The early decades of the 20th century saw a proliferation of complex discourses in the popular press on the “new” or “modern” woman the world over, from Japan, China, Siam and India to South Africa, Germany, England and America. The topics of these often controversial debates included female education and employment, the role of women in the home and the public arena, the sexual and political emancipation of women, and the relationship between women and consumerism (Chatterjee 1993; Barlow 1994; Ankum 1997; Göle 1996; Sato 2003). British Burma was no exception. Referred to variously as khet kāla amyui: samī: (women of the times), khet mhī sū (up-to-date woman), ya khu khet amyui: samī: (present-day women), khet chan sū (trendy woman), khet sac amyui: samī: (woman of the new era), and tak khet samī: (girl/daughter of the era of advancement), the “modern woman” appeared in various guises.¹ She not only signified redefinitions of femininity, but also served as a prominent icon of modernization and sparked heated debates among

¹ In this article, I provide transliteration of Burmese words according to a slightly modified version of the Library of Congress Transliteration System.
intellectuals, writers, journalists, politicians, monks and students about the vital importance of *tui: tak re:* (progress).

One of these archetypes of “the modern woman” was the *aim rhañ ma* (housewife). What distinguished the *aim rhañ ma* from the other “modern women” was her hygienic behavior and consumption of medicine and other scientific commodities, both of which enabled her to ensure the health and happiness of her family.

How do we account for the emergence of the figure of the *aim rhañ ma* and the association of housewifery and motherhood with science, medicine and hygiene? What does the discourse on domesticity reveal about the impact of cosmopolitan ideas about scientific progress, hygiene and health technologies on local understandings of what it meant to be or to become modern? This article shows that the appearance of the ideal of the hygienic housewife-and-mother was not simply an effect of a unilateral and hegemonic process of imperialism. Colonial educators certainly attempted to civilize and domesticate Burmese women according to their own preconceived notions of scientific progress, bodily discipline and hygiene, and bourgeois femininity through the administration of “secular” co-educational public instruction. Yet, representations of the *aim rhañ ma* were also shaped by the rise of consumer culture, aided by the spread of illustrated print material, especially advertisements, the quintessential promoter of consumption.

### Civilize and Domesticate: Educating Burmese Women to be “Better Home-Keepers”

Historical scholarship on European medicine, public health and welfare services has shown that “health and ill-health were both problems and imperatives of Empire” (Bashford 2004, 112). It has also revealed that concerns about

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2 See also Arnold (1988).
The medicalization of pregnancy, midwifery, childbirth, nursing, and child-rearing, the sanitizing of the home, and the modernization of motherhood emerged in European colonies around the turn of the century when, as Lenore Manderson has argued, colonial states initiated the effort to bring “reproduction under state control” (Manderson 1996, 201). For instance, government concerns with improving the indigenous birth rate and health to meet the labor needs of plantations and mines fueled the effort in decreasing infant and maternal mortality rate (Bashford 2004, 127). This was by no means a unique colonial experience but resonated with the implementation, in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, of a range of social policy measures aimed at improving the health of future generations, thereby fulfilling the infant and child health needs of empire (Manderson 1998).

In Burma, too, the attempt by the colonial administration to intervene in matters of reproduction and infant and maternal health manifested itself in the early 20th century in discussions surrounding the inadequacy of indigenous birthing and nurturing practices and the incompetence of Burmese mothers: two factors which, according to the colonial administration, were responsible for the high incidences of infant mortality in Burma. The Society for the Prevention of Infant Mortality in Mandalay reported in 1913 that there were nine towns in Burma with an infant mortality rate of over 40 percent, and that of the approximately 5,000 children born every year in Mandalay, about 2,000 died before they were 12 months, and 1,000 more before they

3 See also Davin (1992) and Ram and Jolly (1998). It should be noted that there is little indication that government initiatives to teach and modernize maternity and domesticity were ever effective. For example, Mary Blacklock of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, who in 1935 toured the British colonies of Asia to assess the welfare of women and children, found that state interventions in maternal and child health had by and large failed: mortality rates were still high and medical services for women were inadequate (Manderson 1996, 41).
reached the age of ten (Smart 1913). In response to the 1913 report, Milicent Smart published a handbook especially for the instruction of “Burmese Mothers,” which contained instructions on first aid for mothers during childbirth and on the rearing of infants from the time of birth. Smart asked Burmese women to read through the handbook “with the country’s welfare at heart, and in view of the appalling loss of life,” and “to at least make a study of European methods of treating confinement cases and of rearing infants from birth, and give them a fair trial in their homes and surroundings” (Smart 1913). The infant mortality rate remained “excessive” and “deplorable” in 1921 according to the annual report by the Public Health Administration of Burma. In the report, the Lieutenant-Governor of Burma condemned the “dirty methods practiced by midwives” and emphasized the dire need for serious efforts to instruct people in Burma on sanitary midwifery, child-bearing and child-rearing methods (Smart 1913).

