

Overall, this book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Islam in Southeast Asia. Interpretative notions such as authoritarian democracy and engaged Muslims are intriguing and should promote discussion and analysis, as will other terms such as “ring-fencing.” While some of the chapters might be assigned to undergraduate students in specialized upper division courses, the volume’s principle audience will be graduate students and specialized scholars.

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### ***Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma***

CHIE IKEYA

Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011, 239 p.

Chie Ikeya’s excellent book offers deep insights into Burma’s social and cultural history under colonialism and modernity mainly through depictions of modern Burmese women. Based on archival research and a meticulous compilation of facts and figures taken from primary sources, the book makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the struggle and progress made by Burmese women in the early part of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the social landscape of nineteenth-century colonial Burma, ranging from descriptions of the country’s ethnic composition and economic specialization to those of its political situation and legal system (in the form of cases that garnered public attention). Ikeya examines the demographic changes incurred by waves of immigration, mainly Indian and Chinese, which resulted in a high rate of mixed marriages and an ethnically plural society that required an enforcement of a plural legal system by the state. In addition, she describes how the country saw the first expansion of modern education and development of printing and the press, which helped increase the literacy rate and created a discursive forum for public debate.

In Chapter 2, Ikeya draws our attention to the fact that although Burmese women were represented by colonialists and early Western scholars as having high social status, this was a tactic to discredit the British colonial project and demand greater political power for the Burmese people within the modernization process (p. 51). Ikeya examines the various legal positions of Burmese women—marriage, divorce, property ownership, inheritance—and states that, contrary to the prevailing image of women’s relative high status, they in fact had to fight for political equality and improvement of their lives. Education became an essential issue in Burma’s modernization process of catching up with the rest of the world, and “. . . debates concerning the education and progress of women were also about the empowerment and advancement of the nation” (p. 71). As a result,

Burma saw the expansion of a coeducational system in the early twentieth century and modern educated women started to play a more active role in public professions. The growth of popular print culture also played an important role in influencing the way young women understood their new affiliations and forged modern identities in the era depicted as *khit kala* (present era).

With the number of school and student enrolment continuing to grow throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, Chapter 3 offers an extensive discussion on modern public education. Modern education provided the necessary institutional structure, socio-economic channels, and enhanced greater opportunities for those who worked in the colonial administration. It also enabled the growth of Burmese women intellectuals and cultural intermediaries during this time (p.38). Ikeya examines the influence of articles by and about women in newspapers and magazines, which emphasized the roles and duties of women as wives and mothers. However, women were increasingly mobilized for Burma's anti-colonial struggle and they were depicted as both feminists and patriots to serve the nationalist discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. Burmese women were also mobilized by the international feminist movement, but Ikeya shows that they forged strong connections especially with women in India and developed distinct priorities and interests that were integral to the nationalist developments in Burma (p.91).

Chapter 4 focuses on the theme of "how to be a modern!" It examines the rise of consumer culture in the 1920s and 1930s in fashion, cinema, and advertisements, and looks at how women functioned as modern consumers reflecting their strong self-transformative aspirations. Here Ikeya juxtaposes two female role models: the youthful and unattached "fashionista" (as Ikeya calls it) on the one hand, and the domesticated housewife-and-mother on the other. Both occupy opposite ends of the spectrum, and Ikeya carefully examines their respective levels and modes of consumption (pp.96–97). Nonetheless, the ways in which modern Burmese women dressed themselves showed their ambivalence as they adjusted themselves to the infiltration of foreign (European) values in opposition to their traditional norms. This chapter articulates how modernity implied self-improvement, self-fulfilment, and liberation to a certain extent, and consumption was a way to achieve modern refinement and upward social mobility, which everyone could be part of depending on their means.

Chapter 5 reveals that despite British policies of racial segregation, the mixed population grew rapidly as a result of intermarriages and "miscegenation." There was social stigma attached to Burmese women marrying foreigners: for these women, marrying a European signified upward marriage mobility whereas marrying an Indian meant downward marriage mobility. Intermarriages also reflected the nationalist climate at the time and a woman's spousal choice "served as an index for measuring her patriotism" (p. 140). It also tested the people's sense of national affiliation and contributed to the growing sense of what it meant to be a Burmese. "To colonialists and nationalists alike, sex and subversion were inextricably intertwined, and both sides of the colonial struggle deployed racialized senses of belonging and exclusion, which converged on the bodies of Burmese

women” (p. 141). Although their bodies were appropriated at many different levels, Ikeya depicts Burmese women as flexible and forthcoming in the ways they negotiated the constraints of the era, while Burmese men are seen as inactive and disempowered in the context of colonial modernity.

Chapter 6 picks up again on the theme of emasculation by examining the social and political meanings represented in bodily practices under colonialism. Ikeya describes how wives and mistresses of foreigners as well as *khit hsan thu* (fashionable modern women) became targets of public criticism through derogatory depictions in books and cartoons. Fashion-conscious modern women were seen as “a willing culprit of imperialist, capitalist, and Western modernity” (p. 145), and the politics of female dress were discussed in the context of nationalist discourse at that time. Despite being ridiculed at times, however, Burmese women explored every possibility to become “modern” through grooming, fashion, or writing, and actively engaged with the new era. In contrast, Ikeya emphasizes the “emasculated” image of Burmese men, subject not only to colonial subjugation and lack of socio-economic opportunities, but also constrained by their inability to take on modern challenges and assert their manliness. It seems to me, however, that such depiction overly dichotomizes the ways in which Burmese women and men experienced modernity. Moreover, it is doubtful if the nationalist movement could simply be reduced to an attempt to “remasculinize” Burmese men (p. 162), and if it was, it still does not answer the question of how gender relations in Burma were affected, since Burmese women (many of them spinsters) were also “masculinized” in their nationalist struggle.

Another criticism I have is the inconsistent manner in which Burmese terms were transcribed in the book. As different systems were used to transcribe the Burmese language, it was often difficult to decipher which vernacular term was implied in the transcription (especially in the footnotes). It would have helped immensely if the book had included a more detailed explanation of the systems for transcribing vernacular terms.

Overall, the book provides a fascinating social history of late-colonial Burma, providing insights into the strength and resilience of middle-class Burmese women who rose to the challenges of modernity and led the way toward self-fulfilment and advancement. It is also a valuable contribution to Burmese studies and modern colonial history in general, and gender and cultural studies in particular, and helps show modern Burma in a different light—open, dynamic, and resourceful.

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