

Making Faces: Tattooed Women and Colonial Regimes

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In the summer of 1889, shortly after Upper Burma fell to the British, a local paper in Mandalay reported an ‘extraordinary’ crime. A British police officer was charged with forcibly tattooing the face of his Burmese mistress. The woman, Mah Gnee, had been marked with what *The Times* of London called ‘opprobrious’ words on her forehead: a tattoo that spelled out ‘Memma Shwin’ (Market Prostitute).¹ A local artist claimed that he had been ordered to execute this tattoo by a white officer, who was known only by his nickname: ‘Thanmigyi Thaken’ (Great Administrator of the State).² Ostensibly, the tattoo was a punishment for Mah Gnee’s infidelity with a lover of her own race. The *Mandalay Herald* offered a cash reward to anyone who could locate the woman, who had apparently been spirited away by British policemen in order to hide their colleague’s misdeeds.

Mah Gnee was apprehended in Myingyan in mid July of 1889, and returned to Mandalay to support the artist’s testimony. She claimed that the offence had taken place in 1886, the same year that the British began their campaign to occupy Upper Burma. Since then, she said, the colonial police had played an active role in concealing her. Shockingly, she declared that the attack had actually been carried out at the police station in Natogyi (Myingyan District); the entire department was implicated in a cover-up. The District Superintendent of Police, Malcolm James Chisholm, was publicly connected with Mah Gnee and was suspected to be the elusive ‘Thanmigyi Thaken’.³ Chisholm was suspended from his duties, and the Inspector-General of Police, Mr Graves, was dispatched from London to investigate.

The Chisholm case occurred at a pivotal moment in British colonial history, precisely spanning the troubled conquest of Upper Burma (1886–89). The annexation, intended to provide access to rich stores of teak and rubies and open up trade with China, soon proved to have deleterious effects on British military and policing resources.⁴ But the case also had an important afterlife in the metropole, which extended into the 1920s.⁵ At the same time as metropolitan authorities were shipped out to Mandalay to censure this act of violence – an act that, I will argue, violated the gendered conventions of tattooing in Burma – highborn women in Britain began to adopt and adapt the tattoo to their own purposes. In this article, I explore the phenomenon of tattooed women in British Burma and in London’s fashionable circles from the 1880s to the 1920s, investigating the interplay between the body politics of these two groups.

In continental Europe, criminologists typically associated tattooing with the sailor or soldier, the convict or prostitute.⁶ But in Britain, the tattoo enjoyed a period of popularity among the upper classes. Tattoo artists of London were lionized in society journals and catered to wealthy clients in lavish Orientalist studios.⁷ By the early twentieth century, it would seem that the tattoo could function in Britain as an emblem of cultural elitism rather than the radical ‘outsider’ status it conferred elsewhere in Europe.⁸ Why did this uniquely British fad, which continental scholars found so baffling, appear at this particular historical moment, clustered in the years around the Great War and the onset of imperial decline? How was this anomalous metropolitan ‘craze’ shaped by a specific set of colonial encounters: for example, between the British and the hill tribes of Upper Burma? What was it about the experience of being a modern British aristocrat – especially an aristocratic woman – that made the ‘foreign’ practice of tattooing so appealing?

There were many colonial precedents for this new British fashion, from the Pacific to South Asia. I focus on nineteenth-century Burma for two reasons. First, British ethnographies of Burma explicated the gendered relationship between tattooing and modernity in ways that resonated with metropolitan practices in the early twentieth century. Although Burma has rarely been treated as an important site for historians of gender, Victorian and Edwardian ethnographers were deeply preoccupied with anomalies of gendered behaviour in this part of the Empire. These anomalies were thought to be most visible in the practice of tattooing. The purportedly atavistic act of tattooing thus took on new meaning for British observers when deployed by the fascinatingly (or disturbingly) ‘modern’ women of Burma. The notion that all tattooed women were ‘New’ Women was articulated in dramatic ways in Burma before it became a topic of investigation about women in the metropole.