It was not only the concern with infant mortality that typified colonial interventions into indigenous patterns of reproduction and maternity, but also its opinion that the improvement of health was directly linked to the improvement of women’s education. Thus, U Po Ka, a Burmese official in the Judicial Service, commented in his book, The Citizen of Burma, on the problem of high infant mortality as follows:

A woman’s sphere of activity is her home. It will be well for the [Burmese] race if she is better educated and taught to take better care of her children; for then we have some hope that there will be a material reduction in the death rate of infants in Burma, which at present is too horrible to contemplate. With the advance of education she will undoubtedly become more womanly (Po Ka 1914, 73).

In Burma, as in other British colonies such as India and Malaya, “better education” was seen by the colonial administration and by members of the indigenous elite as the antidote
to the problem of infant mortality, and more generally, as key to Burma’s development and modernization.4

But what did it mean to “better educate” Burmese women and how exactly did education make Burmese women better mothers and “more womanly”? What U Po Ka identified as “the advance of education” referred to the introduction under the British administration of governmentally and privately supported lay and mission schools that offered vernacular, Anglo-vernacular (i.e., English and Burmese) and English education, or what the Burmese was referred to as “modern education.” One of the many important and wide-ranging effects of this colonial development was the significant expansion of female education.5

Prior to the 19th century, education in Burma was administered almost exclusively through Buddhist monastic schools. The principal goal of these schools, at least in theory, was to encourage students to study the Buddhist texts thoroughly for their moral and spiritual development, and to prepare them for their ordination. In actual practice, the majority of students intended to return to lay life after their study at the monasteries, which represented the only place where education was available. From at least the Pagan period (1044–1287), monasteries offered a general course of study catered to such students that included lay subjects but nonetheless required the study of Buddhist scriptures. Pali was taught together with literary Burmese, and Buddhist texts included in the Tipitaka, together with its Pali and vernacular commentaries, were taught alongside Brahmanical texts, arithmetic, poetry, astrology, medicine and law. There were no fees for monastic education, and as Khammai Dhammasami points out, monastic education “served the educational needs of society as well as those of the [monastic] Order” (Dhammasami 2004, 4–5).

4 For case studies on other British colonies, see Ram and Jolly (1998).
5 For a comprehensive discussion of the varied effects of the development of modern education in Burma, see Dhammasami (2004).
It did not, however, provide for female education. Even as late as the late 19th century, the Cambridge-educated, Sino-Burmese civil servant Taw Sein Ko noted with regret that “the rigid rule of monastic discipline do not justify the pongyis [monks] to entertain female pupils, and consequently, the carrying on of female education, which is regarded by them as below their holy dignity, and as unnecessary by the people, has hitherto been left to the care of untutored masters” (Taw Sein Ko 1913, 224). By “untutored masters,” Taw Sein Ko appears to have been referring to private tutors or to laymen and women who taught in what came to be called “lay schools” during the British period. In 1869, there were 340 lay schools with 5,069 students (3,838 boys to 231 girls) compared with 3,438 monastery schools with 43,773 students, comprising 27,793 lay pupils and 15,980 novices. The first director of the Department of Public Instruction described the lay schools as preparatory schools for both boys and girls that prepared the pupils for any other school that may be within reach. Taw Sein Ko later described them as schools intended primarily for the education of girls. In addition, U Kaung indicates that the subjects taught were more or less the same as those taught in monastic schools, and that the schools were run by laymen and women who taught for merit and charged no fees (U Kaung 1963, 34–5). We have little to no historical records pertaining to lay schools in Burma, however, and it is unclear how long they had been in existence prior to the 19th century. They are seldom mentioned in either indigenous records or European travel accounts, indicating that they were relatively uncommon, and unlike monastic schools, did not serve as important educational agencies.

