

GENDER, HISTORY AND MODERNITY: REPRESENTING WOMEN IN
TWENTIETH CENTURY COLONIAL BURMA

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This dissertation is the first social history of twentieth century colonial Burma to analyze the central role gender played in discourses of colonialism, modernity, and nationalism. It revises the dominant historiography on colonial Burma that reifies and overly emphasizes the significance of ethnicity and is principally concerned with the identification of the origins of the Burmese nationalist movement. This dissertation redresses in particular the occlusion of women and draws attention to the multiple connections between gender and both sides of the colonial struggle, colonial and anti-colonial. Through an interwoven analysis of English and Burmese sources ranging from census reports and confidential memos to missionary pamphlets, fashion advertising, and serialized fiction, my research investigates the emergence of colonial discourses concerning Burmese women and the explosion of censorious and misogynistic representations of “the modern girl” during a formative period that defined Burma’s transition from a pre-modern polity to a modern nation-state. What interests motivated these discourses and representations? Why were there no parallel discourses concerning men or masculinity? I argue that modern colonial rule produced a set of conditions in which colonizing and colonized women and men in unequal relations of power co-authored essentially gendered discourses and binary representations of “East” and “West,” “tradition” and “modernity,” “Buddhist” and

“secular,” and “colony” and “nation.” The socio-historical conditions I attend to include: the large influx of single male immigrants from England and British India; the establishment of secular government-funded educational institution; the formation of a new textual culture which was founded on popular print and visual media; and the centrality of “the status of women” to the colonial civilizing mission and the modernization projects of the indigenous elite. My study examines the complex and sometimes contradictory effects these conditions had on the status of women in colonial Burma and on the emergence of a popular discourse on “Burmese women” that became a privileged idiom for articulating, interpreting, and discussing new and old social inequities.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chie Ikeya majored in Asian Studies at Cornell University, where she received her B.A. in 1999. She began her graduate studies at Cornell University immediately after completing her undergraduate degree and earned a Ph.D. in History in 2006. She currently holds a Rockefeller Postdoctoral Fellowship with the Project for Critical Asian Studies at the Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Predicament of the Burmese-but-Westernized Miscegenating Female

Beginning in mid-1930s, urban colonial Burma—made a province of British India in 1885¹—witnessed an explosion of censorious and often misogynistic representations of Burmese women in the media. These representations, in the form of editorials, commentaries and cartoons that ranged from sarcastic to derogatory, accused the women of transgressing essential Burmese cultural boundaries, sacrificing their freedom safeguarded by “traditional” Burmese society to cavort and mingle with colonizers, and fueling the colonial oppression of Burma. The representations displayed an intense contempt towards “modern-day” women and were concerned with two distinct but interrelated practices, both of which represented an ethnic and cultural admixture: first, Burmese women’s intimate relations with “foreign”—i.e., non-Buddhist, non-Burmese—men; second, Burmese women’s appropriation of modern or what the critics labeled “Westernized” fashion. For instance, one of the most prolific writer-journalists in Burmese history and certainly the most eminent woman writer Daw Amar claimed in an article published in 1936 in a leading newspaper *Myanmar Alin* that modern Burmese girls’ blind admiration for “Western” fashion and lifestyle rendered them incapable of engaging with more serious and important questions of Burmese national independence.² An article in the 27 November 1938 issue of *Seq-Than Journal*, published under the heading, “Burmese

¹ Although Lower Burma was annexed by the British in 1852, the geo-body I refer to as “colonial Burma” came into being in 1885 when the British annexed Upper Burma.

² Amar, “ဝိပဿနာ,” *Myanmar Alin New Year's Special Edition*, April 1936, 9.

women who took Indians,” blamed Burmese wives of Indian Muslims for ruining Burma’s “race and religion”³:

You Burmese women who fail to safeguard your own race, after you have married an Indian [,] your daughter whom you have begotten by such a tie takes an Indian as her husband. As for your son, he becomes a half-caste and tries to get a pure Burmese woman. Not only you but your future generation also is those who are responsible for the ruination of the race.⁴

The author of *Kabya Pyatthana* (The Half-Caste Problem), published the following year, encapsulates the general anxiety over mixed unions: a Burmese woman’s degenerative intercourse with an Indian—who was bound to perpetuate the oppressive treatment of women customary in Hindu and Muslim societies—threatened a spiraling destruction of Burmese society.⁵

Visual representations made such critical evaluations of contemporary Burmese women more vivid. Figure 1 shows a caricature of a modern Burmese girl (*thet khit thami*)⁶ printed in the March 1938 issue of *Thuriya*, another leading newspaper.⁷ The modern girl sports not only chic high-heels but a fashionable jacket-style top; there is an obviously wealthy look about her with her wristwatch, purse, pet dog, and, to top it off, a cigarette between her lips. She stands in sharp contrast to an

³ *Seq-than Journal* (27 November 1938) in "Burma Press Abstract" 5 December 1940, IOR L/R/5/207.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pu Gale, ကြေးမြင်သာနိုး (Yangon: Kyi Pwa Yei, 1939), 8.

⁶ *Thet khit* is translated as the “age of progress,” and in the adjective form means “advanced” or “progressive.”

⁷ *Thuriya* (*The Sun*) was founded in 1911 and run by a limited liability company managed by U Ba Gale, Maung Hla Pe, and Maung Ba Bei, a YMBA member. They initially rented the Ayeyawaddy printing press in order to publish the newspaper, and they were able to purchase their own printing press only when a wealthy woman, Ma Ma Tin, was persuaded to invest shares in the newspaper (Naing Naing Maw, "The Role of Myanmar Women in the Nationalist Movement, 1906 - 1942" (M. A., Yangon University, 1999), 14-15). By the late 1930s, however, *Thuriya*’s largest share-holder was U Saw, a prominent politician who later became Burma’s Premier and the alleged mastermind behind the assassination of Burma’s nationalist/independence hero, Aung San ("Confidential Memo: Burmese Daily Newspapers" 1946, IOR L/I/1/622).

older woman, dressed in a simple blouse and wearing a pair of slippers, who stares in shock at the young woman and exclaims “Oh my!” (“ဟိုဟိ”).⁸

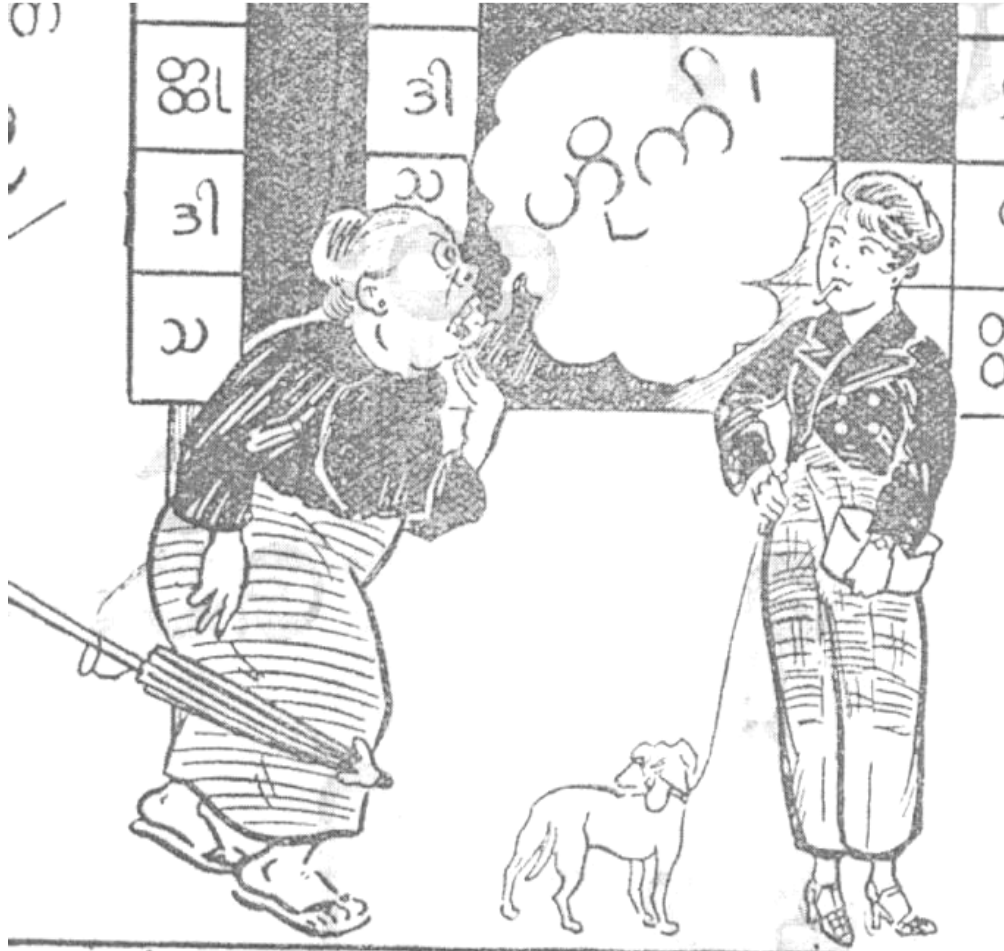


Figure 1: The Modern Girl (Thet Khit Thami)

Source: *Thuriya* (March 1938), 123.

The intense reaction of the older woman, the embodiment of Burmese tradition, evokes the modern girl's flagrant violation of cultural norms. The caption of the cartoon in Figure 2, which depicts two mixed couples, one Burmese-Chinese and the other Burmese-Indian, reads: “Many of our women these days are attaching foreign names to their own [Burmese] names.”⁹

⁸ *Thuriya*, March 1938, 123.

⁹ *Myanmar Alin*, July 1938 (cartoonist and page unavailable).



Figure 2: Burmese-Chinese & Burmese Indian Couples

Source: *Myanmar Alin* (July 1938).

The twofold public criticisms of Burmese women in the popular press gained momentum in the late 1930s. Numerous pundits in Burma including elites, intellectuals, monks, politicians, students, writers, and journalists described the phenomenon of miscegenating and Burmese-but-Westernized modern women as the downside of processes of “modernization” (*toe tet yei* or *kyi pwa yei*), the value of which they debated. While they discussed the modernization of women as a necessary step in Burma’s national independence and questioned both the potential and the danger of the phenomenon, by the end of the 1930s, the debate highlighted the ways that modernization of Burmese women compromised the role of women within the family, conjugal relations and Buddhist society. Curiously, there were no signs in the popular press of concerns over the “Westernized” behaviors of Burmese men or their relationships to “foreign” women or men. No counterpart to the Westernized or the modern Burmese woman appeared.

These representations of the transformative effects of modern colonial rule on Burmese women raise questions concerning the nature of colonialism and modernization in Burma and the process whereby the category of “Burmese women” acquired specific meanings at this particular historical moment. Why did castigations of Burmese women appear in profusion in the 1930s? Under what circumstances, if any, were Burmese women encouraged to “modernize” and in what ways? Or was modernization discussed as an inherent transgression for Burmese women, and what about for Burmese men? Why were only *women*, not men, represented as modern, Westernized, and miscegenating? What interests fueled negative and misogynistic discourses about Burmese women? How might a focused examination of one of the most prevalent subjects of debate in urban colonial Burma illuminate the nature and the impact of colonial rule and the developments it engendered?

Scholarly Interventions: Connecting Gender, Colonialism and Nationalism

These questions lead me, first and foremost, to document and describe a conspicuous phenomenon which occurred in one of the most seminal periods in Burmese history but has eluded scholarly inquiry. Though more scholarship in English has been written about the first few decades of the twentieth century than about any other period in Burmese history, historians have disregarded the accounts of the period by and about women altogether. What little exists by way of studies that examine the historical pasts of women in Burma amounts to a cursory survey of the involvement of Burmese women in nationalist movements written to supplement the official nationalist Burmese history, effectively the only type of historiography that the Burmese government espouses or tolerates. While the current Burmese literature on the period—written predominantly by male, educated, Burman political elites who are either high-ranking administrators or politicians—takes into account the participation

of Burmese women in nationalist movements, it does so to glorify the national anti-colonial struggle led by the *Thakins*¹⁰ (who in turn led the Burma Independence Army, the precursor of Burma's current military regime).¹¹ It offers little, if any, scholarly insight into how women themselves experienced, perceived and articulated the effects of colonialism, modernization and nationalism.

The dissertation redresses the occlusion of women that existing scholarship on colonial Burma has perpetuated. It critically examines period sources in both English and Burmese, official bureaucratic records and popular press material alike, that include intelligence reports, confidential letters, census records, missionary pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, novels, advertisements, cinema leaflets and cartoons. It draws on a wide selection of documentation and artifacts from the 1920s to the 1940s in order to locate the proliferation of the Burmese-but-Westernized miscegenating women in the popular press within a larger historical context.¹²

¹⁰ The title *Thakin* (Lord or Master) was used to assert the leaders' self-respect and dignity vis-à-vis their colonial "masters." The young university students, who comprised the founding members of the *Thakin* movement, all studied socialist literature, the works of Marx and others, and developed an ideology that was a mixture of Marxism and nationalism. All of the *Thakins* became leaders of the anti-colonial struggle and then leading political figures in independent Burma.

¹¹ See Burma Socialist Program Party (Central Committee Headquarters), မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအမျိုးသမီးများ၏ နိုင်ငံရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု (Yangon: Sabei Beiman, 1975); Aye Aye Mu, "[မြန်မာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးကြိုးပမ်းမှု တွင်ပါဝင်သော အမျိုးသမီးများ၏ တက္ကသိုလ် (1919 - 1948)]" (MA thesis, Yangon University, 1981); Maw, "The Role of Myanmar Women in the Nationalist Movement, 1906 - 1942"; Swe Swe Aung, "Women's Role in the National Development of Myanmar" (MA thesis, Yangon University, 2000).

