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Kinship and Marriage in Burma

A CULTURAL AND PSYCHODYNAMIC ANALYSIS

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8. Sexual Components of Marriage

Introduction

Some anthropologists have tended to view marriage and sex as relatively unrelated variables, so that many anthropological discussions of both the motives and functions of marriage stress such sociological themes as the consolidation of political power, the forging of social alliances, economic advantage and division of labor, legitimization of children, and so on—everything, in short, except sex. From these discussions, one would never know that, cross-culturally viewed, sexual behavior is a component of almost all marriages, that in most societies marriage is a necessary means for entering into sexual relations (for the female if not for the male), and that, consequently, sex is one of the important motivational bases for contracting a marriage. This is especially true in societies, such as Burma, in which premarital and extramarital sex are either prohibited, frowned upon, or difficult to achieve. If, then, a special chapter is devoted here to marriage and sex, it is not because the Burmese, unlike other peoples, are especially concerned with sex. Rather, it is because they, like most other peoples, view sex and marriage as intimately related, sex being one of the motives for, and an important ingredient of, marriage.

In this book, which is primarily concerned with family and kinship, there is yet another reason for discussing the sexual component of marriage. Kinship, as I have treated it here, includes, it will be recalled, three relatively independent dimensions: cultural conceptions of kinship and kinsmen, cultural norms governing their interaction, and individually acquired attitudes concerning kinsmen. To a great extent, sexual behavior and sexual attitudes are derived from and are a reflection of all three of these dimensions. The incest taboo, which was discussed in a previous chapter, is only one aspect of sexual behavior which is governed by kinship norms and attitudes. This chapter will deal, though by no means exclusively, with a number of others.

Importance of Sex

Sexual Desire

Most males in Yeigyi assert rather vigorously that of all drives the sex drive is the strongest and the most intense. As one man put it, men always talk about sex when they are together, and he had no doubt, he said, that women do the same. Another man said that, although he was married, he wanted to have intercourse with almost every female he met. The only defense against these desires, he claimed, is to willfully "control my mind." Another maintained that the sex drive is even stronger than the fear of hell, for although all Burmese know that adultery leads to hell, should their sexual feelings be aroused—and "they can be aroused by merely touching a woman"—they will succumb to the temptation. Still another man said that there is scriptural proof for the thesis that sex is the strongest desire. Thus, when Visākhā, the great female disciple of the Buddha, was asked if she ever forgets Him, she answered that He was always in her mind except when she was having sexual intercourse. Hence, he concluded, even for her sex was a regnant drive. Another villager, saying he wanted to become a godling in his next birth, explained his choice by observing that all sexual desire is completely satisfied in the heavenly abode. He, too, alluded to Visākhā who, he said, is now in heaven, where she has 500 males on her right side and 500 on her left, and she has intercourse with them all. For him, *that*—with, of course, the sex ratio reversed—was the quintessential image of paradise.

All the men admit that the intensity of the sex drive diminishes with age; as people grow older, other drives, first economic and then religious, become regnant. Nevertheless, regardless of age the interest in sex, they claim, is almost never extinguished, for "sex comes to an end only when a person can no longer carry even a handful of chaff."

To obtain a proper perspective on the Burmese view of the strength of the sex drive and the difficulty of controlling it, it is important to realize that their view is neither atypical nor extreme. Compare, for example, the views of a Greek pastoral group, the Sarakatsani, described by Campbell (1966:326).

> Sensuality is a condition which constantly threatens to undermine this institution [the family] from within. It must, therefore, be disciplined by all the strength and will of each man and woman. . . . The Sarakatsanos accepts that sensuality is part of the human condition, but that he must struggle to contain and discipline it. . . . A man of God may win an individual and inward control over the condition of sensuality, but ordinary men need the help of kinsmen and the support of institutions in the unequal fight.

Although, given Burmese notions of sexual propriety, it was difficult to interview many women concerning sexual matters, it is probably safe to conclude that the women's sex drive is no less intense that the men's.

Indeed, the men believe, as we shall see below, that the women have stronger sexual desires than they, and there is some reason to assume that this is so—not, however, because of their stronger sexual drive, but because of sexual frustration. In any event, Burmese female informants (other than those of the highly repressed urban middle class) leave little doubt that sex is for them a strong drive, although (unlike the men) it is something which they rarely discuss since modesty forbids it. This is not the case, however, among university coeds, for whom sex—especially speculations about and curiosity concerning their experience on their wedding night—is a favorite topic of conversation. Nor are they backward in admitting to the importance of sex; indeed, some say that they could not live without it.

In any event, most Burmans, both male and female, are agreed that for women, no less than for men, sex is a strong drive, although it is one which a girl, so long as she is a virgin, can control. "If," however, "a girl has once tasted sex, she is worse [her sexual desire is stronger] than a boy." The same notion is expressed in the proverb, "Don't give beef to a fool." Like the fool and his beef, the villagers say, the virgin is content with her lot, but once she tastes sex, she wants more and more. This is reminiscent of the Sarakatsani whose unmarried women seldom go to the well alone and who, when they pass a man on the path, lower their eyes. This "tight prudential control, collectively exercised," is based on the assumption that, "If you put your hand in the fire, it gets burnt" (Campbell 1966:156).

If, then, it can be assumed that the sex drive is as important for females as for males, we can proceed to other measures of its importance. One such measure consists of the villagers' self-confessed low threshold for sexual temptation. Thus, when discussing the Japanese custom of mixed bathing (which the villagers observed during the Japanese occupation of Burma in World War II), some of the men commented on the impropriety of the custom, but others expressed astonishment at the self-control required by the Japanese males. As one put it, "If men are together with nude women, what happens to their penises?" They expressed similar astonishment at Western customs. Thus, some said that ballroom dancing could never occur in Burma, because it would inevitably lead to sex. "How can a man hold a woman in his arms without wanting to have intercourse with her. What could stop him?"

On this score, urban attitudes are little different from those found in the village. In Rangoon, many parents will not permit their daughters to attend dances on the grounds that the sexual temptations aroused by being held in a man's arms would be too strong to handle. Informants report many incidents of private dances being broken up by the stoning of the house by zealots who view such activities as sinful. In a similar vein, the Minister for Information of the military government announced after the coup that the new regime would not allow any newspaper photographs of women with exposed breasts, for they are "likely to arouse immoral passions in men." (*The Nation*, Rangoon, April 19, 1962.)

Their low threshold for sexual temptation also explains why a male and a female are prohibited from being alone together. It is assumed that any two persons of the opposite sex, not even excluding, it will be recalled, father and daughter, will be sexually tempted if they are alone. Indeed, that even moral people might succumb to incest temptations is advanced by some informants as still another indication of the strength of the sex drive, and to support this thesis one informant related the following folk tale. It seems that a certain king was presented with the riddle, "What is the most intense darkness?" and was challenged to find the answer within a week. As the week was drawing to a close, his daughter asked him why he seemed so troubled, and when he explained, she told him that if he would come to her bedroom at midnight he would find the answer. Complying with her suggestion, he discovered a nude woman in the dark room of his daughter, and, sexually aroused, he was about to have intercourse with her, when she identified herself as his daughter. In short, sex is the "most intense darkness" because, if the conditions are propitious, a man will sleep even with his daughter.

If a male and female in fact *are* seen together, especially at night, it is simply taken for granted that it is for the purpose of sex. Hence, even in Rangoon, proper women will not admit even their husband's friends into their house in his absence unless another woman is present, nor would a proper man expect to be invited in. Given these attitudes, it is understandable that the Burmese find it difficult to understand the self-restraint involved in the Western dating pattern. As one villager put it, if the Burmese, like the Americans, were to permit boys and girls to go on dates together, "every girl would soon be pregnant."

Another measure of the strength of their sex drive is the villagers' assumption that it takes Herculean strength to suffer the frustration of sexual privation. Buddhist monks are the most venerated persons in Burma, and their status is one to which most pious Buddhists aspire, but defer for a future rebirth, for the chastity incumbent on the monk is too severe. When laymen explain why they are not monks, their reason, almost invariably, is their inability to give up sex. Indeed, it is precisely because the monk is willing and able to suffer sexual deprivation that he is so highly revered by the laymen. Since, so the argument goes, the sex drive is so strong, the one who can withstand its frustration must possess, as a result of great merit acquired in many previous rebirths, special

qualifications of mind and spirit (Spiro 1971:404-408).

The strength of their sex drive or, alternatively, their interest in sex, may be inferred from villagers' behavior, as well as from their self-reports and their expressed attitudes. Thus, for example, in view of the Buddhist prohibition of adultery, its incidence, as we shall see in a later section, is not low, and, moreover, half the divorces in Yeigyi are caused by sexual infidelity and sexual desertion.[1] Polygyny, too, is primarily instigated by sex, and its low incidence is due primarily to economic and moral constraints, and to the fear of public censure, rather than to lack of interest. The low incidence of polyandry and of female infidelity is similarly explained by the vigilance of their husbands and the women's fears of punitive social and physical sanctions.

A more obvious index of their interest in sex—more obvious because, being approved, it is near-universal—is found in the villagers' sexual banter which, in its sheer exuberance, is matched only by the sexual banter of the Burmese stage. Let us see.

Sexual Banter

Although explicit sexual discussions are prohibited in mixed company, sexual bantering is not only permitted but encouraged. So long as sexual remarks can be expressed by indirection, Burmese villagers, unlike some other traditional peoples, are not at all restrained in their references to sex in mixed company. This is true, as well, in the urban working class, but not in the middle and upper classes, who, at least publicly, are mid-Victorian in their attitudes, and claim that they expect to hear such things only from bazaar women and other "low types." In the village, however, sexual references, usually offered in a teasing or humorous vein, are frequent, and I view them as a reliable measure not only of the villagers' interest in sex, but of their free and non-puritanical attitude toward it.

The indirection in sexual allusions is made possible by the high potentiality of the Burmese language for the double entendre. This potentiality is developed to a fine art in the Burmese theater in which trenchant political criticism, interlarded with obscene sexual humor, comprise the standard fare of the virtuoso, slapstick comedian, who gets away with both when expressed in double entendre. The same technique is also used by ordinary villagers, who rarely resist an opportunity to exploit the sexual potential of a phrase or an expression while in sexually mixed work groups in the paddy fields. These groups engage in much banter and horseplay, for ordinary restraints are relaxed in this highly

1. In Java, too, the strong desire for extramarital sex is "a prime trigger" to divorce (Jay 1969:95).

informal atmosphere. The following are a random sample of the types of sexual banter which I recorded among a variety of such groups.

A male tells of a woman who has just purchased a red skirt and red jacket. Now, he said, she is *red* in her upper part and also in her *lower part.* (Here, and in the other cases quoted below, the words with the intentional double meaning are italicized.)

A male tells one of the females that if she would *send a sickle* to his house after work, and powder her face, he would give her a beautiful *flower* (a Burmese term for penis). She replied that if he did not give her the *flower,* she would steal it from him.

One man asks another whether he had taught his wife to *put (htede* = insert) the paddy plants in correct order before combining them in a bundle, to which a third remarks that he has obviously not taught her to *put* because they still have no children, and a fourth responds to the latter remark by observing that the cluster *(qahpouk)* of paddy plants is too big for a bundle. *(Qahpouk* refers to the female genitals as well as to a "cluster").

A bride, working beside her husband, constantly criticizes him. Almost invariably the young men tease her with the ambiguous phrase *mapyetba-ne,* "don't be wide open."

As a man gets ready to return home his wife tells him not to forget to *hswa* the sesamum plants when he returns, to which everyone laughs, for *hswa* means "turn up"—hence, "arouse (sexual desire)."

Part of the group sings: "Now let us build a pagoda, Hey! Are there any masons?" To which the others respond: "Here we are, but we are *letthama."* (The latter is the term for carpenter, but it also means "one who uses his hand," that is, a masturbator.)

A worker is talking to another about the efficient workers in the village, when a young man shouts that his wife also is *good.* (This could mean "good" in reaping or "good" in bed. There was no doubt, from their shouts of "Ei! Ei! Hey! Hey!," how they took it.)

A young man comes and sits on the boundary of the field which is being harvested. The foreman asks if he has permission to come to the field, adding that his (the foreman's) permission is required. When the man responded with a joking comment, the foreman told him not to belittle his authority because, he said, he has *hnalounpyu,* at which all the workers laughed. *(Hnalounpyu* refers to a double-barreled gun, but it literally means "a pair of balls.")

A young man turns to a woman reaper and says his furrow is *wide,* while hers is *narrow.* She laughingly disputes this, saying hers is wide and his is narrow; this continues back and forth, five or six times, to the great glee of the other workers.

During a work break a young woman asks a man to hand her her cup,

identifying it by saying it has an *qakwe* (crack) in the middle. As he pretends to look for the cup, he asks whether *hers* has a crack in the middle, which leads to tremendous laughter.

