

The Body of the Burmese Muslim

Chie Ikeya

Abstract

Across the colonial-postcolonial divide, the body of the Burmese Muslim has served as a potent embodiment of difference and object of emotions. A non-normative body that troubles the binary frame of the Burmese Buddhist native versus Indian Muslim foreigner, the Burmese Muslim has also occasioned reckonings with the historicity and mutability of social constructions that have become taken for granted realities. As such, Burmese Muslims have been subject to recurrent attempts at political and social control. I explore this persistent record of the Burmese Muslim, starting at the turn of the nineteenth century and extending to the present, and analyze the development of new regimes of social reproduction spawned through but not determined by colonial agenda and priorities.

Keywords: Burmese Muslims; colonial Burma; social reproduction; Burmese nationalism; minority population

Introduction

The body of the Burmese Muslim has been, simultaneously, hypervisible and illegible. In 1901, the British colonial government abolished the category of “Burmese Muslim” and ascribed to those who identified as Burmese Muslim an alien religious, racial, and legal status—what the British called “personal” status. Decades of advocating by Burmese Muslims for official recognition as an indigenous minority population and a valid classification of personhood did not reverse this decision. Contrasting this denial of the Burmese Muslim by the British administration and, subsequently, Burmese national governments, the body of the Burmese Muslim woman—how she dressed, what she felt, and whom she loved, bedded, wedded, and birthed—has constituted a matter of public debate. Across the colonial-post-colonial divide, the female body of the Burmese Muslim has served as a potent embodiment of difference and object of emotions. A non-normative body that troubles the binary frame of the Burmese Buddhist native versus Indian Muslim foreigner, the Burmese Muslim has also occasioned reckonings with the historicity and mutability of social constructions that have become taken for granted realities.

As such, Burmese Muslims have been subject to recurrent attempts at political and social control, including negation, conditional inclusion, and expulsion. I explore this persistent record of the Burmese Muslim, starting at the turn of the nineteenth century and extending to the present.

The work that Muslim bodies performed in the making of empires and nations—and in making their borders and boundaries matter—has been the subject of much scholarship, not least on South Asia.¹ Scholars such as Charu Gupta, Durba Mitra, and Asha Nadkarni have shown that Muslim bodies, constructed as vectors of sexual and reproductive excess and perversion—polygamy, promiscuity, prostitution, and overfertility—constituted targets of regulation in British India, of which Burma was a province from 1886 until 1937.² Virtually no such studies exist on Burma, a country considered “outside the arc of Islam” in Asia and essentialized as a Buddhist heartland, despite its shared border and history (of the British Raj) with India and Bangladesh.³ In examining the centrality of Burmese Muslims to the colonial modern constitution of binary bodies (native-foreign, civilized-uncivilized, Buddhist-Muslim, and Burmese-Indian), I take up the challenge by scholars such as Shefali Chandra “to look beyond more obvious exchanges between colonizing and colonized groups, white and nonwhite,” to probe the development of new regimes of the body, sexuality, and reproduction spawned through but not determined by colonial agenda and priorities.⁴

¹ This voluminous scholarship cuts across regional boundaries such as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and includes works such as Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, eds., *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, eds., *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1996); Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in Algeria, 1830–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

² Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002; first published, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Asha Nadkarni, *Eugenic Feminism: Reproductive Nationalism in the United States and India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

³ Eric Tagliacozzo, “Burmese and Muslim: Islam and the Hajj in the Sangha State,” *Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime*, edited by Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo, 83–106 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 85.

⁴ Shefali Chandra, “Whiteness on the Margins of Native Patriarchy: Race, Caste, Sexuality, and the Agenda of Transnational Studies,” *Feminist Studies* 37.1 (Spring 2011): 127–153, p. 132.

Sovereign vs. Captive Bodies

In 1895, the Chief Court of Upper Burma heard a landmark case that set the precedent for applying “Muslim” not “Buddhist” law to parties who were Burmese Muslim.⁵ Annexed in 1886, Upper Burma was the last territory under the authority of the Burmese Konbaung government to be incorporated into the British Empire and ruled as a province of British India. As such, the British administration based in Lower Burma was still in the process of extending its judicial system of plural legal jurisdiction to Upper Burma. Under this legal dispensation, religious laws—euphemistically termed “personal laws” and formulated as laws that applied only to members of a particular religious community—governed the family affairs of the subjects of British India. In cases concerning marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance, the civil courts administered the “Buddhist law” when the parties were Buddhist, “Muhammadian law” when the parties were Muslim, “Hindu law” when the parties were Hindu, and “Chinese customary law” when the parties were Chinese.⁶

The litigants in *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa* (1895) were identified as *zerbadi*, a term that entered the Burma census for the first time in 1891 as a category of race referring to “the offspring of a Muhammadan native of India by a Burmese wife.”⁷ The court transcript of *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa* itself described the *zerbadi* parties to the lawsuit as “native Muslims” and “Mahomedans of the country, more or less closely descended from Natives of India, but of what portion unknown.”⁸ While neither the plaintiffs nor the defendants refuted the claim that they all belonged to “the Burmese Muslim community,” they disagreed on whether the *zerbadi* were governed by the Buddhist or Muslim law of inheritance.

The defendant Ma Pwa possessed a will left by her deceased father Ko Lin that named her the successor to his estate. The lawyer for her nephews, who were Ko Lin’s grandsons by his elder daughter Ma Myit, contested the validity of the will on the basis that Ko Lin and his family, though Muslim, were “Burmese Buddhists for the purpose of inheritance” and, as such, could not dispose of their property

⁵ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa* (1895), cited in Chan-Toon, *Leading Cases on Buddhist Law* (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1899), pp. 382–88.

⁶ On the implementation of the British colonial jurisprudence of “personal laws” in Burma, see Chie Ikeya, *InterAsian Intimacies across Race, Religion, and Colonialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

⁷ Lowis, C.C., *Census of India, XIIA, Burma, Part II, Imperial Tables* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1901), p. 111, fn. *Zerbadi* is probably a corruption of the Persian word *zīr-bād* meaning “below the wind.”

