The Modern Burmese Woman and the Politics of Fashion in Colonial Burma

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In the mid-1930s, criticisms of modern women’s habits, clothing, and hairstyles exploded in the Burmese popular press, showing that “modern fashion” made a man no less virtuous and patriotic but rendered a woman immoral and unpatriotic. This article examines the nature of these criticisms and their motivations, and reveals that the controversy over the dress and comportment of modern women was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon sustained by irreducibly plural interests. It argues that neither the appeal for traditionalism and national sufficiency in the face of multiple modern and colonial temptations, nor the changing tides of Burmese nationalist movements sufficiently explain the preoccupation with modern women’s fashion, and suggests that the discourse on modern women needs to be analyzed as stemming from a profound unsettling of existing notions of masculinity and femininity, and its effect on relations between the sexes.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of debates in the popular press on the “new” or “modern” woman. The topics of these often controversial debates, which raged from Japan, China, Siam, and India to South Africa, Germany, England, and America, included female education, franchise and employment, the role of women in the home and the public arena, and the relationship between women and consumerism (Barlow 1994; Barmé 2002; Bernstein 1991; Bingham 2004; Chatterjee 1993; Edwards 2000; Göle 1996; Sato 2003; Stevens 2003). British Burma was no exception. Intellectuals, writers, journalists, politicians, and monks questioned both the potential and the danger of toe tet yei (tui⁹⁹ tak⁹ re⁶⁹)¹ or the “progress” and “modernization” of women. Of particular interest to the various pundits was the adoption of khit san (khet⁶⁷ chan⁶⁷) or “modern” fashion by women, and increasingly through the 1930s, articles, editorials, and cartoons critical of the clothing, hairstyles, aesthetics, and habits—or what I refer to in this article as “bodily practices”—of modern women appeared in the vibrant Burmese popular press. Articles titled “The Crest-Hair Problem,” for instance, declared that women should stop

¹In this paper, I provide the rough phonetic equivalent to Burmese words followed by their transliteration, according to a slightly modified version of the Library of Congress transliteration system, in parentheses.
“crested” or raising the front section of their hair. The discussions surrounding the “problem” with modern women went hand in hand with visual representations of contemporary Burmese women.

Figure 1 shows a caricature of *tet khit thami* (*tak‘khet’ sa mĩ’*) or a “modern girl” printed in March 1938 in the leading newspaper *Thuriya* (The Sun). Clad in all the external trappings of modernity—high heels, wristwatch, purse, a pet dog on a leash, a cigarette between her lips—the stylish modern girl stands in sharp contrast to the older woman, dressed in a simple blouse and wearing a pair of slippers. The intense reaction of the older woman, who stares in shock at the young woman and exclaims “Oh my!” (*huik‘*), evokes the latter’s disregard for tradition. Her aloof demeanor and obvious indifference conjure up the need to tame and discipline her, as does her designation as *thami* (*sa mĩ’*)—which denotes “daughter” but connotes a young, unmarried woman—that renders her unattached and free floating.

The public castigation of the bodily practices of modern women culminated in the late 1930s, when women dressed in the *khit san* fashion were harassed by groups of *yahan byo* (*rahan’‘* pyui), young but fully ordained Buddhist monks, who attempted to tear their blouses off with hooks and scissors. Critics denounced the fashion sensibilities of modern women as unethical and unpatriotic; whereas the espousal of *khit san* fashion by Burmese men went unremarked,

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2 *Tet khit* is translated as the “age of progress,” and in the adjectival form means “progressive” or “modern.” In colonial Burmese literature, various other words such as *khit thit* (new age), *khit san* (trendy), *khit hmi* (up-to-date), and *toe tet* (advanced) were also used to refer to the “modern.”
similarly “Westernized” behavior by a woman was construed as a flagrant violation of cultural norms and an insult to Burmese nationalist movements.

This article examines the nature of these criticisms and their motivations, and the social and political roles and meanings encoded in the bodily practices of modern Burmese women. Historical scholarship on dress or what Emma Tarlo has termed “the problem of what to wear” (1996) in colonial Asia has contributed important insights into the way that dress codes embody larger social and cultural ethics and norms and make powerful statements about identity. It has revealed, in particular, that clashes or changes in the fashioning of the body often signify larger social and cultural conflicts and transformations. For instance, studies on the subject of cloth and clothing by historians and anthropologists of South Asia have shown that early Indian nationalists polarized Western(ized) and Indian dress, especially the *khadi* or homespun cotton cloth, as sartorial symbols of British colonial rule and the independence movement (Bayly 1986; Cohn 1996; Tarlo 1996; Trivedi 2003). Although the field of Southeast Asian history has been slow to see dress as a part of political history, recent scholarship on Indonesia and the Philippines has shed light on the centrality of the semiotics of dress to various debates and political strategies on both sides of the colonial struggle in Southeast Asia (Nordholt 1997; Roces 2005).

The “problem of what to wear” in Burma has not been given much scholarly attention, although even a cursory reading of popular press material from early twentieth-century Burma reveals that the clothing and habits of modern women were topics of intense—and at times violent—confrontations involving both men and women, and monastic and lay communities. The lack of scholarship on the problem of what to wear is also surprising given the fact that the “no footwear” campaign against the wearing of shoes by foreigners at pagodas was the source of one of the most publicized disputes between the British and the Burmese, seen by the colonizers and the colonized alike as emblematic of the anticolonial struggle (Mendelson 1975, 197). What little exists by way of an analysis of material culture in colonial Burma attributes the criticisms of *khit san* fashion to the anticolonial campaign of boycotting foreign goods triggered by the economic crisis of the 1930s, which aggravated already existing communalist hostilities and anticolonial sentiments (Adas 1974; Furnivall 1991; Gravers 1999; Singh 1980). Admittedly, early nationalists in Burma, as in British India, associated imported garments with colonialism and cast their protest against modern clothing as a symbolic rejection of British colonial rule. Anticolonial politics, however, fail to explain why women, not men, became the targets of public criticism. Although Burmese men appropriated and fashioned modern or “Westernized” habits no less actively than did Burmese women, discussions in the popular press linked the female gender to low-brow consumerism and materialism. The modern Burmese girl alone, not the modern Burmese lad, was portrayed as a willing culprit of imperialist, capitalist, and Western modernity.

The literature on the politics of dress posits that men could wear Western dress because they represented nationalists in doing so, whereas women, as bearers and wearers of tradition, were required to wear national or ethnic dress.
It is an argument that has certainly proved profitable in some studies of the politics of dress. In the case of colonial Indonesia, for example, Jean Gelman Taylor has argued that the Western-style “suit” embodied the “power and ability to enforce power” (1997, 100), thus Indonesian men in suits “declared themselves to be heirs of the Dutch in their roles as rulers” and “forge[d] new paths into the nation’s future” (113). At the same time, their wives and fellow female politicians and officials in traditional style of dress were rendered the “keepers of national essence” (113) and excluded from power and modernity. Yet if the case of Indonesia reinforces the argument made by scholarship on dress in South Asia, that there was “more at stake in women signifying the purity of their ‘culture’ than for men” (Alwis 1999, 181), Mina Roces has argued convincingly in her study of twentieth-century Philippines that “women were not necessarily always the ‘bearers of tradition’ even in the gendering of costume” (2005, 355). In post-independence Philippines, as she shows, it was men clad in traditional attire who represented the nation (356). The case of colonial Burma similarly challenges “the binary division of men/modernity/political power/Western dress versus women/tradition/no political power/national dress” (355). By and large, Burmese male politicians, not only nationalist men, dressed in traditional Burmese attire. Even those who were “Westernized,” such as Dr. Ba Maw—a Burmese Christian barrister turned chief minister (1937–39), with a bachelor’s degree from Cambridge and a doctorate from the University of Bordeaux, who spoke Burmese with an English accent—chose longyi (a sarong-like traditional skirt worn by both sexes) and Burmese slippers over trousers and shoes.