It should be stressed, lest their attitude be misunderstood, that none of the above incidents is taken by the villagers as obscene; they are analogous, rather, to mildly off-color jokes in American society. Sexual obscenity is something else again. It is crude, the sexual references are direct and explicit, and it is almost always used as insult, invective, and aggression. (Interestingly, it is also believed to be a protection against evil spirits.) The following examples of obscenity, all from Yeigyi, are typical.

A seven-year-old girl is bathing at the well, when another, about the same age, tries to lower her bucket into the well before her. The former shouts, "I fuck you"—an invective, incidentally, which the men use against their oxen when working with them in the fields.

A field foreman, fed up with the bickering of two female workers, shouts: "Hey, the women with the long clitoris, shut up! I fuck your mother."

An old woman, complaining that no one in her house has fetched water for cooking, shouts: "The pricks (males) and cunts (females) in this house are useless. I have to look after all the pricks and cunts in this house, but no prick or cunt around here takes any responsibility. Instead of working, they keep their cunts wide open [all they do is copulate]."

The most hostile and insulting Burmese obscenities relate to oral sex, examples of which will be given in a later section. For the moment, then, these examples will suffice to indicate the distinction between sexual obscenity and sexual banter. For the villagers, the banter is good fun, and, occurring as it does in mixed company, I take it to be a valid measure of the non-puritanical attitude which they have toward sex. Sex is taken for granted as something to be enjoyed; villagers feel few constraints either in admitting that they are sexual creatures or in joking about sex in public. Sexual behavior, on the other hand, is strictly private, and (normatively at least) confined to husband and wife (which is why sex is an important part of, and a basic motive for, marriage).

Cultural Values Concerning Sex

It is paradoxical, at least on one level of analysis, that despite the importance which the Burmese attach to sexual satisfaction, and despite the freedom with which the villagers engage in sexual banter, Burmese cultural values are puritanical and restrictive. This paradox is not only interesting in itself—it constitutes yet another example of the well-documented thesis that personal desires and cultural values are frequently discordant—but it helps to explain important aspects of Burmese sexual behavior to be discussed below. Let us, then, examine some of these puritanical values.

In the first place, there is a strong cultural emphasis on modesty concerning the discussion of sexual matters, or the exposure of sexual organs, in mixed company. Although sex is a favorite topic of conversation in unisexual groups, and although sexual banter is permitted in certain contexts in sexually mixed groups, serious sexual discussion is prohibited in the presence of the opposite sex. When I wished to discuss sexual matters with village men, it was always necessary to make sure that women were out of earshot, and when, as in some cases, I discussed non-sexual matters with a panel of males and females, the latter always left when the discussion would take a sexual turn. (This prohibition does not apply, however, to pre-pubescent girls, who were allowed to come and go with impunity when I carried on interviews concerning sex with the men.) Needless to say, it was impossible to conduct interviews regarding sex with village women, except for those few who, in village terms, were highly liberated and (in one case) of dubious reputation. This was not the case with highly educated urban informants, who saw themselves as participants in a scientific research project. But in normal contexts, even they would no more engage in sexual conversation with men (including their husbands) than would the village women.

Modesty concerning bodily exposure is, if anything, even stronger. The Burmese, like almost all other peoples of Southeast Asia, consider it shameful to be seen nude, and one of the impressive feats of village women—one which I never ceased to admire—is their agility in changing into fresh clothing, after bathing at the village well, without exposing any part of their body. Even parents are prohibited from seeing their sons (above the age of twelve or thirteen) or their daughters (above the age of eight or nine) in the nude. Children, similarly, never see their parents nude, though there is no objection to their being present when their mother nurses a sibling, and the same prohibitions apply to adult siblings. These modesty patterns, as we shall see, are inculcated at an early age.

In addition to their emphasis on sexual modesty, Burmese values stress the baseness of sex. To be sure, these values do not entail the Pauline notion of sex as evil or sinful, for since each individual, according to Buddhism, is at a different stage en route to ultimate liberation from all passions (including the sexual), sex is as appropriate for the "worldling" who remains bound to worldly pleasures, as its extinction is appropriate for the saint who is liberated from them. Still, sex is nevertheless of the flesh, not of the spirit, and since the spirit represents a higher stage of karmic development than the flesh, the weaker the libido, the higher one's position on a scale of karmic progress.

This notion, of course, reflects the Buddhist conception of sex as a base thing. The Buddhist derogation of sex is emphasized throughout Scripture, it is basic to its soteriological message according to which the extinction of sexual desire is necessary for the attainment of nirvana, and it is intrinsic to its core institution of monasticism, a profoundly antisexual institution (Spiro 1971:295-300). It is implicit, too, in the origin myth (summarized in the previous chapter) according to which sex came into being as a result of the development of greed, anger, and lust in what had heretofore been sexless, celestial beings; as a consequence they lost their spiritual and occult powers, which rendered them terrestrial and incurred the wrath of the gods.

The Buddhist conception of sex is both symbolized by and expressed in the behavior of the celibate Buddhist monks, and the laymen's deep veneration for them is a measure of the Burmese dedication, at least on one level, to this conception. For despite the fact that they themselves prize sexual experience, the persons most venerated by the laymen are the monks, and, as we have seen, they are admired precisely because of their sexual renunciation. The same respect is tendered laymen who either reduce or suppress their sexual activity. Indeed, one of the important bases of the political charisma of U Nu, the last prime minister of Burma, derived from his public announcement that he had vowed to live with his wife as a sister.[2] Similarly, when my Burmese assistant, to take a less exalted example, informed a group of villagers that he (a man in his early fifties) had given up sex, his status was noticeably enhanced.

The same value system which applauds the inhibition, if not the extinction, of sexuality, places a negative value on its expression. Thus, just as men of ordinary sexuality are inferior to monks, so too, women (as we shall see) are inferior to men because (among other reasons) they are allegedly more concerned with sex. Similarly, men who are excessively interested in sex are viewed as "base," which is one of the reasons that villagers are constrained from taking a second wife. The same attitude toward excessively sensual women is even more derogatory. One of the more insulting invectives a woman may address to another woman is to accuse her of being oversexed. "You have a torn dirty cunt" *(saukpat pyet ma)*, meaning that you copulate so much that your vagina is enlarged, and "your dirty cunt is inflamed" *(saukpat yaung ma)*, meaning that your vagina itches for a man, are among the favorite expressions in this genre.

These negative values concerning sex are transmitted to children by their parents, both by what they say and by what they do not say, in the course of sexual training. This training begins early. If a parent sees an infant touching or playing with its genitals, he removes the infant's hand, perhaps slaps it lightly, and then covers the genitals with a cloth. As they grow older, children are verbally warned about masturbation, being told, for example, that it is a "nasty" thing to do, that it is "not good to look at," that "people will hate you," and that "you will have no friends." Typically, so parents say, children comply with their warnings, but if a child does in fact masturbate, they may spank him. These admonitions are delivered more strongly to boys than to girls, who, if they scratch their vagina, may be told to wash with soap and water, and, if they continue, may be given a spanking. Children's sexual behavior, whether homosexual or heterosexual, also meets with a spanking, either by parents (if seen in the home) or monks (if seen in the monastic school). In addition, children are warned that such behavior will be punished by rebirth in hell, by the loss of friends, by being hated by others, and so on. If this is not enough, they may also be warned that sex play leads to venereal disease, and boys may also be threatened with castration.

Values concerning sexual modesty, including both obscenity and bodily exposure, are also transmitted fairly early. Boys are expected to be fully clothed by the age of five, girls by the age of four, and they are scolded for any temporary lapses. A boy may be threatened with castration for exposing his penis in a monastery or a pagoda, or for urinating in the presence of others—he is taught to squat and to cover his penis with his hand—or for insulting a playmate by holding out his penis and saying he will copulate with the latter's mother. Children are scolded for using other obscenities, and, if they persist, they may be spanked. As is so frequently the case, parents are especially concerned for fear that they —the parents—will be blamed for the behavior of the children. It should be noted, finally, that by the time the children are twelve or thirteen, they are prohibited from playing together or from being alone together. The violation of this prohibition may also lead to spanking.

If sexual training is restrictive, sexual education is very limited. Although the Burmese are well aware of physiological paternity, parents say they are ashamed to discuss such matters with their children, and if the latter inquire about the origin of babies they are usually told that they drop from the sky and that a baby who likes a particular married couple enters the stomach of that woman. Nevertheless, most adults agree that children know the true facts by the age of eight or nine. If so, their knowledge is typically acquired from older children and by observing domestic animals.

Urban parents, even the highly educated, are also ashamed to discuss sexual matters with their children, but the latter's sources of information

2. Gandhi, it will be recalled, made the same announcement, with comparable political consequences (N. K. Bose, 1953: Ch. 18).

are more various than those of their village counterparts. In wealthy families, servants are an important source of information, as are novels and movies. For girls, spinster aunts or grandmothers may also serve this function, although their instruction is seldom direct or explicit. Still, they do convey to them the notion that a wife has sexual "duties" to her husband, and at the onset of menses they manage to inform them that they are now capable of having a baby. Some girls, however, are raised in almost total sexual ignorance. Thus, one woman, a highly educated and successful professional woman, said she had not only received no sexual instruction, but she had had no preparation for her first menstruation. Frightened, she waited until the second day to inform her spinster aunt. The latter told her that it was a normal thing, but she gave her no explanation other than that she should not sleep with a man because she might have a baby. Somehow, she divined—she does not know how—that this did not merely mean that she should not lie next to a man, but that it referred to sexual intercourse.

Although children receive no instruction from their parents concerning sex, it is highly probable that most children learn about sexual behavior from them in yet another way—by witnessing parental intercourse. In the city, as well as the village, young children sleep with their parents—on a mat in the village, in a bed in the city—sometimes until they are six or seven. In the village, where the house usually consists of one room, they continue to sleep in the same room until they are grown; in the city, they may sleep in the parents' bedroom until they reach puberty. Most parents wait until their children are asleep before having intercourse, but, as one mother put it, "How do we really know whether they see or not?" And, in fact, many parents admit that it is most probable that some of their children have indeed seen them. In one case known to me, the six year old "baby" of the family slept in one cot with his mother, while his father slept in a separate cot. One morning, he ran to his grandmother to tell her that his mother and father were "joined together."

Premarital Sex Prohibitions

Of all the values concerning sex, the most important, by far, and the one implicit in the entire system of sex training, relates to premarital virginity. Virginity, especially in girls, is almost as important in Burma as it is in Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. Although the prohibition on premarital sex applies primarily to females, its effect on the motivation for marriage is just as important for males, for given the female sex prohibition, a young man (typically) must agree to marry a girl if he wishes to have sexual relations with her. For the female, of course, the prohibition is even more restrictive. Unless she marries, she is prohibited from having sexual relations with anyone, whereas the male can visit a prostitute to satisfy his sexual needs, although village parents tell their sons that frequent visits to a prostitute may result in their penis being broken off. Some villagers have sex with prostitutes as their first sexual experience, others after they are married, but in either event their numbers are small. In the cities, however, according to doctors I interviewed, the number is much higher, for a young man must prove his manhood by having intercourse with a prostitute. (Hence, according to these same doctors, the incidence of syphillis is high.) For a villager to visit a prostitute requires a journey to the city—which is one of the reasons for the lower frequency—since there are no village prostitutes. Villagers claim that a prostitute would not survive in the village, regardless of the demands on her services, because she would be driven out, even though traditionally prostitution was sanctioned by the king, and prostitutes themselves were viewed as indispensable. Indeed, prostitutes were called the "country's eyes" and the "country's ornaments." (Personal communication, Daw Than Than Ohn.) The latter term is used even today to refer to prostitutes, as is the term "young goddess" *(nathami)*.

In the cities, boys have still other opportunities for sexual experimentation. Unmarried women, past the usual age of marriage, often induct young boys into their first sexual experience. Alternatively, widows and divorcées, whose chances of remarriage are not very good, constitute another sexual outlet, as do the sexually frustrated mothers of the boys' friends. Since this information comes from selected urban informants, I do not, however, know the frequency, either absolute or relative, with which these experiences occur.

Girls, unlike boys, have no sexual outlet of any kind. For a girl, premarital sex, as we saw in the last chapter, is the worst possible stigma. Indeed, to as much as touch a man's hand, let alone to have intercourse with him, is improper for an unmarried girl, and it may seriously affect her reputation; it could "destroy her name" *(name pyitte)*. It is little wonder, then, that a man who attempts to touch a girl may be charged in court, and, if found guilty, sentenced to prison.[3] Indeed, one such case occurred during my stay in Yeigyi. Nor is the city any more permissive in this regard. A Rangoon friend told me of a friend of his whose son briefly held the hand of a girl friend as they were walking home from work. Three days later the police arrested him, and, despite the efforts of a well known lawyer, he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to a year's imprisonment.

The same restrictive norms apply in the case of a married woman. To even touch the hand of another man's wife is tantamount to adultery.

