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Featuring Articles by:
Alexandra Green
Chie Ikeya
Yin Ker
Jacques P. Leider
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# THE JOURNAL OF BURMA STUDIES

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This article traces the genealogy of a persistent cultural stereotype that has long defined and constituted academic and popular knowledge about Burma and, more broadly, Southeast Asia: the “traditional” high status of women. Although Southeast Asia scholars today generally concur that claims about the high status of women in the region are oversimplified and problematic, postcolonial scholars of Burma largely have perpetuated the discourse of gender equality, which has deferred any attempt to complicate conceptualizations of gender relations and hierarchies in historical Burma.

This study investigates the process whereby the “traditional” autonomy of Burmese women was constructed in opposition to the likewise “traditional” subordinate status of women in South Asia and in contestation of the superiority of European culture and society. It argues that this “tradition” is a product of the multivalent representational practice by colonizing and colonized women and men in unequal relations of power who coauthored essentially and powerfully gendered discourses of colonialism, modernization, and nationalism. This article concludes by suggesting possible ways to move beyond the practice of enshrining persistent and monolithic cultural stereotypes as essential components of Southeast Asian history and to engender scholarship of the region firmly located within, not isolated from, specific and complex historical contexts.

Gender and Tradition in Southeast Asian History
Since at least the nineteenth century, the notion of the “traditional” high status of women in Southeast Asia has been foundational to paradigmatic understandings of the region as a distinct geopolitical and cultural entity separate from the rest of Asia (i.e., South and East Asia) yet part of the greater East. Juxtaposed against images of women in South
and East Asia that have been inextricably intertwined with and determined by norms and practices such as sati, purdah, polygyny, concubinage, and foot-binding, claims about the freedom and independence of women in Southeast Asia have figured prominently in the revisionist attempt by scholars to (re)center a marginalized Southeast Asia (Reynolds 1995). We are reminded of Michael Adas’ *Machines as the Measure of Men*, which examines how Europeans and Americans came to view scientific and technological accomplishments as distinctive measures of European superiority and as the most meaningful means to gauge the abilities of non-Western peoples: a model in which Southeast Asians are disregarded, devalued, and placed below “Indian” and “Chinese” people who have historically demonstrated an aptitude in science and technology through their inventions (Adas 1989:4–5). The “traditional” high status of women in Southeast Asia has served to constitute and define the cultural and historical specificity of the Southeast Asian region and to contest the superiority of South Asian, East Asian, and Western cultures.

Historians and anthropologists of Southeast Asia today generally concur that claims about the purported status of women in the region are oversimplified and highly problematic.¹ They question the (Eurocentric) premise on which such claims hinge—that women’s economic and legal power is the most important factor in determining relations of power and prestige—and point to the need for contextualized and historicized studies of gender in the region (Atkinson and Errington 1990:7). Academic scholarship about Burma, however, has been slow to address this problem of the status of women (Mills 2000). Despite the fact that postcolonial scholars

¹ Recent scholarship points out that high status, often documented as a resilient, underlying social structure or culture of Southeast Asia, in fact derived from early colonialists’ observation that women in Southeast Asia have been active agents in the economic sphere by tradition. This colonial perspective disregarded the fact that despite the high status, freedom, and independence of Burmese women, male dominance and leadership was, at least ritualistically or ceremonially, accepted in Burmese culture. See critical discussions of the concept of Southeast Asian women’s “relative autonomy” and “high status” in Wolters (1999:170) and Andaya (2000:1–26).
of Burma by and large have failed to examine the historical pasts of women in Burma, contemporary studies of Burmese society perpetuate the discourse of the “traditional” status of women which, as Barbara Andaya aptly points out, “carry with them implicit messages of gender equality, economic independence, etc., and invoke a kind of golden age when women were different from men ‘but in no way inferior’” (Andaya 2000:6).

This article examines the discursive formation of the “traditional” high status of women in colonial Burma during the first half of the twentieth century and contributes to the larger project of re-conceptualizing naturalized and essentialized understanding of Southeast Asia and its knowledge field. It looks at the varied and multivalent ways that the “high status” of women circulated and operated in official and popular, and colonial and nationalist discourses on universal suffrage, political reforms, and intermarriage (primarily between a Buddhist Burmese woman and an “Indian” man), and it argues that the Burmese female prototype was formed and understood in opposition to the likewise “traditional” inferior status of her racialized other: the “Indian woman.” It shows that representations of the “traditionally” progressive Burmese woman constituted a key political strategy on both sides of the colonial struggle that was fashioned and utilized by colonizing and colonized women and men in unequal relations of power to justify and de-legitimize colonial rule. The genealogical investigation into this gender-specific cultural stereotype complicates ideas of gender relations and hierarchies in Burma and challenges the persistent practice of enshrining monolithic cultural stereotypes as essential components of Burmese, and more broadly Southeast Asian, histories and identities.
Chie Ikeya