¹² This dissertation does not, however, examine the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942-45). A comprehensive study of the occupation period is beyond the scope of the dissertation and I believe that the period needs to be examined on its own terms. Scholars disagree on the place of the occupation in Burmese history and the role it played in the post-war events in Burma: some argue that the occupation was crucial to the decolonization of Burma in 1948, while others claim that seeds of nationalist organizations and movements had been sown well before the war. Refer to the following for studies of Burma and of Southeast Asia during the Second World War: Harry Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945* (The Hague: Institute of Pacific Relations New York, 1958); Josef Silverstein, *Southeast Asia in World War II: Four Essays* (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies Yale University, 1966); Alfred W. McCoy, *Southeast Asia under Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1985); Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

While my documentary and descriptive aim may be basic, its results revise the dominant historiography on colonial Burma by postcolonial historians whose principal concern has been to identify the origins of the Burmese nationalist movement. These historians have tended to reduce analyses of the period to a stimulus response narrative of an oppressive and emasculating modern colonial rule that prompted resistance and hostile reactions from the colonized indigenous men. My synthesis of English and Burmese, and official and popular discourses expands the horizon of current scholarship on Burma that has largely relied on British colonial records and English sources. As a result of which scholars have not only neglected Burmese sources and archives, but also severely limited ways of evaluating and situating the archives upon which their studies are founded. My use of British administrative records will show that they can provide a large and valuable body of information through which a historical past can be revisited, and that they can be read for both what they say and do not say. Yet there is also a great deal that such material cannot tell us about colonial Burma and here Burmese language material and artifacts of popular culture such as newspapers, magazines, cartoons and advertisements, albeit limited and fragmentary, offer ways to find missing pieces and to think of new and different ways to read and utilize colonial, official and nationalist documents (and vice versa). These sources in fact are capable of providing more than missing pieces and, the following chapters will illustrate, can tell an altogether different story.

My concern with fleshing out the particularities of the process through which gender-specific identities were ascribed, challenged or appropriated by men and women in Burma furthermore draws attention to the multiple connections between gender and colonialism. It shows that Burma's encounter with modern colonial rule produced a context in which "Burmese women" became a privileged idiom through which colonialism, modernization and nationalism were interpreted and debated;

varied and often contradictory representations of “Burmese women”—as “traditional” and “modern,” pious and irreverent, and dutiful mothers and promiscuous young ladies—served as proxies for new relations of power and social inequalities. The context to which I refer can be summarized as follows: the British annexation of Burma prompted a large influx of single men from England and British India that challenged the status quo of sexual relations in Burma; the establishment of secular government-funded educational institutions and the formation of such new cultural media as newspapers, magazines, cartoons and films led to the unprecedented mass participation of women in textual and literary cultures; the centrality of “the conditions of women” to the colonial civilizing mission and indigenous elite projects of modernization also promoted experimentations with gender norms and practices. As the following chapters will show, these developments provided occasions and incentives for penetrating and critiquing ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries, particularly for women in urban Burma. I argue that colonizing and colonized women and men in unequal relations of power co-authored essentially and powerfully gendered discourses of colonialism, modernization and nationalism, and that these gendered discourses, in turn, produced the vocabulary for speaking about “Burmese women” and along with it gender-specific cultural stereotypes that have long defined and constituted academic and popular knowledge about Burma. In addressing this issue, I trace the complex genealogy of a persistent myth that asserts an unchanging gender equality of Burmese society and “traditional” independence of Burmese women.¹³

The genealogical investigation into the “traditional” autonomy and independence of women in Burma and more broadly in Southeast Asia is of

¹³ For an example of the stereotype of the traditional high status of women in Burma, see Khin Myo Chit, *Colorful Burma: A Collection of Stories and Essays* (Rangoon: K.M.C.T. Sazin, 1976).

considerable scholarly import, first, because the notion of the “traditional” has been foundational to paradigmatic understandings of Southeast Asia as a distinct geopolitical and cultural entity separate from the rest of Asia—i.e. South and East Asia—yet part of the greater East. Counterposed against images of women in South and East Asia that have been inextricably intertwined with and determined by norms and practices such as *sati*, *purdah*, polygyny, concubinage and foot-binding, claims about the freedom and independence of women in Southeast Asia have served to define the cultural and historical specificity of the Southeast Asian region and to contest the superiority of South Asian, East Asian and Western cultures. We are reminded of Michael Adas’ *Machines as the Measure of Men*, which examines how Europeans and Americans came to view scientific and technological accomplishments as distinctive measures of European superiority and as the most meaningful means to gauge the abilities of non-Western peoples: a model in which Southeast Asians are disregarded, devalued, and placed below “Indian” and “Chinese” people who have historically demonstrated an aptitude in science and technology through their inventions.¹⁴ The “traditional” gender equality and freedom of women in Southeast Asia has figured prominently in the revisionist attempt by scholars to (re)center a marginalized Southeast Asia.¹⁵

A critical examination of the “tradition” of autonomous women is made even more important by the fact that it continues to significantly determine the history and identity of the region. Academic scholarship and popular knowledge about Burma and more broadly Southeast Asia have been slow to address a problem that resulted from

¹⁴ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ This effort has more or less taken three main directions, outlined by Craig Reynolds as the following: tracing origins, identifying agency, and documenting difference. See Craig J. Reynolds, “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995); J. D. Legge, “The Writing of Southeast Asian History,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.

the revisionist effort—much needed at the time—to deconstruct knowledge about the region that colonialism produced. Scholars of Southeast Asia today generally concur that claims about the high status of women in Southeast Asia are oversimplified and highly problematic.¹⁶ As Shelly Errington points out: “[T]o pull out of context their economic and instrumental power and to designate it as the most important factor in high prestige is to create an optical illusion based on the importation of Eurocentric ideas about the relations of power and prestige.”¹⁷ Yet, postcolonial scholars of Burma by and large have perpetuated the discourse of gender equality which has served as a deterrent to any attempt to complicate conceptualizations of gender relations and hierarchies in historical Burma.¹⁸ They have failed to pursue such imperative questions as: given the scarcity of studies that interrogate what ideas, norms and practices informed gender relations in the region prior to colonialism, on what basis do we continue to make claims about the high status of women in Burma and in Southeast Asia? On what basis do we continue to delineate distinct perimeters between women, culture and “tradition” in Southeast Asia and in other parts of Asia and the rest of the world? The recuperative historical project that sought to recover a Southeast Asian history, modernity and culture unshrouded by colonial or Orientalist discourse has itself constructed naturalized and essentialized understanding of Southeast Asia and its knowledge field.

¹⁶ Recent scholarship points out that the high status, often documented as a resilient, underlying social structure or culture of Southeast Asia, in fact derived from early colonialists’ observation that women in Southeast Asia have been active agents in the economic sphere by tradition. This colonial perspective disregarded the fact that despite the high status, freedom, and independence of Burmese women, male dominance and leadership was, at least ritualistically or ceremonially, accepted in Burmese culture. See O. W. Wolters’ critical discussion of the concept of Southeast Asian women’s “relative autonomy” in O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1999), 170.

¹⁷ Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington, *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 7.

¹⁸ Tinzar Lwyn’s study of the relationship between modern understandings of women’s status in Burmese society and colonial and missionary discourse on women in Burma provides the only exception to this view Tinzar Lwyn, “Stories of Gender and Ethnicity,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 1 & 2 (1994).

I investigate the process whereby the “traditional” autonomy of Burmese women was invented in opposition to the likewise “traditional” subordinate status of women in South and East Asia and in contestation of the superiority of Western or European culture and society. At the same time, I document the ways that Burmese women took opportunities created by Burma’s colonial encounter to co-opt, challenge and refashion gendered notions of power, prestige and authority that circumscribed their role as political, spiritual, ceremonial and cultural authors, leaders, disseminators and critics. This twin strategy breaks with the practice of enshrining persistent and monolithic cultural stereotypes as essential components of Burmese and more broadly Southeast Asian history and provides representations of a select group of women in Burma firmly located within, not isolated from, specific and complex historical contexts.

Ethno-Nationalist Histories: The Colonial Emasculation of Burmese men

Historians have marked the period under examination as a turning point in Burmese history that signaled Burma’s transition from a “pre-modern” polity to a “modern” nation, witnessed high colonialism and the end of colonialism, and paved the way for nationalism and transformed both Burmese and European attitudes and capabilities within the region.¹⁹ They have turned their attention to numerous indicators of Burma’s modernization. The British colonial state administered the

¹⁹ For major works in English on Burma from the turn-of-the-century to the even of national independence, see David Joel Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), especially 173 - 174, 203 - 218, 282 - 291; J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956) Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987); and Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974). Although Thant-Myint U argues that the modern concept of Burmese identity, society and state—originated in political and social transformations in nineteenth-century Burma, he nevertheless locates the manifestation of modern Burma in the early twentieth-century (Thant Myint U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

country from Rangoon, an urban and industrialized center extending its control to the borders of the country while at the same time producing the “modern” borders of the country.²⁰ Burmese adopted Western fashions and enrolled by the thousands in Anglo-vernacular schools that offered secondary education in English. The educated elites experimented with new forms of collective political, social, and cultural organization through literature, the popular press and the cinema.²¹ Buddhist monks involved themselves in political activity.²² Student-led avant-garde groups promoted a discourse of secular progress and Marxist and nationalist revolution. The central role that village organizations played in the Saya San rebellion of 1930-32, the largest and the most famous peasant uprising in Burmese history, which has been characterized

²⁰ See Richard A. O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1983), and Sarah Heminway Maxim, "The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon" (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1992).

²¹ Literary and intellectual historians of Burma have attributed the creation of modern Burmese literature to a literary movement called *khit-san* (ခေတ်စမ်း), meaning “experiment with the new age.” The architects of the movement consisted of the first students of Rangoon University to graduate with degrees in Burmese literature, whose collective and foundational work was published as the *Khit-san Ponbyin*, a collection of short stories published in two volumes (I in 1934, II in 1938), and the *Khit-san Kabya*, a collection of poems published in 1934. Three novel, experimental techniques, in particular, characterize the *khitsan* movement: its colloquial, short, and easily comprehensible sentences free from Pali words and idioms, the description of contemporary life, and its introduction of feminine manners of speech and perspectives. The mentor of these pioneering *khitsan* writers, U Pe Maung Tin, explains in his foreword to the *Khitsan Ponbyin*, that he has chosen the phrase *khitsan* to describe the novel-styled stories and poems to convey the spirit of experimentation integral to the work; he has called them *ponbyin* to indicate that they are tales about ordinary everyday events and to distinguish them from stories extracted from Buddhist scriptures or based on Buddha’s life stories (“Foreword” in Pe Maung Tin, *ခေတ်စမ်းပုံပြင်များ*, ed. Pe Maung Tin, 3rd ed. (Yangon: Pagan Books, 1976), i-iv. While the movement received mixed reactions, literary critics and historians have credited the *khitsan* writers with “a modern literary renaissance,” in the words of one of Burma’s most eminent literary critic U Hla Pe (Hla Pe, “The Rise of Popular Literature in Burma,” *Journal of Burma Research Society* 51, no. 2 (1968): 138). Also see Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Htway’s studies of modern Burmese literature: Aung San Suu Kyi, “Socio-Political Currents in Burmese Literature, 1910 - 1940,” in *Burma and Japan: Basic Studies on Their Cultural and Social Structure* (Tokyo: The Burma Research Group); Tin Htway, “The Role of Literature in Nation Building: With Special Reference to Burma,” *Journal of Burma Research Society* LV, no. i & ii (1972).

²² For the historical literature on the political mobilization of monks under British colonial rule, see E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980); and Manuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965).

largely as a traditionalist movement that drew heavily on fundamental Buddhist and millenarian beliefs, symbolized the growing influence of modern political organizations in Burma's countryside.²³

These mainstream historical narratives of Burma—what I call ethno-nationalist histories—have unanimously characterized this period as a major political and social watershed and have placed emphasis on the impact of colonial and modern developments on men. They highlight the oppression and disempowerment of the traditional, indigenous (Burmese) colonized men by the modern, British male colonizers (and their predominantly Indian middlemen).²⁴ According to scholars of colonial Burma, colonial rule emasculated the indigenous population in Burma in two particularly pernicious ways: the influx of predominantly male immigrants who, under the auspices of the colonial administration, displaced the indigenous population from key socio-economic niches;²⁵ and the destabilization of the exclusively male Buddhist

²³ The Saya San rebellion, the most serious of a series of revolts aimed at the expulsion of the British and the end of the colonial modernizing project, particularly in lower Burma, began on the night of December 22, 1930 when bands of Burmese insurgents raided villages in one of the central districts of lower Burma. The raids extended to other districts and set off a series of uprisings which have come to be known collectively after Saya San (described variously as an ex-pongyi, a folk doctor, and sometimes a nationalist) who led the first insurrections and was the prime mover behind many of those which followed. The colonial administration failed to bring the rebellion under control until 1932, by which time the fatalities caused by the rebellion totaled nearly 1,700. There is on-going debate about the nature of the Saya San Rebellion: most scholars have described it as a resurgence of traditional forms of protest whereas Patricia Herbert and Maitrii Aung-Thwin have suggested that the rebellion was as much an outgrowth of British education and political mobilization techniques as it was of traditional Burma. For details on the rebellion and on the scholarly debate about it, see Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 282 - 91; Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 2 (1981); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Patricia M. Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930-1932) Reappraised* (London: Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books British Library, 1982); Maitrii Aung-Thwin, "Genealogy of a Rebellion Narrative: Law, Ethnology and Culture in Colonial Burma," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003).

²⁴ For a concise discussion of the colonial practice, prevalent throughout Southeast Asia, of using Indian, Chinese, and some indigenous middlemen in industry and commerce, see Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 228-37.

²⁵ Besides Furnivall, the following scholars have written on the socio-economic significance of the Indian immigration under colonial rule: James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery Burma, 1941); Adas, *The Burma Delta*; Ian

monastic order (*sangha*), which was stripped of its royal patronage and supervision.²⁶

Historical actors typically discussed in mainstream Burmese history include male Indian moneylenders and (absentee or resident) landlords and immigrant laborers; Anglo-Indian station masters and policemen; male British colonial administrators; Burmese monks and (disenfranchised) male Burmese peasants and coolies.