3. The identical proscriptions are also found in Central Thailand (Piker n.d., ch. 2:38).

Indeed, this is merely one of five rather innocuous acts which, according to traditional values, either approximate or are tantamount to adultery when committed by a man with another man's wife. In addition to holding her hand, these include going to her house during her husband's absence, remaining with her in a secluded place, engaging her in conversation (if she is already suspected by her husband), and inviting her to his house during her husband's absence.

This seemingly punitive reaction is consistent with the admonition of the proverb, "A woman's most valuable possession is her modesty/A man's is his life" *(Meinma hma qashet/Yaukkya hma qathet)*, and if, to return to the unmarried girl, even the touching of her hand impugns her modesty, how much more is this the case if she should lose her virginity. In addition to moral considerations, however, there are important pragmatic grounds for a girl to remain a virgin, for if it is known that she is not a virgin, it is extremely difficult for her to find a husband. Non-virgins are called used, or defective, carts *(hle-gyou)*, and most men, viewing them as immoral, refuse to marry one. To discover that one's bride is not a virgin constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce (and most men, so they claim, would indeed divorce a non-virgin bride). I know of one man (an extreme case, to be sure) who, because his first wife had been known to be unfaithful, had the wedding invitations for his second marriage read: "the marriage of Mr. X to Miss Y, genuine virgin [*qapyousit*]." Thereby he accomplished two goals: he proclaimed that his second wife was superior to his first, and that he had therefore acquired a more valuable asset than his wife's lover had acquired.

In the past, at least, the husband's information concerning his bride's virginity was not left to chance. Older villagers say that, formerly, the husband's mother would come to the bridal chamber the morning after the wedding to inspect the white sheets for signs of blood. If there was none, the bride would have to explain this apparently damaging evidence.

If, after she marries, a girl is discovered not to have been a virgin, the prestige *(goun)* of her parents also suffers a serious blow, for it is their negligence that is blamed for her condition. Hence, parents do not respond to her condition lightly. During my stay in Yeigyi two such cases came to light. In one, the girl's father forced her to marry her lover, and he then sent them to live with his parents, saying he would not keep them in his own house. In the other, the father banished his daughter from his home, and, forced to move to another village, she found a home with an uncle.

If the loss of virginity is disgraceful for a girl, premarital pregnancy (which informants estimate as five percent of all pregnancies) is doubly so. When the male responsible for her pregnancy is her sweetheart (her intended fiancé), the girl's parents normally insist on an immediate marriage, with or without an engagement or an elaborate wedding. Should the boy refuse to marry her, they will take the case to the headman. If, despite the headman's admonition, the boy still refuses, he must pay a heavy fine (the amount to be determined by the headman and village elders) to the girl's parents, who usually adopt and raise the child.

The stigma which normally attaches to an unwed mother is even more severe when the mother refuses to name the father. In the one case known to me personally, the girl's friends would have nothing more to do with her; and when, despite the request of the village elders, she still refused to name the father, she was banished from the village, for it is believed that the mere presence of a woman whose child has an unknown father will bring misfortune to the village.[4] In this case, the girl returned after the birth of her child, and was permitted to stay, but in most cases the girl would not want to return since the stigma is so great. Indeed, it is not uncommon for unwed mothers to commit suicide rather than face this social censure. Again, urban attitudes are little different from those found in the village, as the following case, typical of scores of similar anecdotes recounted by urban informants, reveals. A young man and his girl friend, having discovered that she was pregnant, decided to marry to protect her reputation. Despite their marriage, his parents (but not hers) refused to see them because of their resulting shame from her pregnancy, and subsequently the boy's grandmother suffered a heart attack.[5] It should be observed, however, that the stigmatization of the mother is only slightly shared by her child. Typically, he will be sent to the monastery when he is old enough, either because of his mother's poverty, or because of the need for male discipline. He may face some teasing from his playmates, who jeeringly refer to him as "a child who does not know his own father" *(qahpei mapode hkalei)*, but this taunting disappears as he (and they) grow older. As an adult, his chances of finding a spouse are not seriously impaired by his illegitimate status.

Although the unwed girl's child is not stigmatized, her parents may be. Hence, it is understandable that they keep their nubile daughters under

4. Urban informants, with whom I discussed this case, suggested that the fear did not concern the child's unknown paternity, but rather the girl's promiscuity, for—they insisted—if she did not name the father it was because she *could* not, not because she *would* not.

5. Contrary to some views, it is not the case that the sinfulness of illegitimacy is a self-evident assumption of traditional society. In Europe, for example, it was not until the sixteenth century that bastardy was believed to be shameful. "Men took care of their bastards, were indeed often proud of them and in many cases brought them home to their wives or mothers to be brought up." (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 1969:201.)

the strictest surveillance. Indeed, boys and girls are separated as early as ten years old, and from that time a girl is not permitted to be alone with any male of her own age or older. Although this seems rather early, it should be remarked that for most girls the onset of menses typically occurs at the age of ten or eleven, and sometimes as early as eight or nine. An adolescent girl is not permitted to have a boy in her house unless her parents are present, and she is not let out at night unless accompanied by a chaperone. The fear is not only that she might be accosted by a male, but that her own impulses might lead her into temptation. The result of this surveillance is that most girls are not only virgins at marriage, but that their sole premarital experience consists of a fleeting touch of a male's hand, typically that of their future husband. Even in the cities, the vast majority of girls are virgins, for fear that the very boys who enjoy their favors might think them cheap and gossip about them with the other boys. Unlike village girls, however, urban girls, who have greater opportunity for contact with boys, usually have some sexual experience before marriage, including kissing and fondling. Overprotected daughters of wealthy families, on the other hand, may have almost no social contact with males other than the servants in their houses, and it sometimes happens that these are the men with whom they consequently fall in love, and subsequently run off with.

Boys, as we have seen, do not suffer from the same constraints as the girls since they are subject neither to the same taboos nor to the serious consequences of their violation. Nevertheless, although Burmese sexual morality clearly rests on a double standard, boys are not immune from parental pressures concerning sex. To be sure, the boy is not censured for not being a virgin at marriage, but promiscuity is viewed as a shameful thing, and to be known as one who "pursues enjoyment [sex]"—*qapyo qapa laikte*—can seriously impair a boy's chances of a good marriage. There are other reasons, too, why sex with a village girl is not to be undertaken lightly. Should the couple be discovered, the girl's elder brother, who keeps her under surveillance, will physically assault him. Moreover, if the girl should become pregnant, he may either have to marry her or pay a large fine. In short, for the boy, no less than the girl, premarital sex is, if for different reasons, a dangerous thing.

It is of interest to observe that parents not only make every effort to maintain their children's (especially their daughter's) virginity, but that custom requires that their virginity be lost in the parents' (preferably the girl's) home. It is there that the bridal chamber is set up, and there that the couple is expected to have their first marital experience.[6] Even urban and westernized couples spend the first night of their marriage in the bridal chamber. If they must leave because the husband has a job in another city, custom requires that they remain for at least three nights. Otherwise, they are expected to remain for at least a few months. By having her first sexual experience under the roof of her parents, it is as if the latter announce to the world that she has entered sexual life with their approval.

The Burmese concern with the virginity of their daughters stands in sharp contrast with the generally high status of women in Burmese society. As we shall see in the next chapter, Burmese women are among the most liberated in Asia, and until the relatively recent liberation of women in the West, they surely enjoyed a higher status and greater freedom than Western women. And yet the cultural emphasis on the protection of their virtue, though not as extreme as in Muslim culture, is yet much more consistent with the subjugated status of women in Islam than with their liberated status in the West.[7]

Before concluding this section, it is important to repeat an observation made in the last chapter: according to many, but not all, villagers, the sexual prohibitions discussed here are not premarital but rather pre-engagement. Once the engagement ceremony takes place, there is no serious objection, so these villagers claim, to a couple having sex relations, although it is preferred that they do not. In short, for these

6. The bridal chamber must be prepared by a happily married couple. Widows, spinsters, and unhappily married couples are prohibited from performing this task.

7. In the Muslim Middle East, both premarital and extramarital sex on the part of the females is regarded with the utmost severity, and among the Bedouins a girl or woman who is guilty of either is put to death by her father or brothers (Patai 1971:121). This extreme measure is based, at least among the Bedouins of Egypt, on the conviction that the reputation of her lineage, as well as of the girl or woman herself, depends mainly on her willingness and ability to remain chaste and pure, for "the main contribution a woman makes to the honour of the lineage is through this passive role of preserving her chastity and purity" (Abou-Zeid 1966:253). Hence, even if she were raped, the girl would be put to death. In any event, the disgrace to the kinsmen is so great that they usually migrate to a region where they and their humiliation are unknown (*ibid*: 256).

Among most Mediterranean peoples, the situation is no different. Thus, for the Sarakatsani, a community of Greek pastoralists, virginity is not only mandatory for girls (and preferred for boys), but it is a quality that evokes a sense "almost of awe" (Campbell 1966:156). As among the Bedouin, an unmarried girl (or a married woman) discovered in a sexual affair is—or, at least, ought to be—killed by her father or brother (*ibid:* 170). For them, as for the Greek Cypriots (Persistiany 1966:182) and the Bedouins, a girl's purity is the responsibility of her parents and brothers so that her shame reflects directly on them.

In India (among the Hindus) virginity is so important that the moment their daughters enter puberty, they "become objects of great anxiety and care in the eyes of their parents" (Kapadia 1966:140). The strong emphasis on virginity is the basis, according to the same authority, for the acceleration of pre-puberty marriages among the Hindus.

In China, too, a girl is expected to remain a virgin until her marriage, but this norm does not seem to be as strongly held by the Chinese as by the Arabs or Hindus, and, if it is subsequently discovered that the bride had not been a virgin, no action will be taken against her, if only because of the damage to the family honor by the revelation of the fact (Hsu 1971:209).

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villagers, it is not her unmarried state, but the risk to her future marriage chances, that is the barrier to a girl's sexual relations. Since the engagement ceremony is a formal, and public, declaration of the couple's *intention* to marry—this, it will be recalled, is its primary manifest function—it eliminates that risk, for the public declaration of intention to marry is tantamount to marriage. In short, it is not premarital intercourse, as such, but intercourse with a man other than her intended husband, that is shameful for the girl.

The engagement, moreover, removes the stigma not only from the loss of virginity, but also from a possible pregnancy. Although pregnancy is frowned upon even during the engagement, the major reasons for the stigma—an unidentified *genitor* or an unwilling *pater*—are removed. Should the girl become pregnant, the biological father is known to all, and since, typically, the couple will then marry, the child is assured of a social father. Moreover, in the unlikely event that her fiancé should refuse to marry her, the girl and her child are protected financially by the dower which, although normally not transferred until the wedding, is guaranteed by the agreement reached between the parents at the engagement. (Indeed, this is the case, as we have seen, even if the girl does not become pregnant: should the boy call off the marriage, the girl nevertheless receives the agreed-upon dower.) It should be noted, however, that urban informants unanimously and vigorously disagree with this view. For them, virginity is required until marriage; the engagement gives a couple no license to violate the taboo on premarital sex.[8]

To summarize, then, premarital (or pre-engagement) sexual behavior is severely regulated, especially for girls. Given these restrictions, it is impossible for a girl to satisfy her sexual needs outside of marriage without suffering serious consequences to her (and her family's) reputation and importantly jeopardizing her marriage chances. A boy, on the other hand, may satisfy his sexual needs by visiting a prostitute. Should he, however, have sexual relations with a non-prostitute, he too may suffer serious consequences: he may be forced into marrying a girl he does not love or into paying a heavy fine to her parents. Moreover, if he has sexual designs on a particular girl, and she insists on complying with the sexual prohibitions, the only way he can have sexual relations is to marry her. In short, for both sexes marriage, or the declaration of intent to marry, is typically the only way to achieve sexual gratification.

8. The village custom, however, is not at all unique to Burma. Until the Parliamentary Act of 1753, an engaged couple was permitted to have sexual relations in England, and despite this Act, "it seems improbable," comments Laslett (1971:142), "that so deep-seated a usage ever completely disappeared from the countryside." In any event, before this "usage" disappeared, it is assumed that brides "must normally have gone to their weddings in the early, and sometimes in the late, states of pregnancy" *(ibid.)*

Sexual Behavior

Among the various forms of sexual behavior, only "normal" heterosexuality is found in the village. Other forms—homosexuality, various perversions, and rape—are either absent or highly infrequent. Nevertheless, before examining normal marital sex, we might briefly describe the attitudes toward these other forms and the frequency of their occurrence.

