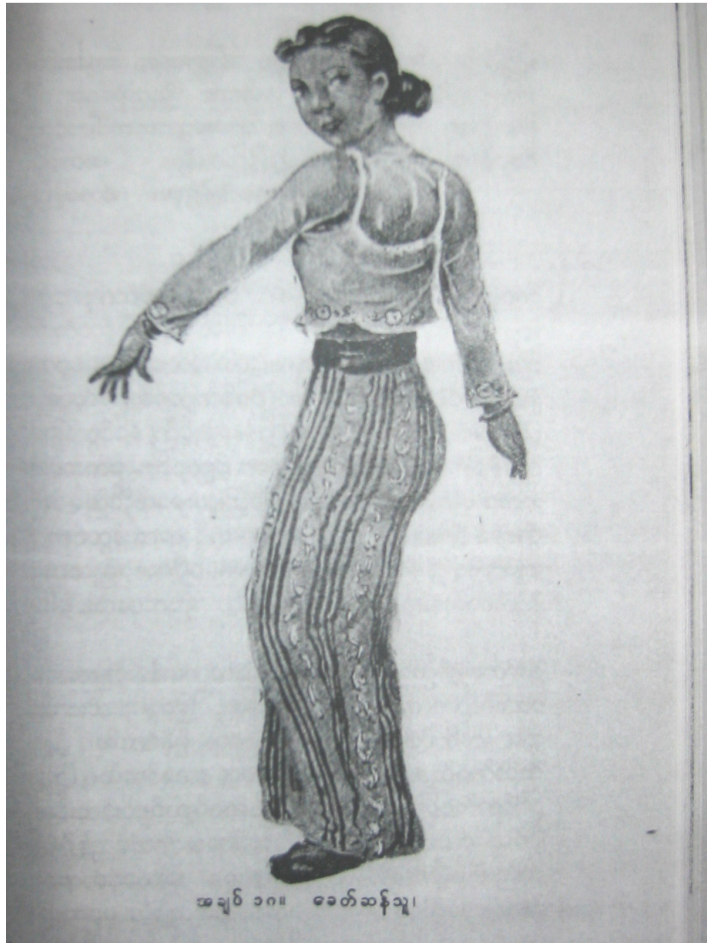


Figure 22: Khitsan Thami Wearing Zarpawli and Eingyi-Pa (I)

Source: Shwe Khaing Thar, *Burmese Clothes and Hairdos*, 89.



Figure 23: Khitsan Thami Wearing Zarpawli and Eingyi-Pa (II)

Source: *Tharyar Magazine* (August 1947), front cover.

Just as the women who wore the sheer blouse necessarily wore the lace-bodice, there were other stylistic choices that were inseparable from the *khitsan* fashion (hereafter *khitsan*) that the sheer blouse symbolized. The “crest-hair” (*amauk*), for example, was an essential dimension of the *khitsan*: although “crest” itself refers to curly bangs piled high in the forehead, it referred more generally to the nascent development of the perm [Figure 24]. Equally indispensable were high heels and cosmetics: the preferred skin fashion was to “paint” the face with such cosmetics as tinted powders, blush, and lipstick (painting the face, of course, also entailed a “skin regime” of cleansing with soap and moisturizing with lotion).³⁸⁰ On top of such accoutrements, the sheer blouse was further associated with contemporary activities: a proverbial portrait of the *khitsan* woman showed her reading a book or a magazine, playing the piano, or using a typewriter. She was also commonly depicted in conversation with a similarly fashionable young man, insinuating that the open mingling of adolescent or adult (presumably single) men and women was itself a novelty.



Figure 24: The Crest-hair (Amauk)

Source: The Comrade Monthly (February 1947), 29

³⁸⁰ Max Factor was apparently the most popular cosmetics company in Burma at the time (Ibid., 92).

These manifold facets of the *khitsan*, together, represented the modern (in the sense of the “latest” and the most contemporary) fashion and the *khit-san thami*, or “the modern girl”—a fashion that continued to be referenced as *the modern* fashion past the end of British colonial rule in 1947.³⁸¹ In so far as it was inextricably intertwined with new activities, moreover, the modern girl personified a modern mentality. The modern girl’s attitude towards the function and the propriety of clothing (and underclothing), her conception of feminine versus masculine hairstyle, figure, skin-tone, and hygiene refashioned the contours of femininity and masculinity.

But whose idea of the feminine did the modern girl personify? Such elements of the *khitsan* as the “English cut,” the crest-hair, and the high heels were certainly influenced by the “Western” (primarily British) association of long hair with women and short hair with men. At the same time, however, long hair was prized as the essence of a woman (as opposed to a girl) in Burma long before modernity. Permed hair was also still coiled into the customary hair-bun called *sadohn* as shown above [Figure 20]. The identification of bodily curves and fair skin tone with women, furthermore, was in no way “foreign” to Burma. While “underclothing” was itself a novel concept, women wore lace-bodice to show it, not to conceal it, and the combination of the sheer blouse and the lace-bodice closely resembled the already existing custom of wearing an unfastened jacket over an exposed corset-like undergarment.

³⁸¹ Shwe Khaing Thar notes that by 1901, Burmese women were starting to dress “more self-consciously” and to display a new kind of awareness towards fashion. And by 1917, the *eingyi-pa* had apparently become popular enough for newspaper cartoonists and writers to choose it as their object of commentary. According to the author, the debate over whether or not to wear *eingyi-pa*—and, concomitantly, whether or not to discard the *eingyi-pa* for the *pinni-yaw*—encompassed the years 1917 to 1941 (Ibid., 86 - 89). In my research, however, I have found that this debate continued to be a recurrent issue in the popular press well into the early 1950s.

The use of the Burmese words *thami* or *lady-thami* to refer to the modern girl is also instructive. The combination of the English word “lady” and the Burmese word “thami” indicates that the young woman who styled herself after the modern fashion was at once local and foreign, or somewhere “in-between.” *Thami* denotes “daughter” but the word also connotes a young, unmarried woman—a woman whose primary identification is through her role as a daughter because, presumably, she is yet to be married or to be a mother. The prefix “lady” suggests that to be modern was to have grown out of adolescence and to be refined. Visual representations of the modern girl in the popular press reinforce the idea that while she was youthful, she was also cultivated. The portraits and advertisements of the modern girl examined above envisaged the young women as fashionable not only because they wore modern accoutrements but also because they were educated and talented: most importantly, they were literate and avid readers, especially, of such recent literary innovations as novels, magazines, and serialized fiction. They had also appropriated such contemporary skills as typing and playing the piano in addition to using cosmetics and toiletry products; even wearing high-heels was a skill to be acquired. In other words, the modern girl possessed the youth, the means, and the know-how to enjoy the fruits of modernity.