Though not without truth, this portrayal ignores the impact of colonial rule on women in Burma. It insinuates that the large immigration of predominantly male socio-economic competitors ultimately had no repercussion for indigenous women who, in turn, are excluded from the category of earners or economic actors. It also fails to consider how the changes that the *sangha* was facing may have influenced

Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

²⁶ Colonial bureaucrats and scholars alike have argued that the *sangha* experienced a decline in power and prestige under colonialism is based on the fact that the British Governor failed, after 1895, to appoint a new *thathanabaing* (or “Archbishop”) on the death of the incumbent. Prior to colonialism, the *thathanabaing* had the power of the state behind him in maintaining discipline in the *sangha*: for example, a yearly census of *pongyis* was taken and penalized those who falsely represented himself as a monk. After the annexation, however, the *thathanabaing* became a mere figurehead left without a recognized Burmese lay leader from whom he could attract personal allegiance. Scholars also point out that under colonial rule, monks became increasingly lax. This prevalent idea of the “decline of the *sangha*,” which actually developed out of the Burmese anti-colonial discourse, has no basis in any kind of fact. There exists no scholarly or critical study of the relative conditions of the *sangha* in Burma prior to and during colonialism. No one has inquired into the condition of the *sangha* or its actual patronage (other than by the king) immediately before and during colonialism; we have no idea how “disciplined” monks were prior to colonialism. As Anne Blackburn correctly points out in her critique of similar claims about the transformations of Theravadin Buddhist monasticism or the lack thereof in colonial Sri Lanka, existing assessments of the impact of colonial rule on Buddhist norms and practices stand on shaky grounds: “The urgent ideological commands of postcolonial (sometimes nationalist) and post-Orientalist scholarship have made it instinctive, and often nearly unavoidable, to deconstruct the impact of colonial conditions on religion, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, and so on... We must recognize, however, that the claims made by such studies are often greatly weakened precisely because we do not know enough about Buddhist communities prior to the latter portion of the nineteenth century to make secure arguments about changing or continuous modes of religious practice...”(7).

See Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*; Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*; U Tin Tut, October 2 1942, “Causes of the Attitude of the Burmese People in the Recent [War] Campaign in Burma”; Dorothy Hess Guyot, “The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1966), 122-23. For the most nuanced discussion of the “decline of the *sangha*,” see the section entitled “The ‘Decline of the Sangha’ Issue” in Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 139-43. See Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) and Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture, Buddhisms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for comparative cases regarding the decline of the *sangha* in Ceylon.

women in Burma. That the prevailing practice of Theravada Buddhism in Burma excluded women from being ordained as monks and from joining the *sangha* hardly changes the fact that women actively participated in and contributed immensely to the operation of the monastic and the Buddhist community in Burma as both lay women and nuns (*thila-shins*).²⁷ These historiographical trajectories have translated into an implicit consensus that colonialism and modernization concerned men rather than women. To this day, no scholar has interrogated how the large immigration of men, the purported destabilization of the *sangha*, and other developments during colonial rule affected women in Burma.

The paucity of scholarship on women in colonial Burma is especially striking given the discourses about women that thrived in 1930s Burma. Published travel accounts and handbooks by colonizers invariably featured a section on “Burmese women.” Colonial administrators and writers and journalists for the nascent but vibrant Burmese popular press alike discussed such developments as the rapid rise in the population of female students in higher education, the unprecedented appointment and employment of women in the medical, legal, bureaucratic, educational, and journalistic professions, and the increasingly prevalent activism of women in legislative and party politics, university boycotts, anti-government rallies and labor

²⁷Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women* (London, Totowa: Zed Books, 1984) and Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*. See the discussion of women’s relationship to merit-making in neighboring Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism is similarly practiced, in Alexandra R. Kapur-Fic, *Thailand: Buddhism, Society, and Women* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1998), 435-37. For scholarship on women and Theravada Buddhism more generally, also see Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *Women under the Bo Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Alan Sponberg, Helen Hardacre, and Princeton University., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha Edited by Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998); Kabilsingh Chatsumarn, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991); Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Jose Cabezon, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

strikes that took place at approximately the same time.²⁸ As mentioned above, subjects ranging from women's new hairstyles and fashion to intimate relations between Burmese women and foreign—i.e. European (namely British) and Indian—men also animated popular discourses about women. Why, if colonial rule in Burma was essentially an ethno-nationalist struggle that had little to do with women, did the effects of colonial rule on women become a subject of popular representations? The following sections outline the ways that my dissertation addresses this overarching question.

Gendered Dynamics of Colonialism and Nationalism

Scholarship on colonial and nationalist discourses of women that have emerged in the context of South Asian, subaltern and feminist studies have contributed important insights into the ways that colonialism and its disenfranchisement of colonized men led to a situation wherein women became the grounds and signs for the colonial struggle and an integral component of twentieth-century (and twenty-first-century) political discourses.²⁹ Modern and traditional images of women materialized

²⁸ For discussion of developments in 1920s' and 1930s' Burma that concerned women, see Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, especially pages 154 – 158, and the section entitled “Burmese Women” in Chit, *Colourful Burma*, 187 - 213. While these works provide only a basic outline of changes in women's lives during in early twentieth-century Burma, they nonetheless represent the extremely limited historical literature on women in Burma.

²⁹ The following list is a selection of works that have contributed important insights into the significance of colonial, anti-colonial and nationalist discourses about traditional and modern women and the “conditions of women” in the context of Asia: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), especially Chapter Five, entitled “Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject,” 118 - 148; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially Chapters Six and Seven, entitled “The Nation and Its Women” and “Women and the Nation,” 116 - 157; Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Prasenjit Duara, “Of Authenticity and Woman: Personal Narratives of Middle-Class Women in Modern China,” in *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 342-64; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University

cross-culturally as metaphorical shortcuts for varied expectations, projections and anxieties which were brought about by processes of colonialism and modernization. The images emerged alongside what are typically described as processes of modernization: secularizing and rationalizing tendencies in education and state administration, the development of the market economy, the growth of the print media and of commercial popular culture.³⁰

Studies of the practices of *sati* and *purdah* (commonly translated as widow-burning and the wearing of veil) have revealed in particular that Orientalist representations of “traditions” and “customs” in the colonies that allegedly repressed women served to legitimize the colonial civilizing mission. Examinations of nationalist representations of “traditional” and “modern” women have been similarly insightful; they have shown that visions of modernization expressed in various parts of the world and in disparate contexts nonetheless converged on the imperative of improving “women’s condition.” They have revealed that the traditional female (i.e. mother, sister and wife) who embodied national essence, spirituality and tradition

Press, 1995); Yoko Hayami, Akio Tanabe, and Yumiko Tokita-Tanabe, *Gender and Modernity: Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003); Barbara Hamill Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan, Asia-Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

³⁰ This is not to suggest that the practice of using women as metaphorical shortcuts for displaced fears and anxieties about new social conflicts is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Studies on mass consumerism and commodity culture and the identification of femininity and of womankind generally with modern modes of production and consumption note that sexual difference lends itself to being talked about in deceptively self-evident polarities, and that sexualized metaphors represent a time-worn aspect of patriarchal culture (Victoria de Grazia, “Introduction,” in Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1-11). Scholarship on the workings of gender in Theravada Buddhism likewise indicates that sexualized metaphors served, for example, to encourage the key practice (by male monks) of celibacy and detachment from the social world which in turn enhanced the prestige of the *sangha* (Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*; Janet Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle,” *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (2003): 89-115). But it is precisely because the trope of the woman-as-receptacle has historically embodied reactions to actual unsettling social changes and conflicts, that the explosion and proliferation of representation and discussions of women in the era of high colonialism and modernization warrant close scrutiny.

within modernity was juxtaposed with the modern female (i.e. single and unattached) who personified capitalism, colonialism and consumerism; these juxtaposed representations of women allowed nationalists to develop an historically and culturally specific understanding of modernization and nationhood in keeping with an ideological and legal framework of nation-building and citizenship that derived from a European tradition. In the process, women's own challenges to patriarchal authority, both indigenous and colonial, were marginalized.

I argue that in colonial Burma, as in other European colonies, imperial authority, ethnic distinctions and national identity were articulated in essentially gendered terms. British colonizers, on the one hand, saw that their role in the colony was to emancipate women whereby they were charged with reforming Burmese women's purportedly traditional loose sexuality, inept child-rearing skills and illiteracy, give them access to education, and free them for the prevalent practices of concubinage and prostitution (which the state officially proscribed but in practice condoned as a necessary evil).³¹ Various agents of anti-colonialism—elites, intellectuals, students and politicians—on the other hand sought to refract a conceptualization of the Burmese nation-state through the “modern,” “Westernized,” “miscegenating,” and “mixed race” Burmese woman who served as a metaphor for what the Burmese nation was not. Just as there was no civilized, white, colonizing subject without the racialized, sexualized, uncivilized, and colonized “Other,” there was no masculine, Burmese, nationalist hero without the unpatriotic, miscegenating, Burmese-but-Westernized female. By illustrating that representations of women during the period under examination served colonial and nationalist agendas *among*

³¹ Ann Stoler's work on prevalent “intimate” relations in European colonies, namely, concubinage and prostitution, has been foundational to understanding the highly political nature of personal or “intimate” relations in the context of colonialism, and the interplay between race, gender, and the colonial project. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

other influential interests, I complicate the bifurcation of discourses of women to categories of colonial and anti-colonial or nationalist.

This study, however, shows that women became the site of colonial struggle in Burma not only because the colonizers disenfranchised indigenous men but also because colonial rule, at the same time that it created divisive and conflicting ethnic and political affiliations and disempowered many in Burmese society, offered new opportunities for social mobility to other members of the indigenous community. While this dissertation cannot generalize about the effects of colonialism on women in Burma, it indicates that at least for the urban and often middle to upper-class groups of Burmese women, the large immigration of foreign men that historians have discussed intensely as the chief cause of the disenfranchisement of the indigenous male population provided ways to negotiate colonial relations of power and to straddle ethnic, cultural, religious and socio-economic divides. The subordination of the colonized population in Burma by the predominantly male British (including British Indian) colonizers gave Burmese women bargaining power—i.e. intimate and sexual power—and an avenue of social mobility unavailable to Burmese men.

The notable growth of new cultural institutions offered another avenue to socio-economic advancement to which the majority of women in Burma hitherto had no access. Although women in Burma were never excluded from participating in such cultural functions as dramas, dances, puppet plays, the *ahlu* and the *pwe*³² as donors, viewers, spectators and consumers, those who conducted cultural rites and events—

³² *Ahlu* refers to acts of alms giving, offering, and donation, principally to the Sangha but also to charitable institutions like orphanages or old people's homes. An *ahlu* more often than not involves a ceremony conducted by monks for an audience ranging from a small group of invited relatives and guests to hundreds of strangers who happen to be in the neighborhood or happen to stop by. Examples of such *ahlu* are ceremonies for novices entering monkhood, birthdays, or funerary ceremonies. *Pwe* means variously public function, communal event, mass celebration, festival, fair, public entertainment, or a show open to all. Depending on the context in which it is used, it also denotes contest, war, mass violence, offertory or oblation.

traveling troupes and itinerant monks—in pre-colonial Burma were predominantly men. While women in Burma had for a long time an influential presence in the economic sphere, as in other pre-modern Southeast Asian societies, the active role of women as economic agents—the very attribute that gave women their autonomy and power—subordinated them to men religiously, politically, ritualistically, and ceremonially, because the worldly sphere of commerce, profit-seeking and monetary affairs was deemed spiritually polluting.³³ The exclusively male Buddhist monks and monasteries were the sole providers of education in Burma which they offered predominantly to male pupils. Buddhist monks thus functioned as the most important vehicles for the dissemination and negotiation of knowledge, and also served as essential cultural intermediaries between the court-based aristocracy and the countryside.³⁴

During the colonial period, however, such new or “modern” cultural media as coeducational institutions and campuses, magazines, newspapers, novels, cartoons and films emerged as increasingly potent purveyors of role models, gender identities, ethical norms and values, and other icons of identity. My discussion of these developments shows that modern cultural media offered both old and new patterns of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, moral messages and ideologies, and altered the relationship of Burmese women to cultural production in two distinct and fundamental ways. First, textuality rather than orality (which entailed the oral performance or recitation of texts for an audience) emerged as the dominant medium

³³ There exists no historical analysis of the prohibition against women taking on the role of a cultural intermediary in Burma. However, the extensive scholarly critiques of what academics and non-academics have widely perceived as the androcentrism and misogyny of Buddhist traditions provides some insights into a woman’s ability to function as a cultural agent in a Theravadin Buddhist society. This scholarship indicates that based on a well-known conversation on the nature of women ascribed to the Buddha and his disciple Ananda, Buddhist traditions have associated women with “attachment and becoming” and men with “detachment and release,” as a result of which women have been prohibited from playing any active role, other than as economic agents, in public affairs of the society (Kapur-Fic, *Thailand*, 382, 435. Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three,” 90-91).

³⁴ Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 150-57.

of representation. Second, and as a result of this shift, which occurred in parallel with the colonial administration's establishment of co-ed and all-girls schools, women began to play a more active and prominent participatory role as cultural intermediaries between state and society, urban and rural, colonial and indigenous, and "modern" and "traditional."

This is not to turn attention away from the material conditions of colonialism—i.e. invasion, occupation, murder, discrimination, and expropriation of land and labor—that the colonized people struggled to resist. My point certainly is not to romanticize or generalize the emancipatory potential of modern cultural institutions or to suggest that they released women from the constraints of pre-existing definitions of woman. The efflorescent discussions in the popular press about the development of new cultural media and the related phenomenon of the growth of female cultural intermediaries as lawyers, doctors, teachers, administrators, writers, and journalists in the 1930s reveal that people in Burma both championed women's defiance of established gender norms and castigated such cultural transgressions. They drew on established notions of femininity and masculinity and fashioned new ones; they challenged the norm of male dominance in the sphere of cultural production but also contemplated who amongst women in Burma should be permitted to function as cultural intermediaries and in what capacity, and questioned what effect such activities might have on a woman's relationship to her family, to the opposite sex, and to Burmese society.