Over the course of the 19th century, the sangha gradually lost its prerogative as the chief provider of education in Burma as a co-educational system of public instruction was established, at first largely due to the effort of Christian missionaries. Christian missionaries had already set up mission schools in Burma in the 18th century, but until the first British annexation of Burma, the few mission schools
run by the Barnabite Roman Catholic missionaries taught primarily the small Christian community in Burma and the select local converts (U Kaung 1930). Thereafter, missionaries became significantly more active in the area of education as the American Baptist Mission and the Anglican missionary group, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, joined in the educational work of missionaries throughout Burma. While mission schools were initially modest enterprises that could hardly be considered rivals of Buddhist monastic schools, they developed into an extensive system of day and boarding schools encompassing large towns and small villages. By 1900, there were 67 Anglo-vernacular and English mission schools recognized by the government, and by 1927, the number had climbed to 275. By 1920, there were 30,854 students enrolled in these schools, and the number had more than doubled to 69,242 by 1930. Most importantly, mission schools had gained a monopoly over Anglo-vernacular and English education, and an early stronghold over secondary and tertiary education (U Kaung 1963, 105; India 1923, 188; India 1933, 171).

Another area in which Christian missionaries made headway was female education. Female education was no doubt a vehicle for gaining female Bible readers and converts. Because Christian missionaries were not welcomed in Burmese homes, “schools functioned as common meeting grounds for European missionaries and teachers and Burmese” (Edwards 2003, 40). In addition, even missionaries who dismissed the idea that native women might make influential evangelists recognized the important role that women were likely to play in the religious practice of their children — women were informal evangelists (Edwards 2003; Womack 2008). At the same time, the interest of missionaries in educating native girls and women stemmed from their dismay at the perceived “ignorance” of women in Burma. Take, for instance, a 1914 survey of 30 correspondents involved in education, mainly Christian missionaries, conducted on the impact of “modern conditions” on the state of Buddhism in contemporary Burma.
The respondents portrayed women in Burma as “more ignorant” and “less well educated” than men in Burma, and felt that the women knew “nothing else but Buddhism”; they agreed that Anglo-Christian education was the key solution to the problem of “uneducated” women in Burma (Saunders and Purser 1914, 62, 65–6).

In sharp contrast to the zealous efforts by Christian missionaries, the colonial government displayed little to no interest in education of the indigenous population until the 1860s. Only four government schools opened between 1834 and 1844, and in 1852, the pupils in these schools totaled a mere 316, of whom about two-thirds were “natives” (Furnivall 1956, 55). In addition, from the 1860s until at least 1924, the general state policy toward education was to regulate, inspect, supplement — and thus extend supervision and control of — the existing schools by administering grant-in-aid to all the schools in the province, rather than support or expand its own few government schools. Schools continued to be maintained voluntarily by monks, laymen, municipalities and other associations. This idea of the “grant-in-aid” system of public education, aimed at sidestepping an expensive duplication of schools throughout Burma, was institutionalized under Sir Arthur Phayre, the first Chief Commissioner of Burma. The government relied on the mission schools it aided via grants for the provision of English as well as secondary education, and the training and recruiting of local English-speaking clerks and interpreters for the colonial administration and European trading firms. For primary education, Phayre originally envisioned using the already existing and ubiquitous monastic schools, but he also hoped to make the education of the masses more “sound” and “systematic” through the addition of “secular studies” — i.e., geography, surveying, arithmetic, anatomy, ancient history, geometry and astronomy — to the curriculum in the monastic schools (U Kaung 1963, 73, 79–80).

Unlike the government grants given to mission schools, the grants to monastic schools were distributed only in the form of Burmese-language primers for the “secular” subjects
written with the help of American Baptist missionaries who translated the material from English to Burmese. The predictably lackluster response of the monks to the grant-in-aid system led the government to promote lay schools instead as the vehicles for public primary education. Government grants to lay schools were paid in cash to both the teachers and the students according to the academic performance of each individual student; girls were paid double the amount fixed for boys (U Kaung 1963, 81). Lay schools emerged as attractive alternatives to monastic schools not only because of the lack of enthusiasm on the part of monasteries, but also because they accepted female students. In addition, lay schools were amenable to state-regulated educational reforms because unlike monastic schools, they relied heavily on the government grants as their main source of funding.  

