

CHAPTER
7“DRESSED IN A LITTLE BRIEF
AUTHORITY”: CLOTHING THE
BODY POLITIC IN BURMA

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Colonialism in Burma disrupted complex sumptuary laws and introduced a new regimen of dress, based on elaborate and often arbitrary rules of precedence, expedience, and notions of racial and social difference.¹ From the 1880s to the 1920s, clothing evolved from a discrete marker of social place to incorporate other vectors of identity, including race and political stance. Since dress was not subject to the same rigorous censorship and restrictions as print media and association, clothing became a useful strategy of resistance and a platform of anti-colonial nationalism.

In early twentieth-century Burma, Western-educated men who formed the vanguard of the secular nationalist movement expressed their attachment to civic-political, constitutional change in their clothes: the trousers, waistcoats and jackets of barristers. During this period, two secular, sartorial challenges to this Western model emerged among male nationalists. One was the adoption of the *longyi* (sarong) and *pinni* (a mandarin-collared, white jacket) and a Burmese headdress of white cloth. The other was the rejection of imported cloth in favour of homespun, following the introduction of Gandhi's Swadeshi

“Man, proud man, Drest in a little brief authority, Most ignorant of what he's most assured, His glassy essence, like an angry ape, Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven, as make the angels weep.” Shakespeare (1604) *Measure for Measure*, act 2, sc. 2 1.127. On 11 February 1942, angered by the racist remarks of a British engineer in Burma who called “the Burmans” “a lot of unreliable, treacherous, cowards”, the scholar Gordon Hannington Luce protested his “indignation”, remarked that he had “never met a more loyal and trustworthy people anywhere”, and went off muttering “clothed in a little brief authority”. Diary of G.H. Luce 1942, National Library of Australia, MS 6754, Box 14, Series 2, Folder 1, Entry for Wednesday 11 February (u.p.).

movement by monks who had studied in India, notably U Ottama. With regard to women, there was greater uniformity. In line with the sentiments expressed in a 1917 ruling of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), which called upon Burmese women to shun mixed-race unions, Burmese women were expected to safeguard national purity in their dress: a *longyi* or *thamein* (a skirt similar in length to the *longyi*, but with a long split up one side), and a *pinni* jacket. These styles of dress were adopted as national costume after Independence.

The advent of military rule in 1962 inaugurated a new sartorial regimen. New ex-officio sumptuary codes stipulated one uniform for the ruled (the *longyi*, or *thamein*, which remained the national dress for men and women) and another for the ruler (military uniforms). In the 1980s, dress once again became a site for resistance. Taking a stand against the junta and echoing the dress code of her father's generation of anti-colonial activists, Aung San Suu Kyi adopted the simple elegance of a *longyi* and a *pinni* jacket, thus simultaneously emphasizing her solidarity with the ordinary, non-uniformed masses and her genealogy. Despite the anti-Western diatribes of the ruling elite and the obsolescence of British "Ornamentalism", the colonial politics of ostentation reverberate in the postcolonial *darbars* and Jubilees sponsored by Myanmar's military government.

Dressing social status, race and gender in Burma

In the context of modern British Indian and Theravadan Southeast Asian history, colonial Burma was an anomaly. In Laos and Cambodia, French systems of governance left the monarchy intact by simultaneously denuding it of independent revenue-raising powers and sponsoring associated material culture, such as palaces and royal festivals. The monarchy's largely symbolic status, however, remained a significant source of mobilization against colonial control. In Siam, as Maurizio Peleggi demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, the monarchy remained an important arbiter of taste. Throughout much of British India, princes were cultivated through a form of indirect control, and were vital mainstays in a system of colonial rule that buttressed and underpinned British power through a complex system of honours, ceremonial dress and decorations best described as "Ornamentalism".² In Burma, by contrast, the British ousted and exiled the monarchy when they captured the royal capital of Mandalay in 1885. Royal monuments were requisitioned. Former ceremonial arenas became barracks and post offices. Burmese regalia gained curio status, and was replaced by an intricate system of honours, medals and ceremonial dress, centred on the British Empire's "cynosure of sovereignty": Queen Victoria.³ This "culture of ornamentation", involved the adoption and

adaptation of indigenous Asian symbolism, notably the *durbar*.⁴ For all its glitz, this was no empty rhetoric. In late British India and in Burma, as in the fifteenth- to eighteenth-century England studied by David Kuchta, “the wardrobe of power was in itself a form of power” that gave “shape, materiality and visibility” to “social, sexual, political, religious and economic relations”.⁵