It is no wonder, then, that a Burmese saying about the flimsy quality of the sheer blouse and the lace-bodice expressed uncertainty in locating the national origin of the modern woman:

အင်္ကျီ—အင်္ကျီပါးရယ်နှင့် မျက်ထားမျက်ထားချို၊
ကုလားလိုလိုဗမာလိုလို၊ ကျွန်မလက်ကိုဆွဲ၊
စုတ်ပြဲလေကုန်ပေါ့၊ ကျွန်မဇာဘော်လီ³⁸²

I’m dressed with a sweet face and in a sheer blouse (*eingyi-pa*)
as though foreign (*kala*), as though Burmese,

³⁸² Ibid., 86.

Of course it tears my lace-bodice (*zarpawli*),
should you so pull my hand!

The twofold description of the sheer blouse and/or the woman wearing the sheer blouse as *kala* (variously translated as “foreign,” “Western,” “white,” or “British”) and Burmese aptly captures the ambivalent relationship of the modern fashion to the new and to the traditional, and to the foreign and to the local. On the one hand, “as though *kala*, as though Burmese” suggests that the sheer blouse and/or the female subject of the poem was simultaneously *kala* and Burmese and, therefore, fused or assimilated. It implies, alternatively, that whether the subject/blouse was *kala* or Burmese depended on which specific aspect(s) of the subject/blouse were highlighted and suppressed. On the other hand, “as though *kala*, as though Burmese” may be interpreted as “not quite *kala* and not quite Burmese,” in which case the subject/sheer blouse was neither *kala* nor Burmese—at least not completely. These various possible interpretations of the hybridity of the modern fashion share the assumption that it contained both foreign and local understandings of femininity. They disagree, however, on the nature of the relationship between the foreign and the local. This disagreement was at the heart of the public debate over whether a Burmese woman ought to wear the sheer blouse.

Press War over the Sheer Blouse

The year 1917 marks a turning point in the history of the sheer blouse. In 1917, *Thuriya* began publishing cartoons and articles that accused the women who wore the sheer blouse of betraying their “nation” (*wunthanu*).³⁸³ The articles claimed that Burma was witnessing an era of nationalism and therefore the appropriate behavior for Burmese women is to thrust aside the sheer blouse and to wear clothing

³⁸³ Ibid. The word *wunthanu* literally means “own race,” “own family,” or “own lineage,” and is used to refer to a quality of patriotism or nationalism.

more befitting their national lineage. In mocking the sheer blouse, the writers and cartoonists for *Thuriya* saw themselves as propagating the idea that women, like men, had responsibilities to the Burmese nation and, in so doing, they themselves were fulfilling their national duty.

One response to *Thuriya*'s censure of the sheer blouse came from the members of the *Konmaryi* who began to wear light brown, homespun cotton blouses (*pinni*) and sarong-like traditional Burmese skirt worn by both sexes with “yaw” designs found in the western hill tracts of Burma (*yaw longyi*). Yet, the wearing of the *pinni* blouse and the *yaw longyi* was a symbolic political action taken by members of an elite nationalist women's association that failed to muster a popular following.³⁸⁴ Even a staunch nationalist magazine columnist like Ma Mya Gale, who specialized in the topic of women and national progress, declared that wearing the *pinni* blouse and the *yaw longyi* hardly counted as patriotism.³⁸⁵ The predominant response to *Thuriya*'s critique, rather, was simply to keep wearing the sheer blouse. The *khitsan* fashion continued to thrive unscathed by its scornful treatment in the popular press until the late 1930s.³⁸⁶

By the mid-1930s, however, not only *Thuriya* but numerous widely circulating journals and magazines also were featuring articles that discussed some aspect of the *khitsan* fashion, whether it was the sheer blouse or the crest-hair, as a grave problem

³⁸⁴ Shwe Khaing Thar notes that the *pinni* blouse and the *yaw longyi* were particularly passé by the late 1910s and that, as an old Burmese adage points out, it was considered to be good only for “profuse perspiration” (Ibid.).

³⁸⁵ Ma Mya Gale was a writer for *Toetetyei Magazine* who wrote monthly columns titled “Women and National Progress” and “Women and Development.” She typically expounded on Burmese women's national duty by discussing women's responsibilities to their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, thereby firmly locating Burmese women's duties towards the Burmese nation in the domestic sphere. Her main concern appears to have been the “progress” of the average Burmese women, as opposed to such elite, women nationalists as the members of the Burmese Women's Association (*Toetetyei Magazine*, February 1934, 31).

³⁸⁶ Thar, ဆင်ယင်ထုံးစံ, 87-88.

for Burmese society. In an article titled “Our (Mis)Deed” (“Tho Pa Yoga”), mentioned in the introductory chapter, Daw Amar indicts the modern Burmese youth, especially the young women, for blindly admiring the “West” and for their erroneous appraisal and appropriation of modern culture. She claims that modern girls are obsessed with the *khitsan* fashion and with adorning themselves with whatever comes from abroad. She adds that modern girls want to own cars, wear diamonds the size of an elephant, and spend their spare time living a “high life” of “tea parties,” “dinner parties” and “card games” as though they were “the wives of British officials” (*bo gadaw*).³⁸⁷ Most disquieting for Daw Amar was her conviction that modern Burmese girls’ desire for trendy, “Western” lifestyle prompted Burmese women—not only the young maidens but also their mothers—to choose their husbands (sons-in-laws in the case of the mothers) on the basis of the men’s wealth. She thus reduces the modern Burmese youth’s understanding of what it means “to progress,” “to advance,” and to be “up-to-date”³⁸⁸ to a question of capital, which she asserts, had little to do with the greater good of the Burmese people. To be more precise, the modern girl’s fashionable ways were harmful to national progress.³⁸⁹

The modern girl in Burma was represented more bluntly as unpatriotic and frivolously miscegenating with “the West.” The following caricature from *Thuriya*, with a striking resemblance to the caricature of a fashionable Burmese lady (Figure 1) in the introductory chapter, depicts a similarly scandalized older lady. Once again, the modern girl’s clothing is much more elaborate than the older lady’s, who is dressed as though she has just returned from a monastery or from meditation (Figure 25). But in

³⁸⁷ Amar, “ဝိပဿနာ,” 9.