Rather than polarize the history of colonialism in Burma as resistance and collaboration, this dissertation looks at the grey area that straddles disempowerment and enfranchisement, and oppression and liberation in an effort to do justice to the plurality of positions and interpretations which women and men forged for themselves in their encounters with colonialism and modernization. The result suggests that

colonial rule in Burma and its impact on the local population simply cannot be understood without a gendered analysis of the colonial power structure. Characteristic of male scholars of colonialism who, Anne McClintock aptly points out, “have seldom felt moved to explore the gendered dynamics of [imperialism],” historians of Burma have failed to acknowledge the relationship between gender and colonialism.³⁵ The remaining chapters illustrate clearly that gender was a constitutive component of processes of colonialism and modernization in Burma.³⁶

Sources: Drawing on Popular Discourses and Representations

I utilize and bring into dialogue a wide range of primary sources from 1920s to 1940s Burma, which are now available in Burma and the United Kingdom. The archives where I conducted research include the Myanmar National Archive in Yangon, Yangon University’s Historical Research Center (UHRC), the Yangon University Central Library (UCL), and the India Office Records at the British Library. While at the National Archive my research focused on government records—official papers, maps, printed books and other items—of the British imperial administration of Burma (i.e. 1885-1948), the material at the UHRC and the UCL consisted mainly of germane Master’s theses in history, memoirs, historical fiction, and newspapers, journals, and magazines published in late colonial Burma.³⁷ The India Office Records at the British Library held material similar to what I examined at the National Archive in Burma but in addition possessed records documenting the activities of a number of

³⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

³⁶ Ann Stoler’s “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender and Morality in the Making of Race” offers a concise and insightful discussion of the defining role of gender inequalities in European imperial culture, (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 41-78). Also see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.

³⁷ The National Archive provided material crucial to illuminating the ways in which the colonial regime saw women—not only Burmese women but also missionary women—as potential vehicles for colonial re-education, and espoused a bourgeois Western model of femininity based on chastity, fidelity, domesticity and maternity.

major British missionary societies that helped me to further build on my analysis of the ways in which missionary and colonial state discourses about gender and relations between the sexes informed ideas about the place of Burmese men and women in society. Most important to this dissertation, however, have been the UCL and the UHRC which, by giving me access to local newspapers and periodicals from the first few decades of the twentieth century, allowed me to tap into popular discourses in colonial Burma.³⁸

Such modern print media as newspapers and magazines began to circulate in Burma at the turn of the century when the British annexation of Burma significantly intensified the movement of commodities, not only of labor, from India to Burma. By the twentieth century, India had emerged as the primary source of paper, amongst many other commodities, into Burma.³⁹ The large supply of paper from India and a rapidly expanding railway system that facilitated transportation to areas not served by the existing inland water transport system⁴⁰ made printed material increasingly accessible and affordable. Together with the relatively high literacy rate of Burmese people,⁴¹ these developments led to the rapid rise and spread of the popular press in colonial Burma (Table 1).⁴²

³⁸ The majority of these sources are urban-based. Although newspapers and periodicals from remote localities were in print at the time, I seldom came across such material during my research. Furthermore, due to its focus on urban, popular, print culture, this study excludes nonliterary (i.e. dramas, dances, songs, films) and rural (i.e. folk songs, pews, puppet plays) culture forms. Although the material gathered at the colonial and missionary archives can provide insights into various different parts of and communities located within the borders of British Burma, I confine my analysis to the urban landscape unless indicated otherwise.

³⁹ In the mid-1930s, the total amount of paper imported from India averaged almost 40,000,000 lbs, the equivalent of \$1,381 in value. Other principal commodities imported from India include cotton yarn, thread, textiles, coal, sugar, and tobacco (J. Russell Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 174-75).

⁴⁰ The railway system in Burma, built rapidly in the decades following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, connected upper and lower Burma, the inland and the delta region by the beginning of the twentieth-century. See Andrus' discussion of inland navigation, rail transport, and road transport (Ibid., 206 - 13, 26 - 47).

⁴¹ Characteristic of Buddhist communities in the region, Burma's general population was relatively literate. Literacy was significantly higher in urban areas as far as female literacy was concerned, but male literacy was more or less even throughout Burma: Roughly seventy percent of the male population

Table 1: Factories in Burma (1940)

Type of Factory	# of Factories	# of Workers
Rice Mills	673	41,626
Sawmills	116	11,579
Cotton Gins	54	3,766
Vegetable Oil Mills	29	1,513
General Engineering	19	2,991
Printing Presses	19	2,681
Railway Workshops	12	3,293
Petroleum Refineries	10	7,454
Dockyards	9	2,201
Coach Building & Motorcar Repairing	8	727

Source: Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life* (1947), 142.

Census records report only fifteen newspapers in circulation in 1891 and twenty-six in 1901.⁴³ The number of newspapers and periodicals published in Burma more than doubled from 1911 to 1921, from 44 newspapers and periodicals (circulation 28,413) to 103 (circulation 145,920).⁴⁴ By the end of the 1930s, there were over 200 newspapers and periodicals published in Burma with the eight most popular Burmese dailies in Rangoon alone comprising a circulation of 31,500.⁴⁵ The average cost of a newspaper decreased from six pyas in the early 1920s to three and a half pyas in the mid-1930s, making it more affordable than it already was to the average Burmese family:⁴⁶ at even six pyas per paper, an average Burmese family

aged five and over and about twenty percent of the female counterpart was literate. Literate men far outnumbered literate women (1-3 female to male ratio), but literacy among females in Burma had grown rapidly during the first few decades of the twentieth century (sixty percent increase between 1921 and 1931, for instance). Hindus and Muslims in Burma, furthermore, were considerably more literate than their “co-religionists” in India. The 1921 Census Report remarks that the high degree of literacy amongst the Hindu and Muslim population of Burma is particularly conspicuous for the women, and especially amongst those born outside Burma. See India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, vol. XI (Burma) (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1933), 160-64; India, *Census of India, 1921 (Burma)*, vol. X (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1923), 172 - 77.

⁴² By 1940, there were nineteen printing presses in Burma large enough to be counted as factories. In addition to these factory-sized printing presses, there were numerous businesses that operated typesetting plants, printing presses, and binderies (Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 156 - 57).

⁴³ India, *Census of India, 1921 (Burma)*, 189.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ , "Burmese Daily Newspapers",

⁴⁶ See the prices of newspapers listed in Tekkatho Tin Kya's index of Burmese newspapers (Tekkatho Tin Kya, မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသတင်းစာများအညွှန်း, Yangon: Sabei Beiman, 1976 (?) 155-77, 203-39).

would have spent less than two percent of their monthly income on buying a newspaper on a daily basis (Table 2).

Table 2: Sample Costs of Daily Merchandises (1920)
(Average Monthly Income of a Burmese Family:
58 Rupees, 8 Annas**)

Item	Price of Item		
	Rs.	A.	P.
Shirt	1	15	5
Sandals		5	8
Rice (per lb)		1	5
Tea (per lb)		14	2
Vegetable (per lb)		1	5
Meat (per lb)	5	8	10
Newspapers & Periodicals			6

Source: *Cost of Living Index, Rangoon* (1921), 108 - 109

*There are 16 Annas in a Rupee, 11 Pyas in an Anna

In sharp contrast to the traditional press, like the *Rangoon Gazette*, which faithfully transmitted the official views of the colonial administration in English, the urban newspapers, magazines, and journals that began publication in Burmese in the early decades of the twentieth century represented public media catered to the general Burmese readership.⁴⁷ The publishers of the weekly journal *Seq-than* [*Ten Million*], for instance, chose a number for the title as a symbol of their commitment to making the journal a straightforward periodical that any reader would find easily understandable.⁴⁸ Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, publishers and presses increasingly printed writings in the Burmese language and provided Burmese translations of English terms and phrases. Newspapers and periodicals printed in

⁴⁷ U Thant, "The Press, the Public and the Pandemonium," *Ngan Hta Lawka* 24, no. 168 (1939): 537-38.

⁴⁸ The *Seq-than* was first published as a monthly magazine in 1935 but became a weekly journal in January 1936. The miscellaneous content of the journal was representative of the journals in publication during the 1930s: the journal featured instructions on gardening, recipes for snacks, guide to tea shops and tabacs, short stories and essays by such prominent writers as U Maung Maung Gyi and Dagon Nat-Shin, English-Burmese translations of fictional literature, and columns written by female authors (Tin Kha, မြန်မာနိုင်ငံစာနယ်ဇင်းမှတ်တမ်းများ (Yangon: Sabei Bei Hman, 1990), 147-50).

Burmese overtook the number of those printed in English by 1921 (Table 3). That the Burmese print media in colonial Burma were meant not only for the English or Western educated elite but for a large and diverse Burmese reading public can be discerned also from the miscellaneous contents of the press. Besides news articles, social commentaries, and the like, the modern popular press introduced law reports, letters and comments from the readers, advertisements, serialized fiction, poetry, anecdotes, gossip columns, and astrology. At the same time that writer-journalists and editors reported international events based on information supplied by foreign news agencies, they paid attention to local news reportage. Cartoons—many focusing on current events and carrying distinct social and political undertones—added to the eclectic contents of the Burmese press.⁴⁹

Table 3: Number and Circulation of Newspapers and Periodicals, 1891 - 1921

Language	1891		1901		1911		1921	
	#	Cir.	#	Cir.	#	Cir.	#	Cir.
TOTAL	15	5,300	26	12,580	44	28,413	103	145,920
English	10	3,720	15	7,950	19	11,598	36	44,267
Burmese	2	480	6	2,380	12	9,015	47	70,773
Burmese and English	-	-	-	-	5	1,350	1	300
Karen	3	1,100	3	1,500	5	4,900	10	25,280
Karen and English	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1,200
Gujarati	-	-	1	500	1	250	1	500
Tamil	-	-	1	250	1	500	2	1,100
Chinese	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	750
Others	-	-	-	-	1	800	4	1750

Source: *Census of India* (1921), 189.

⁴⁹ The cartoons that appeared in twentieth-century Burma may have drawn from older traditions of painting and drawing. However, the cartoons I examine display the following distinctive traits and techniques, outlined as essential ingredients to modern cartoons by Chang-tai Hung in *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945*: “First, cartoons were a new graphic art form drawn with economy of line but replete with powerful ideas. Second, they typically featured exaggerated or ludicrous representations of events or persons. And finally, a cartoon’s success lay in the thought it embodied, not artistic adroitness” (Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 29). It is entirely possible that cartoons appeared in Burma as a tool of political commentary, politicized public opinion, and patriotic messages, rather than as art form.

That the press represented a modern cultural medium that Burmese people widely utilized is made particularly clear from colonial records related to the “1938 Burma Riots”—a series of largely anti-Indian riots that first broke out in Rangoon on the 26 July 1938, spread throughout a large part of Burma, protracted into September of 1938, and resulted in 220 dead, 926 injured.⁵⁰ The *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (hereafter the Final Riot Report), discusses numerous causes of the riots, including the large scale Indian immigration into Burma, unsatisfactory conditions of land tenure, intermarriage between Buddhist Burmese women and Muslim Indian men, and the global economic depression. However, it pinpoints the Burmese press as the chief cause of the riots. The Inquiry Committee concludes that the Burmese press, through its publication of wild statements and objectionable photographs, exacerbated and fueled the riots that could have otherwise been contained and handled by the largely Indian police force (Figure 3 shows one of the “objectionable” photographs prominently featured during the riots). The report claims:

[The photographs] and the letter press which accompanied them, together with the various contemporary articles in the Burmese press charging the police in general, and the European sergeants in particular, with intemperance in their handling of the crowd at the Soortee Bara Bazaar on the 26th of July, contributed in themselves in no inconsiderable measure to the inflammation of public opinion in Rangoon and in the Districts against the police which followed the events of that afternoon. It is a fact that on the evening of the 26th of July the indignation of the crowd against the Mohammedans which had inspired the procession and the events in Pagoda Road veered strongly against the police and this continued throughout the 27th of July. The effect which these photographs and the exaggeration of the Press generally had is most marked in the Districts, where rioting started in many places simultaneously with their receipt from Rangoon.⁵¹

⁵⁰, “Minute Paper, Burma Office” 12 September 1938, IOR M/3/513, The Riots will be discussed more in detail in Chapter Five.

⁵¹ Riot Inquiry Committee, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 27.

(From "New Light of Burma" of 27th July.)



ရန်ကုန်ပုလိပ်များကအတင်းအကြပ်မဲမဲမြင်သမျှကိုလိုက်ရိုက်ကြသဖြင့်၊ ကြောက်အားလန့်အားနှင့်ပြေးလွှားစဉ်တွင်၊ မျက်နှာမြူစာရင် ၃၀ နှင့် ၁၂ တို့၏နံပါတ်တုတ်ရှည်ကြီးများ၏ပြင်းထန်လှသော ဒဏ်ရာများကိုမခံမရပ်နိုင်သဖြင့်၊ သိမ်ကြီးဈေး (စီ) ရုံ၏ဆင်ဝင်အောက်လူသွားလမ်းပေါ်တနေရာတွင်တခါတည်း စကားမေးမရတော့ဘဲ၊ မှောက်လျက်သားလဲကျနေရှာသော သံဃာတော်အရှင်မြတ်တပါး။

Translation.—A venerable *sangha* lying prostrate, pathetic and unconscious, on the pavement under the portico of C Block, Soortee Bara Bazaar, overcome by the severe injuries caused by European Sergeants Nos. 12 and 30 with their batons while he was running panic-stricken owing to the indiscriminate charge made by the Rangoon Police.

Figure 3: An “Objectionable” Photo from the Riots Printed by the Burmese Press

Source: *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (1939), Appendix III, xii - xiii.