Furthermore, Burma was generally perceived as a weak link in the system of British imperial governance. The frustratingly partial nature of the British conquest in Upper Burma meant that this site powerfully evoked metropolitan anxieties about the fragility of Britain’s global powers. In this region, tattooed women were taken as symptoms of uniquely modern crises: specifically, the problem of Britain’s waning international authority.⁹ The notion that tattooed women marked out a distinctively British problem of decline was echoed and elaborated in texts on metropolitan tattooing during and after the Great War. Although exoticist metropolitan consumers took up many objects of empire during this period – from Kashmir shawls to Bantu spears – the adoption of the tattoo by aristocratic British women pointed to a different type of imperial traffic, which documented the insecurity of Britain’s rule rather than its successes.¹⁰

British authors typically located the metropolitan ‘fad’ for tattooing in the 1880s–1920s, an era of exceptional strain for the aristocracy.¹¹ These decades brought agricultural depression and the breakup of landed

estates, the Third Reform Bill and the demands of mass democracy, and the invasion of super-rich plutocrats into high society. Women played a complex role in this crisis. As Lady Dorothy Nevill lamented in 1912, women – who elected without voting and governed without law – were the only true aristocrats left in Britain.¹² Yet highly visible women Labour devotees such as Countess Markiewicz and Lady Warwick also posed important challenges to aristocratic prestige.¹³ Critics of metropolitan women's tattooing investigated whether women could redeem the aristocracy from its apparent obsolescence, or if they would doom their class to the purely ornamental.

The twin axes of imperial failure and aristocratic decline have often been taken as a key dynamic in the modernization of Britain.¹⁴ But what has been less apparent is the nature of the relationship between these two forms of deterioration. Burma had a special role to play in illuminating this relationship. As Britain's aristocrats were increasingly marginalized in social, political, and economic terms, Burma was characterized by British ethnographers as a place devoid of aristocracy altogether: an anomaly within colonial South Asia, but also a dystopian vision of what Britain itself might become. The 'problem' of tattooed women – articulated both in the unstable territories of British Burma and in the fashionable circles of London – underscored the complex historical connection between the downward spirals of *nobilitas* and *imperium*.

In Mandalay, Rangoon, and London, British observers tended to 'read' the phenomenon of tattooed women in remarkably similar ways, that is, as a sign of British failures to rule effectively. In all of these locales, tattooed women dramatized a crisis of British global dominance, that was exemplified by the failures of British men to police, protect, or modernize women's bodies. I begin with the Chisholm case because it vividly illustrates the ways in which tattooed women were taken as signs of weakness in British authority. Specifically, the Chisholm episode highlights concerns about tattooing as a marker of British decline, which in turn influenced debates about metropolitan women's tattooing in the early twentieth century. The Chisholm case powerfully underscored the potential dangers of colonization for the British themselves. Furthermore, the British ethnographic discourse on tattooed women in Burma was linked to a broader, pessimistic narrative about the flaws and limits of modern British rule.

The first reports of the Chisholm case broke just as the French consulate in Burma shut down. From this moment on, the British would deal primarily with the unruly hill tribes – the Shan, the Kachins, the Karennis, the Khyengs and the Chins – rather than competing for territory with continental powers. The British project to annex Upper Burma caused considerable trepidation in metropolitan circles.¹⁵ Upper Burma was described in Britain both as a hotbed of indigenous tribal discontent and as a refuge for Indian 'bad characters' escaping across a frontier 'marked by nothing but brick-work pillars. . . hidden in jungle growth'.¹⁶ Furthermore,

Anglo-Burmese officials contended with the metropolitan perception that Upper Burma had been a peaceful region until the British incursion. The growth of crime in Burma was characterized in London as the result of, rather than the impetus for British occupation. Such concerns may well have been justified. Policing in Burma was expensive – the cost of the force was 13.8% of the provincial revenue – and largely ineffective. Cognizable crime was more prevalent in Burma than in any other imperial province. The process of conquest worsened matters considerably. During the years of British encroachment, violent crime in Upper Burma actually increased over 100%.¹⁷

With regard to the Chisholm case, 1889 was a year of heightened concern about policing in Burma.¹⁸ Just a few months before Chisholm's suspension, Sir Charles Crosthwaite, the Chief Commissioner of Burma, warned, 'there is no province of the British Empire in which the evidences of English power are fewer or less apparent to the people [than Burma] . . . the outward signs of British rule are not conspicuous'.¹⁹ More specifically, he complained that the police's inability to suppress crime in Upper Burma was unparalleled elsewhere in the Empire.²⁰ In his youth and inexperience, Chisholm typified the British police in this region. He was only seventeen when he joined the force in 1881, and was rapidly promoted to District Superintendent in Myingyan. When the attack on Mah Gnee took place in 1886, Chisholm was twenty-two and had been in Upper Burma for less than a year.²¹ His case, with a white police officer at its core, posed a potential embarrassment not only to Anglo-Burmese administrators, but also to British sociologists who had focused their studies of crime in the colonies almost exclusively on indigenous misbehaviour.²² The accusation of a departmental cover-up was particularly troublesome because 'collective' crimes (crimes committed *en masse*) were more typically associated with the downcast indigene than with white Europeans.²³ Chisholm's alleged actions suggested that the colonial police could exacerbate disorder rather than operating as a counterweight to lawlessness.²⁴