What wider socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes and challenges did the bodily practices of modern Burmese women, and their criticisms, symbolize in colonial Burma? This article shows that the preoccupation with the external manifestations of modern women was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The rich literature on the “new woman” and the “modern girl” has been instructive in demonstrating the multivalence of modern women’s fashion. Take, for example, the bobbed hair. It served to distinguish the new woman, an icon of the increased presence and participation of women in the public sphere, from the “old woman.” It was a symbol of the political, economic, and sexual emancipation of the modern girl, “the vanguard of a changing age to battle old customs” (Silverberg 1991, 244). Yet if bobbed hair was synonymous with serious purpose or feminism in some contexts, in others, it was the telltale sign of the ascendancy of a new commercial culture that threatened to remove women from radical politics and enmesh them, instead, in frivolous consumerism (Edwards 2000; Silverberg 1991).

In colonial Burma, too, the controversy over the bodily practices of modern women stood for and was sustained by irreducibly plural motives and interests. The problem of what to wear was not only relevant but also central to serious political concerns in colonial Burma; the iconic fashionable modern woman/girl was essential to and constitutive of the conceptualizations of the “Burmese”
nation-state and national identity. At the same time, however, the assault on the
dress and comportment of modern women signified more than merely a plea for
national sufficiency. I argue that neither the appeal for traditionalism in the face
of multiple modern and colonial temptations, nor the changing tides of political
movements—that is, the emergence of young, Marxist-Leninist nationalists—
sufficiently explain the appearance of the criticisms of the modern woman/girl.
The discourse on the contentious feminine figure also needs to be analyzed as
a product and expression of two distinct but interrelated developments in colonial
Burma: first, a crisis in masculinity, resulting largely from the political, social, and
economic displacement of indigenous men, and second, shifts in understandings
of gender roles and relations, namely the newfound social mobility and cultural
authority of educated and urban working women in Burma. I argue that fashion,
as the epitome of change and mutability, symbolized these disruptions in existing
notions of masculinity and femininity and the effects of these developments on
relations between the sexes.

My argument that the bodily practices of modern women functioned as
metaphorical shortcuts for new social formations and hierarchies, as well as dis-
placed fears and anxieties, draws on the literature on the new woman and the
modern girl. For example, Sarah Stevens argues that in interwar China, the
new woman and the modern girl reflected conflicting emotions arising not
only from a changing gender ideology but also “from ideas of modernity, pro-
gress, urbanization, and ‘new’ China” (2003, 100). Similarly, Louise Edwards
points out that the discourses about the “policing” of modern women in repub-
lican China were “synecdochical discussions about governing a modernizing
(population)” by reformist intellectuals who sought to reclaim their role as
leading advisers for the nation. As such, “focusing on the detailed behavior of
China’s women obscures the deeper significance of the debate” (Edwards
2000, 115). This article reveals that discussions about modern women in colonial
Burma were likewise synecdochical. It also suggests, however, that the behavior
of real Burmese women was not irrelevant to the deeper significance of the dis-
cussions. In fact, in the case of colonial Burma, the deeper significance of the
assault on the modern woman/girl can only be unpacked in relation to real
Burmese women whose behavior unsettled normative masculine and feminine
identities during a period rife with dynamic social and cultural transformations.

THE SHEER BLOUSE AND THE MODERN WOMAN

The first decades of the twentieth century represent a turning point in
Burmese history that signaled the transition of Burma from a premorden
polity to a modern nation. The British colonial state administered the country
from Rangoon, an urban and industrialized center that extended its control to
modern borders it was responsible for producing (Furnivall 1956; O’Connor
The growth of new cultural institutions and media transformed the face of urban life. More than 200 newspapers and periodicals were in circulation by the end of the 1930s (compared to 103 and 44 in 1921 and 1911, respectively), and such modern cultural media as magazines, newspapers, novels, cartoons, and films surfaced not only as low-cost sources of information but also as avenues of public discourse, art, and entertainment, and as increasingly potent purveyors of role models, gender identities, ethical norms and values, and other icons of identity (“Confidential Memo” 1946; India 1923, 189). Burmese enrolled by the thousands in Anglo-vernacular schools that offered secondary education in English, and educated elites experimented with new forms of collective political, social, and cultural organization through literature, the popular press, and the cinema (Aung San Suu Kyi 1987; Furnivall 1956; Hla Pe 1968). Buddhist monks involved themselves in political activity, and student-led groups promoted a discourse of secular progress and Marxist and nationalist revolution (Maung Maung 1980; Mendelson 1975; Taylor 1987). The central role that village organizations played in the Saya San rebellion of 1930–32, the largest peasant uprising in Burmese history, symbolized the growing influence of modern political organizations in Burma’s countryside (Adas 1974; Aung-Thwin 2003; Herbert 1982).

Changes in sartorial norms and practices likewise materialized during this transitional period. The influence of British colonial rule on men’s fashion became visible among upper-class Burmese men, who began to wear belts with their longyi and shoes instead of slippers. The most noticeable change in men’s fashion, however, was in their hairstyle: from the long hair usually coiled into a pile at the top of the head, customary among both men and women, to cropping the hair short in a style referred to as bou ke (buil’ ke, “the English cut”), or shaving the head entirely (see figure 2) (Shwe Khaing Thar 1951, 81–84).

Figure 2. The “English cut” (bou ke). Source: The Screen Show Weekly, June 29, 1934.
Women’s fashion did not follow this trend in hairstyle but witnessed a similar process of trimming. The white extensions of women’s longyi were altogether cut off, and longyis in general were shortened so that they reached down roughly to the ankle instead of to the feet. The length of the top, likewise, decreased and revealed more of the waistline. The most revolutionary development in women’s fashion, however, was the eingyi-pa (ainkyi’på) or sheer blouse: an extremely sheer muslin blouse fastened at the neck and down one side with detachable ornate buttons. The signature characteristic of the blouse was its gossamer quality that exposed the corset-like lace bodice called zar bawli (jā bau lī), which closely resembled European lingerie (see figure 3). It was the sheer blouse that distinguished khit san or “modern” fashion and the modern woman (khet ‘chan’ sū). Yet just as the women who wore the sheer blouse necessarily wore the lace bodice, there were other stylistic choices, such as the amauk (a mok’) or “crest hair,” that were inseparable from modern fashion. The “crest” referred to curly bangs piled high in the forehead, made possible by the nascent development of the perm (see figure 4). Equally indispensable were high heels, cosmetics, and the icons of technical modernization: The preferred skin fashion was to “paint” the face with such cosmetics as tinted powders, blush, and lipstick (painting the face, of course, also entailed a skin regime of cleansing with soap and moisturizing with lotion), and modern fashionable women wore wrist-watches, read magazines, used typewriters, and drove cars. Last but not least, the modern woman in her sheer blouse was commonly depicted in conversation with a similarly fashionable young man, insinuating that the open mingling of adolescent or adult (presumably single) men and women was itself a modern development (see figure 5). Inextricably intertwined with new activities, the modern woman personified a modern mentality. Her attitude toward the function and the propriety of clothing (and underclothing), and her conception of feminine versus masculine hairstyle, figure, skin tone, and hygiene refashioned the contours of femininity and masculinity.