³⁸⁸ In the period Burmese literature, various words such as “thet khit,” “khit thet,” “khit san,” and “khit hmi” were used to talk of progress and modernity” “khit,” meaning era or period, was generally the base word on which other words such as “thet,” “hmi,” “san,” were added. Other synonymous words such as “kyi pwa yei,” “toe tet yei,” were also used, though they referred more often to “modernization” or to “modernize” than to the adjective “modern.”

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

this sketch, the modern girl is with her likewise “progressive” boyfriend. He has an arm around her shoulders and the couple is hidden behind a copy of *Thuriya*, suggesting that the two are engaged in something other than reading.³⁹⁰ In both caricatures, the modern girl personified Westernization and her Westernized ways were explicitly portrayed as excessive.



Figure 25: The Modern Girl with Her Boyfriend

Source: *Thuriya* (August 1938), 127.

The juxtaposition of the old woman and the modern girl and the older woman’s indignation at the sight of the modern girl in Figures 1 and 25 are not coincidental: in the sketches, the modern girl’s fashionable outlook is particularly offensive to the older woman’s sensibilities. The denunciation of the modern girl, in other words, was not simply a nationalist castigation of unpatriotic Burmese women. It was at the same time the old-fashioned yet “wiser” generation admonishing the young-yet-chic *khitsan* generation. In their writings, the opponents of the modern girl invariably described the object of their chastisement as “the young” (*lu nge*) and addressed the chastized as

³⁹⁰ *Thuriya*, August 1938, 127.

“girls” or “daughters” (*thami*). The women who wore the homespun cotton and *yaw longyi* in denunciation of the sheer blouse were married women of an older generation. The critics of the fashionable modern girls bemoaned the eroding of Burmese society and its tradition at the hands of the fashion-crazy youth.

This generational dimension is never made explicit in the criticisms of *khitsan* and its various symbols: the sheer blouse, the crest-hair, the modern girl and so on. Writers for a popular bilingual magazine, *Ngan Hta Lawka*, however, were particularly aware of what they perceived to be a generational clash.³⁹¹ In an article titled “The Age of Criticism in Burma,” H. M. claims that in Burma, “there are people, steeped in conservatism and in tradition, who think of the past in terms of the golden and who are shedding tears because of the revolutionary ideas of the young people born after the advent of the *Kala* [the British].”³⁹² Editorials in October 1938 and April 1940 issues of the *Ngan Hta Lawka* likewise point out that a conflict between the old guard and the modern youth has become increasingly manifest in Burma. While the 1940 editorial characterizes the old chiding the youth as “high-browism,” the 1938 editorial views the generational conflict as arising from the modern youth’s intolerance of the tradition of the old reprimanding the young.³⁹³

³⁹¹ *Ngan Hta Lawka Magazine (The World of Books)* was a 48-page, bilingual (English and Burmese) magazine published from February 1929 until December 1941 by the Burma Education Extension Association—an association founded in 1928 by John S. Furnivall. The purpose of the magazine, first and foremost, was educational. Foregrounding translation from Burmese to English and vice versa, it sought to cultivate “East-West” intellectual, cultural, and literary exchanges, relations and understanding (Nwe Nwe Myint, “ဂန္ထဝေဒကဏ္ဍစာစုစာရင်း (1938 - 1941)” (MA thesis, Yangon University, 1992)).

³⁹² H.M., “The Age of Criticism in Burma,” *Ngan Hta Lawka*, January 1936, 566. The word “*Kala*” not only refers to the British but more generally to foreigners. In fact the word usually refers to Indians in Burma today, and an Indian “*kala*” is distinguished from a British “*kala*”, for instance, by adding the word “white” (*pyu*) when referring to the British foreigner [thus, “*kala-pyu*”]. In the context in which H. M. is writing, however, it is most likely that “*kala*” refers to the British, and he is speaking of the beginning of British colonial rule.

³⁹³ “Eindwin Sitpwe,” *Ngan Hta Lawka*, October 1938, 405-06; “Hiccupping Highbrows,” *Ngan Hta Lawka*, April 1940, 2.

Yet, if the censure of the *khitsan* had its roots in the inevitable “generation gap” and changing relations between the old and the young, why was there no talk of the *khitsan* lad (*khit-san tha*)? The one modern Burmese man discussed in public was the modern monk character in a novel written by a well-known leftist writer, Thein Pe Myint, and published in 1937. Thein Pe Myint’s *The Modern Monk* (*Thet Pongyi*) is a novel about the immoral life of a corrupt Buddhist monk who indulges in lay activities ranging from sexual intercourse to ownership of personal wealth and goods. While Thein Pe Myint’s satire of the modern monk stirred quite a sensation and garnered intense publicity at the time of its publication, it also met with a furious backlash from the *sangha* which led to the government’s banning of the book and Thein Pe Myint’s public apology to the *sangha*.³⁹⁴ The popularity of the novel, then, was not exactly indicative of a positive, public reception of Thein Pe Myint’s depiction of the modern monk. It was, rather, an indication of the high level of controversy that the subject evoked at the time.

More striking and intriguing than Thein Pe Myint’s scandalous modern monk is the persistent popular representation of contemporary Burmese men as *victims* of colonialism and modernization. The intensifying public discussions in the 1930s and 1940s of the sinister repercussions of colonialism and modernization in Burma encompassed a wide array of topics: editorials demanded Buddhist education, or education in the Burmese mother tongue, or the purification of Burmese literature through the filtering out of English, Indian, and Chinese, or national development according to the indigenous religion and culture.³⁹⁵ Popular novels and newspaper

³⁹⁴ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 208. For a detailed discussion of *Thet Pongyi*, see Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, in which Mendelson devotes a section titled “Nationalism and the Sangha: Literary Satire of the Modern Monk” (214 – 221) to analyzing the novel.