THE ‘FREE’ AND ‘INDEPENDENT’ BUDDHIST WOMEN OF BURMA
I: In the Eyes of the Colonizer

Utterly unlike their miserable Mohamedan and Hindoo sisters, they [women in Burma] enjoy absolute liberty—a liberty of which, if rumor prove true, they make ample use. (Gascoigne 1896:43)

A [Burmese] girl does not change her name when she marries, nor does she wear any sign of marriage, such as a ring. Her name is always the same, and there is nothing to a stranger to denote whether she be married or not, of whose wife she is; and she keeps her property as her own. Marriage does not confer upon her husband any power over his wife’s property, either what she brings with her, what she earns, or what she inherits subsequently; it all remains her own, as does his remain his own. (Hall 1898:189)

It has often been said that the women do most of the hard work of the country. But this is not because they are the slaves of their husbands, as among savage warlike races. On the contrary, they occupy a position of independence and responsibility, and it is precisely this sense of responsibility, added to maternal love for their offspring, that makes them work hard when the husband fails to do his share. (Brown 1911:216)
Historians of Burma have tended to disregard the conspicuous paucity of thorough historical studies of the place of women and gender in pre-colonial or colonial Burma, and more broadly in the Buddhist region of Southeast Asia (i.e., mainland Southeast Asia and neighboring Sri Lanka). What little scholars do know about the history of gender relations in Burma indicates that practices favorable to women have existed side by side with sexist and even misogynistic ideas and customs concerning women. Although women in Burma had for a long time an influential presence in the economic sphere, as in other pre-modern Southeast Asian societies, the active role of women as economic agents—the very attribute that gave women their autonomy and power—subordinated them to men religiously, politically, ritualistically, and ceremonially. Economic prowess enabled women to undertake merit-making activities such as making donations to pagodas, but at the same time the worldly sphere of commerce, profit-seeking, and monetary affairs was deemed spiritually polluting (Atkinson and Errington 1990; Kawanami n.d.; Spiro 1997). Additional regulations that apply to female members of Theravada Buddhist societies—such as the exclusion of women from the sangha since the thirteenth century and the shorter history of Buddhist nuns—have contributed to perceptions of women as occupying a secondary position to men (Kawanami 2000; Khaing 1984; Mendelson 1975).

Narrative depictions of women in Buddhist literature, furthermore, have delivered both positive and negative portrayals of women. If women have figured in Buddhist literature as devoted followers of the Buddha, donors, renunciants, and teachers who played a significant role

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2 For a succinct and useful review of the state of Buddhist Studies in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, see the introductory chapter in Blackburn (2001:3–22) and Andaya (2002).

3 Buddhist nuns or thila-shins do exist in Burma to this day but they have not been recognized officially as part of 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.
in the development and spread of Buddhism, Buddhist hagiographies have also cast the women in the role of impure temptresses charged with keeping men from attaining *nibbana* (Bartholomeusz 1994; Blackstone 1998; Dharmasena 1991; Wilson 1996). It is hardly surprising that Mi Mi Khaing, the female author of *The World of Burmese Women* (Khaing 1984), recognized unanimously by Burma experts as the foundational scholarly work on Burmese women, has asserted that women were believed to be spiritually inferior to men despite the high status that Burmese women allegedly enjoyed: “There is no doubt in our minds. Spiritually, a man is higher than a woman. This is just not an abstract idea belonging to religious philosophy. Conviction of it enter[s] our very bones” (16). Gendered practices and representations both favorable and unfavorable to women have thus informed the place of women and men in Burmese society and delineated the boundaries of femininity and masculinity.

Yet, the twentieth century saw positive portrayals of women in Burma become increasingly pronounced in accounts of Burmese society by observers both men and women, colonizer and colonized. Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, and European travelers commented on what they perceived as an exceptional liberty of Burmese women. British representatives of cosmopolitan women’s associations pointed to the freedom of women in Burma in their struggle to enfranchise women in the colonies. Burmese and Indian nationalist leaders drew attention to the high status of women in Burma to discredit the British colonial project and its professed goal of implementing needed social reforms. They focused their critique in particular on the British policy of raising the status of women in the colonies.