But whose idea of the feminine did the modern woman personify? Such elements of modern fashion as high heels, handbags, and wristwatches were quintessentially Western, and the “English cut” and the crest hair were certainly influenced by the “Western” association of long hair with women and short hair with men. At the same time, however, long hair was prized as an essential component of womanly beauty in Burma well before the twentieth century. Permed hair was also still coiled into the customary hair bun called sadohn, as shown earlier (figure 2). The identification of bodily curves and fair skin tone with women, furthermore, was in no way “foreign” to Burma. While “underclothing” was itself a novel concept, women wore the lace bodice to reveal it, not to conceal it, and the combination of the sheer blouse and the lace bodice closely resembled the already existing custom of wearing an unfastened jacket over an exposed corset-like undergarment. It is no wonder that a Burmese poem about the
flimsy quality of the sheer blouse and the lace bodice expressed uncertainty in locating the cultural origin of the modern woman:

I’m dressed with a sweet face and in a sheer blouse; as though foreign (*kala*), as though Burmese, Of course it tears my lace-bodice (*zar bawli*), should you so pull my hand! (Shwe Khaing Thar 1951, 86)
The twofold description of the sheer blouse and/or the woman wearing the sheer blouse as *kala* (*ku la*”, variously translated as “foreign,” “Western,” “white,” “British,” or “Indian”) and as Burmese aptly captures the ambivalent relationship of the modern fashion to the new and to the traditional, to the foreign, and to the local. On the one hand, “as though kala, as though Burmese” suggests that the sheer blouse and/or the female subject of the poem was simultaneously *kala* and

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Figure 4. The crest hair (*amauk*). Source: Flyer for the movie *Beloved Comrade*, 1934.

3The word *kala* not only refers to the British but more generally to foreigners. In fact, the word usually refers to Indians in Burma today, and an Indian *kala* is distinguished from a British *kala*, for instance, by adding the word “white” (*pyu*) when referring to the British foreigner (thus, *kala-pyu*).
Burmese and, therefore, fused or assimilated. It implies, alternatively, that whether the woman/blouse was *kala* or Burmese depended on which specific aspect(s) of the woman/blouse was highlighted or suppressed. On the other hand, “as though *kala*, as though Burmese” may be interpreted as “not quite *kala* and not quite Burmese,” in which case the woman/sheer blouse was neither *kala* nor Burmese—at least not completely. These various interpretations of the hybridity of modern fashion share the assumption that it contained both foreign and local understandings of femininity.

By and large, *khit san* fashion referred to such hybrid outfits and paralleled the development of hybrid clothes elsewhere in colonial Asia, where “foreign” and imported articles of clothing had become increasingly available and affordable. As Tarlo points out, “the adoption of a mixture of European and Indian clothes was extremely popular and also relatively uncontroversial in Indian cities, where European garments were readily available for purchasing or for copying” (1996, 49). Similarly, in colonial Indonesia, “mixtures of ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of dressing [were] not an exception but a normal way of life” (Nordholt 1997, 2). In Burma, too, imported items of clothing were no longer exotic

Figure 5. The modern woman. Source: Flyer for the movie *Modern Woman*, 1934.
goods, and hybrid clothes were not only popular but the standard for modern fashion. As in British India, of which Burma was a province until 1937, a significant portion of the Burmese population was buying imported machine-made clothing or textiles. Under British colonial rule, Burma developed a highly specialized single-product export economy focused on rice, which made Burma rely heavily on the import of manufactured goods, a strikingly large proportion of which consisted of commodities related to the apparel industry: cotton yarn, thread, textiles, and finished items of clothing (Andrus 1948, 171–80; Aye Hlaing 1964, 5–41). While the cheap labor provided by the rural female weavers (for whom weaving was a subsidiary, seasonal occupation) allowed the industry of coarse but cheap and strong cotton longyi and blankets to survive, the local cotton industry could not match the foreign competitors in producing a cheap and yet higher-quality product (Aye Hlaing 1964, 26–29).

In addition to such developments in the clothing industry, advertisements of apparel in colonial Burmese newspapers and magazines contributed to the fashioning and popularization of hybrid modern outfits. The advertisements were, almost without exception, in Burmese or in both Burmese and English, and intended to shape the taste of Burmese consumers and to make the emerging hybrid style palatable, thus marketable. The advertisements also assured those wary of radical alterations to their appearance that they could be fashionable without altogether abandoning the familiar or adopting the foreign. The hybrid modern outfit was not only a sartorial choice necessitated by changes in the clothing industry but also one that appealed to those who endeavored to modernize their image without imitating their colonizers.4

As the public debate over whether a Burmese woman ought to wear the sheer blouse indicates, however, even hybrid outfits provoked accusations of sacrificing the “pure” and “authentic” self for an imitation of the foreign.

THE PROBLEM OF WHAT TO WEAR: THE FRIVOLOUS AND SELF-INDULGENT MODERN GIRL

The problem of what to wear first surfaced in the late 1910s and the early 1920s, a period in Burmese history associated with the country’s political awakening and the emergence of wunthanu (vamsānu), “patriots” or “protectors of

4The hybridization of apparel was not a novel practice per se, nor was it unique to Burma. For instance, Maurizio Peleggi has pointed out that the refashioning of the appearance of the Siamese royalty in the latter decades of the nineteenth century followed the established pattern of hybrid clothing that signified their royal status and “connection to a foreign civilization that was instrumental to the definition of their own identity and yet distinct” (2002, 60). In all likelihood, the modern hybrid outfit in Burma similarly mirrored the established custom among Burmese elites of fusing exotic fabrics (mainly from India during the precolonial era) and indigenous clothing to create a distinctive style symbolic of their cosmopolitanism.
national interest.” The turning point came in 1917, when the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (which became the General Council of Burmese Associations or GCBA in 1920) passed for the first time resolutions of a political and anticolonial nature (Mendelson 1975, 196–235). These resolutions ranged from the decision to send a delegation to Lord Montagu, the secretary of state to India, who was preparing a report on proposed constitutional reforms in Burma, to a strong protest against Europeans wearing shoes in pagoda precincts, contrary to Burmese custom (Maung Maung 1980, 13).

It was also in 1917 that Thuriya began publishing cartoons and articles that accused the women who wore the sheer blouse of betraying wunthanu (Shwe Khaing Thar 1951, 86). The articles claimed that in an era of wunthanu, the appropriate behavior for Burmese women was to thrust aside the sheer blouse and to wear clothing more befitting their lineage. In mocking the sheer blouse, the writers and cartoonists for Thuriya saw themselves as patriots who propagated the idea that women, like men, had responsibilities to the Burmese nation. Thuriya’s censure of the sheer blouse was reinforced shortly thereafter by the leading women’s nationalist organization, Wunthanu Kommaryi Athin (vamsānu kumnārī a saṅī, hereafter referred to as Kommaryi), a subsidiary branch of the GCBA founded in 1919 with a membership of approximately 300 elite women—wives of officials and prosperous women entrepreneurs—to support the nationalist efforts of Burmese men (Aye Aye Maw 1999, 51–55). The members of the Kommaryi condemned the wearing of the sheer blouse and of imported garments in general and began to wear light brown, homespun cotton blouses or pinni (paṅ’nī) and longyis with local yaw designs originating in the western hill tracts of Burma.