Manifest homosexuality seems to be entirely absent in the village, although other forms of unisexual intimacy—sometimes associated with latent homosexuality in the West—are frequent. Thus, one often sees two young men occupying the same mat with one lying against the other, or lying on the other's buttocks, or holding the other in his arms. Unisexual handholding, by both sexes, is also common among teenagers. Although rare or absent in the village, homosexuality is found to some extent, however, in the cities, as is male prostitution. In Mandalay, the haunts of homosexuals *(meinmasha)* are known to everyone, and they, as well as male transvestites *(gandu)*, are viewed with a relatively tolerant attitude, although it is not unknown for boys to abuse and throw stones at them. Lesbians *(yaukkyasha)* are also found in the cities, and they, too, meet with the same relative toleration. The incidence of homosexuality and transvestitism seems to be especially high among male shamans, but otherwise it is my impression that their incidence, and that of lesbianism, is low.

If the older literature on Burma is credible, the infrequency of homosexuality in contemporary Burma represents an important historical change, for some of the older sources specifically mention the high incidence of homosexuality. Writing in the sixteenth century, Fitch describes a custom in which males insert little round balls in the penis (Pinkerton 1811:421-422). Some informants, he wrote, claimed that this custom was practiced to gratify the sexual desire of the women; but the real reason, he continued, was that "[the males] should not abuse the male sex; for in times past all those countries [Burma, Siam, and other countries of Southeast Asia] were so given to that villainy, that they were very scarce for people." Fitch also interpreted the female fashion (since given up) of wearing an unstitched sarong in a similar manner. The exposure of the women's thighs was intended to entice the men from their homosexual proclivities. Hamilton, an eighteenth-century traveler, alludes to this same female fashion, and attributes the same interpretation to his Burmese informants (1930:27-28).

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It was first contrived by a certain Queen of that Country, who was grieved to see the men so addicted to sodomy, that they neglected the pretty ladies. She thought that by the sight of a pretty leg and plump thigh, the men might be allured from that abominable custom, and place their affections on proper objects, and according to the ingenious queen's conjecture, that dress of the *Lungee* (skirt) had its desired end, and now the name of sodomy is hardly known in that country.

Sangermano (1893:158-159) interprets male tattooing (of the upper thigh) in the same way. The exposure of the female thigh ("setting off the beauty of the women"), combined with the male tattoo (which "disfigur[ed] the men"), was calculated to help the women "regain the affections of their husbands."

Like homosexuality, perversions such as voyeurism and sexual exhibitionism are also infrequently found in the villages. During my stay in Yeigyi, I encountered one case of collective voyeurism and exhibitionism. As many as twenty young men would gather outside the house of a certain man, with his knowledge and consent, to witness his intercourse with his mistress. He would entertain them by asking her whether she enjoyed making love, whether she liked his technique, and so forth, so that they might hear her reply.

Although very rare, it is their fear that she might be raped (as well as seduced) that motivates some parents not to leave a teenage daughter alone at night. In the two-year period prior to my arrival in the village there were two cases of rape in Yeigyi. In one, a girl was raped by two boys from an adjacent village; in the other, a girl was raped by a village boy who, however, persuaded her to say she was seduced, with the agreement that he would marry her (which he did). In general, rapists are viewed throughout Burma as the lowest of criminals, and it is said that even in the jails they are shunned by robbers and murderers.

In general, then, village sexuality consists of normal, heterosexual behavior, typically with one's spouse. Since, however, certain physical types are preferred to others as sexual partners, it is relevant to summarize the physical characteristics which villagers look for in a spouse (or any other) sex partner. Burmese males, like many others, distinguish between a pretty and a sexually attractive woman, which is not to say that both attributes may not be found in the same woman. "Pretty" *(hlade)* is a term which is typically used to refer to a woman's face, while "attractive" *(yinde)*—literally, "graceful"—usually includes both face and figure. A sexually attractive woman may be referred to as "wife food" *(mayasa)*, and seeing her makes a male "hunger for a wife" *(mayahsa)*, for she makes "his penis erect" *(li ka)*.

Villagers are almost unanimous concerning the attributes of a sexually attractive female. They include long, narrow, and dark eyebrows; a long and narrow nose; long hair; good sized and firm breasts; narrow waist; sharp and shiny teeth; fleshy and soft fingers and toes; wide, firm and full buttocks; and light skin. They also agree that the first thing they look at in a woman is her buttocks. Long and slender legs are also preferred, but since Burmese women wear ankle-length sarongs, this criterion is typically inoperative. Although breasts are certainly erotic objects, and village men are attracted by them, they seem to be less important than they are to American men, or, for that matter, to Burmese urban men. Thus, the padded brassiere is both known and used among university coeds because, they claim, young men are attracted by large and well-shaped breasts, and more than one female informant in Rangoon commented bitterly—since Burmese, like most oriental, women are typically small-breasted—on men's preference for large breasts. Given the criteria of sexual attractiveness found among village men, many of them said that Indian women are more attractive (though not prettier) than Burmese women.

Women, who are somewhat vaguer in describing a sexually attractive man, do not distinguish between a man who is handsome and one who is attractive. In general, a man should not look "womanly" or "soft," but "manly," healthy, and vigorous. Tallness and slightly wavy hair—the Burmese men spend much time grooming their hair—are also important. But a man's grooming and his style are as important as his physical characteristics.

Turning now to sexual behavior, the first generalization we might make is that although the villagers (as we shall see) are fairly conventional in the scope of their sexual behavior, their restrictions are self-imposed, reflecting their own tastes, rather than consisting of cultural taboos. Indeed, except for the prohibition on anal intercourse, behavioral prohibitions are almost nonexistent. There are, however, *contextual* prohibitions, which relate to the time and place of sex. Thus, intercourse is prohibited when observing the Buddhist sabbath, any time after the fifth month of pregnancy, in the presence of one's parents, in the presence of the Buddha image, adjacent to the fetish of the house spirit, and during the period that the wife is nursing a child. In effect, the latter is a post-partum taboo. It is rarely observed, however, in the city where, indeed, intercourse may be even more frequent at this time because of the belief that a nursing mother is infertile.

A second generalization that might be made is that typically coitus is practiced for pleasure, not for babies, and if unwanted pregnancies occur, it is not because the Burmese do not know about the relationship between intercourse and pregnancy, but because birth control is unknown or not practiced. No villager with whom I spoke used, or knew how to use, any

contraceptive device. A government nurse who has worked in village dispensaries said that Burmese herbal doctors sell "medicine" with alleged prophylactic powers to village women, but she did not know how many women actually use it or how effective it is. Village women do know about abortion, but it is rarely practiced because (so they claim) it is prohibited by Buddhism.

As might be expected, birth control methods are more widely known and practiced in the city, at least among the more educated population. Foam, diaphragms, and even birth control pills can be obtained from certain hospitals. In some cases, coitus interruptus is practiced. Condoms, too, are known and widely used, and some couples know about rhythm. Abortion is rarely practiced, not only because it is dangerous, but because it is illegal, and there is a chance that the performing midwife (unless bribed) might inform the police. (Since the military coup in 1962, all birth control devices have been declared illegal, and are obtainable only on the black market.)

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Given that a newly married couple enters marriage with little knowledge concerning sex, and, in the case of the girl, even less experience, and given the restrictive and puritanical values concerning sex, it is not surprising that village sexual behavior is fairly conventional. Initiated by the husband—the average wife is sexually passive, rarely revealing her sexual desire to her husband—coitus is preceded by only a brief period of foreplay. Kissing, in the Western sense, is not practiced, and its equivalent practice—deep smelling and inhaling—is directed to the cheek and neck, not to the lips.[9] The man may fondle the woman's breasts, but only rarely (in the village at least) does he suck her nipples; men who do so are viewed as having much lust (*rāga*). The contrary is often the case, however, in the city, where some women complain (with some bitterness) that men think that the breasts are the only part of a woman's body that should be stimulated.

Cunnilingus and fellatio never occur, the very idea being viewed as physically disgusting. The former practice is viewed as especially loathsome, because of the men's view of the vagina as dirty and polluting, a view which we shall examine in some detail below. For the same reason, although mutual stimulation of the partner's genitals may be practiced, the man will not touch the vagina directly, but only from outside the skirt. Indeed, even during intercourse (which only occurs at night), neither partner removes his clothing completely. Hence, with few exceptions, the typical villager never sees a completely nude woman.

Intercourse is typically face to face, with the woman on her back. Its frequency depends on how long the couple has been married. Immediately after marriage, the couple may have intercourse daily, even five or six times a day, tapering off to three or four times a month, or less, after they settle into their marriage. Although most men say that orgasm is found in both sexes, they claim that women seldom have one, and some are unaware of the existence of the female orgasm. (Hence, the literal meaning of the terms for orgasm, *pyothi* or *pyat hkwe thwabi*, are "to be soft" and "to have gone down," respectively). Unaware of, or attaching little significance to the female orgasm, the man is primarily concerned with his own, and since many men ejaculate rather rapidly, intercourse is usually a brief episode.

9. Villagers distinguish the sexual "kissing" (*hsoude*) of adults, from the non-sexual "kissing" (*nande*) of, for example, parents and children.

Sexual Frustration and Anxiety

From the above description of marital sex, it may be inferred that many women do not enjoy a satisfactory sex life. Entering marriage with little knowledge or experience concerning sex, they do not know what to expect from the sexual experience. Many of them have no knowledge of the female orgasm, and they submit to sex as a duty, rather than welcoming it as a source of pleasure. As one woman said, many women "endure" sex rather than enjoy it, and their husband's behavior does not help. As has been mentioned, many men have relatively fast ejaculations. Moreover, since many men are unaware of the female orgasm, they are insensitive to the sexual satisfaction of their wives, and they often do little to arouse them prior to intercourse. If a woman is not aroused, one woman observed, she will not be sexually satisfied, and since many husbands engage in only a brief period of foreplay, some women are penetrated before their vagina is properly lubricated. It is little wonder, then, that many wives are sexually unsatisfied, and that fully half of the divorces in Yeigyi are motivated by sexual frustration of the wife.

That the husband does little to arouse his wife, or to prolong the period of sex play, is attributed by the men to various factors. In the first place, since the entire family usually lives in a one-room house, the children (and sometimes older relatives) sleep in the same room as the parents, so that brevity and silence are required if privacy is to be achieved. Moreover, the typical village house has a bamboo floor, and sounds created by any strong movement are magnified, so that, again, privacy demands that action be constricted. Finally, sanitation conditions in the village are primitive, running water and latrines being far from the house, and in the absence of these facilities, there is little desire to continue with sexual activity following the first act of intercourse. For the man, for whom the vagina is a dirty thing even prior to intercourse, the latter factor is an especially important consideration.

But the woman's lack of satisfaction is related to other factors which are

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associated with their own behavior and circumstances. First, a proper Burmese woman, as we have seen, is not supposed to show that she wants to have sex. Since the wife seldom takes the initiative, the satisfaction of her sexual needs is dependent upon the initiative of the husband. Moreover, a proper woman is not supposed to show that she is sexually passionate. Hence, even sexually aroused women are often passive during intercourse, doing little to arouse their husbands, with the result, of course, that the latter do little to arouse them. Urban men, especially, complain about this, saying that their wives' passivity leaves them sexually dissatisfied.[10]

But if, in general, a proper wife, even when young, must show sexual modesty, a woman no longer young must be even more circumspect. A middle-aged woman—one whose children are sexually mature and are about to enter their own sexual lives—is supposed to be relatively asexual; sex is something she should neither think about nor care about. Still, this injunction is not institutionalized, as it is, for example, in China (Yunnan) where (since it is considered "disgraceful" for a woman to become pregnant after the birth of a grandchild), she and her husband sleep in separate rooms as early as the marriage of their sons, but no later than the birth of the grandchild. (Hsu 1971:109.) Nevertheless, in Burma, a spinster past thirty, or so, is looked down upon if she marries, and divorcées and widows face the same stigma. Again, however, the stigma is not nearly so strong as it is in China (Hsu 1971:103-104) or in India (Kapadia 1966:175-176), where the remarriage of a widow among Hindus is unheard of and where, since it is almost impossible for a woman to get a divorce, the remarriage of a divorcée does not arise. In Burma, remarriage can and does occur, but unless she marries a wealthy man—in which case her motive is viewed as security or prestige—the remarriage of a divorcée or a widow is considered to be highly unseemly because it indicates that the woman "cannot stay without a man." For the same reason, then, that it is unseemly for middle-aged widows and divorcées to remarry, middle-aged wives should also refrain from indicating sexual interest in or passion for their husbands.

10. A student of modern Ceylon suggests that there, too, many partners do not have a satisfactory sex life. It is doubtful, writes Wijesekera (1949:81), "whether the partners of a marriage derive the fullest satisfaction, mental or physical. This is a matter of serious doubt more so if it is remembered that the Sinhalese marry young and are not at all educated in sex matters. The subject of sex is taboo. Having little knowledge of sex the couple find themselves together in a strange relationship. Their feelings remain mixed with fear and happiness. The girl is frightened and goes through the night like a victim of sacrifice. And the man none the wiser resorts to brute force. The pain and fear lead to a nervous state in which love and innate bashfulness are at conflict. The first night is remembered by the majority who remain virgins up to that night."