⁸ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, pp. 382–383.

by will.⁹ Indeed, British legal authorities in Burma insisted that inheritance among Buddhists in Burma was strictly intestate and disallowed wills.¹⁰

The plaintiffs argued that the custom among the *zerbadi* was to divide intestate property according to Buddhist law. "The conditions of life in Burma (where the Burmese Mahomedan woman was the working bee of the hive)," their lawyer explained, "made it inequitable that succession should be otherwise than it is among the Burmese Buddhist community, the Burmese woman occupying the same position in the social and domestic economy whether a Buddhist or a Mahomedan."¹¹ The presiding judge conceded that "there may be a custom having the force of law that the Zerbadi [sic] community is governed by the rules of Buddhist law which they have adopted in matters of inheritance."¹² But he sided with the ruling of the district court that prior to British rule, all those who went to court, including the *zerbadi*, had no choice but "to swallow Buddhist law," the law of the land. "The British Government which has succeeded has now expressly legislated that in certain matters, of which inheritance is one," he declared, "the personal law of certain religious communities, of which Mahomedans are one, shall be applicable to the members of such communities."¹³

The judge did not stop there. He proceeded to refute the advocate's contention that the socio-economic position of a Burmese Muslim woman equaled that of her Burmese Buddhist counterpart.

The learned Advocate for appellants in his ingenious argument has referred to the assimilation of the Zerbadis to their Buddhist neighbours around them, their holding of land like natives and not foreigners, their marriages with Burmese women, and the freedom accorded to their wives and daughters who do not live as *pardanashin* women, but go into public and transact business like their sisters who enjoy the liberty and privileges of Burmans in general.¹⁴

⁹ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, p. 383.

¹⁰ The colonial administration debated on multiple occasions (1881, 1888, 1904, and 1917) the question of whether testamentary power should be conferred on Buddhists. Notwithstanding historical evidence of testamentary alienation of estates by Buddhists, each judicial debate determined that Buddhists in Burma had no capacity to make a will. See Taw Sein Ko, "Correspondence on Buddhist Wills," *Journal of Burma Research Society* 7, no. 1 (April 1917): 56–57; Tha Gywe, "Burman Buddhist Wills," *Journal of Burma Research Society* 7, no. 1 (April 1917): 57–69; Taw Sein Ko, "Buddhist Wills," *Journal of Burma Research Society* 7, no. 3 (December 1917): 274–77; Than Tun, "The Legal System in Burma, 1000–1300," *Burma Law Institute Journal* 1, no. 2 (June 1959): 171–84; Andrew Huxley, "Wills in Theravada Buddhist S. E. Asia," *Recueils de la société Jean Bodin pour l'histoire comparative des institutions* 62.4 (1994): 53–92.

¹¹ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, p. 384.

¹² *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, p. 386.

¹³ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, p. 385.

¹⁴ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, p. 386.

“Probably,” the judge granted, “the Burmese women whom Mahomedans or Zerbadis have married would not be willing to submit to the seclusion of strict Mussulmanis so that the men are unable to control their social freedom.” However, he continued, “it is understood that in the matter of divorce the tendency is to follow the Mahomedan law.” In his will, Ko Lin stated that he had exercised *talaq* (“repudiation” or unilateral divorce), divorcing his wife, the mother of Ma Pwa and Ma Myit, according to Muslim law. Extrapolating from this information, the judge concluded that it was inconceivable that “the Buddhist law of inheritance in which the position of the wife is so strong can prevail among Zerbadis.”¹⁵

In doing so, the judge enshrined a colonial jurisdictional imperative: Buddhist law applied only to members of the Buddhist community (and only to their familial and religious affairs); Muslims could not have recourse to Buddhist law, just as Buddhists were precluded from the application of Muslim law. The British formulation of “personal law” and its orderly implementation depended on a simple and stable classification of legal status, to each of which one and only one “personal law” could be uniformly and inexorably applied. The judge ignored a fact laid out in plain sight. The adherence to the Muslim law of divorce, however widespread it may have been among Burmese Muslims at the time, did not preclude a practice among the same group of following the Buddhist law of inheritance.

Masquerading as immutable reality, the “inconceivability” of Burmese Muslims exercising the Buddhist law of inheritance was a legal conjecture that was predicated on the conjuring of binary bodies: the liberal, autonomous body of the Buddhist woman and the captive, docile body of the Muslim woman. This colonial fantasy positioned Buddhist and Muslim women at opposite ends of the spectrum of liberty. The former enjoyed social and economic freedom while the latter, essentialized as a *pardanashin*—a woman who observed seclusion and lacked the ability to act as her own economic agent—endured oppression. These gendered, religious figures embodied the presumptively primordial, discrete religious “communities” that were governable by their respective religious or customary law.

The advocate for the Burmese Muslim plaintiffs deflected, even as he appealed to, this imaginative construct by emphasizing the “Burmeseness” of the *zerbadi*. The *zerbadi*, he attested, were native, Burmese people who shared with Burmese Buddhists “the conditions of life in Burma.” A Burmese Muslim woman, no less than a Burmese Buddhist woman, was a “working bee of the hive”; the former held the same responsibilities and rights as the latter. His argument capitalized on the British conflation of the Burmese with Buddhists, who comprised approximately 85 percent and 87 percent of the total population in Burma according to the British

¹⁵ *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa*, pp. 386–387.

decennial censuses of 1891 and 1901.¹⁶ Though Buddhism originated in India, colonial authorities naturalized Buddhism in Burma, identifying it as the authentic religion of the natives of Burma. As such, the plaintiffs' strategy reified essentialist understandings of Burmeseness. Yet it challenged the presumed fixedness of religion and community and underscored the historicity and particularity of Burmese Muslims who were distinct from the universal figure of the Muslim. On this basis, the plaintiffs hoped, the court would be persuaded to recognize "Burmese Muslim" as a distinct "personal status" that merited its own customized law.

British legal authorities in Burma as elsewhere did recognize that actual social practices often diverged from the dictates of textual law and exhibited important regional and local variations. Their administration of "Buddhist law" provides a case in point. They acknowledged that what they referred to as "Buddhist law" was actually "Burmese Buddhist law" or "Burmese Buddhist customary law," and refused to apply it in cases involving Chinese Buddhists in Burma. If the British colonial judiciary was open to accepting variant legal statuses among Buddhists (e.g., Burmese vs. Chinese), why not also different legal categories of Muslims?