By the mid-1930s, the British government deemed the Burmese popular press *too* influential in forming public opinion and sensibilities, not only amongst the urban Burmese public but more disconcertingly for the colonial state, amongst the rural Burmese masses. The colonial state consequently adapted the *Press and Registration*

of Books Act and the *Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act* for use in Burma in 1937 and began imposing limitations on the freedom of the Burmese printing presses.⁵²

The Burmese press was in fact popular: it had become a common facet of not only urban but also rural life in colonial Burma. Colonial officials may have attributed the popularity and influence of the popular press among Burmese people to the role that it played as an anti-colonial public instrument. Most popular Burmese newspapers and periodicals at the time did attend to contemporaneous nationalist developments, espouse to varying degrees a certain political opinion or another and attempt to sway the political views of the Burmese masses.⁵³ Yet they were by no means nationalist propaganda leaflets. For example, the colonial administration in Rangoon labeled the *Myanmar Alin* (The New Light of Burma), established in 1914 by an entrepreneur-cum-politician U Tin, as the unofficial mouthpiece of the leading anti-colonial organization in the 1940s, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL).⁵⁴ Yet, the same administrators also noted that U Than Tint, the Editor, "has no particular views or any strong opinion on any particular subject—an ideal editor for a paper that follows the tide."⁵⁵

In fact, one needs only to look at the advertisements in Burma's popular press to recognize that concerns and interests other than the nationalist dictated the workings

⁵² The Press and Registration for Books Act (1867) and the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act (1031), as adapted for use in Burma by the Government of Burma (Adaptation of Laws) Order (1937) provided against the publication of matters inciting or encouraging murder or violence. Under the provision of the latter Act, owners of printing presses and publishers of newspapers could be required by a Magistrate to deposit a security to be forfeited in cases where "use is made of any words, signs or visible representations which incite or encourage, directly or indirectly, violence or murder. Where security has not been deposited, the printing-press, all newspapers, books or other documents may be declared forfeited" ("Letter from the India Office to A. H. Joyce, Information Office, Burma Office" 19 August 1939, IOR L/I/1/622).

⁵³ See Htway, "The Role of Literature in Nation Building: With Special Reference to Burma," and Aung San Suu Kyi, *Nationalisme Et Littérature En Birmanie: Quelques Aspects De La Vie Intellectuelle Sous Le Colonialisme* (Geneva: Association Suisse-Birmanie, 1996).

⁵⁴ The colonial administration in Rangoon explained that U Tin saw "the possibilities of profit in making common cause with the political party 'most in demand'" ("Burmese Daily Newspapers").

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of Burma's popular press. Take, for instance, *Thuriya*, a paper for which Burma's eminent "patriot-writer" Saya Lun wrote and served as a chief editor.⁵⁶ Given the fact that nationalist leaders at the time were advocating the boycott of such foreign, imported products as cotton and canned goods,⁵⁷ it is striking that a paper run by a fervently anti-colonial editor-in-chief contained advertisements of such products as the "English" perfume powder, the Milkmaid Brand Anglo-Swiss condensed milk, "colonial" traveling rugs, and shoes (whose wearing by the British at Buddhist temples had long been a principal target of anti-colonialists in Burma) (Figures 4 to 6). Such aspects of the modern print media represented a consumerist culture that catered to a wide range of readers, from shoe-wearing Burmese elites to barefoot commoners, all of whom were potential consumers of modern commodities. Moreover, various other components of the popular press mentioned earlier, such as serialized fiction, poetry, editorials, social commentaries, cartoons and pictorials, infused the print media with intellectual and artistic qualities. The single most striking characteristic of Burma's popular press, then, was its capacity to simultaneously accommodate such diverse interests.

⁵⁶ Saya Lun and his writings are discussed in Chapter Four.

⁵⁷ The nationalist boycott of foreign goods will be discussed in detail in Chapters Three and Six.

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော် သမ္မတနိုင်ငံ ၁၉၄၈ ခု ဇန်နဝါရီလ ၁ ရက် ၁၉၄၇ ခု ဧပြီလ ၁၅ ရက်



ကမ္ဘာတစ်ဝှမ်း ဖိုက်ထုတ် ပြီးသားရှိ ဆီး သို့မဟုတ် ဖို ဆီ လက်သစ် အပေးခေးများ
 ခြေခြမ်းအားဖြင့် လက်သစ်ရ ကာဖီရေများကို မည်ခြင်းမပျက်ပါစေရ။

ကုလားမ ချင်းတောင်းဆွဲ

ကမ္ဘာတစ်ဝှမ်း ဖိုက်ထုတ် ပြီးသားရှိ ဆီး သို့မဟုတ် ဖို ဆီ လက်သစ် အပေးခေးများ
 ခြေခြမ်းအားဖြင့် လက်သစ်ရ ကာဖီရေများကို မည်ခြင်းမပျက်ပါစေရ။

ကမ္ဘာတစ်ဝှမ်း ဖိုက်ထုတ် ပြီးသားရှိ ဆီး သို့မဟုတ် ဖို ဆီ လက်သစ် အပေးခေးများ
 ခြေခြမ်းအားဖြင့် လက်သစ်ရ ကာဖီရေများကို မည်ခြင်းမပျက်ပါစေရ။

ဒီ.ဆီ.အိုင်.က. ဖိုက်ထုတ်ပြီးသော
 ကမ္ဘာတစ်ဝှမ်း ဖိုက်ထုတ် ပြီးသားရှိ ဆီး သို့မဟုတ် ဖို ဆီ လက်သစ် အပေးခေးများ



Figure 4: Milkmaid Brand Anglo-Swiss condensed milk

Source: *Thuriya* (Feb 22, 1927)



Figure 5: Hazlehurst's English Rose Toilet Powder

Source: *Thuriya* (Feb 21, 1927)



Figure 6: Colonial Rug, Shoes, etc.

Source: *Thuriya* (Feb 19, 1927)

The modern print media I utilize in this dissertation contribute to the historiography of colonial Burma because they extended far beyond the confines of the literate, urban elite and bourgeoisie; and in any case, literacy was not limited to the urban population in colonial Burma. They represented inclusive sites of engagement between the state and the mass, the urban and the rural, the foreign and the local, the elite and the non-elite, men and women, and Buddhists and non-Buddhists, and offered opportunities for complex social and cultural transactions between disparate social groups. Public debates, performances, representations and social relations that were produced, disseminated, and consumed through the modern public cultural media enabled Burmese people to appropriate, experiment with, critique and fashion various colonial, elite, Buddhist, nationalist and otherwise contemporary practices and behavior.

Chapter Outline

Chapters two, three and four provide the historical context necessary for assessing, in chapters five and six, the explosive circulation of censorious and often misogynistic representations of Burmese women in the 1930s. Chapter two outlines the immigration and demographic patterns, and the social structure of colonial Burmese society as delineated by the dominant explanatory models of colonial Burmese history and by my own interpretations of census reports. The chapter is intended as a critique of the hyperethnicization of ethno-nationalist narratives of colonial Burma and a clarification of this dissertation's intervention in the current state of Burma studies. It points out that historians have been able to argue for an ethnically segregated colonial Burmese society and to reject the notion that local communities played any role (other than as victims) in processes of modernization only by

completely neglecting the presence of a noticeably large population of Burmese women in urban areas of colonial Burma.

Chapter three examines the rapid expansion of educated and professional female population in Burma in the early decades of the twentieth century and in so doing, underscores another blind spot of the dominant explanatory model for colonial Burma: the active and prominent participation of the local female population in processes of modernization. It looks in particular at the ways Burmese women utilized newly established formal educational institutions to attain and exercise influence as modern cultural intermediaries, i.e. as writer-journalists, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, and legislative administrators. Chapter four continues to investigate changes in gendered notions of education, knowledge and power underlying the increasingly visible population of female cultural intermediaries. It details the introduction of didactic discussions about the Burmese and Buddhist “tradition” of female education in women’s columns that sought to legitimize the development of female authorship, readership and perspective in the popular press. Chapters three and four thus serve to broach the politics of representation: they illustrate the centrality of overlapping representations of “traditional” Burmese women to colonial and nationalist, Buddhist and Christian, as well as commercial interests.

Chapters five and six return to the emergence in the Burmese press of concerns with Burmese women’s sexuality and modernization with which this dissertation began. Chapter five details how the focal point of discourses about the miscegenating Burmese female transformed from Anglo-Burmese (British men-Burmese women) to Indo-Burmese relationships in the 1930s, and at the same time maintained a sustained interest in changing gender relations between Burmese women and men. Chapter six discusses representations of “Westernized” Burmese women’s consumer practices and fashion sensibilities as unethical and unpatriotic. These chapters illustrate that

criticisms of modern Burmese women belie the ethno-nationalist claim about the lack of inter-ethnic intercourse in colonial Burma. The criticisms, however, signified more than merely an appeal for national sufficiency in the face of multiple modern and colonial temptations; Burmese women's conjugal and sartorial choices had become embodiments of the critics' anxieties about the social mobility of young Burmese women in the context of colonial rule and its potential effects on existing relations of power.

CHAPTER 2

THE GENDERED NATURE OF BURMA'S PLURAL SOCIETY

Male Immigrants and Urban Burmese Women

The trajectory of colonial studies in Burma has been essentially determined by a “plural society” model of colonial Burmese society developed by John S. Furnivall. a model of colonial Burmese society first theorized by John S. Furnivall.⁵⁸ Furnivall characterizes colonial Burmese society as a plural society wherein ethnically and socio-economically distinct groups in society—namely, Europeans, Indians, Chinese and Burmese⁵⁹—live side by side but separately, only to meet in the marketplace. The

⁵⁸ John Sydenham Furnivall (1878 – 1960) received his early education at the Royal Medical Benevolent College, Epsom. He continued his studies at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and in 1899 obtained a degree in the Natural Science Tripos. In 1901 he joined the India Civil Service and arrived in Burma on 16 December 1902, at which time he took up the appointment of Assistant Commissioner and Settlement Officer. He was made Deputy Commissioner in 1915 and Commissioner of Land Settlement and Records in 1920. He retired in 1925. During his career as a colonial official, Furnivall worked with the Burma Research Society and in 1924 founded the Burma Book Club. In 1928, he founded the Burma Education Extension Association, which sought to encourage the publication of translations into Burmese, to establish public libraries, form reading circles and study classes throughout the country, and to publish a monthly periodical *Ngan Hta Lawka* (*The World of Books*). Following his retirement to Britain, Furnivall became a lecturer in Burmese Language, History and Law at Cambridge University (1936-1941). In 1940, together with C. W. Dunn, Furnivall published a Burmese-English Dictionary. For a comprehensive bibliography of Furnivall's published works, see Frank N. Trager, *Furnivall of Burma; an Annotated Bibliography of the Works of John S. Furnivall* (New Haven,: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies in cooperation with University of British Columbia Dept. of Asian Studies Vancouver; distributed by the Cellar Book Shop Detroit, 1963).

⁵⁹ Thant Myint-U's discussion of ethnicity in *The Making of Modern Burma* is particularly succinct and insightful. He contends that in general, the primary cleavage in modern Burma was among those seen as “foreign” and those seen as “native,” and among the “native races” themselves: “The colonial census and legal codes divided people by religion, language and known caste categories. Thus, the vast majority of people in the Irrawaddy valley were returned as ‘Burmese Buddhists’. Others were seen as ‘Indian’ Hindus or Muslims or as a member of a ‘native’ minority community. These minority communities in turn were defined in part by existing classification schema of the Court of Ava and in part through the new science of linguistics. Old court notions of ‘Kachins’, ‘Shans’, ‘Karens’ and others largely remained, and were reinforced or somewhat changed by emergent European theories of language, race and migration. The ‘native’ races, grouped by their linguistic families, were seen as immigrating in waves from the north, while the ‘Indians’ from across the sub-continent were the perpetual foreigners of the valley. In local thinking, the inclusion of the English as another *kala* seemed to end around this time. The English were now commonly referred to as *bo*, formerly a military title, and no longer confused with their Bengali, Tamil or Pathan subjects. The peculiar twentieth century divide between ‘Europeans’, ‘Indians’, the ‘Burmese’ and the ‘minorities’ was firmly set” (U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 243-44).

ethnically stratified socio-economic groups retain their respective basic institutions—kinship, religion, education, property, recreation—and share no common values.⁶⁰ In the plural society model, the indigenous ethnic Burmese majority is subordinated to the interests of the immigrant or “foreign” ethnic minorities and deterred from taking part in or influencing the country’s political, socio-economic and cultural modernization.

Furnivall was right to pay close attention to the large influx of adult male immigrants who came from the colonial metropole and British India to fill administrative, commercial, and industrial socio-economic niches created by administrative centralization, industrialization and the development of a capitalist market economy in colonial Burma. Yet, Furnivallian scholarship has painted a highly misleading picture of colonial Burma. Colonial Burma’s plural society offered more opportunities for social mobility and interethnic and cross-cultural interaction than Furnivallian scholars lead us to believe, especially if one considers the gendered terms in which the plural society developed. The influx of predominantly male immigrants represented potential competition and disenfranchisement for indigenous men but increased the demand for indigenous women as partners in domestic, conjugal and (hetero) sexual relations. Plural society signified a surge in mixed unions between indigenous women and foreign men which often offered a potential avenue of empowerment for the women. Patterns of urbanization—especially the remarkably steady and large population of women in urban Burma—also indicate that processes of modernization were more diffuse and social stratification more fluid than historians have claimed.

⁶⁰ John S. Furnivall conceptualized the notion of the plural society to explain the disintegration of social life in the delta of Lower Burma. He theorized that colonial rule and the unrestrained play of market forces throughout Asia and Africa had broken the traditional social cohesion and restrain on individuals. See Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* .

The chapter critiques the plural society model's overriding concern with the ethnic landscape by considering the demographic movements and patterns of urbanization that defined colonial Burma from a gender-ethnic, rather than an ethnic, perspective. In contrast to Furnivallian historians who have rejected the possibility that modern ideas, practices and relations crossed ethnic, socio-economic and cultural boundaries, I argue that although processes of colonialism and modernization alienated and disenfranchised some indigenous people in Burma, they also engaged and empowered others. In so doing, the chapter sets the stage for examining the ways that processes of colonization, modernization and nation-state formation transformed and otherwise affected longstanding gender norms, practices and inequalities in colonial Burma. It begins to lay out the context for investigating how and why discussions concerning modern-day Burmese women entered Burmese public discourse and became privileged idioms through which colonialism, modernization and nationalism were interpreted and debated.