³⁹⁵ *Ngan Hta Lawka* 26:184 (May 1940), 158-162, 26:190 (November 1940), 414-415, 27:196 (April 1941), 119-120; *Thwe Thauk* 7 (June 1946), 17-18 & 21 (August 1947), 2.

articles blamed colonial rule for promoting sexual promiscuity, indebtedness, gambling, alcoholism, and drug addiction in Burma, which in turn had led to Burma's general social and cultural demise. Yet this diverse anti-colonial literature overwhelmingly portrayed modern Burmese men as powerless victims of modern colonial forces in contrast to its prevalent characterization of modern Burmese women as active culprits of colonial modernity.

Take, for instance, Maha Swe's *Our Mother (Doh May May)*, a distinguished anti-colonial, historical novel published in 1938 that appealed to Burmese workers to rise up against the British in protest of their unjust and exploitative treatment. Through the characters of the protagonist Shin Mar Mar's opium-smoking, gambling, and alcoholic sons, the novel impugns the British colonialists for purposely turning Burmese men into gamblers, alcoholics, and drug addicts.³⁹⁶ Even Thein Pe Pyint's satirical depiction of the modern monk was explained by the author himself and by his colleague U Nu who wrote a preface to *The Modern Monk* as a reflection on the destructive impact of the British colonial rule on both the Buddhist clergy and the laity in Burma.³⁹⁷

Numerous cartoons, such as the one featured in a June 1938 issue of *Thuriya*, furthermore, exposed the dislocation felt on the part of the Burmese by the literal and the figurative foreign immigration that colonialism entailed (Figure 26). The cartoon depicts what appears to be four foreign men—Arab, Indian, Chinese, and British—sitting side-by-side comfortably on a bench on which *Myanmar Pyi* or “Burma” is carved. A Burmese man, smaller than the four others, sits uncomfortably on the edge of the bench, as it has almost no room left for him. The cartoon reads: “Crowded by

³⁹⁶ For discussions of popular Burmese literature in the 1930s, see Thida Aung, "The Role of Literature in Myanmar Nationalist Movement: 1930-1938" (MA thesis, Yangon University, 2001).

³⁹⁷ See the six-page preface to *The Modern Monk* by U Nu who explains the motives of the novel.

other guests, such is the lot of the Burmese.”³⁹⁸ Burmese men, in other words, have been marginalized in their own country by the British colonizers and their “minions.”



Figure 26: “Crowded by Other Guests, Such is the Lot of the Burmese”

Source: *Thuriya* (June 1938), 119.

Unlike the modern Burmese girl who was castigated for modernizing excessively of her own volition, such portrayals of the relations of colonial modernity to Burmese men invariably blamed the colonizers and the foreigners, never the Burmese men themselves, for their failings. The modern Burmese girl, by contrast, was morally reprehensible and culpable. This mounting criticism of modern women’s sartorial practices reached its height in 1938 in a collective harassment of Burmese women by young Buddhist monks (*yahanbyo*). In 1938, at the Mahamyamuni pagoda in Mandalay, a group of *yahanbyo* gathered to set on fire bundles of sheer blouses.

³⁹⁸ “မြန်မာပြည်,” *Thuriya*, June 1938, 119.

Similar incidents of blouse-burning led by *yahanbyos* took place in cities near Mandalay, namely Amarapura and Sagaing—cities around which monastic life in Burma clustered. In addition to the blouse-burning, the British administration reported intense, physical and violent incidents of *yanhanbyos* tearing off blouses from the backs of women with hooks and scissors.³⁹⁹

Had the institutional and ideological developments unraveled in the previous chapters and the efforts and actions of Burmese cultural intermediaries to negotiate prevailing gendered relations of power in Burmese society failed to bring about change? This question underlies the final section of this chapter which examines the ongoing debate about the modern and *khitsan* Burmese female in the 1940s. This debate was couched ever-more clearly as a battle over sexism. Already in the late 1920s, the popular press was publishing articles, poems, and cartoons that depicted the wearing of the sheer blouse as a problem between the sexes. In the October 1927 issue of *Bandoola*, for example, the editor wrote a classical Burmese four-stanza verse blaming Burmese women who wore the sheer blouse for instigating men to be excessively lustful.⁴⁰⁰ The sheer blouse was criticized not because it symbolized collaboration with colonialists. It was criticized because it was titillating (to men) and it provoked men to be immoral—which, according to those who opposed the sheer blouse meant that its wearer was immoral. I turn attention to the responses to these criticisms of modern Burmese women that appeared in the popular press in the 1940s. The ways that Burmese men and women publicly countered the continued castigation of the modern girl (*khitsan thami*) suggest that feminist notions of Burmese women and their relationship to knowledge, power and authority had become no less firmly

³⁹⁹ Riot Inquiry Committee, *Final Riot Report*, 186-87; Thar, ဆင်ယင်ထိုးဖွဲ့မှု, 88.

⁴⁰⁰ Bo Min, "ကာလသားမျက်လုံးနှင်အင်္ကျီပါးဘွဲ့လေးချိုး," *Bandoola*, October 1927. The verse held the *khit-san* fashion responsible for inciting *kalatha*, or a sort of leering that is understood in Burmese to represent the most distasteful sensual desire, in men.

established than nationalism in colonial Burma. The fact that Burmese women publicly rejoined the androcentric condemnation of modern Burmese women at all was indicative of this change.

“Let There Be Crest Hair!” Contesting Sexism and Articulating Feminism

In 1947, the magazine *Thwe Thauk* featured a series of editorials and letters on the *khitsan* fashion. The January issue focused specifically on the “crest-hair” and contained a column full of letters from readers, the first of which proclaimed that the crest-hair had no harmful effects on women’s virtue.⁴⁰¹ The author, who signed the letter as “A Modern Person” (*khit hmi thu*), argued that women who adorned the crest-hair spent no more money on hair products than do men on such recreational habits as cigarette smoking. He/she also pointed out that women with the crest-hair were just as dutiful to their husbands as the women without the crest-hair and that the hairstyle did not make them one minute late for work. In another letter signed by a “1946 Woman” states that if men were to give up the Western haircut and revert to the tradition of keeping long hair and wearing it in a *sadohn* (coil), women, too, would stop wearing the crest-hair. The author says: “Perhaps, then, men will realize that though women today wear modern clothes, they, unlike men, have not gotten rid of the traditional *sadohn*.” She adds that women have not frivolously adopted modern clothing but have done so consciously to better suit modern professions.