In the eyes of the Upper Court of Burma, however, to be (or to become) a Muslim woman signified a conversion so radical and contrary to the essence of the Burmese woman as to transform the person into an alien—to alienate her of her status as native and Burmese. The judge insisted on the irreconcilable differences among Muslim and Burmese women. In being or becoming a Muslim, a Burmese woman bound herself to Muslim law and forfeited the entitlement to be considered Burmese.

In 1905, the Chief Court of Upper Burma once again refused to recognize "Burmese Muslim" as the personal status and law of the *zerbadi*, upholding the precedent set by the 1895 case. Two Burmese Muslim women filed an appeal against a decision by the District Court of Mandalay that "Muslim law," not "Burmese Buddhist law," should apply to Burmese Muslims in so far as inheritance and succession were concerned. The women claimed that there was "abundant evidence that outside the Courts the Zerbadis voluntarily and habitually applied the Buddhist law in cases of inheritances."¹⁷ As evidence, the appellants called over a dozen witnesses. Mullah Ismail—an elite member of the *zerbadi* community in Mandalay, *akauk wun* (tax collector) under King Mindon (r. 1852–1878), and subsequently a partner and shareholder of the Burmah Oil Company (the leading British oil company at the time)—testified that prior to and immediately after the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1886, the *zerbadi* settled questions of inheritance according to the laws applicable to Buddhists; Aga Javad, identified as a longtime "Persian" resident

¹⁶ Government of India, *Census of 1891, Imperial Tables, X, Burma Report, Volume II* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1892), p. 24; Lowis, *Census of India*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ma Le and Ma Me v. Maung Hlaing and Ma Mi* (1905) 2 Upper Burma Rulings, pp. 1, 1–2.

of Mandalay, stated that in the forty years that he lived in Burma, he had not once heard of a *zerbadi* requesting the application of Muslim law; Mahomed Isaak, an elderly *zerbadi* and honorary magistrate of Mandalay, explained that Muslim *zerbadi* did not strictly follow the Buddhist law, though they were guided by it, and in general chose to deal with matters of inheritance without going to the courts; Maung Hla, a fifty-year-old *zerbadi* lawyer, affirmed that cases involving *zerbadi* were not decided according to Muslim law, as did Cho Gyi, a 62 year-old woman and one of only two women witnesses who claimed that “in the King’s time Zerbadis divided their inheritance according to Buddhist law,” clarifying that property acquired during marriage was the joint property of husband and wife.¹⁸

The testimonies of these witnesses indicated the prevalence among elite, propertied Burmese Muslims of a practice known among legal scholars as “forum shopping”: of choosing, in a plural legal system, a body of law or forum of dispute resolution that is most likely to deliver a favorable outcome.¹⁹ Again, the presiding British judges refused to accept that Burmese Muslims submitted themselves to Buddhist law of their own volition. The judges were willing to admit that most Burmese Muslims had Burmese names, spoke Burmese, and dressed in Burmese style. One even declared that he was persuaded that there existed “from time immemorial a custom having the force of law, by which questions of inheritance and succession affecting the Zerbadis of Mandalay have been decided by Buddhist law.”²⁰ But they would not countenance the assertion that this custom reflected the desire of the Burmese Muslim subjects. They dismissed the appeal by reasoning that Burmese Buddhist law had been “forced on the Zerbadis by a despotic monarchy” that refused to permit the application of any other law. As in *Ahmed and another v. Ma Pwa* (1895), intricacies of actual lives and practices that either challenged the orthopraxy presupposed in codified personal laws or defied the juridical ordering of society were rejected.

An Illegible Subject

In the decade separating the two civil cases discussed above, “Burmese Muslim” became not only an impossible legal status but an impossible subject position altogether. In 1901, the government abolished the category of “Burmese Muslim” of whom there were 6,872 according to the 1891 census, from the decennial census. In effect, the British excised “Burmese Muslim” from colonial administrative

¹⁸ *Ma Le and Ma Me v. Maung Hlaing and Ma Mi*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁹ Mitra Sharafi, “The Marital Patchwork of Colonial South Asia: Forum Shopping from Britain to Baroda,” *Law and History Review* 28 (2010): 979–1009.

²⁰ *Ma Le and Ma Me v. Maung Hlaing and Ma Mi*, pp. 1, 6.

taxonomy. This left individuals who had previously returned their “religion” and/or “race” as “native Muslim” or Burmese Muslim with the choice of identifying as either *zerbadi* or, starting in 1921, “Indo-Burman,” a new umbrella category of which *zerbadi* became a subgroup. Throughout these years, the British administration persisted in officially defining *zerbadi* and Indo-Burman alike as “the offspring of a Muhammadan native of India by a Burmese wife,” turning Indian patrilineage into an intrinsic characteristic of Burmese Muslims who were now ascribed an alien descent. At the stroke of a pen, the British administration curtailed the possibilities of formal existence as a Burmese Muslim and furthermore made illegible Burmese Muslim communities who claimed no Indian patrilineal—or, for that matter, matrilineal—ties and considered themselves native Muslims.

Such administrative obfuscation of Burmese Muslims did not make them invisible. As the 1905 case suggests, Burmese Muslims appeared stubbornly in civil trials, reminding both judges and litigants what a troubling subject the Burmese Muslim constituted in the eyes of colonial law and government. As the invalidity of Burmese Muslim as a personal status became settled law over subsequent decades of British colonial rule, however, Burmese Muslims sought the application of Buddhist law not as Burmese Muslim persons but rather on the basis of “reversion to Buddhism,” as in the case I examine next. This strategy diminished the Burmese Muslim body in the legal archive.