Tinzar Lwn has shown in her analysis of colonial discourses on Burmese women that Christian missionaries and colonial officials alike “wrote in amazement of Burmese women’s perceived equality with men and their relative freedom and independence” (Lwn 1994:64). A “handbook” on Burma long recognized as the standard authority on the
country and written by Sir George Scott, a late nineteenth-century British officer in Burma, offers one of the most striking examples of this Orientalist perception of women in Burma. The following passage is taken from a subsection entitled “National Character,” in which Scott attempts to outline a Burmese national identity by comparing and contrasting women in Japan and in Burma:

Both are frank, and unaffected, and have a charming artlessness, but the Burmese woman is far ahead of her lord in the matter of business capacity by the way in which she rules the household without outwardly seeming to exercise any authority. The Japanese wife treats her husband as an idol, the Burmese as a comrade. (1906:77)

Harold Fielding Hall, another late nineteenth-century British officer in Burma writing at the turn of the century, claims that a Burmese woman, unlike a European or an Indian woman, “has been bound by no ties” (Hall 1898:173). He elaborates:

You see, she [a Burmese woman] has had to fight her own way; for the same laws that made woman lower than man in Europe compensated her to a certain extent by protection and guidance. In Burma she has been neither confined nor guided. In Europe and India for very long the idea was to make woman a hot-house plant, to see that no rough winds struck her, that no injuries overtook her. In Burma she has had to look out for herself: she has had freedom to come to grief as well as to come to strength. (173)
That women in Burma had categorically gained a reputation for their “liberty” can also be discerned from an article written for *Times India* by Sir Harcourt Butler, who served as Governor of Burma from 1923 until 1927, in which he points out that what distinguishes Burma from India and makes Burma “one of the fairest countries of the British Empire” is that the Burmese women do not wear *purdah* (Butler 1930).

The reputation of traditionally liberated Burmese women—at least as such “outsiders” as colonial travelers and officials understood it—was inextricably intertwined with their comparative perception of predominantly Buddhist women in Burma to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian women in Britain and in British India. The comparison was founded upon Orientalist representations of such “traditional” practices as *sati* and *purdah* in Hindu and Muslim societies, and the lack thereof in Buddhist societies. Another equally important and often overlooked premise for the comparison pertained to Eurocentric and Judeo-Christian notions of enfranchisement and citizenship based in turn on property rights. Studies of legal texts by British officials and scholars and their ideas of “Burmese Buddhist” or “customary” law placed emphasis on the division of marriage property in divorce and the equal rights of women to inherit. Hall asserts that women in Burma have always had “freedom from sacerdotal dogma, from secular law” (1898:172) and “in no material points, hardly even in minor points, does the law discriminate against women” (171). Writing a decade after Hall, another British officer, R. Grant Brown, similarly stresses the gender equality underlying norms and practices pertaining to marriage, inheritance, and ownership in Burma:

\[
\text{[N]ot only do sons and daughters inherit equally from their parents, but} \\
\text{a married woman has an absolute right to dispose as she pleases of property}
\]

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acquired or inherited by her either before or after marriage. She is usually a partner in her husband’s business, and as such as just as much right to sign for the firm as he; but she may have a business of her own, with the proceeds of which he cannot interfere. Even in matters in which she has no part, she is usually consulted before an important step is taken. . . . (1911:217)

Based on this selective comparative view, colonizers determined that Burmese women possessed remarkable freedom, independence, and equality with men. Thus, when international women’s associations pressed the British government to enfranchise women in Burma, they justified their demand on the basis that women in Burma had property rights. For instance, a letter to the Secretary of State for India, India Office, dated December 20, 1933, from the Equal Citizenship and the British Commonwealth league—an association whose professed goals were to secure equality of liberties and opportunities between men and women in the British Commonwealth nations—reads:

On behalf of the women of the Empire, we urge you to forward the views of the women of Burma, and extend the franchise to the wives of men qualified as property owners in the same way that wives in this country are qualified. This is essentially just in regard to Burmese women, since, according to Burmese law and custom, wives are in fact joint owners of the property. To distinguish between the joint holders by enfranchising one only is an obvious injustice. (League 1933)5

5 The International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (Alliance Internationale Pour Le Suffrage et L’Action Civique et Politique des Femmes) similarly wrote to the Secretary of India urging that “the franchise to be exercised by
The Burmese “tradition” of gender equality was thus significantly shaped by the country’s incorporation into the British empire, which privileged the view of Burmese society and culture through the lens of the British empire instead of through the lens of other Buddhist or neighboring Southeast Asian societies where women possessed comparable marital and property rights.

This is not to suggest that colonizers painted images of perfect women in Burma. If Orientalist representations of sati and purdah served to legitimize colonialism, in Burma, it was what Christian missionaries characterized as the excessively free and therefore unrestrained and unrefined behavior of indigenous, non-Christian (i.e., Buddhist) women that served as the raison d’être of the Anglo-American civilizing mission. Colonial officials similarly placed emphasis on the low literacy rate of women and the high infant mortality rate in Burma and portrayed colonial rule—in particular, colonial educational reforms—as an antidote to the lack of education and child-rearing skills of women in Burma. In the eyes of some colonizers, women in Burma, while free and autonomous, still needed to be cultivated.

Nonetheless, the perception that Burmese society was free of customs oppressive to women became the most compelling and certainly the most enduring popular representation of Burmese society in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Take, for example, the following passage from a 1914 survey of thirty interviewees—consisting of Burmese and English university professors, Christian missionaries, and government officials—

owners of property should be on the basis of the vote of both husband and wife as we understand that in Burmese law they are joint owners” (Citizenship 1933).