For Anglo-Burmese administrators, the problems of annexation extended beyond the issues of crime and policing into the social structure of Burma itself. Crosthwaite emphasized the difficulties of colonizing a region that was seemingly without hierarchies. In India, he said, the British could exploit local desires for power, acting upon landowners, heads of tribes, and bankers to control the masses. But in Burma, the 'extraordinary equality' of status and wealth meant that the British had no hereditary ruling class on to which to devolve their government. This complaint about the excessive mobility of Burmese society recurred throughout the Chisholm investigation. In Upper Burma, Crosthwaite lamented, the people 'cannot tell who is their master . . . every scoundrel who is conversant with charms and tattooing gets a following'.²⁵ In this unsettled region, the tattoo symbolized the mystification and fluidity of indigenous politics that seduced the credulous Burmese away from British rule. For Crosthwaite, tattoos created

an artificial appearance of power, which contrasted with the ‘natural’ authority that was properly held elsewhere by hereditary aristocracies. In a place deprived of the gradations of birth – a place that disavowed aristocracy – the tattoo served as a key marker of leadership.

The Chisholm case illustrates the ways in which the phenomenon of tattooed women – and public responses thereto – can help us to understand both micro-histories of power in British Burma and macro-histories of British decline. The participants in the case focused on two points of reference in order to interpret Chisholm’s alleged act of force: first, the glorious history of Burmese tattooing, and second, the shameful history of British military and political instability in Burma. According to British investigators, the Burmese tattoo encompassed a variety of gendered meanings. The despotic King Thibaw had ordered every male Burman to be tattooed in a ‘breech’ design, from his waist to his knees. Breech tattooing was strongly associated with spells, charms, and incantations; British women were said to be particularly enamoured of its beauty.²⁶ But during the days of indigenous rule, tattooing had also had a criminal association.²⁷ The Burmese kings had marked male criminals – but only *male* criminals – in one of two ways: with tattooed blue circles on their cheek, or with the title of their offence on their forehead.²⁸ British ethnographers tended to describe the breech tattoo in Burma as customary, rather than mandatory. The breech tattoo thus served a different social function than the punitive facial tattoo, which was even more closely associated with the disciplinary or penal powers of the Burmese king.

Tattooing on Burmese women had a more complex history. Nicolò Conti, a Venetian merchant and one of the earliest European travellers to Burma, described widespread female tattooing in the fifteenth century. His visit to the land of ‘peacocks and pagodas’ yielded tales of women who punctured their flesh with iron pins, and rubbed pigments into the punctures ‘so they remain painted forever’.²⁹ But most nineteenth-century British writers assumed that Conti had been mistaken or that the practice had died out since. Women in Mandalay and Rangoon were now supposed to have no more than a red beauty spot tattooed on their necks. According to *The Times*, the only women in this part of the world who tattooed their faces were the women of the ‘untamed’ hill tribes, especially the Chins.³⁰

Indigenous sources indicated that the Chin women’s tattoos were ornamental. But most British observers rejected this explanation, considering the tattoos too ugly to serve a decorative purpose.³¹ Rather, the British ethnographic assumption was that facial tattoos protected the women of the hill tribes by making them so unattractive that the Burmese kings would not wish to abduct them. The tribes would thus avoid mixing with the Burmese and would maintain their ethnic purity. The civil servant Charles James Forbes described the contrast between the natural yellow skin of the Chin women and their black facial markings as a ‘hideous disguise’, unappealing to men of all races.³² Indeed, Herbert Thirkell White, later the Lieutenant

Governor of Burma, claimed that Burmese men referred to the 'disfigured' Chin women as 'dog-faces' because of their tattoos.³³ British observers overwhelmingly understood the female facial tattoo as a voluntary 'mutilation' that denoted hill women as tribal property and undermined the power of the Burmese crown.³⁴