In June 1929, Justices of the Rangoon High Court were asked to determine the fate of the dead body of Pwa Myit: a Burmese Buddhist who had become Muslim upon marriage to her second husband, Po Thet, who was *zerbadi*.²¹ According to the record of the case, Po Thet passed away after thirty years of marriage and Pwa Myit followed suit just over a year later. Before she died, three Burmese Buddhist women, two of whom were her relatives, moved into her house. We can only speculate on the circumstances under which the Burmese Buddhist women moved into Pwa Myit’s house; the court record supplies no information on this matter. Perhaps the women had forced their way into the home of an elderly widow in anticipation of a legal battle for her estate. Or, perhaps, they provided care for Pwa Myit because her late husband’s kin would not. Upon her death, the Burmese Buddhist women claimed that Pwa Myit had “reverted to Buddhism” and refused to hand over her corpse to Pwa Myit’s *zerbadi* step-daughter (by Po Thet) and Po Thet’s cousin, who insisted on a Muslim burial. The two parties took their battle to court as the late Pwa Myit lay in a coffin, caught between competing claims and endless questions about who she *really* was—Buddhist or Muslim—at the time of her death. Had she died a Muslim, Justice Baguley argued, “I would hold that a Mohamedan relation of the deceased would be entitled to possession of the body and would be entitled

²¹ *Ma Khin & ors v. U Ba & ors* (1929) 7 Indian Law Reports, Rangoon Series, p. 603.

to bury it in preference to a Buddhist relation of approximately equal standing.” By the same token, he explained, if Pwa Myit had died a Buddhist, the Buddhist relation would be entitled to succession “in preference to a Mohamedan relation of equal standing.”²² Justice Mya Bu concurred that “it is only fair and equitable to extend the rights to the one who belongs to the same religion as the deceased.”²³

Neither party in the case raised the possibility that Pwa Myit, though a Muslim convert, might have wished or been permitted a choice of funerary and burial rites. She may have counted herself one among numerous Buddhist individuals who converted to Islam in the process of marrying a Muslim person without disavowing Buddhist ties and rituals.²⁴ Unlike in the aforementioned cases where Burmese Muslims testified in court that they availed themselves of Buddhist law, there was consensus that Pwa Myit would not be granted the right to be cremated unless she had “reversed” her conversion to Islam and returned to Buddhism. Her dead body and its afterlife manifested how the colonial laws delimited the terms of being and belonging.

We Burmese Muslims

Yoked to India by a colonial taxonomy that insisted on classifying *zerbadis* as Muslims of Indian descent and, thereby, an alien presence, some Burmese Muslims took the fight for government recognition outside the courts to lobby for political representation. Already in 1909, they had formed the Burma Moslem Society (BMS) which described itself as a society of “Burman Muslims” though it counted Indian Muslims among its members.²⁵ It had long opposed the use of the category *zerbadi* in official documents. When the Indian Statutory Commission visited Burma in 1929 to assess the possibility of constitutional reforms—including the separation of Burma from India—that would give India and Burma a greater degree of self-government, the organization published a memorandum “on behalf of Burmese Muslims.”²⁶ The petitioners deplored the tendency among Burmese Buddhists to regard Burmese Muslims “as foreigners and interlopers” and asked that Burmese

²² *Ma Khin & ors v. U Ba & ors*, p. 607.

²³ *Ma Khin & ors v. U Ba & ors*, p. 608.

²⁴ See Ikeya, *InterAsian Intimacies*.

²⁵ Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (Wiesbaden, Germany: O. Harrassowitz, 1972), 57.

²⁶ Known as the “Simon Commission” after its chairman Sir John Simon, the commission’s visit to Burma came on the heels of its visit, first, to India in 1927 for the similar purpose of evaluating constitutional reforms. It was part of a series of commissions and conferences that were convened by the British government to assess revisions to the constitutional structure in India and Burma that culminated in the separation of Burma from India in 1937.

Muslims be “regarded as Burman citizens in every respect.”²⁷ Burmese Muslims, the memorandum declared, “know of no other home except Burma.” It proceeded to affirm the allegiance of Burmese Muslims to Burma:

The majority of them are born in Burma and die in Burma. They have all their properties and vested interests in Burma. They regard this province as the land of their birth, adoption and domicile. In the matter of patriotism and in regard to efforts towards social, educational and political amelioration of the country as a whole, they are not a shade less than the Burman Buddhists.²⁸

In the face of mounting political campaigns for the separation of Burma from India as well as the impending government census of 1931, the BMS stepped up its request to the colonial administration to replace *zerbadi* with “Burma Muslim,” a term that allowed the group to affiliate with the Burmese without renouncing their religious distinction. It published a call to all permanent Muslim residents in Burma to register themselves in the census as “Burma Muslims.”²⁹ In 1931, Burmese Muslims also broke away from the All-Burma Muslim Educational Conference, a gathering of Indian and Burmese Muslims from all over Burma held annually since 1905, and established their own annual All-Burma Burmese Muslim Educational Conference.³⁰ The question of the language of instruction in Muslim schools in Burma had served as a divisive issue since 1915 when the Burmese Muslim members, objecting to the dominance of Urdu, asked that Indian Muslim teachers acquire a satisfactory knowledge of Burmese within the next three years. The issue became all the more divisive as the left-leaning *Dobama Asi Ayone* (We Burmese or Our Burmans Association), the most influential political organization in Burma prior to the Second World War, turned Burmese language into a pillar of its program for emancipating Burma from British colonialism, as suggested by its slogan: “Burma is Our Country, Burmese is Our Literature, Burmese is Our Language, Love Our Country, Cherish Our Literature, Uphold Our Language.”³¹

²⁷ “The Memorandum of the Burma Muslim Community to the Royal Statutory Commission” (1929), IOR/Q/13/1/7, item 17: E-Bur-986, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London, p. 2. The memorandum was authored by the president of the Burma Moslem Society, Maung Bah Oh, but prepared with the support of the Young Muslims’ Union, Mandalay, and in consultation with “representative Muslim elders in different parts of the province” (p. 1).

²⁸ “Memorandum of the Burma Muslim Community,” p. 4.

²⁹ Yegar, *Muslims of Burma*, p. 64. For more on the 1930s movement that advocated for the recognition of Burmese Muslims as native or indigenous Muslims, see Ayako Saito, “The Formation of the Concept of Myanmar Muslims as Indigenous Citizens: Their History and Current Situation,” *Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* 32 (2014): 25–40.

³⁰ Yegar, *Muslims of Burma*, p. 51.

³¹ Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma, 1930–1938* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988), p. 5. This is Khin Yi’s translation from Burmese. Founded in 1930 and modelled

The effort by *zerbadis* to secure their future as “Burman citizens” who shared with other Burmese the same language, literature, and culture pleased neither the Indian Muslim nor pan-Muslim communities from whom the “Burma Muslims” distanced themselves, nor the *dobama* (“we Burmese” or “our Burman”) ideologues and activists with whom the “Burma Muslims” aligned themselves. Contemporary discussions of Burmese Muslims in the press were suggestive of this bitter consequence.