From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, European observers commented on the similarity in male and female apparel in Burma from the waist down, but noted other differences. In the late eighteenth-century Burma observed by the Italian priest Vincenzo Sangermano, men and women both dressed in a *bta-mein* – a length of “striped cotton or silk” that opened in front, revealing the legs and part of the thigh when walking. Both men and women would dress the *bta-mein* up with a white jacket – which was shorter for women than for men – and women would add to this a muslin or silk stole.⁶ Both men and women wore footwear of wood or leather, the latter being mostly “covered with red or green cloth” of European manufacture. Men gathered their hair on top of the head with a white or coloured “handkerchief”, and women tied it behind with a red ribbon. Men commonly tattooed their thighs.⁷ Writing a hundred years later, the British visitor Florence Maryatt noted that girls wore “coloured cloth around the bosom”, and a silk or velvet jacket, in the shape of the “*cosaque*”, which might be ornamented with red or orange tassels. A cummerbund of “native cloth” was worn around the waist. Women still wore the *bta-mein*, which opened in front to reveal the right leg. Men’s legs and thighs were tattooed heavily with designs “in the form of a pair of breeches”.⁸ As the practice of tattooing faded, and the use of imported fabrics increased, the room for such bodily markers of gender difference diminished. In 1916, the British missionary Doris Sarah Morris noted in her diary: “It is almost impossible to distinguish a Burmese man from a Burmese woman ... both wear long black hair twisted up on top, both have a kind of white jacket and a long coloured skirt. The only difference is that a man wears a coloured handkerchief around his head and a woman wears nothing on her head”.⁹

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Cambodia and Siam, the customary short hair and loose wrap-around culottes for women and men promoted European notions of the masculinity and uncouthness of indigenous women. In Burma, the reverse held true. Burmese women were seen as the ravishing epitome of Oriental femininity (see figure 7.1). The corollary vision of the intrinsic effeminacy of the long-haired and long-skirted Burmese man underwrote notions of the comparative masculinity and right-to-rule of the vigorous European male. These colonial discourses echoed debates in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, when the ruling elite had “used the label of effeminacy” to discredit men of other classes and sexual practices, to the extent that wool itself had emerged as the epitome of English manly virtue,



Figure 7.1 “Ma-Hla-Byu” (Miss Pretty and Fair) from R. Talbot Kelly, *Burma Painted and Described* London: Allen and Charles Black, 1905. Plate 7. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

Figure 7.2 Sir George White and Staff with Burmese Interpreter, Mandalay, 1885. R. B. Graham *Photographic Illustrations of Mandalay and Upper Burmah Expeditionary Force, 1886–87* (Birmingham: A. Pumphrey, Photographic Publisher, 1887), Plate 12. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



in contrast to the presumed effeminacy, superfluity and luxury of Oriental silk.¹⁰ Coarse cloth and the ideal of masculinity were twinned in the military uniform worn by British officers (see figure 7.2).

While European observers noted similarities between Burmese male and female attire, Burmese saw things differently. Speaking of Siam in the early nineteenth century, the court official Myawada Zwoogyi Maung Za told Burney, British Resident of Ava, that “the Burmese do not much care for such a country where the women wear their lower dress in the same manner as the men, taking it between the legs and fastening it up behind”.¹¹ In Burma, spiritual powers that are assumed to be inherent in men, known as *hpon*, have long been imbricated in dress and bodily practices embracing both tattooing and the inlaying of small gemstones under the flesh as amulets. The Burmese term *hpon* encapsulates notions of masculinity, gender hierarchy and power. As described by the Burmese writer Daw Mi Mi Khaing, *hpon* is the widely held and potent notion that “man has a nobility of manhood in him”.¹² *Hpon* is not merely some lofty ethereal concept, but informs a range of practices, including the cultural logic of laundry: in order to safeguard *hpon*, men’s and women’s clothing must be separated before washing, and women’s clothing cannot be hung above a man’s. These beliefs give bodily adornment a particular gender-based power, and also endow women with the power to erode *hpon* through strategic contact. These cultural conceptions of male power, however, appear to have largely escaped the attention of European observers in the colonial era.