British scholars of Burma recounted tales of the hill tribes in order to explain continued pockets of anti-British resistance and local ethnic tensions. The history of Burma was characterized by a long struggle for supremacy between the Burmese and the hill tribes: a tangle of successive conquests that persisted without alien intervention until the British incursion.³⁵ In fact, Crosthwaite had opposed the occupation of Upper Burma precisely because of the difficulty of predicting how the hill tribes would respond to British rule; he feared they would find all forms of centralized authority (Burmese *or* British) equally undesirable.³⁶ The perils of annexation prompted new interest in tribal ethnography, in which tattooing played an important part. Overwhelmingly, these hill tribes were identified by their fierce independence from the Burmese, their vengefulness, and, of course, their fondness for tattooed women.³⁷ British sources presumed that Chin women were tattooed only when their tribes infringed on the Burmese border. As these tribes migrated away from the cities, the tattooing of their women was thought to decline in tandem.³⁸

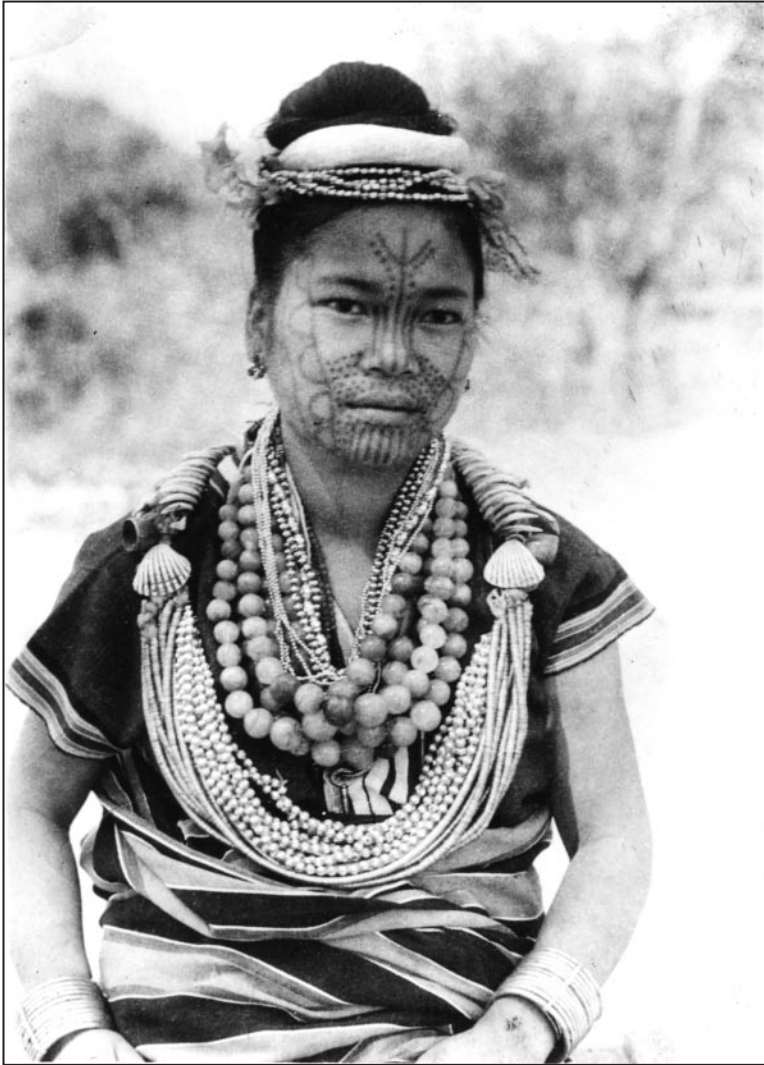
So here was the crucial ethnographic conundrum. What role would a marker of tribal identity play in an age of British rule? According to British accounts, tattooed women served in the days of native rule as highly visible signs of tribal resistance to the centralizing power of the Burmese king.³⁹ The British had now deposed this king. But the tattooed women remained, living reminders of the instabilities of indigenous rule and the dangers of centralization. British colonial policy had no way to make coherent sense of these hill tribes and their tattooed women. While British ethnographers tended to stigmatize South Asian frontier tribes,⁴⁰ the Burmese hill tribes were valorized for their history of resistance to the detested King Thibaw. In theory, the custom of female facial tattooing should disappear now that the likelihood of women being carried off in raids had been so greatly reduced by the British presence.⁴¹ But in fact, the process of occupying the hill regions remained just as disorderly under the British as it had under the Burmese; the hill tribes were never successfully pacified.⁴² Tattooed women served as souvenirs of Burma's own failed empire, which had extended over 1400 miles from the Isthmus of Kra to Assam.⁴³ These tattooed women marked the limits of centralizing power, whether that power was Burmese or British.