In the following February issue, letters by men defending the “crest-hair” were published. Maung Ba Maung, for instance, wrote:

If you’re going to criticize women for keeping the crest-hair, you ought also to consider men’s fashion. You say to women, “Don’t follow every single crazy American trend.” Why don’t you please first do

⁴⁰¹ *Thwe Thauk*, January 1947, 6.

something about the men who pay exorbitant prices for second-hand shirts and pants from America and walk about town flaunting their “stylish” outfit???

Maung Ba Maung’s letter was published alongside the letter from a Maung Maung Aye who made a plea for men in Burma to stop mocking women over such petty things as facial powder, the crest-hair, and women’s eyebrows and begin to get along with women for the good of the country.⁴⁰³

Editorials published alongside these letters similarly discussed the current uproar in Burma over the fashion sensibilities of modern Burmese women first as a dispute between men and women, and second as a problem of sexism. A comment by Ngwe U Daung in an article in the July 1947 issue of *Shumawa* titled “Let There Be Crest-Hair!” (“Mauk Tha Mauk”) epitomizes this observation: “While it may be the ‘law of nature’ for men to criticize, to attempt to marginalize, and to oppress women, there are many reasons why men in the East have far outdone the sexist behavior of men in the West.”⁴⁰⁴ Editors highlighted the hypocrisy of men’s censure of the modern Burmese women—after all, men, too, wore shoes and pants and spent no less money than women on imported goods. They emphasized the active role of women in Burma as income earners and highlighted the fact that fashion and patriotism were not mutually exclusive: in their opinion, it was possible to look good and be a patriot at the same time. These editorials, finally, drew attention to the fact that there was nothing new or unusual about controversial fashion trends. What was shocking was Burmese men’s obsessive and extreme castigation of the *khitsan* fashion and women’s insistence on espousing the fashion despite the censure.⁴⁰⁵

In this efflorescent debate about the modern fashion, one woman stood out as the foremost defender of the modern Burmese girl: Gyanaygyaw Ma Ma Lay, an

⁴⁰² *Thwe Thauk*, February 1947, 29.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ Ngwe U Daung, “မော့ကံသာမော့ကံ,” *Shumawa*, July 1947, 11.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*; *Thwe Tauk*, no. 20 (July 1947), 34 & 36.

illustrious woman writer whose biography of U Chit Hlaing—her late husband who was himself a renowned editor, writer, and journalist—has long been recognized as one of Burma’s all-time literary masterpieces.⁴⁰⁶ To this day, she has been hailed as a pioneering writer who “raised the standard of Burmese literature up to par with the international literary scene.”⁴⁰⁷ Ma Ma Lay made her literary debut in 1934 at the age of eighteen when she wrote articles for the *Myanmar Alin* challenging the view put forth by another Burmese male writer, Maung Ba Htin, that young Burmese women’s interest in journalism was merely a “fad.”⁴⁰⁸ She reinforced her reputation as a bold and fiery literary figure through writing about her political views and about her experiences as a member of the nationalist *Dobama* or “We Burmese” association.⁴⁰⁹ Shortly after marrying U Chit Hlaing, then editor of *Myanmar Alin*’s, the couple began publication of *Gyanaygyaw* in 1939, the most popular journal and one of only two widely circulating journals in Burma in the years immediately before the Second World War.⁴¹⁰ U Chit Hlaing passed away in 1945, leaving Ma Ma Lay to take charge of *Gyanaygyaw* as its sole director and manager, in addition to serving as its chief editor, an unconventional undertaking at the time when most, if not all, publishing houses and periodicals were owned and run by men. While her husband’s death at a

⁴⁰⁶ Ma Ma Lay was born Daw Tin Hlaing and grew up in Bogalay, where her father worked as managing director of a bank. She was educated at the *Myomya Amyothami Kyaung* in Yangon. She published her first article in the *Myanma Alin*, at which time she met U Chit Maung, who was the newspaper’s editor. The couple married in 1937, and began publication of *Gyanaygyaw* (The Weekly Thunderer) in 1939. She published in numerous other newspapers and magazines, in particular, *Shumawa* and *Thwe Tauk*. She is the author of the renowned biography on her late husband, *Thulo Lu* (1947), as well as other famous works including *Thuma* (1945), *Thulo Meinma* (1948), and *Shuma Gni* (1948). She was awarded a prestigious Burmese literary prize (*Sabei Bei Hman*) for her *Moun Ywe Mahu* (1955), and her book about the journey of a young Japanese woman to Burma in search of her Burmese-Japanese half-brother, *Twe* (1974) has been translated into both Japanese and English and is currently being made into a film.

⁴⁰⁷ Preface to the compilation of works by Gyanaygyaw U Chit Hlaing (Gyanaygyaw Ma Ma Lay, ဂျာနယ်ကျော်စီစဉ်မှ . (Yangon: Thiha Yadana, 2002)).

⁴⁰⁸ Nyin, ဗမာအမျိုးသမီး, 280.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 281.

⁴¹⁰ Htun, မြန်မာဂျာနယ်သမိုင်း 1919 - 1941, 93-94.

young age of thirty was unfortunate, her command of *Gyanaygyaw* and her subsequent publication of *A Man Like Him* (Tulo Lu) consolidated the public and the literary community's opinion of Ma Ma Lay as a brave, passionate, tenacious, talented, and avant-garde woman of letters.

It seems, moreover, that Ma Ma Lay had a reputation for being fashionable. In one of the rare scholarly works on important women figures in Burmese history, Saw Moun Nyin remarks that Ma Ma Lay was always dressed “elegantly, stylishly, and à la mode.”⁴¹¹ It is hardly surprising then that Ma Ma Lay was at the forefront of the defense of the modern, fashionable women in the popular press. Ma Ma Lay rebutted the allegation that the sheer blouse *prompted* men to be lustful by pointing out that the problem wasn't the fashion but chauvinism; after all, it was the men who lusted, not the women wearing the sheer blouse. In the January 1940 issue of *Gyanaygyaw*, for instance, Ma Ma Lay wrote an article titled “The Deteriorating State of Men's Mentality” (“Yaukkya Dwe Ye Athwe Akhaw Ha Auq Kya Hla Kya Gala”).⁴¹² She begins the article by referring to a letter she received from a young woman working as a clerk at a lottery shop, who tells Ma Ma Lay that she is constantly taunted at her job by male customers who call her “chic-slut” (*kyet thu ywe ma*). The author of the letter asks: “Am I to blame myself for being faint-hearted?”⁴¹³

Ma Ma Lay points out that the young woman's experience is representative of a pervasive, misogynistic problem in Burma that has been perpetuated by men who insist on viewing women who operate in the public realm as objects of sexual desire. She explains that the reason behind such relentless eroticization of women is not to be found in the way young Burmese women carry themselves publicly but in some

⁴¹¹ Nyin, ဗမာအမျိုးသမီး, 280.