These critiques of the sheer blouse reflected Burma’s political climate in the late 1910s and the early 1920s, which was discernibly influenced by Gandhi’s swadeshi (indigenous goods) and swaraj (self-rule) movements in British India. It was no coincidence that the most prominent member of the GCBA at the time was U Ottama, also known as the “Gandhi of Burma.” A widely traveled Buddhist monk credited with the politicization of the Burmese Sangha, U Ottama had spent many years in India imbibing the political ideas and strategies of the Indian National Congress (he was a member of the Indian National Congress of Bengal from 1918), and he introduced the slogan “Home Rule or Boycott” to Burma (Maung Maung 1980, 14,19). Like early Indian nationalist critiques of the colonial state, the wunthanu movement in Burma focused on

5U Ottama was famous for the inflammatory anticolonial speeches that he gave throughout small towns and villages in Burma (as well as for his letter to the governor of Burma entitled “Craddock Go Home” and published in Thuriya). The colonial government arrested him for one of these speeches, tried him for sedition, and sentenced him to eighteen months imprisonment—the first time in colonial Burmese history that a prison term was handed out for making a political speech. The GCBA organized a day of mourning for U Ottama on July 11, 1921, accompanied by a public demonstration at the Bandoola Park (Aye Aye Mu 1981, 27–28; see also Maung Maung 1980, 14–16; Mendelson 1975, 199–206).
the government’s economic policies, which undermined local industries and impoverished the Burmese common folk, and advocated the use of local goods and a boycott of imported products.

The proponents of wunthamu also drew attention to the detrimental moral implications of colonial rule. Take, for example, the critiques of the sheer blouse in the newspaper Bandoola. In the October 1927 issue, the editor wrote a classical Burmese four-stanza verse blaming Burmese women who wore the sheer blouse for inciting men to be excessively lustful (Bo Min 1927). The editor’s criticism of the sheer blouse stemmed from his opinion that it was titillating and provoked men to be immoral; women who wore such clothing were themselves depraved and the source of moral degeneracy. A boycott of the sheer blouse and the revival of indigenous clothing would thus restore the moral integrity of Burmese men and women.

Accusations of the immodesty of the sheer blouse bear a striking resemblance to the criticisms by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in neighboring colonial Ceylon of the short, sleeveless jackets made out of transparent cloth and worn with sarees (Alwis 1999). Between late 1920s and early 1930s, many Sinhala newspapers and journals published a barrage of articles and poems about the short dresses and skirts and the tiny transparent jackets worn by anglicized, Christianized, bourgeois Sinhala women. These articles and poems compared such apparel to the “garb of prostitutes and actresses, the epitome of moral degradation in such discourses” (Alwis 1999, 183). The women who wore the sheer jacket were likened to “shameless white hussies” (183) and, as in Burma, accused of simultaneously satiating and provoking the lecherous glances of young men. Likewise, the Sinhala critics of the sheer blouse advocated a “respectable,” alternative outfit—comprising a long and preferably white saree and a jacket that covered the shoulders, midriff, back, and legs—more befitting their Sinhalese heritage (181).

Yet whereas in colonial Ceylon, such criticisms were effective in convincing Sinhala women to reject the Anglicized outfit and to adopt the “respectable alternative” instead, the pinni blouse and the yaw longyi failed to muster a popular following in Burma. Shwe Khaing Thar notes that the pinni blouse and the yaw longyi were passé by the late 1910s and that, as an old Burmese adage points out, it was considered to be good only for “profuse perspiration” (1951, 86). The failure, in all likelihood, was a result of the fact that wearing the pinni-yaw was a symbolic, political action taken by members of an elite nationalist women’s association. Even a staunch nationalist magazine columnist such Mya Gale, an indefatigable pundit of the duties of women toward the nation who wrote monthly columns titled “Women and National Progress” and “Women and Development” for Toetetyei (Progress Monthly), declared that wearing the pinni blouse and the yaw longyi hardly counted as patriotism (1934, 31). The predominant response to the critiques of the sheer blouse, rather, was simply to keep wearing it (Shwe Khaing Thar 1951, 87–88).
By the late 1930s, however, not only Thuriya and Bandoola but also numerous widely circulating journals and magazines featured articles that discussed some aspect of modern fashion, whether it was the sheer blouse or the crest hair, as a grave problem for Burmese society. Take, for example, the writings by Amar, who later became one of the most distinguished and prolific writers-cum-social critics in Burma (Kyan 1978, 306—308). In an article entitled “Our Practices” (Tuî Payoga), published in the 1936 New Year’s Special Edition of Myanmar Alin, Amar indicted young Burmese women for their blind admiration and adoption of modern culture. Though Amar was only twenty years of age and at the beginning of her career as a writer and journalist at the time the article was published, her left-leaning disposition was already apparent. She claims that modern Burmese women are obsessed with fashion and with adorning themselves with whatever comes from abroad. She adds that modern women want to own cars, wear diamonds the size of an elephant, and spend their spare time living a “high life” of “tea parties,” “dinner parties,” and “card games” as though they were “the wives of British men” (1936, 9). Most disquieting for Amar was her conviction that the desire of modern women for a trendy, “Western” lifestyle prompted them—not only the young women but also their mothers—to choose their husbands (or sons-in-laws, in the case of the mothers) on the basis of a man’s wealth. She thus equates the understanding of “progress” and “modernization” of young women to capitalism and consumerism, which she asserts had little to do with the greater good of the Burmese people.

Like many Indian nationalists who condemned the destruction of “Indian tradition” for the sake of “meaningless imitation” of Western dress, she accused her fellow Burmese youth of thinking that the mere trappings of modernity could amount to progress (Cohn 1996; Tarlo 1996, 11, 24). Her emphasis, however, was decidedly on the (mis)understanding of “progress” and the critique of capitalism and consumerism, not on the assault on tradition. This is not to suggest that other critics of the Westernized dress and habits of modern women, such as the caricature discussed earlier (figure 1), were not concerned with the preservation of tradition. The juxtaposition, in figure 1, of the old woman and the modern girl, and the former’s indignation at the sight of the latter, are intended to signify the erosion of Burmese society and tradition at the hands of the fashion-crazed youth. At the same time, writers for a popular contemporary bilingual magazine, Ngan Hta Lawka, declared that they detected increased anxiety over the “revolutionary” thinking of the younger generation. In an article titled “The Age of Criticism in Burma,” H. M. claims that in Burma, “there are people, steeped in conservatism and in tradition, who think of the past in terms of the

Ngan Hta Lawka Magazine (The World of Books) was a forty-eight-page, bilingual (English and Burmese) magazine published from February 1929 until December 1941 by the Burma Education Extension Association, an association founded in 1928 by John S. Furnivall. The purpose of the magazine, first and foremost, was educational. Foregrounding translation from Burmese to English and vice versa, it sought to cultivate “East–West” intellectual, cultural, and literary exchanges, relations and understanding (Nwe Nwe Myint 1992).
golden [age] and who are shedding tears because of the revolutionary ideas of the young people born after the advent of the Kala [the British]” (H. M. 1936, 566). The struggle between old-fashioned elders and the “revolutionary” youth to privilege competing visions of modernity was one of the defining characteristics of new social formations in colonial Burma. The critique of the bodily practices of modern women may then be interpreted as an effort by the old guard to make traditional values and customs relevant to the project of modernity.

However, the generational element of the denunciation of the modern girl can be overemphasized, as many of the critics, like Amar, were themselves young men and women advocating change and even revolution. Amar’s view of the capitalist and materialist lifestyle as antithetical to progress, particularly toward national independence, represented a view advocated by the new generation of nationalists who challenged the older generation of established politicians. The 1930s saw the growth of a student nationalist movement strongly influenced by Marxism-Leninism, and Amar herself was a part of this movement and one of the pioneering female student activists. Out of this student movement emerged young Burmese male politicians who became leading members of the Dobama Asi-ayone (Our Burma Party), founded in 1932. Tellingly, they titled themselves thakin (master) as a symbol of the idea that the Burmese people—not the British—were rightful masters of Burma and as an expression of their goal to transform Burma into a classless society of only masters.7 These student activists, like Marxist and socialist intellectuals elsewhere, were of the position that consumerism “distract[ed] modern women from the more pressing issues of politics and class” (Sato 2003, 56).