British ethnographers based their reading of the facial tattoo in Burma on the sex of the recipient. On men, the facial tattoo was viewed as a mark of individual criminal behaviour and of despotic royal punishment: presumably, an irrational practice that would die out under the British regime. For women, the facial tattoo reflected a broader historical process

rather than a personal criminal past. That is, the female facial tattoo signalled the fact that colonial tensions had *preceded* the British incursion in Burma and, perhaps more disturbingly, had survived the annexation as well. This type of tattoo was therefore increasingly difficult to understand in ethnographic terms. What had seemed like a reassuringly ‘ancient’ practice was interpreted anew after the annexation of Upper Burma as an explicitly modern – and explicitly gendered – strategy for dealing with all kinds of colonizing forces. The tattooed faces of Chin women appeared in British photographs and police files through the 1920s (fig. 1), illustrating the longevity of the colonial police force’s interest in tattooed women and making the limited impact of annexation all too visible.

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Burmese Wars, colonial observers struggled to reinterpret the tattoo according to the historical shift from Burma’s internal ethnic conflicts to a new British form of rule. How could the British account for the fact that female facial tattooing had survived the recent conquest where male facial tattooing had not? For Sir James George Scott, the *Daily News* correspondent on Upper Burma, tattooed women were best understood as emblems of colonial modernization rather than as markers of indigenous primitivism.⁴⁴ ‘In Rangoon,’ Scott said in 1882, ‘the tattooing of a woman has special signification. It means she wants an Englishman for a husband!’⁴⁵ In this view, the female facial tattoo was no longer a symbol of military resistance. After the arrival of the British, the tattoo was to be viewed as a romantic invitation, an enticement to interracial union. What made tattooed women in Burma ‘modern,’ in Scott’s view, was not their opposition to foreign rule – a resistance that the British might themselves find uncomfortable – but their purported use of the tattoo to attract white suitors in the increasingly British city of Rangoon. Rather than reading tattooed women in British Burma as political (and specifically as symbols of tribal opposition to all despotic ‘foreign’ powers),⁴⁶ Scott insisted on seeing them as erotic.⁴⁷ His theory, which was widely circulated in scholarship on Upper Burma, strove to reconcile the continued existence of tattooed women with a new narrative of colonial progress.

In 1889, Chisholm’s case was yet another twist in this ethnographic dilemma. Mah Gnee had been attacked in a native medium – that of the punitive tattoo – but one that had always been reserved for men. Furthermore, Mah Gnee’s attacker had not been a native king, but an agent of the colonial police. Indeed, this fact was what defined the action as an ‘attack’ in the first place, rather than a state-sponsored penalty. In adopting the facial tattoo for his wayward mistress, Chisholm had violated the gendered practices of tattooing in Burma. And, in misapplying native technologies of punishment and governance, the British officer was himself labelled a criminal. Significantly, the British anxieties in this case were not about miscegenation. The metropolitan press focused very little on the sexual relationship between Chisholm and Mah Gnee. The crucial ‘intermixing’ – and the source of Chisholm’s wrongdoing – was not in the



By permission of The British Library (Photo 830/45), India Office Collections, 1920s.

Fig. 1. 'A Chinbok Lady', Colonel Thyne collection of the Burma Military Police, India Office Collections, 1920s, British Library, Photo 830/(45).

realm of reproduction, but in the juxtaposition of two incompatible systems of law and punishment. H. Fielding-Hall, a British scholar of tattooing, noted the gulf between Burmese ideologies of punishment-as-purification and British ideologies of punishment-as-degradation.⁴⁸ The problem with Chisholm was that he had used a Burmese technique with a British motivation, and it was this conflation that his colleagues found so disturbing. Specifically, in tattooing Mah Gnee's face, Chisholm had

treated a private act of infidelity as a crime against the state. His alleged actions hearkened back to a *pre-colonial* period, placing the British administration in the role of the Burmese tyrant.