A third basis for sexual dissatisfaction in some women, at least, relates to the marriage system, which prohibits the girl from taking the initiative in marriage. Since the girl's choice of a marriage partner is dependent upon the initiative of the boy, some girls marry husbands with whom they are not in love and for whom they feel no strong sexual attraction. Estimates vary, but sensitive informants say that 10 percent of the girls marry boys they do not love, and 15 percent marry their second choice. This, then, also contributes to some women's lack of sexual satisfaction. "If I don't love him [the husband]," the girls say, "his penis will be a nasty thing."

Withal, the most important cause of the women's unsatisfactory sex life, as we have seen, is related to the men's anxieties concerning sex and women. These anxieties are reflected in a variety of cultural beliefs and conceptions, according to which sex is not only base, but (as the men see it) it is also dirty and dangerous. This view, which is held even more strongly in other parts of Southeast Asia (see Hyman [n.d.:14] for Malaya), is expressed, in the first place, in the belief that the vagina is a dirty *(qanyit qakyei)* and polluting *(thana)* object, and therefore repulsive to both sight and touch. Hence, except for penile contact with the vagina during intercourse, it is otherwise avoided by men. Young boys are permitted to walk about nude—for the penis is a "golden flower"—but young girls must always wear a skirt, not only because of modesty, but because the vagina is repulsive to look at. During love-making, men neither look at the vagina, nor do they touch it with their hand, and—as we have seen—the very notion of cunnilingus is repulsive to them.

It is not surprising, then, that for males and females alike, accusations of cunnilingus are among the most hostile expressions in the Burmese repertory of invective, "dirty cunt licker" *(saukpatyet ma)* and "eater of cunt excrement" *(sauk hkyi thama)* being the favorites.[11] These invectives, as I have already noted, are entirely different from sexual banter, which is always humorous, and good fun, and in which the sexual allusions are indirect. These, on the contrary, are defined as obscenity, and are used only when angered or insulted, as the following examples, recorded in a mixed work group, indicate.

A reaper refuses to tie a bundle of sheaves for his female co-worker, and she tells him angrily to "eat my cunt shit."

11. Except in polite society, where it is never used, all bodily excretions, from whatever organ, are referred to as *hkyi*, excrement. Thus, nasal excretions, eye mucous, ear wax, vaginal secretion, and penile discharge, including semen, are all *hkyi*. Consistent, however, with the different cultural evaluations of the penis and vagina, semen is also referrred to by the polite term, *le-yei*, or the even politer, *qayei, hkyoyei, gweiyei*, or *thut-thwe*.

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A group of young men tease a girl about having a certain sweetheart. Annoyed, she exclaims: "I wouldn't rub him with my cunt."

An elderly woman sees a neighbor take a piece of her jaggery. She tells him to "eat my cunt."[12]

An even stronger expression of aggression, one which is rarely used, is for a woman to publicly expose, or to even threaten to expose, her genitals. Typically, the hemline of the skirt falls to the ankles, and to lift it in anger, even to the knees, is a serious insult. An even graver offense, one which is intended and perceived as contemptuous and insulting, is for a woman to exclaim, "I'll raise my skirt as a flag." This verbal expression is obviously but a pale substitute for the traditional practice, reported by Brown (1915:135), in which an angry woman strips off her skirt, "slaps with her hand that which should be hidden, and hurls a rude invitation at her adversary."

Since it is polluting, any contact with the vagina or its discharges is dangerous. Intercourse, for example, may sometimes lead to impotence, and Buddhist meditation is sometimes recommended as a means of averting this, and other dangers of coitus. Of all the vaginal secretions, contact with menstrual blood is especially dangerous for a man, so that sexual intercourse is strictly avoided during the wife's menses, and many women refrain from visiting pagodas during their period. It must be remarked, however, that Burmese beliefs concerning menstruation are not nearly so severe as those found in such neighboring societies as India (Carstairs 1967:73) or Ceylon (Wijesekera 1949:78) where the woman must remain in seclusion during her period because anything she may touch is defiled.

The vagina is not only polluting—after intercourse, the pollution may be removed by bathing—but it can be a threat to the very source of a man's strength and power, his *hpoun*. Sometimes glossed as "glory," *hpoun* refers to a psycho-spiritual quality, an ineffable essence, which invests its possessor with superior moral, spiritual, and intellectual power. Possessed by men, but not by women, the loss of *hpoun* not only means a serious diminution in the above powers of a man, but his subordination to his wife and children within the family, and to other men outside it. The polluting quality of the vagina is such that if the lower part of a woman's body is higher than a man's head (the most sacred part of his body), his *hpoun* can be importantly diminished, if not destroyed. Hence it is that a woman may not stand over a man while he is sitting, nor may she be on the upper story of a house while he is downstairs. A modern coed said that she and her "progressive" girl friends get great fun from causing the boys (and some professors) discomfort by sitting on a high railing as the latter walk by them on their way to class.

But the threat from the vagina is so powerful that the same precautions apply to the woman's skirt, or any other article that is in contact with the vagina, as to the vagina itself. Thus, a man's *hpoun* is endangered merely by walking underneath a skirt hanging on a clothesline. More than that, care must be taken that men's and women's sarongs be laundered separately, and that they be segregated when they are hung in a closet or placed on a shelf.

In many cases, these beliefs are as strongly held by educated and sophisticated urbanites as by villagers. Even university coeds will not loosen and retuck their skirts when sitting beside a male because that too is a derogation of his *hpoun*. For the same reason, many women are careful not to leave their skirts on a chair, let alone at the head of the bed where they sleep with their husbands, or not to hang them higher than their husband's clothing, or not to hang a wet sarong in the bathroom or in the front of the house. When possible, male and female sarongs are even laundered in different tubs, and ironed with separate irons. In wealthy households males and females use different bathrooms or, when there is only one, they avoid using the same toilet and shower. Some urban informants suggested that this negative conception of the vagina explains why it is that so few Burmese obstetricians and gynecologists are male.

Although contact with the vagina, or with objects in contact with the vagina, is a threat to a man's *hpoun*, other forms of physical contact with women may also pose a threat. His *hpoun* is believed to reside in the man's right arm and shoulder, and it can be diminished merely by a woman's head resting on his right shoulder. Hence, a woman must never sleep on the man's right side, and, if possible, she should avoid walking, sitting, or eating on his right as well. Even a group of university coeds were shocked to see a photograph of one of their girl friends standing to the right of her boy friend. Informants recount a putative historical event in which a Burmese king gave his daughter to his traditional enemy, a Talaing (Mon) king, instructing her to place her head on his right shoulder. When the two kings went to war, the Talaing king was vanquished because he had lost his *hpoun*. Since, then, the woman may frequently, though inadvertently, rest on the man's shoulders during lovemaking, this is yet another reason that sex may be dangerous for the man.

But intercourse is believed to be dangerous for still another reason.[13] Following from traditional Hindu notions (which, the Burmese hold with

12. It should be noted that, although the penis is a "golden flower," fellatio is as repulsive as cunnilingus, and fellatio accusations are also used as obscene invectives.

13. The dangers for a monk are much greater. Discovering that a monk had had intercourse with his erstwhile wife, the Buddha—in a text well known to monks—exclaimed:

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a diminished intensity), it is believed that semen is the source of a male's strength, its absence in the female being the basis for her relative weakness. (See O'Flaherty [1973:261-279] for the scriptural and mythological sources of these Hindu beliefs, and Carstairs [1957:84] for their exemplification in village practice. Hence, intercourse leads to weakness in men because it results in the loss of semen. For some urban informants, this belief is an established "medical fact." If a man loses too much semen, he loses his strength because in discharging semen (*thut-twe*), he discharges blood (*thut* = coming out, *thwe* = blood). And since one drop of semen is the equivalent of one thousand drops of blood, the loss of strength is due to anemia. An eager groom is especially vulnerable, and one hears stories of young husbands being hospitalized after two or three days of excessive intercourse because of loss of strength brought on by semen loss.

The belief that semen loss can cause weakness in young men is supported by the observation that the drying up of semen accompanies the physical and intellectual degeneration of old age. Hence, old men often take "medicine" designed to replenish their supply of semen. Monks have power because, being celibate, their semen remains in the body. For the same reason, anyone who has traffic with supernaturals—a dangerous business at best—must control his sexuality, and exorcists especially reduce their sexual activity so as to have the power to confront the dangers inherent in their work. None of these beliefs, of course, is unique to Burma or Asia. They have all been found in the West as well. Take, for example, the following characterization of marital sex in seventeenth century France.

> The dangers of conjugal life which I have been discussing are easily translated into explicitly sexual terms—and often were by more uninhibited seventeenth-century observers. The idea that marriage was somehow debilitating, that it made men softer, was based on the belief that sexual activity could be dangerous to the health and ought to be undertaken only at carefully spaced intervals. For this reason, Montaigne recommended late marriage and suggested that soldiers should follow a regime of celibacy. (Hunt 1970:74.)

But there is yet another basis for the male's sexual anxiety. Intercourse is not only *dangerous* for the men, but it may also be *threatening* to their self-esteem as males. It makes demands on their virility which they may not be able to fulfill, and it raises a specter concerning their wives' fidelity. These threats, as we shall see, are associated with the putatively strong female libido. In Yeigyi many men view women as almost insatiable. Creatures of lust (*rāga*), they are believed to have little sexual self-control. Whereas men are sexually satisfied after one or, at most, two acts of intercourse, women—so the men claim—require at least three, and even then they are not satisfied! "Women know only three things: eating, sleeping, and sex." Their strong libido is not only a matter of personal experience, but of "common observation." Thus, the men say, the wife of even a healthy, strong, and wealthy man will commit adultery, if she has the chance, even with a man of much lower prestige than her husband. This being so, how can there be any question about the intensity of the female sex drive?

The belief in the strong libido of women is expressed in and reinforced by a variety of literary sources, the locus classicus being the *Culla-Paduma Jātaka*, according to which a princess falls passionately in love with, and seduces, a man whose arms, legs, nose, and ears had been cut off. My Burmese assistant observed that men point to this one *Jātaka* tale as proof for the sexuality of women, while ignoring others that recount their loyalty, fidelity, and virtue. But of course this is a universal tendency: all peoples use their traditions selectively, in response to their own needs and perceptions. In any event, this particular *Jātaka* is a powerful charter for the male belief because it forms the basis for one of the best known classical dramas in Burma—*Paduma*.

Paduma's basic theme, reflecting the theme of the *Jātaka*, is the passionate nature of women (and, as we shall see, the infidelity of wives). Prince Paduma's friend, consoling him for the infidelity of his wife, observes: "It is the habit of women to fall in love with any man that they can see. They are ready to cling to any man as husband; they are attracted as by a magnet. Just as the ocean is ever receiving the great rivers and various streamlets, without turning away one, a woman is ready to welcome all men, whether they be old, or sick, or poor, or bad." (Htin Aung 1937:225.) And Paduma, himself, in the final speech of the play, says that the passion of women is so strong, "they will (even) kill their rightful husbands the moment they want a new lover. Their lust blinds them. . . . They receive all, just as a roaring fire receives all rubbish." (*Ibid.*:231.)

Woman's strong libido is a thesis by no means confined to *Paduma*. "There are five kinds of longing pertaining to women," exclaims King Wagaru's *Manu Dhammasattham:* "longing for dress, food, men, wealth,

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"It were better for you, foolish man, that your male organ should enter the mouth of a terrible and poisonous snake, than it should enter a woman. It were better for you, foolish man, that your male organ should enter the mouth of a black snake, than it should enter a woman. It were better for you, foolish man, that your male organ should enter a charcoal pit, burning, ablaze, afire, than it should enter a woman." (*The Book of the Discipline*, Pt. 1, p. 36.)

seeing." (Forschammer 1885:6.) *The Lokaniti* (Sein Tu 1962:355) makes the claim even more strongly:

> The appetite of women is twice that of men;
> The intelligence of women is four times that of men;
> The diligence of women is six times that of men;
> The sensuality of women is eight times that of men.

As in so many other aspects of Burmese culture, it is important to note at least that almost identical views are found in most of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, among others. So far as India is concerned, it is not unlikely that the views expressed in *Paduma* were the prevailing Indian views of the period. Thus, according to the *Dharmásāstra*, "The sex urge in her [any woman] is so great that she will cohabit with any man she meets, irrespective of his age or appearance. If she be chaste, it is because she has not found a proper man, place, or opportunity." (Kapadia 1966:183.) Again, according to the same source, "Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; they give themselves to the handsome as well as to the ugly, just for the fact that he is a man . . . (for) love of scandal and the lust of sex the Creator gave to women." (*Ibid.*:254.) Although literary sources like these exaggerate and distort, there is little doubt that the belief in the greater libidinality of women is widespread in India. Roy (1975) has most recently demonstrated this for Bengal.