⁴¹² Ma Ma Lay, “ယောက်ျားတွေ့ရဲ့အတွေးအခေါ်ဟာအောက်ကျလှချေကလား,” *Gyanaygyaw*, 27 January 1940, 15-18.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

Burmese men's inability to cope with the modern professional women who not only work outside the home but also possess careers in offices:

For some Burmese men, happiness is when their women subsist only on their (men's) earnings. To be a woman, for such men, is to be a *dependant* [my emphasis]. These men cannot stomach women holding office-jobs, like men, that require going to offices and sitting at desks. These men taunt and harass such women as the young clerk at the lottery shop who wrote to me because they cannot bear to acknowledge that women can perform as well as men in professional careers.⁴¹⁴

Ma Ma Lay proceeds to compare the sexist situation she describes in Burma with the working conditions of women in "Western countries":

In the West, all women—young and old, single and married, daughters and mothers—exercise skills they have gained both inside and outside the home to earn their living. And they dress themselves stylishly and according to the fashion appropriate to their respective careers.⁴¹⁵

She concludes that there is only one solution to Burma's trouble with sexism: for women to fight them and to take the lead in guiding the country onto a different path.⁴¹⁶

Even after Burma's independence in October 1947, Ma Ma Lay continued to write about the symbolic attack on the sheer blouse and the larger problem of misogynistic Burmese men. Her article, "Woman" ("Meinma"), in the January 1948 issue of *Nainggan Thit You Soun* is of particular interest.⁴¹⁷ The first half of the article reads like an exposition of the proverbial modern (and capitalist) imaginary—a discursive imaginary that separates social life into "public" and "domestic" (or "private"), engenders this division of spheres by conceptualizing men as the "breadwinners" and women as the "housewives" and mothers, and associates each gender with the "public" and "domestic" spheres respectively. The nationalist

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹⁷ Lay, "မိန်းမ," *Nainggan Thit You Soun*, January 1948, 39-40.

framework, further building on the modern, “separate-sphere” imaginary, assumes that control over society begins with control over the family and the household, and thus holds women responsible for the nation’s integrity and future prosperity.⁴¹⁸ Ma Ma Lay at first appears to agree with this modern and nationalist imaginary. She begins the article by asserting that women are the foundation of the domestic realm—a statement she follows by pointing out that while men are away from home governing the world and engaging in large businesses, national and international politics, women maintain and ensure the health, order and safety of their homes.⁴¹⁹

The article’s trajectory then takes a turn. She claims: “But men will not admit that they rely on women to uphold them, to nourish and to shelter them—that men and women are mutually dependent.”⁴²⁰ “In fact,” Ma Ma Lay furthermore argues, “men think they can do as they like to women and to keep women in whatever condition they please.”⁴²¹ As in her article examined above, Ma Ma Lay blames Burmese men for refusing to recognize women as their equal and for scornfully viewing women who strive to support Burmese men not only by excelling in the domestic realm but also in the public realm. In order for Burma to move forward, she proclaims, men must recognize that women’s progress is as crucial as men’s progress. She concludes the article by returning to the nationalist imaginary with which she began: “Of the several important national concerns in Burma today, the most important is the group that

⁴¹⁸ See Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Joan B. Landes, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” in *Feminism, the Public and the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Suzanne Brenner, “On the Public Intimacy of the New Order: Images of Women in the Popular Indonesian Print Media,” *Indonesia* 67 (1999); Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Maila Stivens, “Gender and Modernity in Malaysia,” in *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, ed. Alberto Gomes (Bundoora, Australia: La Trobe University Press, 1994); Atkinson and Errington, *Power and Difference* .

⁴¹⁹ Lay, “မိန်းမ,” 39.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

holds the key to the country's welfare: women... the entire country depends on the stable, respectful, and harmonious [domestic] relationship between the sexes."⁴²²

These literary and journalistic efforts by Ma Ma Lay to counter the misogynistic social and cultural currents in 1930s and 1940s Burma further complicates an understanding of why the modern Burmese female was relentlessly and consistently caricatured and castigated. From Ma Ma Lay's perspective, the modern Burmese female was not exceptionally offensive to the elders or to their "traditional" sensibilities; she was, likewise, neither especially provocative nor unpatriotic. At the same time, however, the harassment of the modern Burmese female wasn't simply another example of Burmese men's chauvinistic attitude; it represented a sexist response to what was perceived to be women's transgressions of gender norms and practices, particularly as they related to questions of their role in the public affairs of Burmese society. Through her strategy of directly intertwining national welfare and progress with women's welfare and progress, then, Ma Ma Lay propagated and promoted anti-sexist discourse. Critics of the modern female, on the one hand, sought to elide the problem of sexism by packaging their misogynistic behaviors in nationalist wrapping; Ma Ma Lay, on the other, addressed Burmese men's unwillingness to value "domestic" work and to accept women "crossing" into male-dominated professions through the trope of nationalism.

The Modern Girl, the Patriot and the Burmese Nation

I proposed in the beginning of the previous chapter that in misogynistic representations of modern Burmese women that emerged in the 1930s, the represented women functioned as objects of reflection for male protagonists who become patriots through viewing women as object lessons on the folly of desire for the colonial, the

⁴²² Ibid., 40.

foreign, the Western and the modern. The Burmese-but-Westernized modern female who could not help but succumb to foreign influences served not only to edify singular notions of nationalists, however. Made to embody the polluting agent of clear boundaries while her oppressed but defiant male counterpart represented the impending nationalist hero who would restore the blurred contours of the “Burmese” national identity, she served to undermine the idea that meanings of what it meant to be “Burmese” could and did in fact exist in a spectrum. Those who attacked the modern and Westernized women’s fashion thus shared much in common with those who sought to illustrate to the Burmese public the pernicious effects of colonial rule on the Burmese *amyo* (i.e. her race, ancestors and kin, religion and culture) through Burmese women’s relations to foreign men. Ethnicized and misogynistic representational practices in colonial Burma likewise fashioned and gendered conceptualizations of the Burmese national identity.