By the turn of the century, colonial Burma had developed a system of public instruction that provided nine standards of education — the first four were primary and the following five were secondary — through two main types of schools, Anglo-vernacular and vernacular, each distinguished by the language of instruction and examination. While both girls’ and boys’ schools existed, co-education had become by and large the norm in Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools: 95 percent of the female student population attended co-ed vernacular schools, and there were three times as many female students in co-ed institutions as in girls’ schools.  

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6 The educational reforms included, in addition to the study of supplementary “secular” subjects mentioned above, annual government examinations — instituted since 1880 — held by the Education Department, by Calcutta University, or by the Educational Syndicate (founded in 1881), at which the pupils had to be present. The course of study at the lay schools also had to correspond to the standards prescribed by the Government of Burma or the University of Calcutta, and had to be inspected by the Education Department (Scott 1911, 164).

7 In fact, there was no clear distinction between the two types of schools and, as the 1912–1917 quinquennial report on public instruction indicates, “large numbers of boys are found in girls’ schools and very much larger numbers of girls in boys’ schools” (Burma 1917, 22).
The government remained committed to the grant-in-aid system, having established only 79 government schools by the 1920s, but public schools under indigenous and missionary management had multiplied significantly. In 1870, there were only 22 lay schools officially recognized by the government in Burma, but by 1890, the number had increased to 704 and then to 2,653 by 1910. In 1900, the government recorded 17,620 schools including both private and public schools, and 307,614 pupils in total. By 1930, the number of schools had increased to 25,524 and the population of students had more than doubled to 738,267 (India 1923, 188; India 1933, 171). The increase in the population of female students in educational institutions was particularly astounding. The number of female students in private and public schools alike rose by 45,697 or 61 percent, between 1911 and 1921, and by 99,260 or 82 percent, between 1921 and 1931.8

An unprecedented number of women in Burma thus gained access to “better education.” For a considerable proportion of these women, “better education” entailed an instruction in Eurocentric and often Christian conceptions of femininity, morality, and domesticity. Modern education, with its standards and tests, purportedly rendered the knowledge it imparted rational, scientific and “secular.” Yet, colonial administrators, doctors and nurses, and the missionary educators who played formative roles in colonial-era educational reforms all saw female education as a vehicle for inculcating what they understood to be respectable womanhood according to their notions of “civilized” living.9

8 Although female university students still comprised merely 12.1 percent of the total university student population in 1931, the number of women university students had nonetheless increased by tenfold over the first few decades of the 20th century.
9 In fact, the conflation of modern education with “secular” education by Burma historians is misleading. Dhammasami (2004), for instance, applies Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeysekere’s study of the transformations in Sinhala (Theravada) Buddhism in late 19th-century Sri Lanka and argues that since the late 19h century, Burma witnessed a secularization of monastic education. While Gombrich and Obeysekere’s
Accordingly, while female students in Anglo-vernacular middle schools took the same courses as their male counterparts, they were required to take “domestic economy” and “needlework” in lieu of geometry (Burma 1917, 23). By the early 1920s, “hygiene” had become a compulsory subject of middle school examinations for girls, whereas English as a second language had been made an optional subject (Burma 1928, 28). As the respondents of the 1914 survey mentioned above pointed out, Anglo-Christian education was intended to make Burmese women not only more literate and scientific, but also “better home-keepers” and “more intelligent wives and mothers” (Saunder and Purser 1914, 66). In addition, literacy and scientific knowledge, while necessary, were not sufficient conditions for producing “better” Burmese wives and mothers. In the words of Miss I. Sexton, the Superintendent of the Dufferin Hospital in Rangoon in 1909, “a good moral character” constituted the final prerequisite (Sexton 1909, 27–8). Burmese women were to learn the “science” of domesticity through which they would become, as U Po Ka declared, “more womanly.”

Through “secular” education, colonial educators actively sought to instruct and reshape motherhood and domesticity to be scientific and hygienic, and Burmese women to be “more womanly.” This endeavor was deeply infused with the “white wo/man’s burden” to civilize the “natives.” Within this discourse on maternity, health and hygiene, Burmese women were cast as incompetent custodians of “traditional” and unsanitary bodies and homes in need of rational, scientific and civilized disciplinary policies and practices by the colonial educators.