The 22 February 1932 issue of *Thuriya* [The Sun], the first openly nationalist vernacular paper and the leading newspaper at the time, featured an illustrated article entitled “Burma Muslim Woman and Sartorial Practice.”³² Criticizing the failure of Muslim authorities to issue clear guidelines on how a “Burma Muslim” woman should dress in public, it solicited answers from the readers, offering a monetary reward for those who could identify correctly which of the pictured attires was commensurate with Islam (Fig. 3.1). The three figures embodied a civilizational scale: on one end of the lineup stood a *pardanashin* whose entire body was covered; on the other end, a scantily clad woman outfitted like a flapper wore high heels, a petticoat that accentuates her silhouette, and smoked a cigarette. In the middle sat a woman in what would have been viewed as traditional Burmese attire (except for her shoes) and, as the illustration would have it, just the perfect balance of clothing and coverage, neither excessive nor risqué; her head, face, and neck were visible, unlike the Muslim woman, yet she was modestly dressed, unlike the ultramodern woman. She personified decorum and moderation, unlike the other two who symbolized civilizational extremes—one frighteningly conservative and the other alarmingly liberal.³³

While ostensibly written by two Muslim men, this was unlikely, as a reader pointed out in a letter to the paper in response to the article. Given the general proscription against the representation of living beings in Islam, Ba Thaw argued, Muslim men would be disinclined to submit for publication such an image.³⁴ The

after the Irish nationalist Sinn Féin Party (“We Ourselves” or “Ourselves Alone” Party in Irish), *Dobama asi ayone* represented a new generation of intellectuals and activists, mostly graduates of Rangoon University, who demanded radical political and social changes unlike the older, and England-educated, generation of Burmese politicians. They called themselves *thakin* (master) to symbolize their goal of returning Burma to its rightful masters, the Burmese, and transforming the nation into a classless society of only masters. On the *Dobama Asi Ayone*, see Khin Yi, *Dobama Movement*.

³² “Myanmar muslim amyothami hnit wut sa sin yin hmu,” *Thuriya*, February 22, 1932, pp. 9, 19.

³³ The Modern Girl around the World Research Group, Alys Eve, Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani Barlow, *The Modern Girl Around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). On the modern woman in Burma specifically, see Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011); Tharaphi Than, *Women in Modern Burma* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

³⁴ Ba Thaw, “Do Myanmar muslim,” *Thuriya*, February 27, 1932: 19.



Figure 3.1. Burma Muslim Woman and Sartorial Practice, *Thuriya*, 22 February 1932

objective of those behind the illustrated submission, he suspected, was not to seek knowledge of Islam but to insult *dobama* Muslims.

In subsequent discussions of the subjects of *dobama* Muslims and “Burma Muslim woman” in *Thuriya*, the various readers who wrote in argued over what kinds of veiling were in fact prescribed by Islam; how Burmese women, whether Muslim or not, should dress in public; and how the Burmese Muslim differed from Indian Muslims.³⁵ Consensus emerged around two points. First, the *burkha* or the veiling of a woman’s whole body except her eyes, originated in India, not in the heartland of Islam. Second, the *burkha* had no place in Burma. The verdict confirmed the opinion of legal authorities who likewise viewed the *pardanashin* as the antithesis of a Burmese woman.

³⁵ “Do Myanmar muslim: purdah,” *Thuriya*, February 26, 1932: 8; Ba Thaw, “Do Myanmar muslim”; “Do Myanmar muslim,” *Thuriya*, March 1, 1932: 19–20; “Do Myanmar muslim,” *Thuriya*, March 25, 1932: 7–8; “Myanmar Muslim akyauing: purdah,” *Thuriya*, March 30, 1932: 23.

Had the *dobama* Muslims won a concession in this debate? Perhaps. There was acknowledgement that veiling was a heterogeneous practice with wide ranging local and regional variations. Islam could be assimilated—it could be Burmanized—as the Burmese Muslim had been doing. At the same time, the resolution to the debate over *dobama* Muslims and veiling required the hierarchization of different veiling practices and the rejection of the “Indianized” variant. In the hopes of convincing the colonial administration and Burmese lawmakers that they belonged in Burma, the *zerbadis* and “Burma Muslims” estranged themselves from fellow Muslims.

Conditionally Burmese

The exchange of views about the Burma Muslim woman in *Thuriya* exemplified public discussions about the fate of Burmese Muslims that unfolded over the course of the 1930s. First, it highlighted the conditional status of the Burmese Muslim in Burma, contingent upon their continual performance of Burmeseness and fidelity to Burma. Second, it fixated on the body of the Burmese Muslim woman. Both found expression in the literary works of writers celebrated to this day as the founding fathers of modern Burmese literature, such as the prominent Marxist writer and *Dobama Asi Ayone* member Thein Pe Myint (1914–1978).³⁶

“Khin Myo Chit” (1933) marked Thein Pe Myint’s debut as a modernist writer. An archetypal tale of the political coming of age of the male protagonist, it offers a lesson in the gendered duties of a political person: a woman dies for her man and the man learns to renounce his attachment to her in order to give his life to his community and country. The title, which is a feminine Burmese name that literally translates as “Friend [who] loves [her] kind,” alludes to the heroine of the short story, Khin Htway, a Burmese Muslim schoolteacher. She agonizes over her relationship with Htein Lwin, a young Burmese Buddhist anti-colonial revolutionary. Their love for one another, she is convinced, calls into question Htein Lwin’s loyalty to the Burmese Buddhist and undermines his nationalist credentials. She resolves to end their relationship and rebuffs Htein Lwin’s endless endeavor to see her—a decision that wreaks havoc on her body which wastes away under the unbearable weight of a broken heart. In her dying words, Khin Htway implores Htein Lwin to be strong if he loves her—to not succumb to grief as she will—and carry through with his struggle to deliver Burma from colonial rule. For him to see Burma a free and prosperous country, she says, would make her suffering worthwhile.³⁷

³⁶ For other examples, see Ikeya, *InterAsian Intimacies*.

³⁷ Thein Pe Myint, “Khin Myo Chit,” reprinted in *Thein Pe Myint Wutthu Do Baung Gyouk Sak* (Yangon: Ya pyi sa ouk taik, 1998), p. 34.