Unlike in the 1920s and the early 1930s, however, women began to respond to such criticisms in the popular press towards the late 1930s. The perceptions and discussions of the impact of colonial modernity on gender relations by women in Burma interrupted and countered the condemnatory discourse of the modern and Westernized Burmese female. They revealed that such representations of Burmese women appeared because women in Burma took an increasingly active role in government administration, anti-colonial protests and nationalist organizations, all of which had largely been the sole purview of men. In modern colonial Burma, then, the figure of the modern Burmese female distinctively embodied social mobility. The particular contestation over the *khitsan* fashion stemmed from changes in status symbols that were closely interconnected with the shifting status quo of Burma’s gender hierarchy and social mobility. The participants of the debate over the sheer blouse negotiated such questions as who has the authority and the privilege to define

the rights and responsibilities of a man and a woman, and on what basis? Who gets to determine the moral or the patriotic amount and type of consumption? Should young Burmese women be able to exclude (Burmese) men from decision making processes?

Critics targeted young Burmese women in their “nationalist” campaigns precisely because the modern Burmese female not only embodied an object of reflection but threatened to compete against her male counterpart as aspiring and leading decision-makers in modern Burmese society. This is not to suggest that the critics of the fashionable Burmese-but-Westernized modern female were not actually mobilized by nationalism, anti-foreign sentiments or the economic depression of the 1930s. It is rather to draw attention to the central and persistent concerns with changing gender relations that animated popular discourses in colonial Burma and yet have eluded the attention of historians who have focused narrowly on the ethno-nationalist rhetoric of the period. The attack on actual Burmese women by scissor-wielding monks in particular reminds us that the castigation of the sheer blouse wasn’t solely or even essentially about imagining the nation but about a collective body of women who participated actively in controversial debates and challenged gender norms in a highly public fashion.

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE: GENDER, HISTORY, AND MODERNITY

How do we account for the explosive appearance of discourses about “Burmese women” in colonial Burma during Burma’s transition from a pre-modern entity to a modern nation-state? How should we interpret the role that powerfully gendered discourses and representations of emerging social inequalities played in colonial Burma’s political, cultural and socio-economic landscape? These broad questions have provided the framework for this dissertation, the first scholarly attempt to integrate women and gender into the history of Burmese colonial modernity.

That historians have accorded little importance to issues of women and gender says more about the limitations of methodological and theoretical approaches that have shaped existing academic studies of colonial Burma than it does about their salience during period in question. One crucial limitation of previous studies is their reliance on English-language colonial-era documents, both colonial state materials and missionary records, the majority of which were written in English and are readily available in systematically organized public archives and libraries in London.⁴²³ My study, by contrast, has incorporated multiple contemporaneous Burmese-language sources, many of which have never been integrated into existed colonial histories of Burma. One reason why Burma scholars have relied on British colonial sources is because conducting research in Burma, where most holdings of Burmese language as well as popular press material are located, poses taxing linguistic and logistic challenges. Applicants who apply for access to historical archives invariably encounter seemingly endless red tape and bureaucratic hurdles; the government rarely grants

⁴²³ For information on specific archives, refer to my discussion of sources in the introductory chapter.

permission and in many cases the applicant will receive no reply at all. A successful applicant, upon finally arriving at the National Archive or Yangon University's Central Library, finds that artifacts of popular culture such as newspapers, magazines, cartoons and advertisements from the colonial period have not been microfilmed or preserved under appropriate conditions such as air-conditioning. Material that has been acquired and catalogued may be missing, irretrievably damaged, or fast decaying. Navigating through the archives in Burma, in other words, forces one to work with a diverse but patchy assortment of pieces and fragments of history, rather than with systematically organized archival collections. A great number of sources used in this dissertation, moreover, had to be found outside traditional archival locations, for instance, from booksellers and private collections.

In addition to the poor conditions of and difficult access to the archives that have made scholars averse to conducting research in Burma, Burma's repressive and isolationist political regime has made it nearly impossible to conduct research in Burma.⁴²⁴ As a consequence, most scholars of Burma have placed undue emphasis on English language, missionary, and British official documentation located in archives outside Burma. Not surprisingly, their histories reflect what preoccupied the authors of their source material: namely, insurrection, religious reformations, and anti-colonial resistance. The majority of historical writings on Burma to date focus on anti-colonial and nationalist movements engaged in by peasants, politicized monks, students, and elite politicians who are predominantly male. Many of these scholars, like former colonial administrators, seek causal explanations for the development of subversive movements in Burma and in so doing, attribute an unwarranted degree of significance

⁴²⁴ The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which assumed power after staging a military coup in March 1962, and the current military regime, the State Peace and Development Council, have both closely monitored the activities of local and foreign researchers and scholars, especially those who work on post-WWII Burma.

to rifts and conflicts that colonial rule produced between the Christian or secular modern colonizer (and his Indian, Muslim or Hindu middlemen) and the Buddhist or superstitious traditional colonized. They have thus promoted a selective account of the colonial period to which I have referred as “ethno-nationalist.”

I reconsider colonial rule in Burma by integrating a wide range of previously overlooked sources—official and popular, Burmese and English, colonial and nationalist, Christian missionary and Buddhist—all of which centrally pivot on the relationship between gender and modernity. This is not a matter of simply providing an alternative perspective. History, like music, can be “played” and listened to in a range of pitches or notes, but when these different notes are played together as a chord, they produce quite a different sound. My strategy of investigating the theme of gender and modernity, a phenomenon hitherto undocumented despite its prevalence in the period sources, and of utilizing source material similarly ignored by scholars, fundamentally revises the dominant ethno-nationalist paradigm of colonial and postcolonial studies of Burma. It critiques the way knowledge about Burma and Southeast Asia has been produced, and disrupts essentialized and naturalized conceptions of the region.