The Arab view, it may be added, is little different. (Berger 1964:101.) Women, according to Arab belief, "are driven by inordinate sexuality. They are animalistic in their behavior." (Antoun 1968:691.) And this is not only because their lust is greater than men's, but because they are less able to control it. Hence, if their libido is to be controlled, it is necessary to subject them to infibulation, clitoridectomy, or social seclusion (Patai 1971:476-477).

In Southeast Asia, Javanese (Geertz 1961:130) and Malayan males certainly believe that the female libido is stronger than the male's. Indeed, many Malay divorces are initiated by men on the grounds that they cannot satisfy their wives' sexual expectations (Nash 1974:38).

In Burma, as well as in these other groups, the male belief in the strong female libido is most probably a myth. There are, to be sure, some overly sexed women in Burma, as there are anywhere else, but they are the true nymphomaniacs—known as *tanha kyide meinma*, "women with strong lust"—who are often turned to as mistresses, especially by men whose wives are frigid. The latter observation reminds us that there also are some overly repressed women in Burma, especially in the urban middle class, whose resultant puritanism is of the classic type. In general, however, Burmese women seem to have neither more nor less libido than any others. It is not unlikely that the claim of many men that they cannot satisfy their wives' sexual needs—a claim, it will be recalled, that is supported by the testimony of at least some women—is not a result of an excessively strong female libido, but of their own sexual behavior (most especially rapid ejaculation following brief foreplay). In short, what these men see as excessive libido in their wives is, more likely, sexual frustration. The same situation, perhaps intensified, is found in India (Roy 1975:Ch. 3) and China (Hsu 1971:247-253).

Hence, although their explanation may be invalid, those men who believe that they do not satisfy their wives' sexual needs are probably correct. This being the case, it is not unlikely that sexual intercourse poses a threat to their self-image as virile males. Although this threat may be defended against by the personal belief that (in the words of one informant) "it is only natural that a man be anxious about maintaining an erection," or by the cultural belief (implicit in the cultural notions concerning the vagina, semen, and *hpoun*) that intercourse is highly dangerous, such defenses would merely render the anxiety unconscious. Sexual anxiety is, of course, widespread in South and Southeast Asia,[14] and the concern with potency medicine is equally widespread. In Burma, this concern begins with the very inception of marriage when, after the wedding ceremony, the groom's friends feed him eggs and milk which, it is believed, "strengthen" his penis and increase his sex drive so that he can better satisfy his wife. All of this is consistent with the Rorschach finding (Steele n.d.) concerning the "lack of sexually potent phallic responses in the male protocols."

The men's anxiety concerning their ability to satisfy their wives exacerbates yet another anxiety, which concerns their wives' fidelity. Although men, as we shall see, are more adulterous than women, and although they, unlike women, may have multiple spouses, they believe that women are especially prone to infidelity. Villagers say that a man can never trust his wife outside of his eyesight, for at the first opportunity she will commit adultery.

Like their other beliefs concerning women, the men's belief in their wives' infidelity is found in a variety of cultures in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In Java, for example, husbands (and wives too) are so

14. Malay men may represent the extreme case in Southeast Asia (Hyman n.d.:37). Indeed, as Hyman's perceptive paper indicates, the Burmese conflicts concerning women and sex are, in all their aspects, relatively mild compared to those experienced by the Malays.

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suspicious of their spouse's infidelity that it amounts to "an almost paranoid watchfulness." (Geertz 1961:133.) If anything, Arab men are even more anxious than the Javanese about their wives' fidelity (Berger 1964:104) which, no doubt, is one reason for *purdah*. The same anxiety, to turn to an entirely different time and place, is found in seventeenth-century France where, according to Hunt (1970:74), every husband was portrayed in satire as having "to face the danger of being betrayed by his wife." This ubiquitous concern is poignantly reflected in the words of Montaigne. "There is hardly one among us who does not fear more the shame which comes to him from the vices of his wife than from his own; who does not concern himself (astonishing charity) more with the conscience of his good wife than with his own morals; who would not prefer to be a thief and blasphemer and that his wife were murderer and heretic, than that she should be less chaste than her husband." (Hunt, 1970:74.)

As is the case in these latter cultures, in Burma, too, this belief is expressed in and supported by tradition. It is found in numerous tales and plays, and in some of the best known works of the classical theater, including, of course, *Paduma*.

> One is more certain of one's ability to drink up all the waters of the ocean, than of the faithfulness of one's wife (Htin Aung 1937:231).

A similar view is found in *The Lokaniti* (Sein Tu 1962:233):

> All rivers turn out to be winding;
> All Forests are full of kindling;
> All women, given a secluded place,
> end by sinning.

The Buddhist view of the wife's infidelity is exactly the same, as the following passage from a *Jātaka*, and attributed to the Buddha, indicates: "You couldn't be certain of a woman, even if you had her inside you and always walked about with her. No woman is ever faithful to one man alone" *(Andabhūta-Jātaka)*.

If this picture of female sexual frustration and male sexual anxiety seems overdrawn, I hasten to observe that the quality of Burmese sexuality is little different from that in most other societies in which sex has been studied in detail (see Obeyesekere [1973] for Ceylon) rather than surveyed superficially. Freud's Vienna, as the comparative data alluded to throughout this section indicate, was not and is not the only cultural setting in which sex has posed problems. Since, sexual difficulties, of one kind or another, are widespread, most societies provide institutionalized means for dealing with them. Burma, of course, is no exception to this generalization, but since this aspect of the problem is not germane to our discussion of marriage, it will be dealt with elsewhere.

Extramarital Sex

Sexual anxiety and sexual frustration often lead to attempts to "prove" one's potency, or to achieve a more satisfactory sex life, by means of fresh or heterogeneous sexual partners and experiences. Adultery and (where it is permitted) polygamy are obvious expressions of such attempts. (Since, as we saw in the last chapter, "adultery" is a culturally variable concept, I shall use, instead, the descriptive, and morally neutral expression, "extramarital sex.") In this section, I wish to examine these hypotheses in the Burmese setting.

It has already been noted at the beginning of this chapter that men claim that sex is a regnant drive, that sexual temptation is omnipresent, and that if a man and a woman are together in private, the presumption is that their purpose is sexual. Even more important for our present discussion is the claim of many men that, after marriage, their sexual desire for other women may be stronger than that for their wives. This claim is reflected on the cultural level in a well-known and oft-repeated folk saying: "You may call a married man 'old,' but if he descends only three steps [from his house], he becomes a bachelor." That is to say, the moment a husband leaves his house, he is ready for a sexual adventure.

The men's assertion that the libidinal tie to the bride does not persist for long, or with much intensity, after marriage is consistent with a number of other findings. The frequency of sexual intercourse, as we have seen, drops off rather sharply after the early post-wedding period. Moreover, different terms of affection are used to describe the husband's (compassionate) feeling for his wife, on the one hand, and his (passionate) feeling for a sweetheart, fiancée, or mistress, on the other. Thus *hkyitte* is used to refer to love for wives, *kyaikte* for sexual attraction to others. There are some men, to be sure, who claim that in all cases the felt emotion is sexually based, but many say that the feeling for the wife is akin to that for the mother or sister, for whom the term *hkyitte* is also used.

These, moreover, are not the only lexical cues which point to the libidinal distinction between the (eroticized) non-wife and the (non-eroticized) wife. A spouse, like a parent or sibling, is properly characterized as an object of "loving kindness" *(myitta)* or of "longing attachment" *(thanyozin)*, but not, any more than the parent or sibling, as the object of "desire" *(tanha)*. As a technical term in Pali, the language of Buddhist Scripture, *tanha* is glossed as "clinging [to worldly things]," but as a Burmese loan word it has taken on a sexual connotation. Thus, to say of a person that he has *tanha*—literally, *tanha shide*, or "*tanha* exists [in him]"—is to characterize him as lustful, so that even if husband and wife love each other and enjoy a satisfactory love life, it would be considered

crude and improper for either to say that he feels *tanha* for his spouse. With respect to other women, however, or to his wife before they are married, it is said that "he looks at her with *tanha*" or that "he feels *tanha* for her." All of these lexical distinctions, then, assimilate the wife to those close consanguineal kin (parents, siblings, and children) who, normatively at least, are non-erotic objects.

These disparate data suggest that sometime following marriage, love for wife loses much of its erotic component, that a once libidinal object has become in part delibidinized. Since Freud's early formulation, the dynamics by which this process occurs has been fairly well understood. "Where they love," Freud (1912:183) writes, "they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love. They seek objects which they do not need to love, in order to keep their sensuality away from the objects they love."[15] Consequently, females are (unconsciously) dichotomized into a pure, or asexual class (mother, sister, wife) and an impure, or sexual class (mistress, prostitute).

This dichotomy, it is important to note, is found in all of the major civilizations. In the West, its most famous cultural expression was found in the institution of courtly love, which was associated with the love of the Lady, on the one hand, and the adoration of the Virgin, on the other, with the wife being relegated to an unimportant, almost residual category (De Rougemont 1957:93-122). During this period and later, romantic love was considered possible only between lover and mistress, not between husband and wife, and it was not until the seventeenth century that "mature sexual satisfaction (was) considered possible in married as much as in illicit love." (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 1969:201.) The notion of the pure—and even the virginal!—wife is still found in pockets of Western civilization. It is said, for example, of contemporary Greek Cypriots, that "if it were possible to combine the concepts of virginity and motherhood the ideal married woman would be a married mother virginal in sensations and mind." (Peristiany 1966:182.) Similarly, among the Sarakatsani, Greek shepherds on the mainland, "even married women must remain virginal in thought and expression." (Campbell 1966:146.)

This bifurcation of the female into the pure (asexual) wife-mother and the impure (sexual) mistress-prostitute is also found in the Near East where, as Berger (1964:105) observes, romantic love and marriage "have thus far remained largely unconnected. In Arabic literature there is much

15. Ironically, Freud assumed that both the phenomenon and the process underlying it are peculiarly characteristic of modern man. It is the sexual (presumably, puritanical) ethic of modern, western civilization which, he believed, is responsible for this phenomenon. Since, however, this process is produced by sexual anxiety of a certain kind, and since the sexual ethic of modern civilization is not the only cause of this anxiety, it is not surprising that this phenomenon, as we shall see, is widespread.

courtship and romantic love but not between men and women who marry each other."

In South Asia, this bifurcation is not only as pronounced as in the previous culture areas, but it is there that it finds its strongest cultural expression (in religion and myth). Hindu culture, as Roy (1975:119) observes, "has not been able to accept sexual pleasure *(kam)* in conjugal as well as romantic love. . . . This conflict in attitude is reflected in the dichotomous image of two kinds of women—the mother (to be respected) and the mistress (to be desired sexually)," and the wife is classified with and assimilated to the goddess-mother figure. Indeed, in Bengal all eligible wives are classified terminologically as mother *(ma)*.[16] The identical process, as Obeyesekere (1973) has observed, occurs in sections of Ceylon, again at the levels both of culture and personality.

In East Asia, too, to take China as an example, romantic love and marriage are dissociated. The husband has sex with his wife in order to have children; for sexual pleasure, however, he turns to prostitutes and (if he can afford one) concubines. (Hsu 1971:104-106; Yang 1969:57). Although this dichotomy does not seem to be expressed in religious symbolism, it is expressed in other cultural forms. Thus, the romantic school of *Tz'u* poetry drew upon love affairs with prostitutes for "much of its motif" and traditional scholars wrote some of their best poetry in houses of prostitution (Yang 1969:57).

To summarize, then, the delibidinization of the wife is a widespread cultural phenomenon, one which is hardly restricted to Burma. This phenomenon, moreover, has important behavioral consequences. In its extreme form, it is expressed in the Don Juan character, who (in his Western manifestation) compulsively flees from mistress to mistress as each becomes delibidinized once she has become a sexual conquest, or who (in his Javanese and Malayan manifestation) pursues a relentless cycle of marriages and divorces. In a less extreme form, it may be expressed, as it is in Burma, in the less relentless form of extramarital sex. As in so many other matters, Burma falls between China and India in this regard. If, in China, romantic notions are systematically excluded from marriage, so that prostitutes and concubines are the primary, if not exclusive, means for sexual satisfaction (Yang 1969:54-57), and if, in India the "sexual desire [of a male] may remain unfulfilled all his life unless he has extra-marital 'affairs' with socially acceptable women such as prostitutes" (Roy 1975:121), in Burma, as we shall see, the situation is not at all that extreme; for although prostitutes and mistresses are important sexual

16. In India, moreover (or at least in Bengal), the same bifurcation occurs with respect to the male figure. For Bengali females, Śiva, the ascetic god, is the ideal husband image, while Krishna, the libertine god, is the ideal lover image (Roy 1972:182-183).

objects, they are an ancillary, rather than a central, means to sexual satisfaction.