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vast study examines far-reaching influences of “modern” values of the British colonialists, especially Protestant Christianity, on Sinhala Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988), Dhammasami focuses on the assumption by modern secular institutions of functions that the sangha used to perform. For other works that identify modern education in Burma as a displacement of Buddhist monastic education by secular education, see Furnivall (1956), Mendelson (1975), and Thant Myint-U (2001).
Consuming Scientific Progress:  
The Hygienic aim rhañ ma  

The colonial educational system was not the only source of the discourse on modern wifedom and motherhood in colonial Burma. The development of the popular press opened up a whole new site and techniques for the production of ideas about domesticity.

As in other early 20th-century cities, colonial Burma witnessed a rapid rise and spread of the press. The number of newspapers and periodicals published in Burma more than doubled from 1911 to 1921, from 44 newspapers and periodicals to 103. By 1921, vernacular papers overtook the number of those printed in English; there were 47 Burmese-language newspapers comprising a circulation of 70,773, compared with 36 English-language newspapers with a combined circulation of 44,267 (India 1923, 172–7, 189). By the end of the 1930s, there were more than 200 newspapers and periodicals published in Burma (Burma 1939). Besides news articles, social commentaries and the like, the 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. Photographs and cartoons — many focusing on current events and carrying distinct social and political undertones — added to the eclectic contents of the Burmese press. The press surfaced as low-cost sources of information and an avenue of public discourse, art and entertainment that increasingly defined popular consciousness.

This growing popular press in colonial Burma witnessed a proliferation of articles on the tui: tak re: of women, especially on their role as wives and mothers, in the 1930s. These articles, written predominantly by women (or men writing as women), gave useful information, advice, and guidelines
on matrimony, childcare, and housekeeping to *khet kāla amyui: samī:* (women of the times). *Toe Tet Yay Magazine*, for instance, regularly printed articles entitled “*Amyui: smī: tui. e* tui: tak re:*” (Women’s Advancement) from the start of its publication in 1933.10 The articles, written by two female authors, Khin May and Mya Galay, gave instructions on the proper raising of children and featured recipes for Burmese dishes. For example, Khin May wrote in her November 1933 editorial that the most meaningful way in which Burmese women can make progress was in their capacity as mothers, especially of young children (Khin May 1933). In “*Amyui: samī: myā: cit e* yan kye: mhu lui là: ap kron:*” (About the Need to Improve Women’s Cultivation), also published in *Toe Tet Yay* in 1934, Mya Galay asserted that mothers, not fathers, are responsible for disciplining their children because a *ya khu khet* (present-day) father is the breadwinner of the family and is therefore unable to give adequate attention to his children (Mya Galay 1934a, 21). Precisely because mothers were now in charge of raising their children, women had to prioritize the study of Buddhist teachings over modern education, though the latter was important to women’s development (Mya Galay 1934a, 59). Articles drove home the imperative of domesticity for women at the same time that they provided consolation for women with reservations about marriage and motherhood. The prolific woman writer Khin Myo Chit was known for her articles that gave advice to young wives, such as “The Mother-in-law,” in which she counseled her female readers on how to overcome ill feelings, jealousies, and/or hostilities between them and their mothers-in-law with whom they lived.11 The emergence of these writings on women and


11 The article was first published in Burmese in *Myanmar Alin*, volume 2, number 2, and then translated by Myint Tin into English and published in *Ngan Hta Lawka* 26, no. 188 (September 1940).
their “advancement” was possibly a strategy to maximize circulation, by keeping up with the population of female readers who were growing older. It may also have been an attempt to update domesticity and thus make it more acceptable to “women of the times” who might otherwise find a career and independence more appealing than marriage and motherhood, as Adrian Bingham has argued in the case of interwar Britain (Bingham 2004, 84–5). Whatever their goals, they presented an elaborate image of the home and family, and stressed the importance of the domestic role of women.

Alongside such material, newspapers and periodicals also published numerous advertisements that might appeal to the mothers and wives among the readership. Advertisements for fertility drugs for women accompanied advertisements for other “feminine” products such as face and body powder. Advertisements for baby products such as milk powder and baby food, as well as children’s clothing, furniture, household goods, hygienic products and medicine, kitchen and other electrical products similarly filled the pages of numerous popular newspapers and magazines (see Figures 1 to 6). These advertisements were, almost without exception, in Burmese or in both Burmese and English, and intended to shape the taste of Burmese consumers.