6 Scholarship on colonial discourses of women that have emerged in the context of South Asian, subaltern, and feminist studies—and in particular, studies of the practices of sati and purdah, commonly translated as widow-burning and the wearing of veil—have revealed that Orientalist representations of “traditions” and “customs” in the colonies that allegedly repressed women served to legitimize the colonial civilizing mission. See Said (1978) and Mani (1998).

The women of Burma are said to enjoy already many of the privileges for which their Western sisters are clamoring. . . . It is probably true to say that whilst the position assigned to women in Buddhism is low, yet in practice the women of Burma have made a place for themselves which is certainly unique in the East; and in some ways in advance of that in the West—if not actually, at least relatively, to the position of men. (Saunder 1914:63)

According to the interviewees, women in Burma were more privileged and more “advanced” than women in other parts of the world, including the West.

II: In the Eyes of the Colonized
This view of women in Burma was by no means confined to Christian or British colonizers. Take, for instance, an article by U Ka, entitled “Muslim Women” (Muslim Amyothamimya), in the April 1936 New Year’s edition of Myanmar Alin in which the author contrasts women in Burma with Muslim women. U Ka begins with a lengthy exposition on purdah, which he describes as “a Muslim custom of hiding women at home” (Ka 1938:42) for the sake of preventing them from tempting Muslim men to be lustful and immoral. He then outlines the various ways that a Muslim woman is allegedly deprived of numerous privileges. He claims that while she is virtually locked up at

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8 The survey was conducted on the impact of modern conditions on the state of Buddhism in contemporary Burma and published as Modern Buddhism in Burma: Being an Epitome of Information Received from Missionaries, Officials, and Others (Saunder 1914).
home to perform domestic duties, when there is a war, she must accompany men to nurse the injured. “What is this belief,” deplores U Ka, “that a Muslim woman should undertake a Hajj when she is prohibited from entering a mosque?” (45). He adds that Muslim women in Burma cannot read religious texts, newspapers, or anything written in English (43–45). U Ka contrasts the desolate account he has presented of the life of a Muslim woman with the uplifting portrayal of Buddhist women in Burma:

Young Buddhist women graduate with [sic] bachelor and master degrees. They run companies and stores. They become doctors, administrators, teachers, municipal representatives, and editors for newspapers and magazines. (52)

Not only Burmese social critics but also British Indian subjects who traveled to Burma reinforced the view that women in Burma occupied a higher social position than that of women in India. One of the pioneering leaders of nationalism, democracy, and non-violent political resistance in India, Lokamanya Tilak,10 for instance, referred to the social condition of women in Burma in speeches he gave in India after his visit to Burma in 1899:

All the reforms like absence of caste division, freedom of religion, education of women, late marriages, widow remarriage, system of divorce, on which some good people of India are in the habit of harping ad nauseam as constituting a condition precedent to

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9 An annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the fifth of the “Five Pillars of Islam,” stipulates that every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

10 For information on Lokamanya B. G. Tilak, see Gopal (1956) and Chousalkar (1990).
the introduction of political reforms in India, had already been in actual practice in the province of Burma. . . . It is borne in upon us by the situation of the Sinhalese and the Burmese that the opinion of some wise person about the indispensability of social reform for national or industrial advancement of our country is entirely wrong. . . . Some European writers have sought to advise us to bring about social reform as a preparation for political reform. But it is human nature that this piece of precept should stand suspect till we see with our own eyes what kind of political reform is given to Burma which is socially in a position to deserve it. (Chousalkar 1990:214)

What is interesting about the passage is that Tilak draws attention to the British refusal to grant political reform to Burma in spite of the socially advanced status of the Burmese female. In India, nationalists saw the British colonization of Burma, despite the high status of women in Burmese society, as proof that British colonial rule merely deployed the “oppressive” treatment of women in India as a justification for refusing to grant India political reforms. The “high status” of the Burmese female, in other words, played a key role in the political maneuvers of nationalists in India.

By the 1930s, the high status of women served as an essential political strategy of nationalist movements not only in India but also in Burma. The image of the exceptionally liberated Burmese women, positioned in contrast to the traditionally repressed women in India, was repeatedly cited as evidence of the country’s legitimate demand for administrative reforms. Exemplary of this political strategy, the Secretary of the Burmese Women’s Association, Daw Mya
Sein, put forward the case for extending the reforms granted to India in 1910 but denied to Burma as follows at the Burma Round Table Conference in 1931:

The women of Burma occupy a position of freedom and independence not attained in other provinces. Socially there is practical equality between the sexes. Purdha is unknown; women take their full share with men in the economic life of their country and the percentage of literates among women is far higher than elsewhere.\(^\text{11}\)

Given the fact that the British colonial discourse of a civilizing mission used the conditions of women in the colonies as an index for measuring the quality of a civilization, it is no surprise that nationalists highlighted the egalitarian nature of gender relations in Burma. The high status of the Burmese female exposed the illegitimacy of British colonial rule.

