

Colonial attempts to hem in racial and gender difference through practice, law and lore made dress a potent field of resistance in British Burma, giving rise to new strands of nationalism by design.

# Nationalism by design

## *The politics of dress in British Burma*

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On 22 November 1921, a young male named Maung Ba Bwa was apprehended by police at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. Maung Ba Bwa was one of an unusually high number of Burmese 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. In Maung Ba Bwa's recollection of events, "his attire" had attracted police attention. "He was wearing a *pinni* jacket and *Yaw longyi*, obviously rather self-consciously and in demonstration of his nationalist sympathies," stated the resultant police report; "He seems, possibly not without reason, to think that some Government officers regard such clothes with disapproval". Maung Ba Bwa was brought in for questioning following the storming of the Shwedagon by British and Indian police, 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. The scholar-official J. S. Furnivall, who presided over an independent commission of inquiry into the police response, would also pin his diagnosis of Maung Ba Bwa's political orientation on his wardrobe. His *pinni* jacket and his *longyi*, the commission reported, were proof positive of his "nationalist sentiment".<sup>1</sup>

### Wearing your politics on your sleeve

By the early 1920s, in a climate where speaking out or publishing critiques of colonialism saw some young monks and other activists jailed for years, increasing numbers of Burmese civilians - like Maung Ba Bwa - chose to express their political leanings in their dress. But nationalism did not have a single uniform. Those western-educated Burmese who formed the vanguard of the secular nationalist movement dressed up their attachment to civic-political, constitutional change in the trousers, waistcoats and jackets of barristers. By contrast, identifiably 'Burmese' clothing became *de rigueur* for those 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 which the British insisted that Burmese use when addressing Europeans. This latter school of nationalists displayed their allegiance to the Burmese nation and their distaste for colonial rule in the *longyi* (sarong) and *pinni* (a mandarin-collared, white jacket) and a headdress of white cloth. Conflicting views over appropriate male attire contrasted with a general consensus among young male nationalists of both schools, as well as older males and females of a more conservative political bent, over the proper clothing for Burmese women. The latter were expected to safeguard national

purity in their dress: a *thamein* (a skirt similar in length to the *longyi*, but with a long split up one side), and a *pinni* jacket.

When Britain secured the conquest of Burma with the ouster and exile of King Thibaw and Queen Suppayalat following the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885, all manner of customs and mores would unravel. One casualty of this marginalisation of an institution that had functioned as the epicentre of Burmese cultural life, was a complex sumptuary system. Once elaborate markers of status, the lavish costumes of ministers and courtiers soon emerged as coveted museum-pieces, some splendid examples of which now adorn London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

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.

With colonial conquest came new sartorial *modus operandi*: trousers, berets or 'pith-helmets', stockinged feet and shoes. The latter were not *new per se*. Slippers and cloth, wood and leather shoes were recorded in Burma in European accounts and court paintings, during the century prior to colonisation. But new footwear etiquette contravened socio-cultural norms prevalent among Buddhist Burmese. In India, Europeans had long failed to observe the native practice of removing shoes on entering temples.<sup>2</sup> In Burma, this single issue rallied the public to the nationalist movement more than any other.<sup>3</sup> 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 com-

mon 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. 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.<sup>4</sup>

### Homespun symbols of nationalism

Nationalism also left a footprint in the political economy of dress. 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 homespun and handwoven cotton.<sup>5</sup> 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 Prome, he bemoaned villagers who worked with 'foreign yarn', motivated not by 'any instinct of patriotism' but by revenue streams.<sup>6</sup>

The year after Gandhi's visit, race riots broke out between Burmese and Indians, sparked in part by low rice yields and high rates of interest charged by Indian moneylenders. Established that year, the We Burmese Association (*Do Bama Ah Si Ah 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 homespun clothing and against western apparel.<sup>7</sup>



Maung Me Oung.  
Our Sub-Representative at Maulmein.

Burmese man, c. 1903. Picture taken from *Buddhism*. Vol 1 Dec 1903

In the first decade of Burma's Independence, Prime Minister U Nu 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".<sup>8</sup> Nine years later, in 1962, General Ne Win inaugurated a new era of military rule with its own, ex-officio sumptuary laws. Long hair, the 'traditional' mode of hair for Burmese men prior to colonial rule, was now associated with western modernity, and outlawed. The *longyi*, or *thamein*, was declared the national dress for men and women, so marking the commoners off from the ruling class whose dress owed more to British and Japanese military tailoring than to Burmese sartorial traditions. In the 1980s, dress once again became a site for resistance. Aung San Suu Kyi's adoption of a *longyi* and a *pinni* jacket echoed the dress code of her father's generation of anti-colonial activists and so subtly undergirded both her political pedigree and her declaration of Burma's "second struggle for Independence". In the contemporary state successor of colonial sumptuary laws, narratives on race, clothing, and national legitimacy remain intimately intertwined.

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### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Myanmar, Government of Burma Police Department, Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Shwedagon Fracas, 14 January 1922. The Committee comprised J. S. Furnivall, Maung Thin, Maung Hla Pe.
- 2 Bernard Cohn 'Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century' in Weiner, A. and J. Schneider. Eds. 1989. *Cloth and Human Experience*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 3 Naw, Angelene. 2001. *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*. Chiang-mai: Silkworm.
- 4 *Shoe Issue which paved the way to the independence struggle in Burma*. Lanka Daily News, December 25, 2004 in <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/> Accessed 6 March 2007. The monks' leader, U Kettaywa, was sentenced to life for attempted murder.
- 5 U Maung Maung, 1980. *Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920-1940*. Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No. 4. New Delhi. p. 129
- 6 Gandhi in Burma. 1979. Rangoon: Information Service of India.
- 7 *Ta Khin Do Bama Ah Si Ah Yone Tha Maing* (The History of the We Burma Association), Translation by Ma Khin Ma Mar Kyi. 1976. Rangoon.
- 8 Nu, U. *Burma Looks Ahead*. 1953. Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery.



Advertisement for a European outfitters in Rangoon posted in *Buddhism*. Vol 1. Dec 1903