The distinctly 20th-century commodification of a woman’s role as housewife and mother is unmistakable in these advertisements, which only rarely featured fathers, husbands or men for that matter. A အိမ်လိုင်စီးအမျိုး (modern housewife) was an enterprising consumer, “under great pressure to acquire all the commodities necessary for the satisfactory performance of motherhood” (Stivens 1998, 63). The captions in the advertisements for baby products unfailingly suggested that “everyone knows” that mothers should bottle-feed, not breastfeed, their infants, and they should nourish their children with condensed milk and malted biscuits; even in Burma’s tropical climate, they should clothe their children top to bottom, and precisely because of the hot climate, they should use refrigerators to keep groceries.
Figure 1 Advertisement for Milkmaid Brand Anglo-Swiss condensed milk, in Thuriya, 1927
Figure 2 Advertisement for Telephone Brand Soap, in Youq Shin Lan Hnyun, 1934
Figure 3 Advertisement for Cyac Pan: Nvai powder, in Youq Shin Lan Hnyun, 1934

Figure 4 Advertisement for Fanchon Body Powder, in Thuriya, 1937
Figure 5 Advertisement for Angier’s Cough Medicine, in *Thuriya*, 1937
fresh and safe. If Western medicine had endowed mothers with the tools to alleviate their children’s everyday illnesses such as coughing and constipation more swiftly than ever before, soaps had equipped mothers to prevent their children from getting sick. The advertisement for “Telephone Brand Soap,” for example, was marketed as a safe and effective product of the state-of-the-art experiments by Western and Japanese expert scientists, specially crafted with rare and beneficial herbal and fruit extracts to produce soft and healthy skin (Figure 2). In addition, body powders could be used not only to achieve “smooth and velvety skin” and “beautiful face and charming body,” but also to “eliminate” unpleasant body odor. The advertisement for “Angier’s Emulsion” claimed that the emulsion was used widely in hospitals and that doctors recommended that the emulsion be utilized (Figure 5).

Modern medical technology had also given hope to women who had hitherto failed to conceive, as the 1929 advertisement for the “Universal Female Pills,” made in Germany according to the advertisement, suggested. Although the census report
of 1931 stated that “there is no evidence of the practice of western methods of birth control among the indigenous races” (India 1933, 79), advertisements for contraceptive products abound, informing women that they could control when and how many children they had and avoid excessively large families (Figure 6). Advertisements for treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and impotence as well as lotions and tonics that enhanced the pleasures of lovemaking usually accompanied the advertisements for contraceptive products. “G. Impoten Pills” guaranteed to restore the virility of a man in youth, and “Wondio” avowed to instantaneously give women the sexual drive of a pure virgin and make them inseparable from their husbands (Youq Shin Lan Hnyun 15 June 1934, 38). Akin to the “wise mother” of Meiji Japan who performed her domestic duties, in particular, child-rearing,  

12 Scholarship on sexuality in 20th-century Germany — the source of contraceptives and other sex-related products in colonial Burma — has shown that birth control was widely available before the 1960s, when the oral female contraceptive “Pill” first became available. Edward Ross Dickinson notes that the Weimer state supported the dissemination of contraceptives and contraceptive knowledge through the public health insurance system as a means of “securing the reproductive health of the country” and combating abortion (Dickinson 2007, 230). Even in the Third Reich when “objects intended for indecent purposes,” i.e., birth control and sex toys, were outlawed, condoms, classified as prophylactics against venereal disease, were sold in vending machines (Heineman 2002; Timm 2002; Waite 1998). Similarly, Andrea Tone has shown that a profitable and growing birth control industry had developed in the United States by the early 1930s, despite longstanding legal restrictions (Tone 1996). In addition to condoms, various female contraceptives such as vaginal jellies, douche powders and liquids, suppositories and foaming tablets were sold under the legal euphemism “feminine hygiene” (Tone 1996, 486). Tone points out that “pharmaceutical firms, rubber manufacturers, mail-order houses, and fly-by-night peddlers launched a successful campaign to persuade women and men to eschew natural methods for commercial devices whose efficacy could be ‘scientifically proven,’” and by 1938, the contraceptive industry’s annual sales had exceeded $250 million and was declared one of the most prosperous new businesses of the decade by Fortune Magazine (Tone 1996, 485).
“in accordance with the latest scientific knowledge and practice” (Bernstein 1991, 7), the aim rhai ma improved her home as a scientific consumer and acquired the technologies and commodities necessary for the upkeep of a sanitary home, a healthy family and conjugal bliss.