By citing the high status of the Burmese female as evidence of the country’s legitimate demand for sovereignty, nationalists reinforced their claim to self-rule and/or independence. At the same time, they questioned both the superior status of the colonizing women and the colonizers’ conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. Take, for instance, the following statement by Daw Khin Myint in a talk entitled “Englishmen as Seen by Burmese Women”:

\(^{11}\) This quote, from minutes of proceedings at the Round Table Conference, which Daw Mya Sein attended as the only female member of the Burma delegation, is cited in Khaing (1984:156).
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.”

The high status of women in Burma had become established as a resilient Burmese national tradition and Daw Khin Myint drew on this tradition as a strategic move in her struggle to negotiate prevailing, unequal relations of power. Insofar as the high status of women in Burma symbolized a serious challenge to the legitimacy of British colonial rule and civilizing mission, the maintenance of this symbolic tradition figured as an imperative element of the anti-colonial struggle in Burma. An editorial in the 1936 New Year’s edition of *New Light of Myanmar* titled “Some of Burma’s Problems,” thus, urged women in Burma to pursue professional careers for the sake of their “traditional” high status. In the editorial, the editor calls on Burmese women to not fall behind women in other countries—namely the West, China, Japan, Turkey, Persia, Egypt, and other “uncolonized” countries presumably on the fast track to modernization—who were joining the armed and police forces, taking up professions as mechanics, journalists, doctors and nurses, teachers, lawyers, and judges. “Burmese women,” he says, “are you going to let your time-honored reputation as exceptionally liberated women of the East be ruined?” (*New Light of Myanmar* 1936:9).

In fact, by the late 1930s, the preferred tactic of anti-colonialists in Burma involved accentuating not the high status of women in Burma per se, but rather its loss under colonial rule. The next section examines the role that the threatened loss of the “time-honored” high status of a Burmese woman

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12 The talk, given at a meeting of the Rotary Club of Rangoon, was printed in *Ngan Hta Lawka* magazine (Myint 1937:542).
played in Burmese nationalist discourses by looking at censorious discussions about a type of intermarriage that I refer to as the “Indo-Burmese” marriage: a marriage between a Burmese Buddhist woman and an “Indian” man that circulated in the Burmese media in the 1930s (I will elaborate on what the term “Indian” meant in 1930s’ Burmese discourse in the following section). These representations, in the form of editorials, commentaries, and cartoons that ranged from sarcastic to derogatory, depicted Indian men as racially inferior minions of the British colonizers and accused Burmese women who married such men of transgressing essential Burmese cultural boundaries and sacrificing the freedom safeguarded by “traditional” Burmese society. The section shows that the figure of the miscegenating Burmese female, who had become the target of critics who sought to illustrate to the Burmese public the pernicious effects of colonial rule on the Burmese race and religion, was essential to and constitutive of the conceptualization of the Burmese nation-state and national identity.

The Trouble with the ‘Indo-Burmese’ Marriage

Both inter-faith marriage and marriage between a Burmese woman and a non-indigenous man have represented common practices since at least the nineteenth century, and Burma scholars have noted that such unions were even encouraged by the local population (Thant 2001:244). In the 1920s, however, government officials, politicians, writers, and intellectuals began to discuss a marriage between a Burmese Buddhist woman and an “Indian” man as a morally and culturally reprehensible practice that purportedly threatened the socio-cultural oppression of women in Burma.

13 According to John C. Koop’s The Eurasian Population in Burma, the children of Burmese women and European men first appeared in Burma as early as the sixteenth century in the maritime districts of Mergui, Tavoy, Martaban, Pegu, and Akyab, where early Portuguese traders, explorers, and navigators settled (1960:17–20).

14 “Interrace,” in fact, emerged as a socio-cultural problem in Burma as early as 1870, when the British administration issued circulars prohibiting European officials from conjugal liaisons with indigenous women. In Burma, as in other European colonies in Southeast Asia, intimate relations between colonized women and colonizing men—and the progeny of such unions—were considered harmful to “white
The terms “Indian” (*kala*)\(^{15}\) and “Indo-Burmese” need a brief explanation. As it was disseminated in the Burmese media in the 1920s and 1930s, the term “Indian” referred mainly, though not necessarily, to a Hindu or a Muslim from the Indian subcontinent. “Indian” in the context of the Indo-Burmese marriage furthermore signified the group of mostly male, immigrant and/or seasonal traders, workers, and laborers from the Indian subcontinent who came to Burma in the thousands to work in Burma’s paddy fields, rice mills, factories, and docks. Far from being a homogeneous lot, the group of Indian immigrants included a diverse array of people from Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, Sikh, and other religious backgrounds: Chettiar moneylenders from Tamil Nadu, 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).