In an age in which “race” was not yet a recognized marker, and notions of male and female specificity were treated as intrinsic rather than extrinsic qualities, dress served as a primary marker of social boundaries. As Thant Myint-U observes, a rigid hierarchy of indigenous nobility was kept in place by “customary sumptuary rules” that clearly marked local mandarins apart from their subjects. Such rules included “the right to wear certain types of dress” and to ride horses.¹³ At the royal court, the types of cloth and apparel, and the colour of parasols were regimented according to rank and precedent so that despite the multitude of religious and cultural ceremonies, “no-one was ever at a loss as to what to wear or where to sit”.¹⁴ Although not explicitly linked with race, dress nonetheless held significance as a marker of one’s incorporation into the dominant body politic. When thousands of Mons migrated east to Tenasserim in the eighteenth century, they demonstrated their allegiance to the Burmese crown by “adopting Burmese dress and hairstyles” as well as taking Burmese names.¹⁵

It was therefore only natural that Burmese should categorize Europeans along similar lines. In his commentary on Western rule in the “Compendium of King’s Dhamma” (*Rajadhammasangahakyan*) written in 1878, the erudite court official U Hpo Hlaing (1829–1883) underscored the status of

Westerners as beings outside the kingly realm not by alluding to their country of origin or physiological difference, but by describing them as “those who cover their heads with woollen caps”.¹⁶ Woollen hats were symptomatic of the dour dress code that prevailed among the British in India until the late Victorian era and formed part of an arsenal of garments, including thick woollen clothing and flannel shirts, designed to protect Europeans from tropical maladies.¹⁷ A notable item of this plethora of prophylactics was the “solar topi”, which was retained until the 1940s. While the latter became a metonym for colonial authority and superiority (“the toughest Rangoon bandit could never understand it,” sang Noel Coward of the superior endurance of the sun it allegedly afforded Englishmen), Gandhi’s cloth cap would become a “metonym for disorder”.¹⁸

In 1870, J. Talboys Wheeler, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of British Burma, encountered three monks at Pagan who evinced fascination, curiosity and “warm approval” for his “solar hat”, went into “ecstasies” over his silk umbrella, and paid their “best attention” to his shoes and socks. The monks also “applauded” his “white alpaca coat”, and compared his shirt and collar favourably “with the coarser materials of their own yellow garments”. When Wheeler declined to hand over his Solar Topi or his shoes, and offered them instead a silver coin, the monks were insulted and rejected his offer, indicating not only the Buddhist injunction against monks handling money, but also perhaps that their interest in his head and footwear was inquisitive, rather than purely acquisitive, behaviour.¹⁹ By contrast to Talbot Wheeler’s dour wardrobe, the Minister of the Interior Yaw-Ahtwen-Woon with whom he met in 1870 was “dressed in white, with the usual silk loongyee” and wore the “decoration of the golden tsalway of twelve strands, which presents a handsome and imposing appearance with its golden chains over Burmese costume”.²⁰

The disestablishment of the Burmese monarchy triggered the collapse of this sumptuary system. British officers transformed the Mandalay palace into colonial headquarters. Lavish court costumes fell into disuse, their value increasingly pegged not to social status in indigenous eyes but to their exotic cachet in the European gaze. When London’s Victoria and Albert Museum took over the East India Company Museum in 1886–87, the latter’s holdings already included samples of “women’s clothing”, but these appear to have been mostly from India, including pyjamas and muslin tunics. “Stripped of their rank and authority”, many aristocrats and figures of royalty were now “almost destitute”. We can only speculate about whether or not they were “glad” to “part with their possessions”, but over time, exquisite examples of court costumes travelled from Mandalay to South Kensington, through gifts, sales and loans by such figures as L.M. Parlett, a Divisional Judge in Lower Burma,

who passed on the costumes of Cabinet Ministers, Secretaries of State, and Queens to the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1900s²¹ (see figure 7.3). Against this rapid dislocation, clothing gained great salience as an affordable, quotidian, accessible and “legal” medium of resistance and discontent.