Although a variety of conditions may produce the psychological need to dichotomize women into erotic and non-erotic objects, and, hence, to delibidinize the wife (relative to other women), it is not implausible to assume that in Burma, as in many other societies, this process is related to male sexual anxiety. Although our data are not sufficient to test the psychodynamic explanation for this anxiety which was suggested in the previous section, these data are at least consistent with that hypothesis. If this anxiety, as I argued above, explains the husband's rapid ejaculation, it might also explain the relative delibidinization of his wife. For if rapid ejaculation may be viewed as a means for coping with this anxiety by reducing the *duration* of the anxiety-producing experience, the delibidinization of the wife may be viewed as a defense against it because it reduces the *frequency* of the experience. If so, it is not a very efficient defense, for since the husband's sexual need persists, it is merely rechannelled onto other females; but since his anxiety remains, so does his need to "prove" his potency. On both accounts one would expect the delibidinization of the wife to be accompanied by a pervasive attraction for other women, and this, as we have seen, is indeed the case. It is this attraction, it may then be inferred, that leads to extramarital sex, the keeping of mistresses, and the taking of lesser wives.

The woman's interest in extramarital sex does not require such an elaborate psychodynamic explanation. Although the men's explanation for the women's extramarital impulses is misplaced, their assumption that many women have such impulses may be accepted as highly probable for a variety of reasons. First, given the woman's sexual dissatisfaction discussed in the previous section, the assumption is consistent with theoretical expectations. Second, there is the testimony of the less inhibited female informants who say that it is true. Third, there are the reports of successful seducers who claim that, given the proper circumstances, the seduction of a married woman is relatively easy. Fourth, there are the many cases—perhaps "reports" is the better word—of extramarital sex.

That both spouses evince a readiness for extramarital affairs is supported by the Thematic Apperception Test, which indicates that "both sexes have high romantic expectations and both sexes appear sexually impulsive so that relationships may be initiated or terminated through impulsive sexual liaisons. Failures in romantic expectations in one relationship and the resulting hostility may be 'acted out' by acquiring a new partner who at least for some period of time will fulfill the romantic ideal." (Steele n.d.)

Although it is impossible to obtain reliable quantitative data concerning extramarital sex, it is safe to say that it is more frequent among husbands than wives, and that it is more frequent in the city than in the village. Thus, for Rangoon, estimates of female infidelity (by female urban informants) range from 10 to 25 percent; male informants, on the other hand, claim that "most," or the "vast majority" of men, at one time or another, have had extramarital experiences. Unfortunately, village estimates are not comparable with those for the city because, when working in the villages, my concern was with "adultery" as the Burmese define this term, which, it will be recalled, is a more restricted category than "extramarital sex."

Turning, then, to these restricted data, estimates of village "adultery" were obtained in six villages from headmen and village elders. (Because adultery cases, if they are brought to court, are heard by these officials, it was assumed that they would be the most reliable informants concerning *known* cases of adultery.) In three villages, to which I came as a stranger, there were reported to be no known cases of adultery, while in the other three, in which I worked rather extensively, the reports were different. In one, my question evoked only the qualitative estimate, "many." In a second, the estimates were 10 percent for women and 25 for men. "Where ever there is a village," the elders of this village (quoting a folk-saying) observed, "there you will find adultery." In Yeigyi, the third village, the estimates were 5 percent for women and 10 for men. I personally, however, knew of five cases of adultery which occurred during my research in Yeigyi, including one in which the husband was having an affair with the wife of his best friend, while his own wife, in turn, was having an affair with another man.

These data raise at least four questions. First, in the case of husbands, why is there less "adultery"—extramarital sex with married women—than other kinds of extramarital sex? (This question applies only to husbands for, it will be recalled, any form of extramarital sex is "adultery" for a wife.) Second, why is the incidence of infidelity lower among females than males? Third, why is its incidence lower in the villages than the cities? Finally, why is there a wide discrepancy between the desire for, and the incidence of, extramarital sex, especially among women? These questions can be answered *seriatim*.

That males practice extramarital sex less frequently with married, than unmarried, women is hardly surprising, given the Burmese values concerning "adultery" and the punitive consequences (both natural and supernatural) associated with it. To seduce another man's wife is viewed as a highly immoral act which, if discovered, causes the adulterer much shame, stigmatizing both him and his family. In addition, the seducer, as

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we have seen, is liable to both criminal and civil damages, including imprisonment and the payment of a fine to the cuckolded husband. Moreover, although a husband's infidelity is not considered to be "adultery," it is nevertheless grounds for divorce. To be sure, the wife is reluctant to sue for divorce, and she can usually be talked out of it because a lawsuit makes her husband's infidelity public, and this is a source of great shame for her. Nevertheless, should she press her charges, she can not only obtain a divorce, but her husband must forfeit the dower, as well as other kinds of property that are ordinarily divided upon partition. Finally, there is the fear of karmic retribution, for, as we have seen, the Buddhist punishment for adultery is twofold: rebirth as a homosexual, followed by rebirth in hell.[17]

Unlike the seduction of a married woman, seduction of an unmarried woman is not considered to be shameful for a married man, and although it, too, is immoral and subject to punishment, neither the one nor the other is sufficiently serious to serve as an important deterrent. To be sure, the seduction of a virgin, especially one from a good family, is extremely immoral and dangerous; her male relatives will take physical revenge and the law will claim damages. Typically, therefore, sex with an unmarried woman is sought either with a widow or divorcée, or with a girl from a depressed social class concerning whom there is little social opprobrium or punitive recourse. In Yeigyi, for example, the favorite objects of extramarital sex are either seasonal farm workers or Mandalay prostitutes. In the city, too, the unmarried women are usually prostitutes, and among the wealthy, servant girls may serve this function.

Although there is little danger or opprobrium attached to a husband's infidelity with an unmarried woman, a distinction must be made between casual extramarital sex and the keeping of a mistress. Casual sex, whether it be with a prostitute or a non-prostitute, is rarely censured, and if anything it is taken for granted, even by the wife. She might object if he visits prostitutes regularly, but even then her objection is not so much moral or emotional as financial. As in China (Yang 1969:57) her objection is to his squandering of the family income. The keeping of a mistress, however, is another matter, and although the wife's objections may not be based on moral grounds, they are nevertheless serious. A mistress (*qapyou maya*, "unmarried wife;" or even *mayange*, "lesser wife") is a threat to the wife in at least four ways. First, she is expensive. Moreover, she takes the husband away from the home, for, unlike the Chinese concubine who is taken into the home, the Burmese mistress is rigidly segregated from the family. Again, since her husband prefers to be with his mistress, the wife loses face. Finally, the mistress is a potential lesser wife (of which more below). In short, the wife's opposition to her husband's having an affair is based essentially on pragmatic, not moral, grounds.

So far as the community is concerned, an affair evokes censure only if it becomes public. This is especially the case with respect to those men who are notorious for their frequent and public infidelities. Such censorious attitudes are more frequently held by women than by men, for whom the gay seducer—"[he who] pursues and is hungry for women" (*meinma laik hsade*)—is often an ambivalent object, publicly censured but (more often than not) secretly envied by his fellows. Moreover, as an indication both of wealth and sexual attractiveness, his many affairs may actually enhance his prestige (*goun*). Nevertheless, although secretly envied, such a man—who, unlike his counterpart in China, cannot use the need for children as a convenient and acceptable rationalization for his behavior (Hsu 1971:104-106)—is publicly condemned by males as well as females. Indeed his public condemnation is so strong that, until recently, he could not even be portrayed in fiction. As Hla Pe (1965:182) has observed, "A novel in which the hero has a mistress in every village and town he visits was not allowed to be seen in most of the 'drawing rooms' of that [the 1920s] period."

Of the two kinds of extramarital sex, the keeping of a mistress is the less frequent because, among other reasons, few men can afford the expense. According to informants, a large percentage of those who can afford a mistress do in fact have one—and this, as Sangermano (1893:164) reports, was true in the nineteenth century as well—but their absolute number, given this economic constraint, is small. For this reason, as well as for others discussed below, the mistress is an almost exclusively urban phenomenon.

For the wife (for whom all extramarital relations are adulterous), infidelity entails the same karmic consequence as it does for the husband, but the social consequence is even more serious. Women, as we have seen, are expected above all to maintain their reputation (*qathayei*) as virtuous and modest wives, and the smallest challenge to their virtue —the touch of a man's hand, a conversation in a private place, the very hint of flirtatiousness—is enough to cause the "loss of reputation"

17. Although Scripture does not specify the karmic consequence of adultery, the belief that it is punished in hell is based, according to village informants, on a well-known folk tale which, in addition, has been popularized in a song composed by the famous Burmese actor, Shwe Maung Tin Maung. It seems that each of the four sons of a rich man seduced a married woman, and then were consequently reborn in hell, where they were immersed over their heads in a boiling cauldron. Periodically, each would emerge from the cauldron long enough to utter the first syllable to the first word of a sentence before falling back into the boiling water. The first syllable, respectively, uttered by each—the entire word, not to mention the rest of the sentence, was never completed—was *du, tha, na, thaw;* hence the title of Shwe Maung Tin Maung's song—*Duthanathaw*. It is from this tale that it is known that the karmic punishment for adultery is rebirth in hell.

(qathayei hpyette) or the "destruction of her [good] name" *(name hpyette)*. For a woman adultery is an unthinkably disgraceful act, one which stigmatizes her and disgraces her children. Nothing, including her husband's infidelity or his sexual indifference, can condone her infidelity; unlike the Chinese wife, she may properly seek (and receive) a divorce if either of these conditions disturb her, but she may not commit adultery. If stigmatization is not a sufficient deterrent, the woman has also to consider that if she is discovered, her lover's wife (if he is married) may work sorcery on her, her husband will almost certainly divorce her (leaving her penniless), and he may also—as numerous newspaper reports testify—beat and even kill her. Although these are serious enough, the traditional punishment for an adulteress was even more serious. After shaving her hair—a symbol of her stigmatized state—the husband was permitted to sell her into slavery (Hamilton 1930:28).

Given this set of values and negative sanctions relating to adultery, the fact that its incidence, though low, is even as high as it is, is a measure of the strength of the desire; and this in itself, I would suggest, adds additional credence to the explanation for adultery suggested above. That its incidence (and that of infidelity in general) is less in the village than in the city, can be accounted for (as the villagers themselves suggest) in at least four ways. First, the chances of discovery—and, hence, of punishment—in a large and anonymous urban setting are much smaller than in the village, where it is all but impossible for anything to be kept private. Second, villagers have a more sincere commitment to traditional Buddhist values and are more sensitive to the requirements of Buddhist sexual morality. Third, having more strongly cathected the Buddhist cosmology, villagers are more strongly motivated by the predictable karmic consequences of violating Buddhist morality. Finally, the villagers are typically too poor to afford the expense.

These urban-rural differences aside, it should now be obvious that if a married man wishes to have an extramarital affair, he is best advised to choose an unmarried mistress. This choice, however, may create still another set of problems, for unlike a married mistress, who is supported by her husband, one unmarried expects to be supported by her lover. Even more serious, she may insist that the latter take her as a "lesser wife" as the price for continuing the affair, which brings us to the subject of the next section, polygyny.

Polygyny

Polygyny is a legally permitted practice in Burma—as it is in China, but not in India—and it is accepted, if not approved, by Buddhism. Moreover, unlike some other societies in which polygyny may be based on economic and political motives, its motivation in Burma is almost entirely romantic (including sex and affection). Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to define some terms.

Although colloquially even a mistress may be called a "lesser wife" *(mayange)*, technically this term is reserved for a woman, other than his first, or senior, wife *(mayagi)*, with whom a man is not only having sex, but with whom he lives and eats under a common roof. These three activities, it will be recalled, constitute the criteria for marriage. Typically, as I have already suggested, a lesser wife begins her relationship as a mistress, and it is only when she threatens to terminate the relationship that the man, usually reluctantly, agrees to elevate her status to that of wife. At her insistence, they may even have a wedding, though this is uncommon. The lesser wife not only lives with the man as his wife —though not under the same roof with the senior wife—but she and her children have stipulated rights in the man's estate. Moreover, the husband introduces her in public as his "wife" (never as his "lesser wife" which, as we shall see, would be degrading). The lesser wife *(mayange)* is to be distinguished, in turn, from the co-wife *(maya pyaing)*, the latter being the equal of the first wife in almost every sense, most especially in that she and her children have equal inheritance rights with the senior wife and the latter's children.

Both in villages and in the city it is rare for the two wives to live in the same household. "A woman," according to the oft-quoted proverb, "will share a piece of cake with another woman, but she will not share a man with her." Hence today, as in the past, a polygynous male typically lives in his official residence with his senior wife, while his lesser or co-wife resides in a separate household. (This is also the case in Java [Geertz 161:132] and the Kandy region of Ceylon [Yalman 1967:112-113], as well as in certain tribal groups in Burma [Lehman 1970:122].) Indeed, the co-wife usually lives in a separate city, not merely in separate household. Actually, polygynous households are more frequent in the village than in the city, where they almost exclusively consist of cases of sororal polygyny. (Such cases are found even in the highest social strata: both the former Commissioner of Police and the secretary to the National Planning Commission maintained such a household.) Since the village is small, and the joint wives would necessarily interact with each other anyway, the importance of separate households for maintaining domestic tranquility is less obvious. Moreover, the village polygynist is usually less capable of supporting two separate households.