The term “Indian” did not reflect the heterogeneity of this group, however, and stereotyped immigrants from the Indian subcontinent as lower-class and lower-caste Muslim and Hindu men and women, typically of skin color darker than that of the indigenous races of Burma.\(^{16}\) Figure 1 shows a...
cigarette advertisement, featured in a 1937 issue of a leading newspaper, that sheds light on how the Burmese print media portrayed “Indians” in Burma; the Burmese men in the ad (the shoe-wearing cigarette smokers) represent college students, one of whom has just returned from a trip upcountry during an academic break and there, is accompanied by a (shoeless) Indian coolie carrying his luggage.

I employ the term “Indo-Burmese marriage” instead of “Burmese-Muslim marriage,” the term the British administration used, because the latter description doesn’t accurately capture the racial or, rather, interracial aspect of the intermarriage in question. As the following discussion will show, “Burmese-Muslim marriage” is a misleading description of the unions that became the target of public castigation; critics often conflated “Indian” and “Muslim” in their discussions of intermarriage, but they directed their criticism consistently at a Burmese woman’s marriage to an “Indian” man rather than a Muslim man per se.

The Indo-Burmese marriage first emerged as a public concern in the early 1920s as an agenda of the leading women’s nationalist organization, Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin (hereafter referred to as Konmaryi), a subsidiary branch of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA).17 The first public denunciation of Indo-Burmese marriages by the Konmaryi took place on July 11, 1921 at a demonstration organized by the GCBA to protest the imprisonment of U Ottama, a nationalist monk and a leading member of the GCBA known as “the Gandhi of Burma.”18 Addressing those who were gathered

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17 When the Konmaryi was founded on November 16, 1919, it was an elite women’s organization with approximately 300 members led by an executive committee of officials’ wives and prosperous women entrepreneurs, chiefly bazaar traders, whose chief commitment was to support the nationalist efforts of Burmese men (Maw 1999:51–55; Mu 1981:7–30; Nyin 1976:17–21).

18 U Ottama was famous for his inflammatory anti-colonial speeches, which he gave throughout small towns and villages in Burma. The colonial government arrested him for one of these speeches, tried him for sedition, and sentenced him to eighteen months imprisonment—the first time in colonial Burmese history that a prison term
at a park in downtown Rangoon for the protest, Konmaryi members declared that Burmese women should not marry men of a religious faith other than Buddhism (Gale 1939:128). The purported problem underlying Indo-Burmese marriages concerned the loss by the woman of her Buddhist spousal rights, especially those pertaining to divorce and inheritance, through the marriage. The colonial administration summarized the problem as follows:

First, it is said that a Burmese Buddhist woman who has contracted an alliance

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19 The word *kabya*, in its most basic meaning, refers to people of mixed ancestry. The etymology of the word, however, is uncertain. Some argue that *kabya* is a derivative of the word *kaq-*pa, which refers to a person who has taken up residence, temporarily or permanently, in a locality that is not his native place. *Kaq-*pa also means parasite. Others claim that *kabya* derived from the word *kwe-bya*, which means to be divided or to become various, a word especially applicable to living beings (Judson’s Burmese-English Dictionary 1953:174–250; Myanmar-Engleik Abeidan 1993:4, 22; Gale 1939:7).
with an Indian and has cohabited with him openly in the belief that she is married to him, often discovers, when the question of her status arises, that, by reason of the operation of the personal law of the man, she is not his wife. Secondly, in order to contract a valid marriage, she is bound to renounce her own Buddhist religion and to adopt that of her Muslim husband. And, thirdly, it is said that, even if she is recognized as the wife of the man, she does not obtain the benefit of the status of a married woman under Burmese Buddhist Law. Burmese Buddhist Law allots to a wife an equal share in the properties acquired by her and her husband or, in certain circumstances, either of them during the marriage and gives her the whole estate as a survivor on the death of the husband. (Committee 1939:28–33)

A Burmese woman lost her “high status” through her marriage specifically to Muslim men but more generally to any non-Buddhist men.