Burma’s administrative absorption into British India as a Province – a status it retained until 1935 – combined with the abolition of the monarchy to ensure the exclusion of indigenous trappings of authority from the “wardrobe” of colonial power. Those who chose to work with or for the colonial regime, such as the Western-educated and trousered elite who formed the nucleus of

Burma’s first nationalist movement, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, often adopted European clothing. In this context, Burmese dress would become the preferred wear of more radical nationalists who styled themselves, in an inversion of colonial sociology, as “Thakin” (master) (for men) and “Thakin-ma” (for women), Thakin being the Burmese term of address that the British insisted that Burmese use when addressing Europeans.

With colonial conquest came new sartorial *modus operandi*: trousers, berets or “pith-helmets”, stockinged feet and shoes. The latter were not new in themselves. Slippers and cloth, wood and leather shoes were recorded in Burma in European accounts and court paintings during the century prior to colonization. But new footwear etiquette was introduced that contravened socio-cultural norms prevalent among Buddhist Burmese. Of particular note here is the “footwear controversy”.



Figure 7.3 Minister’s military court costume, late nineteenth century. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Colonial sumptuary laws: Footprints of European power

In 1830, Resident Burney, British Resident in Ava, doffed his hat but not his shoes in an audience with the Burmese King.²² During Britain's dealings with the Mandalay Court, successive residents honoured Burmese Court etiquette and removed their shoes when entering the royal audience chamber.²³ Conversely, as contemporary illustrations by a Burmese court artist show, Governor General of India Lord Dalhousie and British Commissioner Arthur Phayre retained their shoes in their first formal meeting with King Mindon's Ambassador to Calcutta in 1854 (see figure 7.4 COLOUR PLATE SECTION), no doubt prompting Ambassador Ashin Nanmadaw Payawun Mingyi to turn up for the following meeting in his shoes.²⁴ Similarly, when two British military officers visited the district governor in Bhamo in 1870, they were received in a large audience hall with thick carpets "on which they sat in the Burmese fashion, and of course without taking off [their] shoes."²⁵ Following objections by Sir Douglas Forsyth in 1875 to the "indignity" of having to take off his shoes, Lord Northbrook, Viceroy of India, instructed the British Resident of Ava not to take off his shoes. The policy was upheld by Northbrook's successor Lytton, although he privately rued Northbrook's "mistake".²⁶

Meanwhile, in Simla, India, memos had been flying back and forth regarding the issue of "native gentlemen wearing shoes." In one case, a Native gentleman from Bengal was required by the Judge to take off his English boots or shoes on entering the court. Another ruling held that a Christian Native gentleman might retain his shoes in court, but that a non-Christian Native gentleman must remove his. It would be seen as an "indignity", reasoned an officer of the Calcutta High Court, "if a Native were seen standing upon any carpeted portion of the Court-house with shoes of any description on his feet".²⁷ As Cohn writes, the politics of shoes demonstrated how native emulation of Western practice was seen as insubordination.²⁸ Subsequent heated debate led to the 1854 Bengal Resolution, which ruled that native gentlemen could appear before Englishmen wearing European boots or shoes, and was extended over India in 1874. However, when a group of Indian gentlemen lobbied the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal for the use of a cap that could be taken off in *durbars*, courts and other official gatherings whenever they passed a European official, the response was hostile and demeaning. "No European of respectability would appear in public in such caps and they cannot therefore claim as they do to associate its adoption with 'Western Culture'". The hostility of this reaction, as Collingham asserts, was tied up with the potential of a "civilized" Indian body to neutralize the affect of European superiority.²⁹ The cultural logic underpinning such assumptions was that "Europeans did not have to conform to Indian custom, but Indians had to conform to European

ideas of what was proper Indian behaviour”.³⁰ Thus, Europeans might enter temple grounds with their shoes on, just as they would enter a Christian church, but natives must remove their shoes within the secular chambers of colonial power and justice.