That the nationalist political discourse of the thakin[s] relied increasingly throughout the 1930s on an “us-versus-them” rhetoric, that is, Burmese nationalists versus colonialists, also compounded unsympathetic perceptions of the modern girl. A striking example of this anticolonial rhetoric is provided by records published by the thakin[s]. In their publications, the thakin[s] espoused a binary concept of the “Our Burmese” or dobama (tu’i bama) versus “Their Burmese” or thumya-bama (sümyä’ bama). Thumya-bama or “their Burmese” could mean variously “Burma dominated by the Burmese of their (the British) side,” “Burma ruled by the British together with Burmese collaborators,” “the Burmese people of their (the British) side,” or “the Burmese who collaborated with the colonial regime” (Nemoto 2000, 1). The following passage from a pamphlet distributed by the Dobama Asiayone in 1936, for example, not only captures the rhetoric used by the members of the Dobama Asiayone but also sheds light on the way they perceived the thumya-bamas:

If there exist dobamas, there also exist thumya-bamas.
Be Aware of them.
Thumya-bamas do not cherish our Buddhism, do not respect it,

7After leaving the university, the young nationalists, who emerged as some of Burma’s leading politicians in the early 1940s, devoted their energies to writing leftist political tracts and organizing peasant and labor protests in their struggle against British imperialism.
They go into the councils,
They try to dominate monks whether directly or whether indirectly,
They take advantage of the law, accept bribes.8

Used in such contexts, Kei Nemoto explains, the term thumya-bama reflected the thakins’ identification of themselves as distinctly different from and opposed to not only the British but also, more importantly and more specifically, the thumya-bama—that is, Anglo-Burman and other “mixed” Burmese people, the privileged echelon of Burmese society composed of members of the Indian Civil Service, and nationalists who favored dominion status over complete independence (Nemoto 2000, 2–4). Within this framework in which nationalists appealed to the Burmese ethnicity in order to integrate the country into a coherent community, the Westernized Burmese girl represented the quintessential thumya-bama. Through her clothing, smoking, and cavorting, she personified the fear that the intermingling of Burmese people with modern “Others” reinforced political and economic colonization with cultural imperialism.

Ultimately, however, neither conservatism nor the changing tides of ideological and political movements in the emergence of young Marxist-Leninist intellectuals and nationalists account for the gendered nature of the censure of modern fashion. Burmese men were engaged in practices of being modern just as much, if not more, than Burmese women. U May Oung, a young “England returned” barrister writing in 1908, lamented the fact that young Burmese men “were learning to drop Burmese ideals, to forget and even to despise the customs and habits of his ancestors, and to hanker after much that was bad and very little that was good in those alien races” (U May Oung, quoted in Aung San Suu Kyi 1990, 47). Yet it was the modern girl, not the modern lad, who became the subject of controversy. The one exception was the “modern monk,” made famous by the well-known leftist writer Thein Pe Myint, who published The Modern Monk (Tak’ bhun“ krī”) in 1937. The book was a highly controversial novel about the immoral life of a corrupt Buddhist monk who indulges in lay activities ranging from sexual intercourse to amassing of personal wealth and goods. The author himself explained his satirical depiction of the modern monk as a reflection on the destructive impact of British colonial rule on both the Buddhist clergy and the laity in Burma (Mendelson 1975, 214–21). The modern monk, then, was a male counterpart to the modern girl. The public reception of the novel is revealing, however. The satirical depiction of the modern monk stirred quite a sensation and garnered intense publicity at the time of its publication, not because of its popularity but for the furious backlash

8This is Nemoto’s translation of a passage from Komin Kochin Ahpwe, Komin Kochin Tih-dawngbru Sasu Ahma 1 (Rangoon: Komin Kochin Ahpwe, 1936). I have used thumya-bama rather than the synonymous and perhaps more common thudo-bama to stay faithful to the Burmese text.
that it prompted from the Sangha, which led to the banning of the book by the
government and a public apology from Thein Pe Myint (Smith 1965, 208).

No less conspicuous than the absence of the “modern lad” is the fact that the
modern girl appeared in the popular press at a historical juncture when there
appeared to be no lack of Dobama or “Our Burmese” women. Burmese women
in the 1920s and the 1930s showed no signs of becoming less patriotic: For every
nationalist organization founded, it seems, a women’s branch appeared; women uni-
versity students and factory workers took an increasingly active role in anticolonialist
protests. For example, in the University Boycott of 1936, thirty-six women students
protested on the slopes of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, where they camped along with
other male strikers and voiced the objections of the Burmese public against what
they believed to be the continued non-Burmese control of higher education. Then, in 1938–39, two hundred women workers from Yaykyaw Ma Sein Nyunt’s
Cheroot Factory and approximately one thousand more from Thamaing Rope
Factory and Rangoon’s matchmaking factories joined students and other workers
in the eleven-month strike against the British Oil Company. In another well-
known action by women protestors, four female students undertook a hunger
strike in protest of the imprisonment of workers who participated in the 1938–39

Why did images of the unwise, materialistic, modern girl who flaunted tra-
dition for the sake of Westernization appear at this very moment when an increas-
ing number of politically and visibly active Dobama women emerged? Was the
modern Burmese woman a figment of the imagination, bearing no relation to
actual women? Was she an image invented and co-opted by intellectuals and poli-
ticians? In Burma, as in other Theravada Buddhist societies, women have long
been associated with attachment to the realm of desire, and the influential role
of women in the worldly sphere of commerce, profit seeking, and monetary
affairs—the very attribute that gave women their autonomy and power—was
deemed spiritually polluting (Andaya 2002; Atkinson and Errington 1990;
Keyes 1984; Khin Myo Chit 1974; Kirsch 1985). The choice of women over
men as symbols of capitalist and consumerist modernity, therefore, would have
been logical.9 The commercialization of the modern girl in the popular press,
especially in advertisements, would have also made the gendered trope readily
available for deployment. The writings of the foremost defender of modern
Burmese women, Gyanaygyaw Ma Ma Lay, suggest that the frivolous and self-
indulgent modern woman was indeed a fabrication. They also suggest,
however, that the behaviors of real modern women were fundamental, not irre-
levant, to the discourse on the modern woman.

9It has to be said that although the female sex, more than the male counterpart, is associated with
“attachment” to desire within Theravada Buddhism, qualities such as chastity, self-sacrifice, and
suffering, epitomized by the devoted female followers of the Buddha, donors, and renunciants
who figure in Buddhist literature, are at the same time identified as female virtues.
Ma Lay, one of the most well-known Burmese writers both locally and internationally, made her literary debut in 1934 at the age of eighteen when she wrote articles for Myanmar Alin challenging the view, put forth by a Burmese male writer, that the interest of young Burmese women in journalism was merely a “fad.” She founded, edited, and published with her husband Gyanaygyaw (The Weekly Thunder), the most popular journal and one of only two widely circulating journals in Burma in the years immediately before the Second World War. Her husband, U Chit Hlaing, passed away in 1945, leaving Ma Lay to take charge of Gyanaygyaw as its sole director, manager, and chief editor—an unconventional undertaking at a time when most, if not all, publishing houses and periodicals were owned and run by men. Her command of Gyanaygyaw at a young age of thirty significantly contributed to the opinion of the public and the literary community that Ma Lay was a talented woman of letters (Khin Maung Htun 1974, 93–94).