The Konmaryi members continued to speak publicly against Burmese-Muslim marriages in Rangoon and in Mandalay, as a result of which the colonial government drafted the Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill, a precursor to the Women’s Special Marriage and Succession Act, in 1927.20 The act decreed that Burmese customary law be applied to marriages involving Buddhist women who belong to any of the indigenous races of Burma, given the following conditions: first, that the man was at least eighteen years of age and the woman at least sixteen (with the consent of both parents if either was below twenty);

20 See Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill (Draft, July 20, 1927) in (Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill, Protest Against 1927).
second, that the woman had no subsisting marriage tie; and third, that the marriage was solemnized and recorded by the registrar or the village headman. If the couple cohabited without marriage and without being registered thus, the woman or her parents, guardians, and siblings, could inform the village registrar of it, at which time both parties were to be summoned and urged to legalize the union. If the man refused to legalize the union, a suit for breach of promise to marry or for seduction could be brought against him. If the union was legalized, Burmese customary law applied to all matters related to divorce, inheritance, succession and ownership of properties. In addition, any child born before legalization of the union also gained “legitimate” status.21

The bill, however, failed to pass until 1939, and the Konmaryi’s public criticism had failed to muster a popular following until the late 1930s when resolutions dealing with the Burmese-Muslim marriage appeared as an important agenda at nationalist meetings throughout the country.22 The colonial state in fact cited the Burmese-Muslim marriage as one chief cause of a series of anti-Indian riots—referred to as the “1938 Burma Riots”—that broke out in Rangoon on July 26, 1938.23

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

21 The 1927 draft outlawed polygamy, recognized adultery and cruelty as matrimonial faults to justify divorce, and defined divorce to be the only means (aside from death) of breaking marital ties, thus safeguarding against hasty divorces. As Daw Mi Mi Khin points out, however, Burmese customary law still failed to apply to marriages involving Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men (1984:42–43).
22 The Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage and Succession Act (Burma Act XXIV, 1939) came into effect on April 1, 1939 (Burma Act XXIV 1939:15–24).
23 Varying historical accounts explain the anti-Indian riots by placing emphasis on the intensification of anti-colonialist sentiments, the economic crisis triggered by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Burmese public’s heightened awareness of ethnicity. For various historical narratives of riots and the Burmese-Muslim marriage question, see Riot Inquiry Committee (1939), Adas (1974), Furnivall (1991), Gravers (1999), Singh (1980), and Yegar (1972).
was first published seven years earlier and then republished a few months prior to the riots. Those gathered for the meeting marched to the Soortee Bara Bazaar and upon arrival at the bazaar, began throwing stones and attacking Indians. The police stepped in, as a result of which a monk was injured by an Indian policeman. Similar riots spread throughout Burma immediately following the unrest at the bazaar, protracting into September 1938 and resulting in 220 dead and 926 injured.

The British administration attributed the riots to several other factors besides Maung Shwe Hpi’s book, including the 1930s economic depression, the sensationalist and inflammatory coverage of the riots by the popular press, and intermarriage between Buddhist Burmese women and Indian men. The report underscored the link between Indo-Burmese marriages and the riots, asserting that in the majority of organized protests against Maung Shwe Hpi’s book, the marriage question was raised although it bore no actual relation to the book. “It became evident to us,” states the *Riot Inquiry Interim Report*, “that one of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of [Burmese] was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular” (Committee 1939).

Newspaper articles published in the wake of the riots indicate that an Indo-Burmese marriage was perceived not only as the woman’s decline in status but furthermore as her violent physical oppression. A report published April 21, 1939, in the *Toetetyei* (The Advance Monthly), entitled “Burmese women meet with troubles,” gave an account of a Burmese woman, Ma May Myit, who married an Indian man about fourteen years earlier. According to the report, Ma May Myit was taken to India by her husband in November 1938. Upon her arrival, she found herself ill-treated at the hands of her husband and his first wife before she was ultimately kicked out of the house. Ma May Myit went to Calcutta where she found Burmese residents who financed her passage back to Burma (*Toetetyei* April 29, 1939).

A Burmese woman who married a Muslim not only
dragged herself down, but more generally, she denigrated Burmese society at large. An article in the November 27, 1938, issue of Seq-Than Journal (Ten Million), published under the heading, “Burmese women who took Indians,” blamed Burmese wives of Indian Muslims for ruining Burma’s “race and religion”:

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

The July 25, 1938, issue of Thuriya featured an article that accused immigrants to Burma who professed other religions of “seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives, causing dissension in order to create such communities as Dobama Muslim (We Burmese Muslim).” The critics of Burmese women’s liaisons with Muslims echoed the colonialist Darwinian discourse on racial degeneration. A Burmese woman was destined to damage Burmese culture because she had to adopt her husband’s religion and custom. She thus destroyed her amyo (အမောင်): i.e., her race, ancestors and kin, religion, and culture. The author of Kabya Pyatthana (The Half-Caste Problem), published in 1939, summed up the discourse against the Burmese-Muslim marriage: “A Burmese woman who marries [an Indian Muslim man] hurts both her amyo and her cultural heritage” (Gale 1939:126). A Burmese

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24 The passage from the letter, written and published in Burmese in the July 25 issue of Thuriya, was cited in English translation in Committee (1939:11).

25 The word amyo is often translated into English as “race,” although race is only one of its meanings. The word also means “kind” or “species,” and refers to a person’s lineage, heredity, family, relative, and class.
woman’s degenerative intercourse with an Indian—portrayed as inherently inclined to perpetuate the oppressive treatment of women customary in Hindu and Muslim societies—threatened a spiraling destruction of Burmese society (8).