As a result, the present study has broadened the understanding of Burmese colonial modernity beyond the level of politics and illuminated new social hierarchies, economic inequalities, and cultural forms and practices that became focal points of intense public discussions during the 1920s to the 1940s. It has identified specific constellations of factors that prompted changes in relations between the sexes: urbanization, industrialization, formations of new cultural institutions and systems of education; the displacement of the Konbaung polity by a centralized colonial administration that enabled those previously excluded to gain access to power; and the increase in racially mixed unions. Structures of the economy and demographic factors

intersected with political, religious and socio-economic ideas and interests related to “Burmese women’s status”—often inseparable—that mobilized women and men. As shown in chapter three and four, the colonialists who provided the institutional framework for the expansion of female education intended education as a means of domesticating, not empowering, women in Burma according to Christian, Eurocentric, bourgeois ideals of femininity. By contrast, nationalists regarded female education, literacy, and employment as political strategies for advancing national self-determination. The demand by European feminists for Burmese women’s right to education was based on local and specific though putatively universal ascriptions of human values and women’s rights. Burmese literati and intellectuals argued for women’s empowerment not only for the purposes of increasing female readership but also in the name of an imagined Buddhist ethic. Colonizing and colonized women and men, in unequal relations of power and with intersecting but irreducibly plural interests, motivations, and positions, thus co-authored powerfully gendered discourses of tradition and modernity, and colonialism and nationalism.

These movements that specifically targeted Burmese women, despite their different ideological trajectories, paralleled far-reaching socio-economic developments that held mixed implications for women in colonial Burma. They offered women ways to challenge the restrictions historically placed on their activities and to make gender specific demands. They resulted in notable changes in gendered conceptualizations of education, knowledge and authority, which benefited in particular the middle to upper class, urban women who were well-situated to capitalize on the opportunities created by these changes and by the growth of modern cultural institutions. Yet they also raised questions about the unintended repercussions of mobilizing women, the gendered effects of colonial rule on social control, and how they might be limited. The representations of women examined in this study such as

the traditionally progressive Burmese woman, the enviable yet pitiful and disdained Bo-gadaw (the white man's mistress) and the Burmese-but-Westernized fashionable female epitomize the irreducible multiplicity of meanings that colonial modernity had for people in Burma. "Burmese women," both as a heuristic category and as actual historical agents, in other words, articulated and gave shape to emergent and often ambivalent transnational ideas of social reform, race, nation-state, and consumerism.

My analysis of the conditions in which "Burmese women" became a privileged idiom for discussing colonialism, modernization and nationalism thus prompts us to place the differential positioning of women within colonial modernity at the foreground of colonial studies. In so doing, it forces us to reckon squarely with the intricacies and nuances of social structures and relations on which colonialism was predicated: the movement of people, ideas, and goods across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries in Burma's plural society was more fluid than Furnivallian scholars have suggested. While the large immigration of predominantly male British colonizers and their "middlemen" from British India displaced some members of the indigenous community from key socio-economic niches, it also fostered inter-ethnic intimate relations that gave Burmese women (and their families) bargaining power. As suggested by the lively discussions about the "modern" or "Western" education, employment, political organization, liaisons, and fashion of "Burmese" women that I have investigated, more mixture and greater mobility existed in Burma's plural, colonial society. A gendered examination of colonial Burma thus allows a micro-level analysis of social relations that illuminates how men and women interpenetrated and intermingled within ethnic, cultural, political and socio-economic boundaries.

These are specificities and variables too important for us to omit from reformulations of the colonial past. They enable us to explore how we might complicate teleological narratives of the transition from pre-modern to modern that

deterministically see hegemonic “Western” ideologies, i.e., rationality, secularism, capitalism, and social equality and justice, take root in the colony despite resistance by the indigenous population. My historical case study of what has long been understood as a cornerstone of Southeast Asian history and identity—egalitarian gender relations and the high status of women—has likewise problematized revisionist narratives of an “authentic” Southeast Asia that freely appropriates from Western modernity while resisting any transformations to the core of the regional culture. It suggests that historical context is not, as Tani Barlow argues in her call for critical historiography of colonialism and modernity in Asia, a matter of “positively defined, elemental, or discrete units—nation states, stages of development, or civilizations.”⁴²⁵ It proposes that local realities may best be illuminated if colonial contact is understood as a meeting of multifaceted cultural paradigms whose influences wax and wane as economic and political circumstances change.

A critical history of colonial modernity in Burma, however, still needs to incorporate a careful documentation of gender-specific relations of power in Burma on the eve of colonialism. As I have indicated throughout this study, the relative paucity of studies on gender and “tradition” in pre-colonial Burma seriously undermines any attempt to evaluate the historical significance of colonial modernity. In order to better assess the impact of colonialism on longstanding social relations, future research must interrogate what ideas, images, practices, and institutions informed notions of women and men, and of femininity and masculinity, in pre-colonial Burma through a range of historical sources concerning women’s social history. Such sources might include pre-colonial Burmese legal texts and court records dealing with marriage, adultery, and divorce; lithic inscriptions and records of donations to the Buddhist monastic

⁴²⁵ Tani Barlow, “Introduction: On ‘Colonial Modernity,’” in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, Tani Barlow, ed., Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, 6.

community; Pali canonical and para-canonical texts, jataka tales, vernacular folk tales, popular dramas, and various gnomic texts.

A reconstruction of pre-colonial Burmese ideas of gender will provide a more solid foundation not only for colonial studies but also for comparative studies of the emergence of representations of specifically “modern” women in Asia in the early to mid-twentieth century. Why did “the modern girl” appear around the world at roughly the same time? While my dissertation examined the ways that the “modern girl” acquired specific meanings in a particular historical place and moment—i.e. 1930s colonial Burma—future research might focus on cosmopolitan and transnational flows of ideas, commodities, technologies, institutions and images that contributed to production and dissemination of modern ideas of gender and sexuality across national and regional boundaries.

The present study points to the need for yet another kind of scholarly intervention. Although this dissertation has looked carefully at the construction of gendered colonial discourses and provided possible ways of deconstructing gender-specific cultural stereotypes that have constituted knowledge, it has admittedly failed to look closely enough at the positions women themselves took in relation to such discourses. Due to the scarcity of historical sources authored by women until the mid to late 1930s, I have turned to various public actions by women that offer insight into the ways that women viewed or responded to changes around them. I have suggested that colonial modernity was predicated on specific representations of women and on complex transformations of women's social, educational and sexual practices. Yet only through analyses of the ways that women themselves perceived and evaluated the ideas, practices, and institutions that dominated the political, cultural, and socio-economic landscape will we be able to further and more sufficiently understand the

necessary relationship between gender, colonial modernity, and history in Burma, Southeast Asia and beyond.

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