When they live in separate households, the husband not only divides his time between his wives, but he usually segregates them socially as well. His social life with his senior wife includes the circle of friends

acquired during their marriage, a circle into which his lesser wife does not intrude. With her, he has an entirely different social circle. Moreover, it is his senior wife who, if he is a government official or a business or professional man, serves as his official hostess and who accompanies him to official parties and receptions. (This is one of the reasons that lesser wives have often been called "concubines" by Westerners.)

Despite its legality, the incidence of polygyny in Burma (as in China) is small, a generalization which seems to hold for all periods in Burmese history for which we have information. Indeed, Forbes' (1878:64) description of nineteenth-century Burma—"except among officials and the wealthy [polygyny] is seldom practiced. In ordinary life a man with more than one wife is talked of as not being a very respectable person"—applies without change to contemporary Burma. And if Conti is correct—"This people," he wrote, "take only one wife" (Forbes: *ibid.*)—it applied to the fifteenth century as well.[18] My own survey in Upper Burma yielded similar results. Thus, in Yeigyi, there is only one man who currently has two wives—he took his second after his first became ill, and now both live in the same house—although there were three other cases in the past. Data from ten other villages are similar to those from Yeigyi. In six, there were no cases of polygyny, although in three of the six there had been at least one polygynous marriage in the past (including one in which the wives lived in the same house). In three of the ten there was one case of polygyny each (and in one, the wives lived in the same house), and in one there were three cases.

This negligible incidence of polygyny in these Upper Burma villages not only holds for villages in Lower Burma (Pfanner [1963:135] reports no polygyny in the village he studied), Central Thailand (Piker [n.d., ch. 2:40] reports only one case in the region he studied), and Java (Geertz [1961:131] reports a rate of 2 percent for the subdistrict in which she worked), but it holds for urban Burma as well, although villagers assume as a matter of course that in the city, any wealthy man, including foreigners, will have at least two wives. When friends from Yeigyi saw me at a pagoda festival with my wife and two other women, one Indian and one American, they took it for granted that the latter were my lesser wives, and they never quite believed me when I said they were only friends. The fact is, however, that the incidence of urban polygyny is probably not much higher than it is in the village. Although, unlike the village, I have no survey data for the city, the same urban informants who acknowledged the very widespread practice of extramarital sex said that probably no more than 5 percent of urban males, if that, have multiple wives.

It should also be noted that very few polygynists have more than two wives. In my ten village survey, I discovered only two cases of a husband with three wives (and in both cases they all lived in one household). Such cases are somewhat more frequent in the city—but they are usually confined to the wealthy—and the number of wives varies. The upper limit, in my research at least, is thirty-three, the husband being a very wealthy Muslim timber merchant. Other well-known cases are far less dramatic. In Mandalay, one of the leading Buddhists of the city, and a well-known physician, had four known wives. In Rangoon, a well-known financier, and the founder of numerous monasteries, had "countless" wives (and over fifty children). In the same city, a Vice Chancellor of Rangoon University, whose senior wife was European, had five lesser wives before he was dismissed from his post for marrying a sixth.

The infrequency of polygyny, especially in comparison to the frequency (at least in the city) of extramarital sex, is a challenging finding, one which is best explained by the stigma which attaches both to the husband and to the lesser wife. The lesser wife is always considered inferior to the senior wife. Often she is viewed as no better than a prostitute, not only because she is viewed as having broken up a home, but because, usually much younger and of a lower social class than her husband, she is viewed as having married him only for his money. Even when mitigating circumstances (as when the first wife is a permanent invalid, or has given birth only to girls) constitute morally justifiable grounds for taking a second wife, the stigma still remains to some extent.

The stigma attaching to the man is just as great, but even harder to sustain, for he is stigmatized by his friends and family, persons who are of little importance to the lesser wife, but who, for him, constitute his most important reference group. The reason for his stigma is two-fold: first, for having committed an immoral act, second, for his indiscretion in permitting his first wife to know of his second marriage. Normally, even those who are aware of the marriage pretend that it does not exist, and, following the well known admonition, "As for knowing, let [them] know, [but] don't let them see" *(thida thisei mamyin)*, the husband does not advertise it. Those few who violate this precaution usually do so at the

18. Since few men, whatever their value system, can afford multiple wives, it is safe to assume that historical reports that convey a contrary impression—thus, Conder (quoting Hough) refers to polygyny as "abound[ing] in this country" (Conder 1826:89); and Bell (1852:84) writes that the Burmese would take as many as "three or four wives in the course of a month"—could only have been referring, their hyperbole aside, to government officials, the nobility, and the court. Indeed, royalty practiced prescriptive polygyny, for, in addition to a very large harem, the king had to have four queens, one for each of the cardinal directions. As for government officials, even older informants today report that in the past officials kept wives in different parts of the district they served, a practice which (so they say) only gradually died out as a result of British influence.

insistence of the second wife, or because of the prestige which they derive from it. In Burma, as in Java (Geertz 1961:131), to afford more than one wife is a sign of wealth; it is also, moreover, a sign of virility as well as a measure of the man's attractiveness to women. Although, on these accounts, the polygynist is at least an object of ambivalence for his fellows, if not of secret envy and admiration, they will condemn him for his thoughtlessness concerning his first wife and his children. In the first place, he causes her humiliation because his second marriage announces, as it were, that she does not satisfy him sexually, and working-class women, especially, have been known to murder husbands and second wives as a result. If his lack of sexual satisfaction is then interpreted as a function of his own immoderate sex drive, his children are also humiliated by the fact that their father is a man of excessive sex *(tanha)* or lust *(rāga)*. Indeed, I have known sons who have cursed, and even struck, their fathers after becoming aware of their polygyny. The father's fear of the son after taking a lesser wife is a folk theme. Daughters, too, often leave, or threaten to leave, home when their father takes a lesser wife.

In addition to humiliating his wife and children, the polygynist causes them financial loss, the second basis for his thoughtlessness. In supporting a second wife (and her children) the husband necessarily deprives his first wife and her children of additional income. More important, they forfeit part of their inheritance to the second wife, for since 1948, when the inheritance rule was liberalized, both wives have equal rights to the husband's estate. Even before 1948, however, when the first wife was the sole heir, the law stipulated that the second wife and the children of the first wife divided the estate upon the latter's death. For both reasons, the stigma attached to a wealthy polygynist is less than that to a man of ordinary means.

A final reason for the infrequency of polygyny, both in village and city alike, is the husband's fear of being harmed by his first wife, for women, as we shall see in the next chapter, can acquire magical power to dominate or harm their husbands. The husband's fear of this power is a very important deterrent to the taking of a second wife.

If polygyny is only rarely employed by men as a means for dealing with their sexual tensions, polyandry is even less frequently used by women. It is universally abhorred, and almost nonexistent. Urban informants tell of isolated cases of a young student, or a younger distant relative, who, living in the home of a married couple, becomes the wife's lover (with or without the knowledge of the husband). But, of course, he is a lover, not a husband. They also tell of cases of poor women who, with the approval of their husbands, take wealthy lovers to improve their economic position. In these cases, too, the second male is a lover and not a husband. Indeed, the only genuine case of polyandry I discovered in my investigations occurred in a village close to Yeigyi. This being a unique, as well as an especially interesting, case, it is worthwhile examining it more closely.

The first husband of the polyandrous wife had been a monk, who had left the order to marry her. Owning no land, and having few agricultural skills, he eked out a living as a hired hand. From the very beginning, he was henpecked by his wife, and humiliated by her sharp tongue and—a rare thing in Burma!—her physical beatings. About fifteen years later, the wife took a second husband ten years her junior and of not inconsiderable wealth; she married him, so the villagers claimed, for money and sex. Whatever her motives, the marriage led to a great outrage, and the woman was forced to move (with her second husband) to another village. Sometime later her first husband became ill, and her relatives, who refused to care for him (his relatives lived in another part of the country), requested that she return to the village. Viewing her as a prostitute, the villagers objected to her return, but they had no legal basis for excluding her.

From the moment she returned, she and her two husbands were completely ostracized. When, a few years later, her first husband died and her second husband contracted an insidious skin disease, the working of karmic punishment was seen by everyone. A few months before I arrived in this village, the woman, whose children were now in their teens, pleaded with the headman and elders to permit her to join the mutual aid society (from which she had heretofore been excluded) so that she might perform the Buddhist initiation rite for her son. Although persuaded by her religious motives, they only reluctantly agreed to lift the ban.

Why, then, is polygyny a legal and recognized form of marriage, while polyandry is illegal, punishable by ostracism and banishment? The Burmese have few (if any) satisfactory answers to this difference in attitude. Some informants explain the difference by invoking the proverb, "If a tree is good, ten thousand birds can take shelter in it" *(thitpin kaungyin/hnget tathaung na hlaingthi)*; that is, since the man is the breadwinner, he can marry as many women as he can support, while the woman, who is economically dependent on the man, cannot have more than one husband. This is obviously no answer, not only because many women are breadwinners and can indeed support more than one husband, but because the opposition to polyandry is emotionally and morally, rather than practically, based.

Other informants relate Burmese attitudes toward polyandry to the belief (and the legal principle) that the husband "owns" his wife's sexuality. On this premise the prohibition of polyandry rests on the same

grounds as the prohibition of female adultery or premarital sex, namely, the husband's exclusive rights to his wife's sex.

For many Burmese, especially villagers, there is no need to explain the difference in attitude between polygyny and polyandry. It is "only natural" that (together with the other differences between men and women) men, but not women, should have the right to multiple spouses. For a woman to have two husbands is tantamount to prostitution. "Beyond that," as one villager put it, "there is nothing more to say about it!"

But, of course, there *is* more to say about it, for although polyandry, unlike polygyny, has a very restricted cross-cultural distribution, its most important provenance is the area to the north (the Himalayas) and south (Ceylon) of Burma. Moreover, Ceylon, like Burma, is a *Theravāda* Buddhist society, with a rice economy, a bilateral kinship system, nuclear family households, stringent premarital sex taboos, inheritance through both males and females, belief in male superiority, and so on. In short, except for caste, Ceylon is a society whose primary cultural and structural features are very similar to Burma's. Nevertheless, polyandry (especially adelphic polyandry) was an accepted and a legal Sinhalese practice in the past (Cordiner 1807:164; Haeckel 1883:237), and, despite the fact that it subsequently became illegal, it is still practiced with impunity (Ryan 1953:151; Tambiah 1966; Yalman 1967:108-112). To be sure, polyandry is rare in Ceylon, as it is wherever it is found, but is is not as rare as polygyny.[19] Although this is a perplexing problem, like the Burmese themselves, I have no answer for it.

19. In light of the Burmese data, Leach's explanation for Sinhalese polyandry is untenable. "Polyandry exists in Ceylon," Leach argues (1955:185), "because, in a society where both men and women inherit property, polyandrous arrangements serve, both in theory and practice, to reduce the potential hostility between sibling brothers." Even for Ceylon this argument is weak—it leaves unexplained the vast majority of marriages that are not polyandrous—and in the light of the Burmese data it is weakened further, for in Burma, which has the same inheritance system as Ceylon, polyandry is not only virtually absent, but is abhorred. Tambiah (1966:296) explains Sinhalese polyandry as an attempt to combine resources (especially land) where neither husband has sufficient resources to support a family independently. Since, however, many villagers are embarrassed to talk about polyandry, and since in some cases, at least, the wife takes the initiative by sexual advances toward the future second husband, it is doubtful that this is the only basis for its practice.

9. Interpersonal Components of Marriage

To understand the relationship between husband and wife, it is first necessary to understand the relationship between the sexes in general. Since, however, this relationship is both influenced by and expressed in cultural values and norms, it is necessary to consider not only the relative structural positions of the sexes in Burmese society, but also the cultural ideology of the male-female relationship. Following that we shall treat the cultural norms which are expected to govern the relationship between the spouses, and, finally, we shall describe the actual relationship of husband and wife. This actual relationship, as we shall see, represents a complex compromise of the inconsistencies that obtain among various cultural, structural, and personality variables.

Structural Equality of Males and Females

Burmese women are not only among the freest in Asia, but until the relatively recent emancipation of women in the West, they enjoyed much greater freedom and equality with men than did western women. Today, as we shall see, they control not only the family economy but most retail trade as well—village hawkers, and the proprietors of the stalls and shops in town and city bazaars, are preponderantly women. Women are well represented, too, in large business enterprises. Moreover, except for engineering, women are liberally represented in the professions. In the villages, women participate in the productive phases of the agricultural economy, and they receive the same wages as men for the same work (even though, according to men and women alike, men accomplish more because of their greater strength).

Legally, women are the equals of men. The family estate is divided equally between sons and daughters, women own property in their own name, and after marriage husband and wife own all property jointly.