The story drew heavily on an emergent liberal discourse of modern love and marriage in 1930s Burma that empowered individual choice and the heterosexual conjugal couple as the foundation of the family.³⁸ This modernist formulation of intimate liberation, however, did not extend to those who loved and married across religion. True love culminated in the realization that a Muslim woman can only be a crippling burden on a Burmese Buddhist man. “Khin Myo Chit” imputed to Khin Htway a parasitic existence and an innate degeneracy. She lives off her host (Htein Lwin) without whom she cannot survive. Htein Lwin, in contrast, can finally thrive without Khin Htway, who is presumed to be incapable of reinvigorating the community of Burmese Buddhists. The story implied that true love and happiness for Htein Lwin resides in a relationship with a Burmese Buddhist woman who can be his helpmate and nurture future Burmese Buddhists. It left only one choice for a Burmese Muslim woman who loved a Burmese Buddhist: self-abnegation. This was a cruel, gendered romanticization and absolution of the eugenicist theory among Burmese Buddhist intellectuals such as Thein Pe Myint that Burmese Muslims were a threat to the health of the body politic whose reproductive bodies needed to be controlled.³⁹ By depicting Khin Htway’s death as enlightened, wilful suicide, “Khin Myo Chit” insinuated that Burmese Muslim women like Khin Htway accepted their conditional belonging in the Burmese body politic—as bodies requiring regulation and containment.

The politicization of the female body was not unique to the Burmese Muslim. Burmese Buddhist women were urged to resist marrying foreigners and to boycott the use of imported clothes and textiles and wear, instead, blouses made of *pinni* (light brown, homespun cotton).⁴⁰ In a sharp historical reversal, the body of the lay Buddhist female displaced the male body of the monk—who must renounce all carnal temptations, especially food, alcohol, and sex—as the primary focus of disciplinary control and asceticism. Inspired by the Gandhian *swaraj* (self-rule) movement and its emphasis on renunciatory bodily practice such as celibacy, vegetarianism, fasting, and the wearing of *khadi* (home-spun cloth) as a central method of achieving self-government, women emerged as the primary target of this ascetic modality of self-rule in Burma as in India.⁴¹

³⁸ On reformulations of love and marriage in colonial Burma, see Chie Ikeya, “Talking Sex, Making Love: P. Moe Nin and Intimate Modernity in Colonial Burma,” in *Modern Times in Southeast Asia, 1920s–1970s*, edited by Susie Protschky and Tom Berge, 136–65 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

³⁹ On reproductive nationalism in Burma, see Ikeya, *InterAsian Intimacies*.

⁴⁰ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, pp. 86–88.

⁴¹ Joseph Alter, *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Srirupa Prasad, *Cultural Politics of Hygiene in India, 1890–1940: Contagions of Feeling* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 43–59.

Anti-colonialists in Burma likewise envisioned the virgin, self-disciplining bodies of Burmese Buddhist women, untouched by foreign goods and men, as the bastion of Burmese sovereignty, the embodiment of self-mastery, and the foundation for Burmese liberation. The Burmese Buddhist woman was imagined to achieve progress and flourish through this practice of discipline, unlike the Burmese Muslim woman who was expected to perish.

An Object of Pity and Redemption

Though configuring the Burmese Muslim woman's body as a source and sign of degeneracy and affliction, popular narratives did not necessarily condemn her to death and destruction. Many characterized the Burmese Muslim woman as a suffering captive who needed to be saved and restored to Buddhism, as in the article "Kala gadaw" (1934), or "An Indian's mistress."

Penned by the student activist, writer, and education reformer Po Kyar (1891–1942), the article purports to be a reportage based on the author's first-hand knowledge of a Burmese wife of an Indian Muslim man.⁴² It opens with Po Kyar's unexpected encounter with a childhood friend, May Mya, on his way to the port city of Sittwe in western Burma. On board the boat to Sittwe, Po Kyar meets a couple he construes to be Indian. The husband, who is fluent in Burmese, explains that he moved from India to Burma nine years ago. Po Kyar soon discovers to his surprise that the wife of the Indian man, whom he mistook to also be Indian, is a Burmese convert to Islam and a native of his hometown with whom he had gone to school.

Upon learning that her Muslim husband is a halal butcher, Po Kyar asks May Mya if she herself also slaughters animals, an activity regarded as a demeritorious act that contravened the teachings of the Buddha. Seen through his eyes, May Mya is an unrepentant convert and *kala gadaw*. She explains to Po Kyar that in the hopes of bettering their lot, Burmese women, even those already married to Burmese men, were flocking to Indian Muslim men. The revelation confirms Po Kyar's worst fear: women like May Mya were not so much wives as "mistresses" who prostituted not only their bodies but their beliefs for material benefits. "So this is what it has come to," Po Kyar remarks, horrified by what has become of his childhood friend.⁴³ He returns to Rangoon convinced that May Mya has transformed beyond recognition—she is no longer recognizably Burmese—and beyond salvation. But the story takes a proverbial turn when May Mya arrives at his doorstep: battered, disheveled, and beseeching redemption.

⁴² Po Kyar, "Kala gadaw," *Youq Shin Lan Hnyun* (May 1934): 26–32, p. 26.

⁴³ Po Kyar, "Kala gadaw," p. 31.

The spiritually, sexually, and physically exploited body of Burmese converts and wives of Indian Muslim men enacted the deleterious effects of Burma's attachment to India under British colonial rule, beckoning rescue and "reversion" to Buddhism. Putatively based on the actual experience and testimony of the women, such narratives also evoked the imminent danger to Burmese Buddhist women posed by the forced marriage, so to speak, of Burma to India and the urgency of securing a divorce. Yet, the separation of Burma from India in 1937 did not make the body of the Burmese Muslim any less embattled or incendiary, or any less of a contested object of public feelings and opinions. Accusations that Indian men used the wombs of Burmese women to (pro)create an interloping population of Burmese Muslims and destroy the *sin sit* (pure, genuine) community of Burmese Buddhists inflamed the "anti-Indian riots" of 1938, the most spectacular incidence of communal violence in colonial Burma.⁴⁴ The independence of Burma from India inaugurated a sharpened focus on the Burmese Muslim as a troubling internal other.