What is also unmistakable in these advertisements is the dominance of hygiene and health-related products as markers of progress and modernity. In all likelihood, this was at least in part a result of the association of “hygiene” and “domestic science” with the “secular” education offered in public and Anglo-vernacular schools. Yet, the appeal of medicine and hygienic products was also rooted in the fact that they made scientific progress readily available. Advertisements for medicine and hygienic goods guaranteed that their products were recommended by doctors and that their effectiveness and safety had been proven by the latest scientific tests. Most importantly, they came with comprehensive instructions for usage (or so the advertisements stated) so that even women who had never taken a course in hygiene or received formal education could achieve scientific progress through the consumption of the “scientifically produced” commodities. The advertisements for medical and hygienic products alluded to instant progress. They also conjured up the possibility of immediate attainment of social mobility and status, as an advertisement for “Sunlight Soap” by Lever Brothers suggests (Figure 7). The advertisement shows a group of men speaking scornfully about a father and a son: “Look at the father and son; they are totally stained and dirty. It’s disgusting.” Upon returning home, the son tells his mother that people avoid him and his father, and asks why he is so filthy. The parents are both at a loss: they agree that the whole family looks unclean, despite the fact that the mother spends all of her time cleaning. The husband, acknowledging that she works hard, thinks the solution is to hire a domestic helper, but they cannot afford to do so. As luck would have it, a friend advises the wife against getting a helper and instructs her to start using Sunlight Soap to bathe her children as well.
as to wash their clothes and to clean her house. Within days of following her friend’s advice, her home and family have become immaculate, and the grateful husband comes home with a ring. The consumption of Sunlight Soap has made their home and family cleaner, healthier, happier and more respectable. Even an average family that cannot afford a maid can therefore gain refinement and respectability through cleanliness.

The consumption of medical and hygienic products thus promised self-actualization and swift gratification. The simple act of buying and using a particular brand of soap enabled a woman to be an exemplary wife and mother and to transform a scorned and miserable family into a radiant and joyful family. The ring the aim ṛhaṅ ma received as her reward likewise symbolized the immediate gratification Sunlight Soap

![Figure 7 Advertisement for Sunlight Soap, in *Journal Gyaw*, 1941](image_url)
delivered. Other advertisements similarly linked consumption to self-fulfillment and pleasure. Contraceptive products, for example, were not only meant to control family size; they were explicitly marketed for women “who want a break from the hardship of pregnancy and childrearing” and “who do not want to be disfigured by childbirth and the exhausting demands of motherhood” (Youq Shin Lan Hnyun 1934, 38). Even aɪm rhaɪn ma and mothers deserved to look and feel their best. Contraceptives must have also allowed Burmese women to explore their sexuality in new ways, as did medication and lotions advertised specifically as formulated for enhancing sexual intercourse. The consumption of modern scientific commodities was both practical and pleasurable. The smiling faces of the men, women and children in the advertisements evinced the triangulation of science, consumption and fulfillment.

The advertisements that focused on women’s domestic life thus projected an idealized conceptualization of the aɪm rhaɪn ma and her modern home and family. They fashioned an elaborate image of a modern private sphere for the public to consume and covet, highlighting in the process the necessary relationship between the home and marketplace. The housewife-and-mother depended on the marketplace to provide the scientifically-produced commodities from the West, and to a lesser degree, Japan, without which she would be unable to ensure the health and happiness of her family. The representation of the aɪm rhaɪn ma and her home was deeply informed by cosmopolitan notions of scientific progress.

At the same time, however, the aɪm rhaɪn ma and her modern home were not envisioned as imitations of “Western” domesticity. Advertisements for Western commodities were printed alongside articles that elaborated on the duties of a wife-and-mother to create homes suitable for the Burmese amyui: and tuɪn: praɪnī — her “kind” and country. ¹³ For