Industrialization, Centralization and Urbanization

The British annexation of Burma began in 1826 with Burma's defeat in the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) and the handover of the provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim to the British government. The British next defeated the Mandalay-based Konbaung polity in 1852 at the end of the second Anglo-Burmese War and annexed Burma's delta region (to the south of Prome and Toungoo Divisions; refer to the map of political divisions of the Province of Burma in Figure 7).

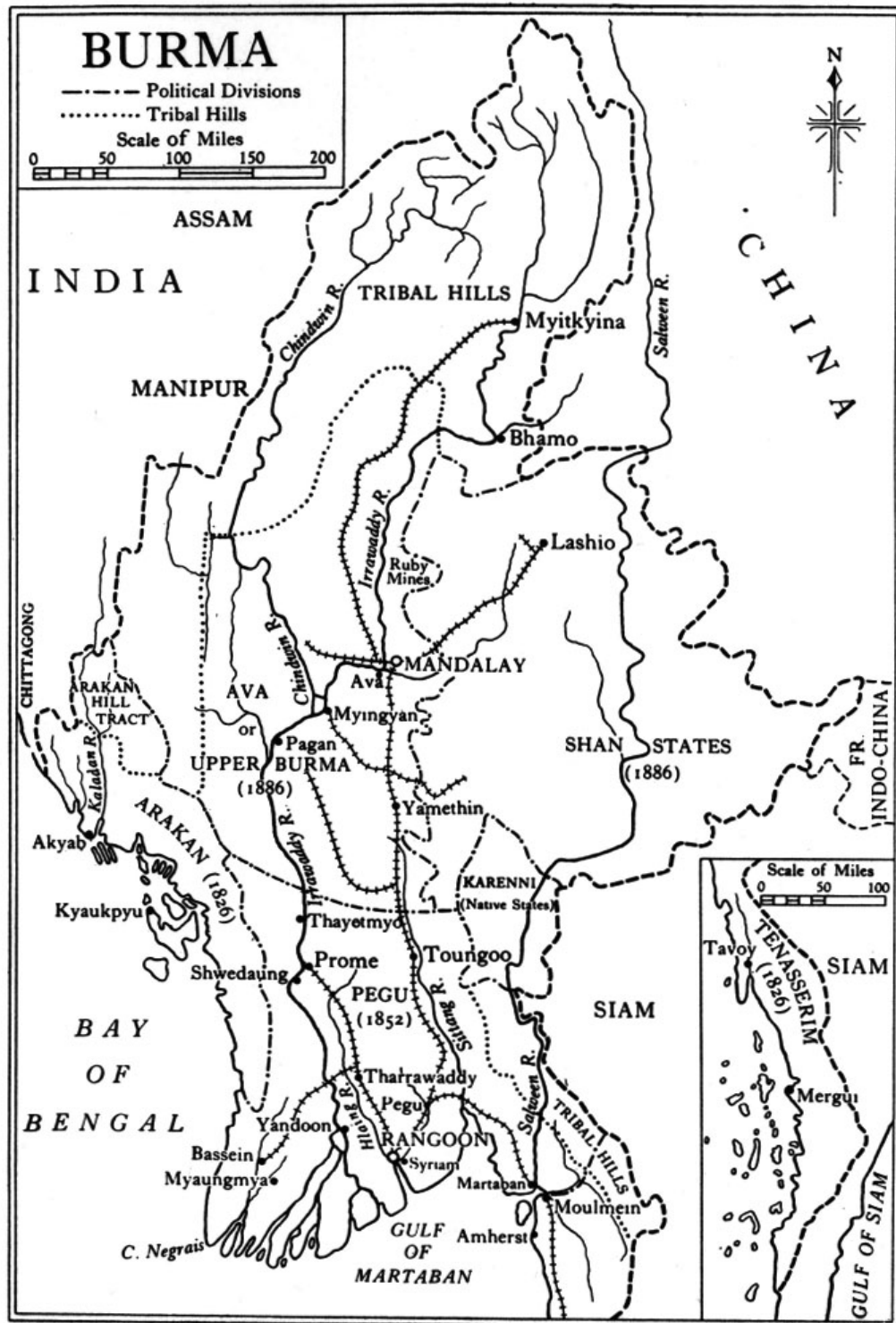


Figure 7: Political Divisions of the Province of Burma in the Twentieth Century

Source: John Furnivall. *Colonial Policy and Practice* (1956). 569.

The Anglo-Burmese war thus resulted in the last Burmese monarchy's loss of its outlet to the sea and the rice surpluses from the delta region and led to rapid transformations in Burma's political and socio-economic landscape.⁶¹ For several decades thereafter, Michael Adas points out in his influential study of the development of Burma's delta region under colonial rule, the British government based in Rangoon made concerted efforts to insure the dominant economic position of the delta region while nominally sharing political power with the Konbaung monarch. British efforts to develop the Delta region into a source of raw materials and a market outlet in the decades after the second Anglo-Burmese War were evident in the unparalleled growth of processing, port, and railway centers, particularly in Rangoon and Bassein.⁶²

In 1886 the geo-body we refer to as "colonial Burma" finally came into being as a result of the third and final Anglo-Burmese War. At the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, the British unceremoniously shipped off the last Burmese monarch, King Thibaw, and his immediate family from Mandalay to the town of Ratanagiri along India's western coast where King Thibaw spent the remainder of his life. Unlike colonial Malaya which became "British Malaya" and where the sultanate was not abolished, colonial Burma was incorporated into British India and administered by and subordinated to the Government of India until 1937.⁶³ This gave

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of state reforms in Burma during the second half of the nineteenth century that were undertaken in response to rapidly changing local and global conditions, see the chapter on "The grand reforms of King Mindon" in U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 105-29.

⁶² Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 4, 7-10.

⁶³ In 1897, the office of Lieutenant-Governor was furnished with a Legislative Council, making it possible for legislation concerning Burma to be enacted in Burma for the first time under British rule (although the Council's powers were strictly limited). In 1923, the Province of Burma constituted a Governor's Province under the *Government of India Act, 1919*, wherein responsibility for a whole range of functions was devolved on the Government of Burma (again, certain functions of government continued to be dealt with by the central Government of India, notably defense and external relations, currency and coinage, tariffs and customs, civil and criminal law, and communications and transportation controls). The subordination of Burma to the Government of India finally ended in 1935 (*Government of Burma Act, 1935*), when Burma was given a fully self-contained constitution. The new constitution, which came into effect on 1 April 1937, set up two chambers of parliament, a Senate half-nominated by the Governor, and an elected House of Representatives. The Governor was required to

the British control over Upper Burma and further consolidated the pre-eminence of the delta region when the British made Rangoon Burma's capital.

In the decades following Burma's complete annexation, the delta region and its cosmopolitan epicenter in Rangoon grew into the world's leading rice-exporting area and transformed from a backwater into Burma's political and socio-economic center. The region contained twelve of the thirteen principal rice-growing districts in Burma, a high concentration of rice mills, the chief ports for Burma's rice-export, and the main entry points for Indian immigrants and consumer products from the West.⁶⁴ By 1940, Rangoon was home to 134 out of the 1,027 factories in Burma and 23,727 of the workers—nearly thirty percent of the total population of factory workers in Burma. Hanthawaddy and Insein districts included Rangoon's industrial suburbs and had another 18,487 workers.⁶⁵ The expansion and elaboration of Burma's political and economic systems under colonial rule and the ensuing creation of numerous new administrative, commercial, industrial, and agricultural niches attracted immigrants not only from the countryside but more prominently from Europe, India, and China. According to the 1921 census, the population of Rangoon had more than doubled to 341,962 from the total population of 134,176 in 1881 (and 70,000 in 1852) [Table 4].

act on the advice of Ministers who commanded a majority in the Legislature. Defense, external relations and monetary policy remained under the control of the Governor, who was responsible to the Secretary of State for Burma and ultimately under the authority of the British Parliament. But in all other areas of national life, the Burmese Legislature exercised control, subject only to certain reserve powers vested in the Governor. During the Japanese invasion of Burma, the British and Indian elements of the administration withdrew to India and a Government of Burma in exile, with a nucleus of a civil administration, was set up at Simla. The Government of Burma resumed charge in October 1945, after an absence of three and a half years, and remained in power until 4 January 1948 when British rule formally ended and Burma became an independent republic.

⁶⁴ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 4-5, 10 - 11.

⁶⁵ Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, 142-43.

Table 4: Variation of Population in Lower and Upper Burma

	1931		1921		1911		1901
	Actual Pop*	Immi-grants	Actual Pop	Immi-grants	Actual Pop	Immi-grants	Actual Pop
LOWER Rangoon	5,435,058 400,415	670,678 259,758	4,820,745 341,962	725,924 231,647	4,332,402 293,316	743,099 201,870	3,433,273 236,119
UPPER Mandalay	4,823,979 371,636	136,140 62,925	4,405,770 356,621	114,750 54,751	N/A 340,770	N/A 41,870	N/A 343,155

Sources: *Census of India* (1921), 55; *Census of India* (1931), Part I, 38.

*Actual Population refers to the number of people who are present in a designated area at the moment when the census is taken (as opposed to those who are normally resident in the area, including those temporarily absent and excluding those temporarily present).

The Burmese themselves were fast becoming a minority group in the city. The 1881 census shows that of the 139,408 residents in Rangoon, 66,838 were Burmese, 66,077 Indian, 3,752 Chinese, 2,570 European and 171 Karen. In 1881, then, forty-four percent of the residents were Indian. In 1921, Indian residents had increased to fifty-five percent and less than half of the total population overall had actually been born in the city. The city drew scores of bankers, merchants, and entrepreneurs, predominantly British and Indian, but also Jewish, Armenian, Chinese, French, and German. Anglo-Burmans, Eurasians from India as well as local Eurasians of Portuguese and French descent dominated certain government sectors, namely the railways, telegraph and postal departments.⁶⁶ Burma's integration into British India triggered a steady stream of seasonal laborers whose journeys were facilitated by the falling costs of steamship travel. Thousands came from the Indian subcontinent annually to work in Burma's paddy fields, rice mills, factories, and docks. Far from being a homogeneous lot, the group of Indian immigrants in itself included a diverse array of people: sailors and boatmen from Chittagong; coolies from Telegu; Bengali *durwans* (or guards), *dhobies* (or laundry washers), tailors, and barbers. The colonial

⁶⁶Maxim, "The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon", 60; Government of Burma, *Report of an Enquiry into the Standard and Cost of Living of the Working Classes in Rangoon* (Rangoon: Labor Statistics Bureau, 1928), 4.

government and companies hired upper-caste Bengalis as clerks and Tamils from Madras usually became household servants.⁶⁷ Chinese immigrants made their presence known mostly as traders but also as craftsmen.⁶⁸ Although immigration was by and large male, approximately twenty-eight percent of Rangoon's female population was born outside the Province of Burma and one-third of the female residents of Rangoon were Indians (incidentally, less than a third of the total population of Rangoon was female).⁶⁹ Likewise, Rangoon attracted newcomers from the countryside seeking better employment opportunities in a new environment.

Changes in governance introduced by the colonial administration also fueled the centralization of power in the delta region. Although Burmese kings stationed centrally appointed officials in the provinces, the hereditary village headman (*myo-thu-gyi*) from the local ruling line mediated the authority of such officials (*myo-wun*) since the 1600s. The British, however, abolished the village headman's position, leaving nothing between the center and the village. In addition to the fact that the colonial state sent its own officials out into the provinces to assert central control, the officials' modern education, salary, and career prospects directed his loyalty to the center. In his insightful scholarship on Southeast Asian patterns of urbanization, Richard O'Connor remarks: "Throughout the region [Southeast Asia], provincial patriarchs lost their autonomy and thus their resources as well to an ever more powerful urban center. Small wonder then that lesser towns stagnated while capital burgeoned."⁷⁰

⁶⁷Burma, *Report of an Enquiry into the Standard and Cost of Living of the Working Classes in Rangoon*, 3-12.

⁶⁸India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 136.

⁶⁹India, *Census of India, 1921*, vol. X (Burma) (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1923), 74, 80.

⁷⁰O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism*, 57.

The rise of Rangoon as Burma's epicenter derived furthermore from the establishment of academic institutions and the growth of communities of Western-educated Burmese and foreign intellectuals in the capital. "Although Mandalay remained the main religious center and repository of traditional Burman culture," Adas notes, "the introduction of Western education and the formation of an English-trained, Burmese elite provided Lower Burma with a counterbalance."⁷¹ O'Connor elucidates the role that modern education played in the centralization of power in the delta region under British colonial rule:

If at first a modern education was only a means to elite status, it gradually also became part of the meaning of being elite... As education opened up the elite to those of low birth but high ability and so eased a distinction of blood, it only strengthened a distinction of place: to get a good education you had to be or become urban.⁷²

Just as courts with their arts, etiquette and high culture had once been integral to the cultural status of a city, the concentration of educational institutions in the delta region played a key role in rendering the region the center of civilization and society in colonial Burma. Interestingly, then, although such technological advancements as the railway and steamboat had linked Rangoon to the ancient city of Mandalay more closely than ever before, the two capitals seemed to grow further apart: Rangoon emerged as a new cultural nucleus, symbolic of material, technological, institutional, and cultural progress, in contrast to Mandalay with its sacral, religious, and cultural heritage.

⁷¹ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 5.

⁷² O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism*, 72.