In neighbouring Siam, which escaped colonization, European visitors were often “as perturbed by the failure of the Siamese to wear hats, shoes or socks” as by the bare breasts and chests of women and men.³¹ Here, European headwear and footwear was never a matter of controversy but rather became an object of idolatry by monarchs and heads of state bent on fashioning an image of Thai modernity. Scholars of Thai cultural politics have argued that the apparent mimicry of Western hair and wear at the Siamese court was not blind imitation but a cultural defence policy. In this analysis, the adaptation of Western modes of dress served to present Siam as already civilized and therefore in no need of cultural redress through colonization.³²

In India, the 1909 Hobhouse Commission found the quotidian translation of notions of European superiority into bodily practice a major cause of political tensions. Indians saw legislation on dress as compounding “the deplorable feeling that European officers generally have, that the Indians are a subject race and an inferior people”.³³ Well into the first decades of the twentieth century, the “bodies of Indian gentlemen” remained “the main battleground over which the struggle to maintain prestige on one side and deference on the other raged”.³⁴

In India, Europeans had long failed to observe the native practice of removing shoes on entering temples.³⁵ In early twentieth-century Burma, this single issue rallied the public to the nationalist movement more than any other. Under colonial rule, Europeans inscribed their right to wear footwear in pagodas in public notices asserting that “No-one can wear shoes inside this pagoda compound except for British or Europeans”. Witnessing such a notice on his return from England in 1916, the lawyer U Thein Maung complained to the chief of the pagoda committee at the Shwe San Taw pagoda in Pyi, who revised the wording to read “no exceptions”, and ignored subsequent requests by the Deputy Commissioner of Burma to remove the notice. The same year, a group of young Burmese men, a number of them dressed in Western clothes, assembled in Rangoon’s Jubilee Hall for the All Burma Conference of Buddhists to discuss their common outrage at the continued refusal, by Europeans, to remove their footwear when visiting sacred precincts. Their demand that the government legislate the removal of footwear in pagodas was reinforced by a resolution of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association the following year.³⁶ The failure to adopt such laws sparked violence in October 1919, when outraged monks attacked a group of Europeans wearing shoes in the sacred precinct of Eindway Pagoda, Mandalay.³⁷

To colonial observers, however, exposed to a world where difference was regulated by segmented seating of Burmese, British and Anglo-Indians at *darbars* and other official functions, sartorial segregation was normalized, and the idea of either party following another's dress patterns produced unease. "I don't know whether it is wise or not" wrote Doris Sarah Morris, the Headmistress of St Michael's School for Girls in Mandalay, in 1918, on meeting a "blind clergyman" who "wears Burmese clothes, and goes barefoot and sits on the floor". "It may appeal to some Burmans," she continued, but "probably others would despise an Englishman who followed the Burmese customs".³⁸

Masquerade and the colonial politics of dress

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, subaltern subjects of British India, as in Burma, used Western dress as a validation of the right to racial equality. By adopting Western dress, "natives" attempted to turn the tables on their colonial masters, and in so doing exploited European fears that equated emulation with ridicule and insubordination. The adoption of native dress by Europeans moved from an era of experimentation and "masquerade" in eighteenth-century India through the casual, naturalized adoption of dress in early to mid nineteenth-century India, to a rejection of native dress and a consolidation of Victorian dress codes. By the late nineteenth century, Europeans in the colonies were most unlikely to adopt native dress, unless to "disguise" themselves or to perform as exotic others in Metropolitan Centres. In early twentieth-century Burma, those Europeans who dressed in *longyis*, like the Reverend noted by Doris Morris in the preceding section, were considered eccentric or "beyond the pale".

In turn-of-the-century Siam, King Chulalongkorn issued a decree specifying the type of clothing one could wear in public. By this point, as Rosalind Morris argues, dress had become "a matter of cultural signification not only for foreigners" but also for Thais, who were beginning to anticipate and internalize Western perceptions.³⁹ Conversely, at around this juncture, South and Southeast Asians, most notably Mohanandas K. Gandhi, moved from an embrace of European dress convention to its tactical rejection. When he first arrived in England in 1887 bearing a letter of introduction to Dr P.J. Mehta, Gandhi experienced the "shame of being the only person in white clothes" in the lobby of London's Victoria Hotel. Mehta arrived in a top hat, and when Gandhi rubbed the fur the wrong way, the piqued doctor gave him his first lesson in European etiquette, explaining that "we come to England not so much for the purpose of studies as for gaining experience of English life and customs".⁴⁰ Sixteen years later, when Gandhi attended Lord Curzon's *darbar*,