¹³ The word amyui: actually refers variously to race, breed, lineage, family, rank, caste, kind, sort and species. Yet, in colonial Burma, it took on the meaning of “a nation or ethnic group.”
example, in a 1934 issue of *Toe Tet Yay*, Mya Galay warned that women must not mingle with men of questionable character and intelligence because such men will damage not only the women themselves, but also the children begotten through such relationships, and ultimately ruin the future of her *amyui*: (Mya Galay 1934b, 72). Khin May was likewise of the opinion that Burmese women should make an effort to raise their children to be valiant men and women who are proud of their country. In her November 1933 article on “women’s advancement,” for example, Khin May advised her readers to choose wisely what kinds of stories they tell their children. “You should not tell your children Western fairytales nor purposeless stories,” she counseled, and recommended that mothers tell their children legends about intellectuals, literati and gallant men and women from Burmese history. A mother must acquaint her children with stories “that make them aware of the great and noble past of their *amyui*” and “instill pride in their country and heritage” (Khin May 1933, 113). Mirroring the political realities of the 1920s and 1930s, a period in Burmese history widely recognized as the era of political awakening and the emergence of *vamsānu* (protectors of national interest), the modern Burmese wife-and-mother was to be a patriot conscientious of her duties to her *amyui*:  

Articles that gave advice on how to live harmoniously with in-laws also demonstrate that the modern Burmese family remained an extended one that valued ethics of deference to parents. A wife’s economic independence and mutual respect between husband and wife were also portrayed as important Burmese values and customs in the popular press. Take, for instance, the following statement by Khin Myint in a talk she gave in 1937, which was subsequently printed in the *Ngan Hta Lawka* magazine:

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14 *Vamsānu* is derived from the Pali words *vamsa* and *anurakkhita*, meaning “lineage” and “protected,” respectively, or a “protected lineage.”
Englishmen respect their women, but he will not entrust his pay envelope wholly or solely to her charge. Not so in Burma. The Burmese woman knows how to make money and how to keep it. She sees to it that she is appointed “Chancellor of her husband’s exchequer” and keeper of the “Family Purse” (Khin Myint 1937, 542–3).

Khin Myint furthermore contends that although Burmese men “delight in playing the part of ‘Lord and Master,’” the Burmese “wife-beater” is a scarcity (Khin Myint 1937, 54243). Wifedom and motherhood were thus articulated and conceived of as a combination of activities, behaviors, values and commodities that were perceived to be both Western and Burmese, and “modern” and “traditional.” The modern Burmese home benefitted from scientific and technological advancements such as soap, medicine and the refrigerator, but it was governed by Burmese ethics and codes of conduct. The housewife-and-mother, therefore, modernized her home without necessarily Westernizing it, and served as the protector of physical and moral hygiene and the producer of a healthy family and nation.

Conclusion

The early 20th-century discourse on domesticity, found in colonial reports and administrative documents, handbooks, newspapers, magazines and advertisements, provided a representation of the modern housewife-and-mother and her role in safeguarding the health and welfare of her family as well as of the Burmese society at large. It described the importance and necessity of the “science” of domesticity and “Western” housekeeping skills and instruments such as “first aid,” sanitary products, medicine and even refrigerators to a woman successfully performing her duties.

The article has revealed that two cultural and educational institutions functioned as the primary site for the production of this discourse on domesticity that linked housewifery and
motherhood with “domestic science,” medicine, and hygienic behavior: “secular” government-funded co-educational schools and the popular press. The colonial educators who provided the institutional framework for the expansion of female education intended education as a means of domesticating and civilizing Burmese women in keeping with their own notions of scientific progress, bodily discipline and hygiene, and bourgeois femininity.

That is not to argue, however, that the discourse and representations of the scientific and hygienic housewife-and-mother served merely as agents of imperialism. The developments in the content of the popular press discussed above also resulted from concerns of the publishers and editors with increasing circulation. They sought to augment circulation figures by publishing newspapers and periodicals that included a wide spectrum of views, that is, something for everyone, by keeping up with the community of female readers that was growing older. Similarly, they incorporated advertisements that not only helped to finance the popular press, but also served as one of the primary transmitters of the ideal of scientific and hygienic domesticity. Finally, visions of the aim rhañ ma, her hygienic home, and healthy family were also shaped by the increasingly influential nationalist discourse that valorized the role of women as wives and mothers of the nation, which tasked them with the job of physically and culturally regenerating and sustaining their amyui: and tuiñ: praññ. The discourse on the aim rhañ ma articulated Burmese interpretations and configurations of tui: tak re:, at the same time that it offered understandings of wifedom, motherhood, and the home that were deeply informed by cosmopolitan ideas about scientific progress, medicine, and hygiene which served as dominant markers of modernity.
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