A Body with a Seditious Heart

On the first anniversary of the 1938 riots, the leftist press *Kyi pwa yay* (Progress) published a 158-page book entitled *Kabya pyatthana* (The Mixed Problem, 1939) by one of its editors, Pu Galay. U Hla (1910–1982), who had co-founded the press with his wife and fellow writer Daw Amar (1915–2008) had commissioned Pu Galay to write the book.⁴⁵ "Some *kabya* treat Burma as not their own, as though they do not belong, which results in a real loss for the country," wrote U Hla in his foreword to the book by way of explaining the need for its publication.⁴⁶ By "some *kabya*," he had in mind the *zerbadi* or, as Pu Galay put it, *kabya* (mixed person/people) descending from Burmese women and Indian Muslim men. The gender-race-religion pairing of Burmese Buddhist women and Indian Muslim men reinforced the definition of *zerbadi* and Indo-Burman adopted by the colonial administration. One of the most revered kings in Burmese history, Kyansittha (r. 1084–1112), who also happened to be a son of an Indian princess, was therefore not *zerbadi* because he was the son of a Burmese father, according to Pu Galay. Indeed, he wrote approvingly of such marriages between Burmese men and Indian princesses while ignoring the royal gifting of Burmese princesses to Indian men.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ikeya, *InterAsian Intimacies*.

⁴⁵ On the press and the famous husband-wife partnership, see Daw Amar, *Kyun ma yay te thu baw Ludu U Hla* (Yangon: Kyi pwa yay sa pe, 2009), pp. 326–329.

⁴⁶ Hla, "Meik set," in Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana* (Mandalay: Kyi pwa yay, 1939), p. 6.

⁴⁷ Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, pp. 39, 57–58.

U Hla defended the focus of the book by explaining that it was “impossible to cover all aspects of the *kabya* problem in one book,” and that he intended it as volume one of what would become a two-volume tome.⁴⁸ The second volume never materialized.

In his opening passages, Pu Galay conceded that “a person who is not mixed is truly rare” and that all human beings were *kabya* in one way or another. What he, like U Hla, found unnerving was that the *zerbadi* was Burmese in neither *thwe* (blood) nor *seik* (heart). “It’s worse to be *kabya* in heart than to be *kabya* in body,” he declared, insisting that “every person who lives in Burma and dies in Burma ought to share one blood, one heart, with Burmese people.”⁴⁹ The remainder of the book chronicled the reputedly corrupt *seik* of the *zerbadi*. It painted an unflattering picture of the early history of *zerbadis*: as fugitives of the Mughal empire and criminals executed for their transgression of the royal order by King Alaungpaya (r. 1752–1760) prohibiting cattle slaughter. Unworthy subjects they were, but Burmese kings bestowed upon them royal titles out of benevolence, stressed Pu Galay.

The British colonialists then arrived, Pu Galay continued, bringing with them “hordes” of Indians and upending the historically harmonious relations between *zerbadis*, *kabya* and the Burmese.⁵⁰ His description of this more recent and populous group of *zerbadis* emphasized their kinship with the Burmese: they dressed like the Burmese, they went by Burmese names, and they spoke Burmese. He detailed, with express sympathy, the struggle of the *zerbadi* to make Burmese, not Urdu, the language of instruction in Islamic schools in the country. “Burmese Muslims are Burmese countrymen, born to people of the Burmese race and in the land of Burma,” he asserted, and blamed Indian Muslims for what he portrayed as the underdevelopment of the Burmese Muslim, i.e., their lack of competence in either Burmese or English as a result of the dominance of Urdu in the madrasas.⁵¹

Pu Galay did not otherwise demonstrate compassion for his subject. The rest of the book amounted to a blow-by-blow account of the chasm between the “pure and genuine” Burmese and the Burmese Muslims. The list of accusations against the latter ran long: they coerced Burmese women into conversion; they married multiple women and repudiated them, while denying their wives the same prerogatives; by agitating for constitutional representation, they had played right into the hands of the British, serving as pawns in the colonial game of divide and conquer; they had forsaken their own Burmese people to side with the British, only to find that they had alienated themselves as a community that was “neither Indian nor Burmese.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Hla, “Meik set,” p. 6.

⁴⁹ Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, pp. 11–12.

⁵⁰ Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, p. 89.

⁵¹ Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, pp. 100–105.

⁵² Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, pp. 90–91, 95–98, 116–117.

The book ended with one last example of the so-called *kabya* problem: the failed attempts to legislate marriages between Burmese women and foreigners until 1939, when a bill governing the marriage of Buddhist women in Burma to non-Buddhist men was finally approved. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act was scheduled to come into force in April 1940. The Act was reproduced in full in the book as its final chapter.

The Act required a Buddhist woman who intended to marry a non-Buddhist man to file a notice of intent with the Registrar, usually a village headman or a magistrate, 14 days in advance of the marriage—a procedure that was intended to allow any person with objections to the marriage to file a complaint with the Registrar. It additionally instructed the Registrar to: publicize the intent to marry “by affixing a copy thereof at some conspicuous place in his office”; and notify the parent or guardian, in cases where one of the parties were under 20 years of age, and the (ex?) husband “if the woman had already married a man.”⁵³ There was only one member of parliament who voted against this Act, Pu Galay observed: the *zerbadi* barrister and councilman Mirza Mohamed Rafi.⁵⁴ A native of Burma who had campaigned against separation from India, he was, to Pu Galay, living proof that the *zerbadis*, though Burmese in body, suffered from a seditious heart. Their inclusion in the Burmese body politic demanded constant vigilance.

The Body of Evidence

A century after the British colonial regime deemed them a perpetual alien presence in Burma, recognizable and legible only as people of an irrevocable foreign origin (Indian) who are subject to a foreign personal law (Muslim law), Burmese Muslims have again become objects of legal debates, media campaigns, and political agitation and retaliation that have rekindled the question of whether Burmese Muslims are—or can ever be—“really” Burmese. The military-led political and economic liberalizations that began in 2011 ushered in a wave of violence against those labelled “Indian” (*kala*), Muslims in particular, incited by monastic nationalist movements such as Ma Ba Tha (Association to Protect Nation and Buddhism) as part of their “Buy Buddhist” and “Marry Buddhist” campaigns.⁵⁵ In sermons across the country attended by large audiences, comprised of mainly women, leading Ma

⁵³ Pu Galay, *Kabya pyatthana*, p. 2. The permissible objections had to be made on the grounds that one (or both) of the parties was underage, of unsound mind, or, for the female party, already married.

⁵⁴ *Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act* (Burma Act XXIV 1939), p. 132.

⁵⁵ *Ma Ba Tha* is the Burmese abbreviation for *Amyo tha bada thathana kar gway saung shauk yay ahpwe*.