The Plural Society in Colonial Burma

Although urbanization, foreign immigration, and ethnic pluralism were not new to Burma,⁷³ the speed and intensity with which the delta region became an ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse urban center had unprecedented consequences for Burmese society. Historians have typically viewed these effects as the formation of what Furnivall termed a “plural society,” as mentioned above. Based on his twenty-some years of residence in Burma as a commissioner for the British administration (plus many more years spent in Burma after retirement), Furnivall produced most of the basic secondary scholarship on socio-economic life in colonial Burma and shaped profoundly the historical representations and analysis of colonial Burmese society. In his voluminous *Colonial Policy and Practice* (1947), Furnivall cites the following account given in a British command paper⁷⁴ from 1920 to encapsulate the impact of British colonial rule on Burmese society:

In India the British administration had to employ Indian agency for all posts, major and minor, which were not filled by Europeans. Indian commerce and Indian professions were gradually built up by the people themselves. All that was not European was Indian... But in Burma the people were in no position to compete with the influx of Indians who flooded in to exploit the resources of the country and to take up posts

⁷³ The port of Martaban, for instance, became a Portuguese trade and factory outpost around 1520 and in the mid-seventeenth century, Mergui became an important trading station and a settlement by English, French, and Dutch traders and adventurers developed. Cities likewise functioned as the focal points of *mandala* polities in pre-colonial Burma: the Pagan Dynasty (1044 – 1287) was based in Pagan, the Ava Dynasty (1364 – 1555) in Ava, the Toungoo Dynasty (1531 – 1752) in Pegu then Ava. As O'Connor points out, the city was the center of wealth, power and prestige prior to colonialism and remained the focal point of Southeast Asian social landscape in the colonial era. See Arthur Purves Phayre, *History of Burma : Including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim, and Arakan, from the Earliest Time to the First War with British India, Reprints of Economic Classics* (New York: A.M. Kelly, 1969), 264-65; John Clement Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma* (New Haven,: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1960), 17; G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March, 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest*, 1st ed. (London,: Cass, 1967), 364-69; O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism*, 71.

⁷⁴ A “command paper” refers to a paper laid before Parliament by command of the Crown.

for which no trained Burmans were available. In the administration, commerce and industry, it was less trouble and usually cheaper to recruit Indians than to train Burmans; and Indians, once they had gained a footing, naturally tended to build up an almost insurmountable barrier against the admission of Burmans.⁷⁵

In his pyramid scheme of the plural society, “foreign” men—i.e. people of non-Burmese descent or mixed ancestry and predominantly non-Buddhists—occupied the apex of colonial Burmese society: foreign men resided in Rangoon and dominated urban, prestigious, skilled and well-paying jobs. The further down the pyramid, the more likely those who fill it are agrarians, Buddhists and Burmese. Furnivall followed the paradigmatically colonial classificatory system, whereby he divided the population in Burma into “four main sections”—Europeans, Indians, Chinese, and Burmese—and argued that these four main groups “had nothing in common but the economic motive, the desire for material advantage.”⁷⁶

Census data from the early decades of the twentieth-century appear to support Furnivall’s conceptualization of the plural society. According to the 1931 Census Report, the majority of Burma’s working population was engaged in agriculture [see Table 5]. Seventy-five percent of Burmese earners and eighty-seven percent of earners of other indigenous ethnic groups—collective earners who, combined, comprised over eighty percent of the total earning population and over ninety percent of Burma’s total population—were engaged in agriculture [see Tables 6 & 7]. Table 7 also shows that while the indigenous population of Burma was comprised principally of agriculturalists, Chinese and Indians born outside Burma specialized in trade and unskilled labor, respectively. Europeans and Eurasians,⁷⁷ who specialized as “clerical

⁷⁵ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 116.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁷⁷ I use the term “Eurasian” to refer to the people and groups the British classified as “Anglo-Indian” or “Anglo-Burman”—terms that the British government applied even to people who had no traces of Indian or British connection. The term “Eurasian” is more accurate, as John Koop explains in his study of Eurasian people in Burma, because “if collective ancestries, both paternal and maternal, were to be examined, one would find English, Portuguese, Irish, Scottish, French, Dutch, Italian and German

workers,” “technical experts,” and “professionals,” clustered around the upper echelon of the socio-economic pyramid. The data corroborates Furnivall’s model of colonial Burmese society and its ethnic division of labor and economic specialization.

Table 5: Population by Race

RACE	MALE	FEMALE
Burmese (or “Burman”)	4,202,079	4,393,952
Other Indigenous Races		
• Arakan	106,817	101,434
• Chin	172,473	176,521
• Kachin	73,797	79,548
• Karen	682,121	685,552
• Mon	170,142	166,586
• Shan	454,051	446,153
Chinese (Cantonese, Fukienese, Yunnanese)	127,049	66,545
Indo-Burman	90,307	91,859
• Zerbadi	60,413	62,292
Indian Races	733,911	283,914
• Chittagonian	163,912	88,240
• Hindustani	132,842	42,125
• Tamil	93,435	56,453
• Telegu	123,940	35,819
European & Allied Races	7,885	3,766
Anglo-Indians	9,884	9,316
Other Races (e.g. Arab, Japanese, Jew, Persian)	1,836	1,203

Source: *Census of India* (1931), 242 – 245.

descent on one side, and on the other side Burmese, Indian, Shan and Karen descent all in different proportions and combinations”(Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, 1-2).

Table 6: Distribution of Economic Functions by Ethnicity in Burma

Economic Function	All Ethnicities	Burmese	Other Indigenous	Chinese	Indians born in Burma	Indians born outside Burma	Indo-Burman	Europeans & allied Races	Anglo-Indians
THE WHOLE PROVINCE	3,778,336	2,014,723	1,102,621	79,258	73,471	457,403	38,519	6,567	4,628
Cultivating Landowners	1,174,584	524,087	607,782	12,605	10,521	12,393	7,100	50	28
Cultivating Tenants	535,695	365,291	133,866	624	13,444	18,405	4,053	2	10
Agricultural Laborers	917,212	619,281	218,371	1,574	23,630	46,322	8,023	-	10
Herdsmen	26,547	6,696	5,438	869	1,256	11,693	588	5	1
Fishers & Hunters	50,389	31,472	14,571	458	483	2,376	980	5	6
Clerical Workers	47,341	18,497	3,916	1,875	2,075	17,957	1,359	420	1,117
Managers of Organized Industry	3,347	1,718	214	202	121	599	77	264	131
Craftsmen	191,689	109,031	18,676	11,387	3,907	44,398	2,815	458	887
Unskilled & Semi-skilled Laborers	435,293	166,381	41,242	15,014	8,994	197,561	5,152	369	352
Technical Experts & Professional Classes	23,611	11,827	3,565	529	611	3,583	698	1,981	761
Traders and Shop Assistants	246,065	99,066	24,248	32,621	6,163	76,386	6,122	576	479
Rentiers	44,048	26,921	12,257	602	771	2,299	759	153	259
Army, Navy, Air Force and Police	32,569	9,652	6,651	89	614	13,376	233	1,793	157
General Public Service Not in Other Categories	13,191	6,022	6,047	299	69	130	99	236	280
Medicine	18,192	11,815	3,691	333	243	1,688	215	69	88

Source: *Census of India* (1931), 300.

Table 7: Distribution of Occupations in Burma (Based on the 1931 Census Report)

Occupation	% of Workers
Agriculture	66.5
Industry	10.7
Trade	9.0
Transport	3.6
Professional and Liberal Arts	3.2
Animal Husbandry	2.3
Forestry	0.8
Public Administration	0.7
Domestic Service	0.7
Exploitation of Minerals	0.6
Police, etc.	0.5
Rentiers	0.1
Unproductive & Insufficiently Described	1.3

*Source: Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life* (1947), 39.

Post-Furnivall historians of Burma have by and large reinforced the plural society model of colonial Burma.⁷⁸ In the only study of the Eurasian population in Burma, John C. Koop underlines the ethnic and socio-economic segregation of the Eurasian community in colonial Burma, a community that resided primarily in Rangoon.⁷⁹ He explains that Eurasians increasingly felt superior to the indigenous people:

One result of this was to restrict to a minimum social contacts between the Eurasians and members of indigenous groups, excluding relatives... Eurasians proved to be politically reliable, and the British rulers preferred to employ them rather than indigenes in minor government

⁷⁸ Adas, *The Burma Delta*; Maurice Collis, *Trials in Burma* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1945); D. G. E. Hall, *Burma* (London; New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950); John Frank Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March, 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest*; Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*; Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); Albert Dennis Moscott, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974); Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*; Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*

⁷⁹ According to Koop, European rulers developed prejudices and discriminatory practices against the Eurasian population, not merely against the indigenous population, towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

positions, particularly in technical departments like the railways, posts and telegraph.⁸⁰

In a recent study of urban development in colonial Burma, Sarah Maxim similarly indicates that colonial Burma's urban landscape lacked the more symbiotic relationship between the rulers and the ruled and the resulting "mestizo culture" that was characteristic of treaty port cities that existed prior to colonialism. "One of the hallmarks of the period [of colonial port cities]," Maxim notes, "is the development of so-called mestizo cultures, in which immigrant groups intermarried with each other and with local peoples and developed a new, syncretic identity which was quite specific to this urban environment."⁸¹ A mestizo culture, she argues, was missing in colonial Burma.⁸² "A basic characteristic of colonial politics had been," Dorothy Guyot remarks, "the vast gulf separating the small, Western-educated elite from the tradition-bound villagers."⁸³ In contrast to mestizo society, colonial Burma lacked shared values, meaningful social discourse, and cross-cultural interaction. The kind of interaction that the plural society entailed, suggests Furnivall, was one of conflict:

Everywhere there is rivalry and some degree of conflict between Town and Country, Industry and Agriculture, Capital and Labor; but when rural interests are Burman, and urban interests mainly European, with Burman Agriculture and European Industry, Burman Labor and European Capital, the elements of conflict are so deep-seated and so explosive that even the best will on both sides can hardly avert disaster.⁸⁴

The notable exception to this otherwise unanimous view has come from Michael Adas. While he emphasizes the segmented nature of the plural society in colonial Burma, he reminds his readers in *The Burma Delta* that Furnivall's emphasis

⁸⁰ Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, 18-19.

⁸¹ Maxim, "The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon", 5.

⁸² See the following works: Adas, *The Burma Delta*; Taylor, *The State in Burma*; Guyot, "The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma."

⁸³ Guyot, "The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma," 184.

⁸⁴ J. S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, 3d ed. (Rangoon: Peoples' Literature Committee & House, 1957), xvii.

on the interrelations between disparate ethno-cultural groups tends to obscure the important cleavages which existed within each group.⁸⁵ Also pertinent is his observation that the “middle” section of Burma’s plural society was, contrary to the conventional interpretation of the layered pyramid, comprised of both immigrant and indigenous people. Adas underscores, in particular, the extensive participation of the Burmese in money lending and wholesale marketing which contrasted sharply with the comparatively low level of involvement in these activities on the part of indigenous people in other parts of Southeast Asia.⁸⁶ The British government’s annexation of Burma, its brusque abolition of the monarchy, and its imposition of direct administration, although violent, appears to have provided more radical economic opportunities for indigenous peoples than in such places as Malaya or Cambodia where kingship was not abolished. Adas gives detailed accounts of local entrepreneurs who flourished following the British cancellation of restrictions on rice exports and the abolition of royal sumptuary laws that had formerly prevented people from engaging in the conspicuous consumption which can follow and sometimes inspire economic success.⁸⁷ The following passage from *The Burma Delta* vividly describes the widespread diffusion of foreign consumer items, reflecting the prosperity gained by some ordinary agrarians as a result of economic growth accompanying British colonialism:

⁸⁵ Adas also points out that members of different ethno-cultural groups were found in varying proportions at most levels of common institutional systems. “Outside of the political sphere, no niches were the total monopoly of any one group, and control of positions at different levels was continually changing.” For instance, colonial Burma’s “middle-class,” was not the exclusive domain of Europeans and “Anglo-Indians.” A select group of upper middle-class Burmese and ethnic minorities who were educated abroad or fluent in English from missionary schooling similarly worked in the public administration (Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 123).

⁸⁶ As Adas indicates, wholesale trade and credit provision were left chiefly to the Chinese minorities and Chinese mestizos in Thailand, Java, and the Philippines, while in Malaya, both Chinese and Indian immigrants filled most of the middleman’s niches (Ibid., 110-11).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 71-76.

Successful agriculturalists often lived in houses made of wood rather than the traditional thatch and bamboo. Corrugated iron roofs, which were considered signs of prosperity, were common in the villages of many tracts... European and Indian textiles and cheap consumer items like kerosene lamps, canned milk, biscuits or sardines, mosquito nets, soap, and European glassware or crockery were found in all but the poorest villages. In the more fertile tracts cultivator-owners' (as well as landlords') houses commonly contained European furniture, mirrors, artificial flowers, gramophones, English lamps, looking glasses, metal safes or chests, and clocks. Their walls were decorated with portraits of Queen Victoria and Kaiser Wilhelm, Christmas cards, and pictures cut from the illustrated magazines of the day.⁸⁸

British intervention, in other words, offered possibilities and means of modernization and socio-economic mobility for locals, not merely for immigrant foreigners.

This point is evident in the pattern of urbanization in colonial Burma. While the delta region contained thirty-four of the seventy-nine towns listed in the 1921 census as "urban towns" and hosted the largest proportion of the urban population (623,021), twenty-six urban towns with a total population of 385,033 were located in central Burma. Approximately twenty percent of the population of the delta region, seventeen percent of that of coastal or central region, and fourteen percent of that of the whole province was considered urban.⁸⁹ Similarly in 1931, although urban towns and urban population were still concentrated in the delta region, they were nonetheless scattered throughout the province [refer to Figure 7 and Table 8]. While differences between urban and rural Burma were increasingly palpable, urbanization itself was more diffuse than is often depicted.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 75-76.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 71, 81.

⁹⁰ The 1921 Census Report remarks that there were highly recognizable differences between life in an ordinary village and life in large towns or even in the populated quarters of a smaller town. An urban or urbanizing town was distinguishable from "its size, density of population, high land-values, administrative system, corporate feeling, variety of population and of occupations, the convergence of lines of communication, the provision of public utilities, the possession of markets or shops, schools, pagodas, courts of law or revenue offices, each of which may be and generally is at once the cause and the effect of the development of others" (India, *Burma. Part I* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, 1923), 70).