he was pained to see some Rajas and Maharajas pairing their fine Bengali dhotis, shirts and scarves with “trousers befitting khansamas [waiters] and shining boots”. At a later *darbar* for the founding of the Hindu University, the sight of Maharajas bedecked “like women”, with “silk pajamas and silk achkans” and jewellery led Gandhi to see this finery in a new light: as the “insignia not of their royalty, but of their slavery”, “badges of impotence” worn not of free will but because it was obligatory.⁴¹ In the late 1910s and early 1920s, the nationalist monk U Ottama, who had been exposed to Gandhian strategies during his studies in India, agitated for a boycott of foreign cloth in Burma. His campaign for homespun clothing rang a contrast with the British-educated barristers whose European attire clothed a nationalism that aspired “to construct a form of self-determination upon British premises”.⁴²

On 22 November 1921, police apprehended a young Burmese male named Maung Ba Bwa at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. Maung Ba Bwa was one of an unusually large number of Burmans visiting the Pagoda on this November evening for an exhibition of weaving, and a performance of a *phwe* (Burmese traditional theatre) by two leading artists on the occasion of the Tazaungdaing festival. “He was wearing a *pinmi* jacket and *Yaw longyi*, obviously rather self-consciously and in demonstration of his nationalist sympathies,” stated the resultant police report. “He tells of being stopped by a policeman and attributes this to his attire. He seems, possibly not without reason, to think that some Government officers regard such clothes with disapproval”. Maung Ba Bwa was apprehended not as a suspect, but as the witness to the storming of the Shwedagon and British and Indian police earlier that evening, when Gurkhas “desecrated the pagoda by rushing up the steps with their boots on”. In the ensuing fracas, which pitted monks against such colonial agents of “order”, a Burmese civilian was killed. In analyzing Maung Ba Bwa’s version of events, the Fabian scholar-official J.S. Furnivall, who presided over the independent commission of inquiry, corroborated his diagnosis of the witness’s political orientations exclusively with reference to his wardrobe. His *pinmi* jacket and his *longyi* evidenced “nationalist sentiment”, which in turn accounted “for his frame of mind in respect of the police” and explained “his predisposition to accept the case against them as correct”. In a startling leap of logic, the report then made the witness personify a larger feeling abroad, namely “An aptitude to regard every act of authority as oppressive”, which “tends towards a disregard for law and order, and leads to friction which strains the machinery of Government”.⁴³

Influenced by Gandhi’s Swadeshi movement, Burmese nationalist students seized upon cloth and clothing as a symbol of national identity and a support to the national economy, encouraging people to wear their nationalism in native home-spun and hand-woven cotton.⁴⁴ On his 1929 visit to Burma,

impressed by the superior craftsmanship of the Burmese spinning wheel, Gandhi asked Indians in Burma to boycott all cloth of foreign manufacture. In Moulmein, he chastised Burmese women for wearing foreign silks, and urged them to “revise [their] taste for foreign fineries”. In Paunde, he contrasted foreign umbrellas with the picturesque Burmese parasols. In Prome, he bemoaned the fact that villagers worked with “foreign yarn”, motivated not by “any instinct of patriotism” but by revenue streams, weaving “foreign yarn” into the beautiful *longyi*s that had once been “manufactured out of hand-spun”.⁴⁵

The year after Gandhi’s visit, race riots broke out between Burmese and Indians, caused in part by low rice yields and high rates of interest charged by Indian moneylenders. Established that year, the We Burmans Association (*Do Bama Ab Si Ab Yone*) retained a xenophobic edge to some of its songs, but borrowed from Indian nationalist strategies in its agenda. In September 1930, the Association ruled against the importation of foreign materials such as cigarettes and clothing, and sustained its campaign for traditional home-spun clothing and against Western apparel.⁴⁶ A Buddhist revivalist movement led by the Sayadaw from 1935 to 1941 campaigned for brown habits, and against muslin jackets.⁴⁷