Ba Tha monks alleged an insidious plan among Muslims in and beyond Burma to devour the Burmese people, destroy Buddhism, and Islamicize Burma through a strategy of deliberate demographic aggression: seducing or forcing Buddhist Burmese women into polygynous marriages, conversion to Islam, and unwanted, uncontrolled sex (including rape) and breeding. They repeatedly cited the example of Wa Wa Myint, a young woman who was interviewed by a Ma Ba Tha monk about her failed marriage to a Muslim man. She testified in front of an audience in a monastery in October 2012 that her husband pretended to be a Buddhist until their marriage, at which point he forced her to convert to Islam. When she disclosed her desire to “reconvert” to Buddhism, he became physically and emotionally abusive.⁵⁶ As in the 1930s, those proclaiming to be defenders of Burmese Buddhists promoted an alarmist myth of a Burmese Buddhist nation under assault by Muslim terrorists waging a global “love jihad,” an alleged conspiracy to forcibly convert unsuspecting women to Islam through rape and duplicitous marriage.⁵⁷

The crowning achievement of Ma Ba Tha was the enactment in 2015 of a set of “National Race and Religion Protection Laws,” including an amendment of the Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage and Succession Act, that criminalized polygamy and restricted the capacity of Buddhist women to consent to intermarriage and conversion.⁵⁸ The revised “Myanmar Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law,” preserves the Buddhist woman’s freedom “to profess the religion freely according to her faith” by prohibiting the conversion of the Buddhist woman “by using various means”; the vague language leaves open to interpretation what constitutes forced conversion. Article 33 furthermore allows any married woman who is a Myanmar citizen, regardless of her religion, to have recourse to the law through the act of conversion to Buddhism,⁵⁹ with the obvious objective of encouraging women to convert or “revert” to Buddhism while discouraging the conversion of Buddhist women with the threat of penal consequences (e.g., imprisonment up to six months,

⁵⁶ Niklas Foxeus, “Performing the Nation in Myanmar: Buddhist Nationalist Rituals and Boundary-Making,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 178 (2022): 272–305, p. 288. Also see Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar: The 969 movement and anti-Muslim violence,” in Melissa Crouch (ed.), *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim–Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, 183–210 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “The Role of Myth in Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar,” in Iselin Frydenlund and Michael Jerryson (eds), *Buddhist–Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, 197–226 (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵⁷ Charu Gupta, “Allegories of ‘Love Jihad’ and *Ghar Vāpasī*: Interlocking the Socio-Religious with the Political.” *Archiv Orientální* 84, no. 2 (2016): 291–316.

⁵⁸ The four laws are: the Population Control Law no. 28/2015, the Conversion Law no. 48/2015, the Myanmar Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law no. 50/2015, and the Monogamy Law no. 54/2015.

⁵⁹ It reads: “While a non-Buddhist woman, who is a citizen of the Union of Myanmar, was cohabiting with a non-Buddhist man as husband and wife, and the woman converted to the Buddhist religion; they shall be treated as though they contracted a marriage under this Act.”

fine of 50,000 kyats). In addition, under the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, persons other than the individual who intermarries or converts are permitted to initiate criminal proceedings against a "Myanmar Buddhist woman" and her non-Buddhist partner who cohabit without registering their marriage in the manner required by the laws.⁶⁰ The law thus expanded the power of the law to control women's bodies. While the National Race and Religion Protection Laws were condemned by national and international civil society groups alike—several women's organizations in the country came together to denounce the laws as antithetical to the interests of women—they also garnered wide support, especially among Buddhist women in Rakhine state.

Such fearmongering by Buddhist ideologues and organizations occurred with the tacit sanction of the quasi-civilian state that carried out "security operations" against the Rohingya. A minority Muslim population based in the western Rakhine state, almost a million Rohingya have been displaced since 2012. According to the proponents of these anti-Muslim campaigns, Burmese Muslims are "Bengali jihad-ists," temporary guests, and undesirable immigrants who do not belong in Burma. The transition in 2016 to the democratically elected government under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party National League for Democracy (NLD) did not alter this situation. In an interview with the Voice of America, conducted shortly after being appointed the Minister for Religious Affairs by the NLD, Aung Ko declared that Muslims (and other religious minorities in Burma) were "associate citizens," unlike Buddhists, who were "full citizens."

Beyond the borders of the country, graphic media reporting on the Rohingya crisis have hypervisibilized the raped, mutilated, starved, scarred, and displaced bodies of Rohingya women in internment camps in Bangladesh—bodies that circulate as corporeal evidence of the widespread persecution of the Rohingya which has been declared a genocide.⁶¹ These refugees maintain, just as "Burma Muslims" and *dobama* Muslims did, that they are native Muslims, born and raised in Burma, who know of no other home.

⁶⁰ Article 27 of the 2015 Law

⁶¹ See, for example, "All My Body Was in Pain': Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma," Human Rights Watch, November 16, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/16/all-my-body-was-pain/sexual-violence-against-rohingya-women-and-girls-burma>; Hannah Beech, "When a Baby Is an Everyday Reminder of Rohingya Horror," *New York Times*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/07/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-rape-refugees-childbirth.html>; "Burma's Path to Genocide, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," accessed March 28, 2023, <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide>; Natasha Yacoub, Nikola Errington, Wai Wai Nu, and Alexandra Robinson, "Rights Adrift: Sexual Violence Against Rohingya Women on the Andaman Sea," *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* 22, no.1 (2021): 96–114.

Across the colonial-postcolonial divide, the body of the Burmese Muslim has animated, circulated, and sustained public feelings of indignation, anger, and pity, mobilizing people into collective action and legitimating both mundane and spectacular forms of violence, including the legislation of anti-miscegenation laws that granted government authorities and monastic leaders far-reaching powers to subject Burmese women to moral and corporeal control. In the name of protecting Burmese women, community, and nation, such projects of social and political regulation have secured a privileged position for Burmese Buddhists and consigned others to dehumanization, dispossession, and displacement. This is a reiterative, cumulative history of the Burmese Muslim, in which those who proclaim to be defenders of Burmese Buddhists have labored relentlessly—and often successfully—to install as truth and truism an imaginative feat: of a “pure and genuine” Burmese Buddhist body, community, and nation that must survive and propagate at the expense of the Burmese Muslim body.

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