In her work on important women figures in Burmese history, Saw Moun Nyin remarks that Ma Lay had a reputation for being fashionable and that she was always dressed “elegantly and stylishly” (Saw Moun Nyin 1976, 280). It is hardly surprising then that Ma Lay was at the forefront of the defense of modern, fashionable women in the popular press. Ma Lay rebutted the allegation that the sheer blouse prompted men to be lustful by pointing out that the problem lay not with the women who wore the sheer blouses but with the beholdlers, the men who lusted. In the January 1940 issue of Gyanaygyaw, for instance, Ma Lay wrote an article titled “The Deteriorating State of Male Mentality” (Ma Lay 1940). She begins the article by referring to a letter she received from a young woman working as a clerk at a lottery shop, who tells Ma Lay that she is constantly taunted at her job by male customers who call her a “tramp.” The author of the letter asks, “Am I to blame myself for feeling faint-hearted in the face of the taunting?” (Ma Lay 1940, 15)

Ma Lay points out that the experience of the young woman is representative of a pervasive problem of male chauvinism that has been perpetuated by men who insist on viewing women in the public sphere as objects of sexual desire. She explains that the reason behind such eroticization of women is not to be found in the way young Burmese women carry themselves in public but in the inability of some Burmese men to cope with modern professional women who not only work outside the home but also possess careers in offices:

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10 Many works by Ma Lay have been translated into several languages, including Not Out of Hate, the first Burmese novel to be translated into English and published outside Burma. For a brief biography of Ma Lay in English, see Anna Allott’s introduction to Margaret Aung-Thwin’s English translation of Not Out of Hate (Allott 1991).
For some Burmese men, happiness is when their women subsist only on their (men’s) earnings. To be a woman, for such men, is to be a dependant. These men cannot stomach women holding office-jobs, like men, that require going to offices and sitting at desks. These men taunt and harass such women as the young clerk at the lottery shop who wrote to me because they cannot bear to acknowledge that women can perform as well as men in professional careers (1940, 15).

Ma Lay then proceeds to describe the working conditions of women in “Western countries”:

In the West, all women—young and old, single and married, daughters and mothers—exercise skills they have gained both inside and outside the home to earn their living. And they dress themselves stylishly and according to the fashion appropriate to their respective careers (15).

She concludes that there is only one solution to Burma’s trouble with male chauvinism: for women to take the lead in guiding the country onto a different path (18).

Such literary and journalistic efforts by Ma Lay to counter the sexist current of the social and cultural milieu of 1930s Burma further complicates an understanding of why the modern girl was relentlessly and consistently caricatured and castigated. From Ma Lay’s perspective, the bodily practices of modern women were not sexually provocative. They were neither offensive to the elders or to their “traditional” sensibilities, nor unpatriotic. What was offensive was the mentality of chauvinistic men, the root of the censorious representations of the modern girl. The titillating and debauched modern woman was fictitious.

Insofar as the harassment of modern women represented a reactionary response to the defiant behavior of a new generation of women, however, the modern woman was not entirely imaginary. Modern women in Burma were transgressing normative gender boundaries in various ways. The British administration introduced government and privately supported lay and mission coeducational and all-girls schools, which led to a rapid expansion of female education (Ikeya, forthcoming). The population of female students in educational institutions private and public alike rose astoundingly between 1910 and 1930—the number increased by 45,697 or 61 percent during 1911 and 1921, and by 99,260 or 82 percent during 1921 and 1931—and by the mid-1930s, there was an unmistakable literacy and education gap between the generation of females under thirty years of age and the older generation of women in Burma (India 1933, 170). With the rapid rise in the population of literate and educated women, women began to play more visible and active roles in the area of cultural

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11For a comprehensive discussion of the varied effects of the development of modern education in Burma, see Khammai Dhammasani (2004).
production. The 1920s generated the first female doctors, barristers-at-law, school principals, and educational administrators in Burma. Census records from 1921 and 1931 show that the population of women employed in the professions of public administration, law, medicine, education, and journalism increased by 33 percent during the decade. Especially notable was the 96 percent and 64 percent increases in the fields of medicine and education, respectively (India 1923, 246–55; 1933, 145). In addition to lawyers, doctors, administrators, and educational instructors, the 1920s and 1930s produced women editors and writers who, for the first time in Burmese history, joined men in the ranks of the most prominent and widely read authors and social critics.

These were groundbreaking developments. Prior to the twentieth century, Buddhist monastic schools represented the only place where education was available, and monastic education was given almost exclusively by male monks to predominantly male pupils. While more research is necessary in order to make any conclusive claims about the state of women’s education in precolonial Burma, the existing scholarship suggests that female education was given little importance by both monastic and lay communities (Dhammasami 2004; Kawanami 2000). Although women were never excluded from participating in dramas, dances, puppet plays, and the a lha (acts of almsgiving and donation, principally to the Sangha but also to charitable institutions like orphanages) as donors, viewers, and spectators, those who conducted cultural and religious rites and events—traveling troupes and itinerant monks—were primarily men. Not until the early twentieth century did women function in the capacity of producers, arbiters, and transmitters of knowledge.

The modern girl thrived in the popular press precisely because of the very real activism of Burmese women of various ages who called into question the contours of prevailing gender identities. Whether pursuing higher education, writing alongside male writers and editors for the press, appropriating new hairstyles and clothes, or organizing worker’s strikes, women in colonial Burma actively explored the possibilities for the modern woman. In the guises of writer, student, professional, laborer, and politician, they served as prominent icons of modernization and challenged existing cultural norms and practices, particularly those pertaining to notions of femininity and masculinity.

12 In 1921, there were 17,760 women in the professions listed here as opposed to 23,588 in 1931. In medicine and education, in particular, the numbers rose from 3,332 to 6,540 and 2,955 and 4,857, respectively.
13 Although Buddhist nuns or thila-shins do exist in Burma today, they have not been recognized as part of the official religious community that is the Sangha since the thirteenth century. However, that the prevailing practice of Theravada Buddhism in contemporary 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.
An article entitled “If Wives Should Receive Salaries!” published in the August 1938 issue of Ngan Hta Lawka exemplifies this point (Auzam 1938). The author, who questions what would happen “if husbands were to give monthly salaries to their wives,” first claims that “there would be less [women] robbing men of their jobs,” and explains as follows: “As wives they would have less worry and more income for they could exploit their personal charms and blandishments with greater success than as clerks and typists in offices” (308). The author then posits that a prospective wife would haggle with her suitor over her salary:

If she were just a plain woman with a high school qualification and very few other attainments, she would not demand much. Whereas, if she were a [university graduate] with honors in some subject like Pali, and knew how to play the [piano] and cook delicious dishes and had Diana-like face with a stream-lined figure, then she would demand a very high salary. (308)

The author also imagines the wife demanding “an increment after a year’s service,” or a raise “with the coming-in of every newcomer into the family” (308). The author then concludes,

Such, in short, are few of the incidents which…are apt to create domestic strife and discord if husbands should, in a spirit of generosity and because of the strike of wives who will no longer hold their portfolios without salaries, grant salaries to their better halves! (308)