Burmese socialism and body politics, 1962–2000

In the Siam of the 1940s, Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram legislated an end to the traditional unisex, loose wrap-around culottes known as *jong-kraben*, and required men to wear shirts and trousers, and women to wear skirts and blouses, and both to wear hats, shoes and socks as part of a new set of cultural dictates (*rattbanियom*).⁴⁸ As Peleggi argues elsewhere in this volume, the quest to cast Siamese citizens as modern subjects in the European gaze was an indisputable rationale for such decrees. Regional comparisons were no less significant. One contemporary justification for the decree was that the *jong-kraben* was unsuitable for independent Thais because it resembled the dress in the French Protectorate of Cambodia, and thus emblemized not only antiquity but also colonial status.⁴⁹ In Indonesia, leader Sukarno demoted the *kain* or *sarong* and promoted Western garb for Indonesian males, arguing that “this old fashioned native dress has a demeaning effect” and restricts the manful stride and upright posture conferred by “trousers” which alone could allow Indonesian men to “walk[] erect like any white man” (Taylor, this volume).⁵⁰ In Burma, by contrast, socialist modernity legislated in favour of the retention of the *longyi* by men as well as women.

In 1951, addressing the all-Burma Indian Cultural Conference three years after Aung San’s assassination, Prime Minister U Nu referred to the need for

Burma’s “cultural reawakening” now that it was free from colonial subjugation, and singled out “dress” as one of many “different channels” that “carries with it that distinctive mark of the culture of the race or nation which is its very backbone”.⁵¹

In 1962, the establishment of military rule by General Ne Win inaugurated a new hierarchy of dress. The state asserted its control over its citizens by insisting that all civilians wear “national” dress, making the right to wear trousers a military privilege. Bodily deportment was a principal litmus test for the BSPP’s enforcement of conformity: being a Burmese citizen meant wearing a *longyi* rather than Western trousers. Long hair, the “traditional” mode of hair for Burmese men prior to colonial rule, was now associated with Western modernity, and outlawed. In a stark antithesis of Thai Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram’s above-mentioned cultural dictates, Ne Win also banned public kissing by young couples. Ne Win’s supervision of even “the smallest details of national life” included a decree that the Burmese ought to wear national dress. The people were thus collectively antiquarianized, leaving the military as the men of action who alone could legitimately wear the trousers⁵² (see figure 7.5). Because of its association with masculinity and power, the Burmese concept of *hpon* has been particularly useful to military regimes.

Until the 1990s, *hpon* appears not to have featured explicitly in discourses of national identity. One measure of the current military regime’s insecurity is



Figure 7.5 U Sa Kyaw Sein *Construction and Reformation All Over Myanmar, 1991*. The background image is the Mandalay Palace.

their seizure of a range of dress-based metaphors to undermine their legitimate political opposition. In one campaign, government newspapers underscored the weakness of the opposition movement's *hpon* due to its metaphorical proximity to Aung San Suu Kyi's "hemline". In 1996, state media reported that Aung San Suu Kyi's skirt would destroy a male's *hpon* on contact, and had sapped the opposition's *hpon* and its strength.⁵³ In further bids to de-legitimize Aung San Suu Kyi the following year, state media contrasted her bestowal of "her life and body to an Englishman of colonial race" with her father's war against the British, and, in an echo of the YMBA's campaign against miscegenation some sixty years earlier, accused her of destroying her own race by "mixing blood with an English man".⁵⁴ In light of these attacks, Aung San Suu Kyi's adoption of national dress has been a recurrent source of frustration and consternation to the military regime.

In the election campaign of the late 1980s, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party members wore traditional clothes. Suu Kyi donned the clothes of the various ethnic groups in each region and, like Burmese women in the past, always pinned a sprig of flowers in her hair.⁵⁵ The broad-brimmed farmer's hat, *kamauk*, adopted by Gandhi on his Burma visits, became the symbol of the party. By contrast, the sartorial ancestry of the ruling elite's military uniform merges the authoritarianism of both former British colonialists and the Japanese army of occupation.

Since the 1990s, dress has once again emerged as a site for the military government's assertion that it is both guarding and controlling "national Myanmar culture". In this context, the body itself emerges as a living museum, and dress and deportment become symbols of the military's success in defending the country from modernization and Westernization. Much like the campaigns against spiritual pollution (*jingshen wuran*) that restricted male hair length and tight jeans in 1980s China, the cultural politics of 1990s Burma focused on controlling the public parameters of Burmese-ness. From the mid 1990s, the Junta began to allow limited Western dress on television, but introduced a new set of "Regulations for Entertainers" in 1995 that restricted musicians' attire.⁵⁶ In 2004, in line with broader directives that films must preserve national culture, character and "Myanmar" styles, Burma's motion picture and video censor board prohibited the wearing of Western trousers and skirts for Burmese actresses, and insisted that Burmese women wear only "traditional dress".⁵⁷