Table 8: Samples of Urban Towns and Urban Population by Divisions (1931)

Urban Towns	Number of Urban Towns	Urban Population
BURMA	92	1,520,037
Tharrawaddy	7	51,312
Mandalay	6	183,203
Insein	6	51,857
Pegu	4	40,699
Magwe	4	40,476
Pyapon	4	37,848
Pakkoku	4	23,115
Bassein	3	56,908
Prome	3	50,182
Henzada	3	44,394
Toungoo	3	36,906
Yamethin	3	33,107
Maubin	3	25,156
Myaungmya	3	24,879
Amherst	2	72,081
Akyab	2	40,338
Myingyan	2	33,575
Thaton	2	23,462
Thayetmyo	2	21,790
Sagaing	2	19,199
Shwebo	2	15,025

Source: *Census of India* (1931), 49.

Even Adas, however, ultimately perpetuates the Furnivallian claim that an incommensurable divide between the modern colonizer (and eventually the Westernized local elite) and the traditional colonized defined colonial Burmese society. While noting that such modern public institutions as Western education and law were shared by Burmese people and foreigners alike, he nonetheless insists that the process of “Westernization” or modernization had little to do with Burmese people below the level of the English-educated elite: “The great majority of the cultural groups which made up the plural society in Burma adhered to their traditional institutions and participated only marginally, if at all, in Western institutions beyond

those in the economic sphere.”⁹¹ The historical representation of colonial Burmese society, then, has portrayed a devastating picture of Burma as an ethnically stratified society in which each ethnic group worked for its self-interest or for the domination of others.

Burmese Women and Foreign Men

Furnivall’s concept of the plural society, a concept that has been widely applied, theorized, and discussed in the context of Caribbean and African societies, has functioned as the cornerstone of scholarship on colonial Burma. Although it has allowed for complex historical and political analyses of socio-economic processes in colonial Burma, it has also led scholars to exaggerate the gulf between the urban and the rural, the foreign and the local, and the ruler and the ruled. Moreover, the plural society model has hyperethnicized studies of colonial Burma and created a false sense of monolithic homogeneity within each ethnic category at the expense of gender, class and other cleavages.

One glaring problem with the plural society model is its failure to consider the gendered nature of modern colonial rule. As mentioned above, Furnivallian scholarship posits that the influx of male immigrants under colonialism transformed Burmese society. The immigrant population of women in Burma paled in comparison to the male counterpart. Immigrants from India, 572,530 in 1921 and 617,521 in 1931, comprised roughly eighty percent of the total immigrant population in Burma. The female immigrant population from India for 1921 and 1931, 103,055 and 98,803, represented eighteen and sixteen percent respectively.⁹² This fact, ironically, has

⁹¹ Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 107.

⁹² Immigrants from China represented roughly fifteen percent of the total immigrant population in Burma in 1931, and the female portion comprised twenty-one percent. See India, *Census of India, 1921 (Burma)*, 90-91; India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 60-63.

translated into an implicit consensus that the impact of the development of the plural society only or mostly concerned men (local and immigrant). The plural society model, in other words, rules out indigenous women from the category of earners or economic actors and simultaneously implies that colonial rule ultimately impacted indigenous men, not indigenous women, who were disenfranchised by the immigrant socio-economic competitors.

This underlying principle of the plural society model is highly misleading because women, immigrant and indigenous alike, comprised a substantial portion of colonial Burma's working population. Even after the colonial administration excluded the female workers it had deemed were *part-time*, there were still 461 female workers per 1,000 male workers for all occupations in Burma in 1931.⁹³ More importantly, the effects of colonial rule on indigenous women are imperative to understanding the workings of colonial Burmese society precisely because the colonizers and their middlemen were predominantly men. For example, a staggering sixty-three percent of Rangoon's male population was born outside Burma whereas only one-quarter of Rangoon's female population were likewise born outside Burma.⁹⁴ Half of the female population in Rangoon, which constituted roughly one-third of the total population of

⁹³ The 1921 reported 673 female workers per 1,000 male workers for all occupations. The dramatic decrease between 1921 and 1931 was due to the difference in instructions issued for the two censuses. The proportion of female to male workers in 1921 was seen as giving an incorrect impression by the colonial officials "since a woman who gave only a small part of her time to a remunerated occupation was counted as a worker just as much as a man who spent all his working hours at his occupation" (India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 137). The change in instructions, of course, is reflective of colonial administrators' notion of what constitutes "work" and of the historical period when "domestic" or unpaid labor was not considered work (which may certainly be the case even today); correspondingly, it has little, if anything, to do with the question of whether a woman who worked "part-time" was actually a working person. The 1931 census report lists seventy-three percent of the female population in Burma at the time as "non-working dependants" (unfortunately, the census gives no data on the number of female non-working dependants). This number is highly misleading, as it fails to take into consideration the work done by the various female members of a family (especially agricultural). See India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 144-45; India, *Burma. Part I*, 246-55.

⁹⁴ India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 54.

Rangoon, was indigenous, predominantly Burmese.⁹⁵ Approximately eighty percent of these women, furthermore, were under the age of forty.⁹⁶ The indigenous female proportion of urban population throughout Burma remained consistent throughout the colonial period: the sex-ratio, given as the number of females per 100 males, was 101 in all urban towns for the indigenous races. The presence of Burmese women in urban areas of Burma, in fact, was striking enough for the census commissioner of Burma to remark in the 1931 Census Report that “[A]pparently Burmese women appreciate the amenities of town life.”⁹⁷

Table 9: Percentage Classification of the Urban and Rural Population by Ethnicity (1931)

Ethnicity	Whole Province	Urban Areas	Rural Areas
Indigenous	90.3	58.5	93.9
Indian	6.9	30.5	4.2
Chinese	1.3	4.7	0.9
Indo-Burmese	1.2	4.2	0.9
Others	0.2	2.0	-

Source: *Census of India* (1931), Pt. 1, 50.

The striking presence of Burmese women in urban areas of colonial Burma is significant. Consider the following facts: first, the relatively small total population of foreigners constituted over forty percent of the country’s urban population (Table 9). Secondly, the majority of foreigners in Burma were men. In 1931, approximately seventy-two percent of Indians, sixty-six percent of Chinese, and sixty-eight percent of Europeans were male (Table 10). Thirdly, since the early twentieth century and at least until the beginning of the 1930s, there were consistently more Burmese women

⁹⁵ The 1921 Census Report remarks that it is a fact which is not commonly realized that “one-half the female population (in Rangoon) is of indigenous races. Amongst the indigenous races and in both sexes all except about 3 to 4 percent are Burmese and a little under 2 percent are Karens” (India, *Burma. Part I*, 74).

⁹⁶ India, *Census of India, 1931 (Burma): Part One*, 53.

⁹⁷ India, *Ibid.*, 52.

than men in urban areas whereas there were three times more Indian men than women and twice more Chinese men than women.⁹⁸

Table 10: Sex and Civil Condition by Ethnicity (1931)

Ethnicity	Total Population	Female Population	Unmarried Female	Married Female	Widowed Female
All Ethnic Groups	14,647,497	7,166,821	3,734,136	2,680,877	751,808
Burmese	9,596,031	4,393,952	2,320,404	1,619,978	453,570
Other Indigenous Groups	4,623,991	2,316,266	1,179,943	876,016	260,307
Chinese	193,594	66,545	36,333	24,557	5,655
Indian	1,017,825	283,914	137,311	124,068	22,535
Indo-Burmese	182,166	91,859	51,481	31,533	8,845
European	11,651	3,766	N/A	N/A	N/A
Eurasian	19,200	9,316	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: *Census of India* (1931), Pt. 2, 54 – 56, 232.

Incidentally, the census reports do not supply information on the marital status of Europeans or Anglo-Indians in Burma. Why did the colonial state choose to omit, without any explanation, data on the marital condition of European and Anglo-Indian men and women in Burma? Is it possible that the unexplained omission was linked precisely to the fact that Burmese women in particular appreciated “the amenities of town life,” including the presence of foreign men? Or that the predominantly urban European and Anglo-Indian men—unmarried, married, and widowed alike—particularly appreciated the amenities of urban life in colonial Burma, i.e., the large population of Burmese women? The final point to be considered in reflecting upon the conspicuous population of urban Burmese women in colonial Burma, in other words, is a fact that the plural society model discounts but the colonial administration

⁹⁸Ibid.

undoubtedly recognized: the proliferating relationships between foreign men and indigenous women.

Interethnic unions between Burmese women and foreign men represented a common practice since at least the nineteenth-century.⁹⁹ But census data on the population of Eurasian and Indo-Burmese people in Burma indicates that these relations increased significantly as a consequence of the large influx of male immigrants under colonial rule [Table 11]. Given the miniscule population of European, Indian and Chinese women in Burma—which, combined, only composed five percent of the total female population in 1931—the substantial rise in interracial unions is hardly surprising. Burmese women in colonial Burma did exactly what Furnivallian scholars have denied the existence of: they engaged in interethnic sexual relations and produced a mestizo population.

Table 11: Eurasian and Indo-Burmese Population in Burma, 1891 – 1931

Year	Number of Eurasians	% Increase Over Preceding Decade	Number of Indo-Burmese	% Increase Over Preceding Decade
1891	7,132	N/A	N/A	N/A
1901	9,974	40	20,423	N/A
1911	11,106	11	59,729	192
1921	16,688	50	125,262	110
1931	19,200	15	182,166	45

Source: *Census of India* (1931), 230 - 32; Koop, *Eurasian Population in Burma* (1960), 22.

Where in the plural society model do Burmese women fit? How do the interracial relations between indigenous women and foreign men, and the resultant population of Eurasian and Indo-Burmese people square with studies that characterize

⁹⁹ According to John C. Koop's *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, mentioned in Chapter One, the children of Burmese women and Europeans 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.

Burma as not having a mestizo population? How did interethnic unions impact relations between Burmese men and women? What developments in modern colonial Burma have Furnivallian scholars missed by failing to account for the gendered nature of the plural society in colonial Burma? The following chapters address these questions and interrogate the various ways that processes of colonialism, modernization and nation-state formation directly impinged on the lives of women in Burma and on their representations in popular discourses.

Urban Burmese Women and New Cultural Institutions

This chapter has shed light on weaknesses in the plural society model and the ethno-nationalist narratives of colonial Burma by drawing attention to the large population of indigenous women in urban areas. The next chapter continues to examine this dimension of colonial Burmese society that has escaped scholarly inquiry. What were these women doing? How did their relationship to colonial rule differ from that of men, of rural men and women? How might they (and what they were doing) relate to the explosion of discourses about Burmese women? The chapter addresses these questions by focusing on the prominent ways that urban (and often young) Burmese women partook of new cultural institutions.

Take, for instance, the Burmese press which, as indicated in the previous chapter, developed into a thriving cultural medium in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Women journalists and editors appeared alongside women's columns in the popular press in the 1920s, signaling the growth of female readership.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the indigenous female population formed one of the most dependable patrons of the

¹⁰⁰ I will discuss the development of female authorship and readership in colonial Burma in detail in chapter four.

nascent yet burgeoning cinema industry in colonial Burma.¹⁰¹ The managing director of Globe Theaters, Ltd., the leading cinema company at the time, noted not only that “the illiterate classes who would not have otherwise cultivated the cinema habit are now becoming almost regular patrons in increasing numbers,”¹⁰² but also that Burmese women, more so than European women, frequented the cinemas. The next chapter reveals that new cultural media which developed in colonial Burma were more accessible to local communities than Furnivallian scholars suggest and that people in Burma actively experimented with various modes of modernization.¹⁰³ It looks in particular at the ways that modern institutions contributed towards the emergence of women in positions of cultural intermediaries.

¹⁰¹ The first cinema in Burma, “The Star,” was opened in 1908 in Rangoon. According to the Burma Board of Film Censors, there were sixty-five cinemas outside Rangoon in such towns as Mandalay, Maymyo, Myingyan, Yenangyaung, and Bassein, and fifteen to seventeen in Rangoon by 1928. The large cinema companies operating in Burma at this time included the Madan Theaters, Ltd., the pioneer of the cinema industry in British India, and others such as The Globe, Cinema de Paris, Raphael Picture Palace, Olympia Cinema, and Elphinstone and Edison Bioscope. At its inception, Burma’s cinema industry appears to have been dominated by theaters that catered exclusively to European, Eurasians, and the indigenous elite. By the mid-1920s however films shown most prevalently were Burmese: in 1927, there were seventy-four Burmese films shown in Burma, in comparison to thirty-six Chinese and forty-five Westerns films (Oral Evidence of the Burma Board of Film Censors, 18th January 1928, Government of India, *Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28, Evidence*, vol. III (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publications Branch, 1928), 521-40). A voluminous report on colonial Burma’s cinema industry from 1928, based on responses to questionnaires and oral interviews conducted and collected by the Indian Cinematograph Committee, indicates that the cinema was increasingly popular with Burmese people and that incomes from cinemas dedicated to showing Burmese films were proportionately larger than from the cinemas showing Indian, Western, or Chinese films (India, *Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28, Evidence*, 521-40).

¹⁰² The report suggests that cinemas in Burma were patronized by people of various backgrounds—Burmese, Europeans, Eurasians, Indians, and Chinese, the educated and the literate as well as “uneducated” and the illiterate, and the working and the middle classes—and the cinema houses displayed a variety of films including Western features, Burmese, Indian and Chinese films, and serials. (“Written evidence of F. H. Sidhwa, Managing Director, Globe Theaters, Ltd., of India, Burma, and Ceylon,” in India, *Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28, Evidence*, 639-50).

¹⁰³ Ironically, Furnivall himself mentions that Burmese people held a monopoly in the Burmese film industry as well as the Burmese popular press (Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, 164). There are other modern institutions such as administrative and legal institutions, novels and book clubs that ought to be examined. Aside from Furnivall’s brief comment on the lack of such public institutions as museums, art galleries and, outside of Rangoon, public libraries in colonial Burma, there is no historical analysis on the development of modern public institutions in Burma. I discuss modern educational institutions in the following chapter, but other modern public institutions fall beyond the scope of this dissertation.