Here marriage functions as a metaphor for relations between the sexes, and a “salaried” wife symbolizes redefinitions of established gender norms and practices. The entrenchment of capitalism has made capital the overriding consideration in the “intimate” sphere of domesticity (though men, who are “generous,” are less capitalistic than women, who are calculating and materialistic), and twentieth-century developments in women’s education and employment have led men and women to compete against one another. Self-realized women rob men of their jobs, salaries, and domestic bliss. Gender relations are thus presented as a zero-sum game: Women’s gains are men’s losses, and the empowerment of women translates into the disempowerment of men. Not everyone in Burma perceived the achievements made by women as losses incurred by men. For example, many women and men actively advocated for women’s education and employment as vital social reforms indispensable to national progress and independence (Ikeya, forthcoming). Yet many others commented on the transgressive behavior of Burmese women as an indirect means of discussing what the authors portrayed as the emasculation of Burmese men.14

14See, for example, P. Monin’s “Please Tell My Wife” (1940), a short story about a village headman who pleads with his wife not to take a young lover.
The emergence of educated and working women was by no means the only catalyst for the crisis in masculinity, which was a product of various other conditions that have been discussed in the historical scholarship on colonial Burma. Historians have placed emphasis on the disempowerment of Burmese men under colonialism and have focused on one particularly pernicious way in which this took place: the influx of predominantly male immigrants who, under the auspices of the colonial administration, displaced the indigenous population from key socioeconomic niches (Adas 1974; Furnivall 1957; Maung Maung 1980). The expansion and elaboration of Burma’s political and economic systems in the decades following the British annexation of Lower Burma in 1850, and subsequently, of Upper Burma in 1885, created numerous new administrative, commercial, industrial, and agricultural niches that attracted immigrants from the colonial metropole, British India and Malaya, as well as China. The bankers, merchants, and entrepreneurs represented a medley of Baghdadi Jews, Armenians, Chettiaris from Tamil Nadu, British, and other Europeans. In addition, Burma hosted Eurasians from India and Malaya who, together with local Eurasians of Portuguese and French descent, dominated certain government sectors, namely the railways, telegraph, and postal departments (Burma 1928, 4; Maxim 1992, 60). Similarly, integration into British India triggered a steady stream of seasonal laborers whose journeys were facilitated by the falling costs of steamship travel. Thousands of seasonal traders, workers, and laborers came from the Indian subcontinent annually to work in Burma’s paddy fields, rice mills, factories, and docks. Far from being a homogeneous community, the group of Indian immigrants included a diverse array of people from Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, Sikh, and other religious backgrounds: besides the Chettiar moneylenders already mentioned, sailors and boatmen from Chittagong, coolies from Telegu, and Bengali durwans (guards), dhobies (laundry washers), tailors, and barbers. The colonial government and companies hired upper-caste Bengalis as clerks and Tamils from Madras usually became household servants (Burma 1928, 3–12). “Chinese” immigrants, who made their presence known mostly as traders but also as craftsmen, likewise constituted a varied group of Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka men and women, most of them having migrated from the provinces of Fukien and Kuangtung or from the Straits settlements—a departure from precolonial patterns of immigration primarily from Yunnan (Chen 1966; India 1933, 136).

In colonial Burma, as in precolonial times, the immigrant population of women paled in comparison to its male counterpart. In 1931, approximately 72 percent of Indians, 66 percent of Chinese, and 68 percent of Europeans were male. Of the immigrant population from India, which represented roughly 80 percent of the total immigrant population in Burma, the percentage of female immigrants was only 18 percent and 16 percent in 1921 and 1931, respectively. Female immigrants accounted for 21 percent of the total immigrant population from China, and for 32 percent of the total European immigrant population (India 1923, 90–91; India 1933, 60–63).
The colonial capital at Rangoon, where the Burmese themselves were fast becoming a minority, manifested most visibly the magnitude of these colonially determined immigration patterns. The 1881 census shows that fewer than half of the 139,408 residents in Rangoon were Burmese (66,838 Burmese, 66,077 Indian, 3,752 Chinese, and 2,570 European). By 1931, immigrants constituted 65 percent of the population of Rangoon (India 1933, 54). Female immigrants, however, accounted for only 12 percent of the total immigrant population of Rangoon in 1921. In inverse relationship to the male immigrant population in Rangoon, the majority of female residents in Rangoon were indigenous and predominantly Burmese women (India 1923, 74).

The large influx of male immigrants that colonial rule precipitated, and the minuscule population of women immigrants in Burma, which composed only 5 percent of the total female population in 1931, made the rapid growth in relations between foreign men and local women inevitable, as evinced by the sharp rise in the “half-caste” population, especially Eurasian and Indo-Burmese, in Burma. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were 9,974 Eurasians and 20,423 Indo-Burmese; by 1931, there were double the number of Eurasians (19,200), and almost nine times that of Indo-Burmese (182,166) (India 1933, 230–32; Koop 1960, 22). Although census data do not provide information on the Sino-Burmese population, colonial-period court records concerning marriages between the so-called Chinese Buddhist men and Burmese Buddhist women demonstrate that Sino-Burmese unions were similarly widespread (Maung Maung 1980, 60–63). The chief justice of a decisive case that ruled on whether Burmese Buddhist Law should apply to a Sino-Burmese marriage even claimed that marriages between Chinese men and Burmese women were the most common form of intermarriage in colonial Burma (Chief Justice Rutledge, quoted in Maung Maung 1980, 63).

The effects of these colonial demographic trends on Burmese men found expression in the prevalent image of them in the popular press as victims of colonial modernity—images that attested to a crisis in masculinity. Numerous cartoons, such as one featured in a June 1938 issue of Thuriya, exposed the dislocation felt on the part of Burmese men by immigration of foreign men that colonialism entailed, a situation for which the Burmese devised the catchword auk-kyā, nauk-kyā (aok’ kya nok’ kya), meaning “fall behind, fall below” (Furnivall 1957). The cartoon depicts what appears to be four foreign men—Arab, Indian, Chinese, and British—sitting side by side comfortably on a bench on which “Burma” (Mran’ mā praññ’) is carved. A Burmese man, smaller than the four others, sits uncomfortably on the edge of the bench, as it has almost no room left for him. The cartoon reads, “Crowded by other guests, such is the lot of the Burmese” (Figure 6).

Another cartoon featured in the October 10, 1925, issue of Deedoke offers another illustration of the way that Burmese men were marginalized in their own country by foreign men (Figure 7, read from left to right, top row first). The cartoon, entitled “On Being a Foreigner” (Tuin’” khra” phrae’ titka), begins with a picture of a Burmese woman flatly rejecting what appears to be
a marriage proposal from a British man. She says, “You think you’re worthy of me?” Her mother, however, entreats her daughter to accept the foreigner’s proposal, which prompts the daughter to ask why. The mother, envisioning the foreigner with his foreign servants, replies that marrying him will mean that they get to be chauffeured in cars. The daughter evidently accepts the foreigner’s proposal because, explains the caption next to the couple, “she is opportunistic.” Just as she gives birth to the foreigner’s child, however, a servant instructs her,
“Go! Go! The wife from the home country is coming!” Presumably, the foreigner’s wife in Britain is on her way to Burma to join her husband. The cartoon concludes with the Burmese “wife” in tears and with the following caption: “Oh, the impermanent nature of life.”