In the 1990s, consumer pressure forced Nike, Triumph and other clothing manufacturers to pull out of Burma. Campaign posters for the Dirty Clothes, Dirty System lobby sponsored by the Canadian Friends of Burma, among other groups, promoted posters of barbed wire bras and G-stings, and slogans such as "Support Breasts, Not Dictators" (see figure 7.6). Within Burma, different images prevailed at Rangoon's Military Museum, where a green

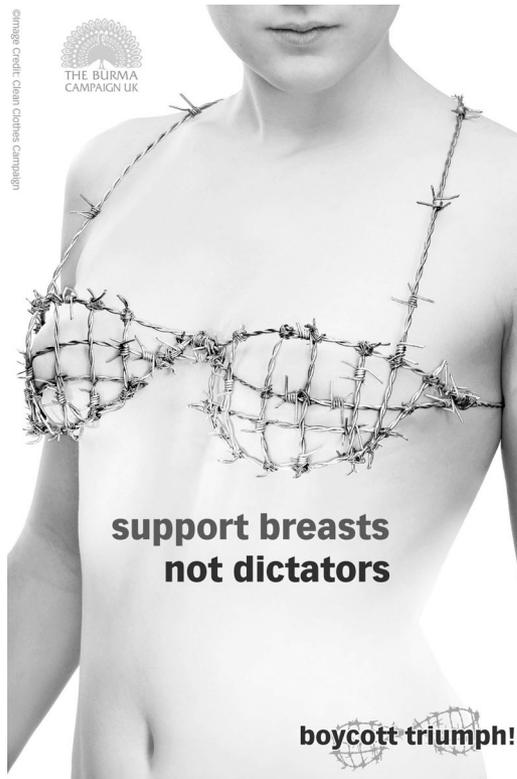


Figure 7.6 Burma Boycott Campaign Poster: Copyright The Clean Clothes Campaign. Reproduced with permission from the Burma Campaign, UK.

suede hunting vest on the first floor vied for attention with export apparel produced by a Tatmadaw Clothing Joint Venture Company, and a display of shoes from the Tatmadaw Footwear Factory mixed fluffy pink slippers and gold high heels with jungle shoes and golf boots. It remains to be seen what effect these bizarre juxtapositions will have on the government's claims to *hpon*.⁵⁸

In Burma, whispers of ridicule are often directed against the wives of military officials who attend Pagoda ceremonies dressed in “traditional” clothes but dripping with jewels, far removed from the serene figure that Aung San Suu Kyi cuts with her simplicity and natural ornamentation of a flower. A recent and controversial example of such ostentation was the marriage of Thandar Shwe, daughter of military leader Than Shwe, to her military groom Major Zaw Phyo Win, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Commerce. She appeared at the ceremony bedecked with pearls, diamonds and gems.⁵⁹ Instead of the royal palace or the colonial Jubilee Hall or *durbar*, the wedding was held in the exclusive government guesthouse, and has seen the bride dubbed Thandar “Sein” (Diamond) by Yangon residents.⁶⁰ Footage of the clothing

showed Than Shwe dressed in a white shirt and *longyi*, revealing a rare glimpse of the general out of uniform.

Conclusion

Colonial attempts to hem in racial and gender difference through practice, law and lore lent dress its potency as a field of indigenous resistance in Burma, giving rise to new strands of nationalism by design. By the early 1920s, in a climate in which speaking out or publishing critiques of colonialism saw some young monks and other activists jailed for years, increasing numbers of Burmese nationalists chose to make their political statements in their dress. Young Burmese men and women adopted the *pinni* and *longyi* as major symbols of national identity. But in evaluating these fashion statements, we should not read them through a purely Western-Burmese lens. Dress also exerted its communicative power between different interest groups in Burmese society. Today, the continuing saliency of dress as a political instrument of resistance and repression is seen in the various debates and decrees in military Myanmar, as well as in the dress code of the leader and members of the opposition. In the contemporary state successor of colonial sumptuary laws, narratives on race, clothing and national legitimacy remain intimately intertwined.

Notes

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