The figure of the miscegenating Burmese female who had abandoned her “high status” thus provided an outlet for a racialized and sexualized critique of the impact of colonial rule on Burmese society. By discussing Indo-Burmese marriages as demeaning and harmful to the prestige of Burmese women and the Burmese amyo, critics indirectly accused the British colonial state and its middlemen, the Indians, of oppressing Burmese people. On the other hand, by claiming that the Burmese public was concerned chiefly with marriages between Burmese Buddhist women and Indian Muslim men, the British sought to elide the fact that their economic and immigration policies resulted in the disenfranchisement of the indigenous population, a result that Burmese people felt particularly acutely as a consequence of the 1930s’ economic depression. The colonizer and the colonized in Burma alike deployed racialized and sexualized senses of belonging and exclusion which converged on the bodies of Burmese women.

The “high status” still functioned as an essential political strategy, but in the context of the late 1930s, it served the interests of those who sought to refract a conceptualization of the Burmese nation-state through the Burmese female who had betrayed her amyo. In the discourses of the Indo-Burmese marriage, the women functioned as objects of reflection. In her analysis of literary conventions used in Buddhist hagiographic literature, Liz Wilson argues that the function of women who appear in Buddhist narratives is often as objects of meditation that lead to the edification of the male subjects who observe the women:

In a broad cross-section of hagiographic literature, male protagonists become Arahats, or “worthy ones,” through viewing dead, dying, or disfigured
female bodies. By viewing women as object lessons on the folly of desire, the men in these narratives thereby achieve the state of spiritual liberation that is characterized by the eradication of desire and thereby become worthy of veneration and emulation. (Wilson 1996:3–4)

In the castigating public discussion of a Burmese woman’s relations to “Indian” men, male protagonists became nationalists or nationalist heroes through viewing women as object lessons on the folly of desire for the colonial and the “foreign.” The figure of the intermarrying and miscegenating Burmese female who racially and culturally degraded her people by getting into bed (literally) with the “minions” of the British colonizers served to edify a singular conceptualization of the Burmese nation-state. Just as there was no civilized, free, and independent traditional Burmese female without the uncivilized, oppressed, “Indian” and female “Other,” there was no sovereign and self-respecting Burmese nation without the unpatriotic, miscegenating, and degraded Burmese female.

**Conclusion**

The “tradition” of gender equality and high status of women in Burma developed as a result of the multi-dimensional and multiply motivated representational practices by colonizing and colonized women and men who co-authored essentially and powerfully gendered and racialized discourses of colonialism, modernization, and nationalism. Christian missionaries and colonial officials cited the “traditional” freedom of women in Burma in their effort to justify colonialism. If in British India the oppression of women served as the justification for the colonizers’ civilizing mission, the untamed and uncultivated freedom of women in Burma legitimized colonial rule. Women’s associations, both local and cosmopolitan, advocated for women’s enfranchisement on the basis that
women’s suffrage was in keeping with Burmese “tradition.” Nationalists and social critics in India drew attention to the British colonization of Burma, despite the high status of women in Burmese society, as proof that the “oppressive” treatment of women in India was a mere excuse for the continued colonization of India. Members of the Burmese political, intellectual, and social elite referenced the “high status” as a testament to their rightful claim to decolonization and self-rule. They likewise flaunted the “high status” to contest the superiority of the colonizing society, race, and culture.

My analysis of the political efficacy of the concept of Burmese women as having “high status” and its varied uses by everyone but Burmese women themselves has also shown that in colonial Burma, as in other European colonies, imperial authority and national identity were expressed not only in racialized but also gendered terms. “Burmese women” developed into a privileged idiom through which disparate social groups in colonial Burma interpreted, debated, appropriated, resisted, and otherwise engaged with new relations of power and social inequalities created by processes of colonialism and modernization. Both as a heuristic category and as actual historical agents, the “Burmese women” examined in this study, such as the traditionally progressive woman and the miscegenating woman, articulated and gave shape to emergent cosmopolitan ideas of social reform, race, and nation-state.

Finally, my examination of the construction of gendered discourses has allowed us to begin deconstructing gender-specific cultural stereotypes that have defined and constituted knowledge about Burma. A critical history of Burma, however, is in need of another kind of scholarly intervention: a careful documentation of gender-specific relations of power in Burma on the eve of colonialism, modernization, and nationalism. The relative paucity of studies on gender and more broadly “tradition” in pre-colonial Burma seriously undermines any attempt to evaluate the significance of colonial modernity or to assess processes of historical change. By interrogating the ideas, images, practices, and institutions that informed nor-
mative notions of femininity in colonial Burma, we will be better positioned to question the ways that these gendered ideas have historically delineated the boundaries among women, culture and “tradition” in Burma.

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