While the cartoon, tinged with Buddhist teaching about impermanence, is clearly meant to be a sarcastic commentary on “foreign” men, it also sheds light on the repercussions of British colonial rule on the status of Burmese men. The very exclusion of Burmese men from the cartoon implies that foreign men had displaced them. Officialdom, wealth, and such modern accoutrements of power and prestige as a car and a chauffeur had become the prerogative of foreign men who immigrated to Burma under the auspices of the British colonial administration. Intimate relations with foreign men offered socio-economic benefits that Burmese men could not provide. This disparity between Burmese and foreign men in socioeconomic power and status would have magnified in the 1930s because of the Great Depression, a period during which increasing numbers of Burmese men and families became indebted. As the extensive literature on the 1930s crisis in Burma has documented, an unprecedented number of Burmese traders, peasants, and laborers—both men and women—lost their livelihood and were forced to look for new jobs (Adas 1974; Brown 2005). In all likelihood, one of the occupations to which such displaced women turned to alleviate the adverse ramifications of the Depression was prostitution, the scale of which in Burma was described by a 1916 report as the largest in British India. It is conceivable that the Depression thus had the effect of making more Burmese women more easily sexually available to foreign men, especially if in the 1930s, as in the 1910s, the clients of brothels in Burma were predominantly British troops and sepoys from the Indian subcontinent (Cowen 1916, 2, 6–7). It was not only socio-economic power and prestige but also sexual prowess and productivity that were denied to many local men.

In sum, colonial rule in Burma produced a set of conditions whereby the masculinity of indigenous men was attacked from many fronts. Changes in gender norms, practices, and relations—real as well as imaginary—represented one of these fronts, as the fear of gender subversion conjured in “If Wives Should Receive Salaries!” indicates. Women in 1930s Burma took an increasingly active role in government administration, anticolonial protests, and nationalist organizations, all of which had largely been the sole purview of men. They actively utilized such modern developments as government-funded education, the popular print media, and women’s political organizations, and sought access to professional

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15 The caption refers to the Buddhist law of nature that states that there is no permanent entity underlying human life.
16 The report was written by John Cowen, a teacher at the Rangoon Baptist College and a close affiliate of the YMCA, the American Baptist Mission, and the international abolitionist group Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, which was committed to the abolition of prostitution.
careers and government offices to represent themselves in public. They emerged alongside and in competition with their male counterparts as aspiring and leading decision makers in modern Burmese society. In so doing, the modern Burmese women of the 1930s served to exacerbate the emasculation of Burmese men.

**THE POLITICS OF FASHION**

The mounting criticism of the modern girl’s sartorial practices reached its height in 1938 in the collective harassment of women by young Buddhist monks (*yahanbyo*). A group of *yahanbyos* gathered at the Mahāmuni pagoda in Mandalay to set on fire bundles of sheer blouses, and similar incidents of blouse burning led by *yahanbyos* took place in cities near Mandalay—cities around which monastic life in Burma clustered. In addition to the blouse burning, the British administration reported intense and physically violent incidents of *yanhanbyos* tearing off blouses from the backs of women with hooks and scissors (Committee 1939, 186–87).

The blouse burning and persecution of women wearing the sheer blouse by the *yahanbyos* are striking for a number of reasons. First, the choice by the *yahanbyos* of the sheer blouse as the target of their campaign is curious for the fact that both violence and physical contact between a Buddhist monk and a woman are contrary to Buddhist monastic discipline outlined by the canonical Vinaya. Second, not only was there little apparent animosity between women and the Sangha in Burma, political monks such as U Ottama attracted a large female following. These women followers regularly participated in anticolonial demonstrations organized and led by monks (Maung Maung 1980, 1–26). These aspects of the incidents involving the *yahanbyos* and the sheer blouse have failed to enter the mainstream historical narratives of colonial Burma in which the incidents collectively represent an atypical instance of the common anticolonial boycott of foreign goods that got out of hand (Mendelson 1975; Maung Maung 1980).

The public castigation of modern women’s fashion more generally has appeared in Burmese history only as a side note to broad interpretations of the anticolonial boycott campaign of foreign goods that surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the 1930s economic depression. In addition, while the adoption of *pinni-yaw* by the Konmaryi has been described as a “movement,” thus something formulated, structured, serious, and substantial, the pursuit of modern fashion by women has been represented as a trend, thus fleeting, unpredictable, immaterial, and superficial. That the *pinni-yaw* has become one of the most widely known symbols of anticolonialism in Burma is hardly surprising given the historical currency that Gandhi’s *swadeshi* movement has gained in the historiography of colonialism. But the reduction of the contestation over the modern girl to a debate over fashion discounts the powerful political positions—no less powerfully political than the sartorial choices of the member of the Konmaryi—taken and represented by these women.
By giving serious consideration to the material conditions heretofore dismissed as “fashion,” this article reveals alternative interpretations of the prevalent discourse on modern women’s fashion. It shows that in Burma, women’s fashion stood for irreducibly plural and often competing meanings. Women such as Ma Lay saw “modern fashion” as a symbol of their conscious undertaking of new roles. As other scholars have noted, changes in dress represent not only changes in wealth, religion, government, and availability of goods but also transitions in “understanding of the self” and social roles and expectations (Taylor 1997, 112). For female college students and graduates in 1920s and 1930s Burma, modern fashion served to distinguish them as members of the growing educated middle class who had career ambitions to be achieved through learning and self-advancement. It also served as a sign of their participation in a khit thit (khet’ sac’) or “new era,” whose values and lifestyle were characterized by flux, mobility, and hybridity.

Yet “if clothing is one form of ‘text,’” as Roces explains, “several meanings can be attributed to it, often meanings different from the wearer’s agenda” (2005, 369). What some Burmese women intended as a conscious effort at self-reconstruction, others perceived as mindless mimicking of the West and its values and lifestyle that emphasized wealth and consumption. Amid a nationalist discourse undergirded by traditionalism, on the one hand, and Marxism-Leninism, on the other, “modern” Burmese women were imagined as agents of colonial modernity, capitalism, and consumerism. The image of the modern Burmese woman, juxtagposed with the image of the modern Burmese man as a victim of colonialism, allowed nationalists to develop a historically and culturally specific understanding of modernization and nationhood. Depictions of the modern girl as an embodiment of desire, of pleasure, and of the physical clearly indicate that her image functioned as an object lesson on the folly of desire for the colonial, the foreign, the Western and the modern. In the hands of those who sought to illustrate to the Burmese public the pernicious effects of colonial rule on the “Dobama,” the modern girl served to edify a singular notion of nationalism.

Last but not least, I suggest that khit san fashion, especially the sheer blouse, had become a symbol of anxieties about the social mobility of young Burmese women and its potential effects on existing relations of power. The criticisms of the sartorial choices of Burmese women represented an attempt to circumscribe not only their political role—as wearers and bearers, not leaders, of nationalism—but also their social and cultural roles. If in Dutch Indonesia women in traditional dress were associated with the colonial past and thus made to embody immobility and disempowerment, in British Burma, women in modern fashion personified mobility and empowerment. To denounce modern women’s fashion was to denounce the mobility and self-realization of young women and to express the desire and need for control, stability, and discipline. This is not to suggest that critics who targeted young Burmese women in their “nationalist” campaigns were not actually motivated by nationalism, antiforeign sentiments, or the economic depression of the 1930s. It is rather to draw attention to the central and persistent
concerns with changing gender relations that animated popular discourses in colonial Burma. While further research is necessary to determine whether the sense of castration among lay Burmese men can be legitimately extended to the Sangha, I would argue that even the violent attack on Burmese women by scissor-wielding monks wasn’t solely or even essentially about imagining the nation or preserving tradition. The castigation of the sheer blouse was about women who participated actively in controversial debates and challenged long-existing notions of femininity and masculinity in a highly public fashion.

Acknowledgments

The research for this article was funded by grants from the American Association of University Women and Cornell University. I presented versions of this article at the University of Washington at Seattle and at a meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. I gratefully acknowledge the many insightful comments I received from various scholars in these contexts. I also wish to thank Tamara Loos, Anne Blackburn, Eric Tagliacozzo, and Lilian Handlin, as well as the anonymous referees of the *Journal of Asian Studies* for their helpful suggestions and constructive criticisms. All errors and omissions are my own.

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