The media response to the Chisholm case varied by region. The British city of Rangoon supported Chisholm, while the Burmese enclave of Mandalay demanded his resignation; the Mandalay Herald even established a fund to cover Mah Gnee's legal expenses.⁴⁹ Although metropolitan coverage was less detailed, at least two London papers – *The Times* and the *Woman's Herald* – were sympathetic to Mah Gnee, using this occasion to protest other 'brutal excesses' of the military police in Upper Burma and to question the efficacy of the British occupation.⁵⁰ Public evaluations of Mah Gnee's facial tattoo proved surprisingly contentious both in Britain and in Burma. The press described it variously as a brand (with clear words written out), an abstract design, or a series of red dots. Mah Gnee was never photographed or drawn.⁵¹ Her own testimony was that the words 'Memma Shwin' had been clearly visible on her forehead in 1886. The Burmese tattooist had showed 'parental' compassion, she said, in using a less enduring shade of red rather than the permanent black ink that had been ordered by the 'Thaken'.⁵²

During the investigation, Mah Gnee admitted that she could not definitively identify the white man who had ordered her tattoo; as she coyly put it, she had only ever seen him by candlelight. She focused less on Chisholm personally, and more on a general indictment of the conduct of the police department for concealing her these past three years. Chisholm's defense was far more spectacular, literally so. He marshalled a parade of local women to show that their foreheads were marked with good-luck charms. He claimed that these voluntary charms resembled what he called the 'design' on Mah Gnee's forehead. But his pseudo-ethnographic (and perhaps strategically ignorant) display of indigenous women – who did not testify and merely showed their faces in court – failed to impress his accusers: in part, because Mah Gnee was Burmese and not a member of the tattooing hill tribes like Chisholm's witnesses.⁵³

At the local level, Chisholm's advocates explained white European aid for Mah Gnee in gendered terms. The *Rangoon Gazette* characterized the anti-Chisholmites as misguided white women philanthropists, and referred unflatteringly to a 'flutterin[ing] in the dovecots wherein arose the pretty story of the branded lady'.⁵⁴ Indeed, the allure of Mah Gnee's case for British women was complex. Mah Gnee was pictured in anti-Chisholmite newspapers as a hapless victim of white male brutality. But British readers also tended to associate Burmese women with an astonishingly wide array of social and economic freedoms. British scholars frequently praised the equality of Burmese men and women before the law and observed that Hindu or Indian practices of child marriage and compulsory widowhood were rejected in Burma due to the 'perfect fairness' of Buddhism.⁵⁵ In terms of gender roles, Burma was painstakingly differentiated not just from

South Asia – a popular focal point of Western feminist reforms – but also from Britain. The freedom of Burmese women to obtain divorces, to trade at bazaars, and to enter into contracts on their own authority contrasted sharply with the limited gains of British feminism. In 1882, the *Morning Post* noted that the Burmese had long anticipated the Married Women's Property Acts in Britain and secured equal property rights for women.⁵⁶ Indeed, Violet Greville's 1892 article, 'Women and Worship in Burmah', described Burma as 'the land of women *par excellence*'.⁵⁷ While some of the 'advances' that Greville described were frivolous (for example, the right to smoke cigars or to flirt), she also stressed the value of Buddhist tenets of universal tolerance in promoting female independence. As one British woman traveller wrote, all Burmese women were 'New Women' at heart.⁵⁸

The tattooed women of the hill tribes, such as the Chins, were thought to enjoy the highest privileges of social equality.⁵⁹ Although the *punitive* tattooing that Chisholm had wrongly enforced was characterized as archaic or brutalizing, the *voluntary* tattooing of tribal women in Burma designated a corpus of rights and privileges that was as yet unmatched in Britain. The British feminist encountered in Burma an important variant on 'the white woman's burden'.⁶⁰ Here, she was required to live *up* to the condition of indigenous women rather than unshackling them. If the men of Burma were typically described as primitive, then the women – especially tattooed women – were taken to exemplify rather more modern traits that British women might wish to emulate. Mah Gnee's plight, therefore, was attributable entirely to the vagaries of colonial annexation; her 'normal' condition as a Burmese woman would more likely have been perceived in Britain as enviably liberated.

The 'case of the tattooed lady', as the Burmese newspapers called it, came to a conclusion of sorts in September of 1889. Chisholm was 'substantially' acquitted, and he was back on duty in Myingyan by July 1890.⁶¹ But private correspondence suggests that not all Anglo-Burmese investigators were convinced of their colleague's innocence. Crosthwaite concluded that while Chisholm might not be directly responsible for Mah Gnee's tattoo, he had clearly not given a 'full and ingenuous' report of all that he knew about the case: '[Chisholm's] story does not hang together, and if it is proved that the Inspector from Myingyan was sent to buy [Mah Gnee] off, it will look bad. He heard that she had been maltreated and robbed by men who were hangers on of his and took no action at all though he was a police officer.'⁶² Mr. O'Brien, the editor of the *Rangoon Times*, wrote to Thirkell White that, 'I have not much sympathy with Mr. Chisholm – from all I hear he is one of those black sheep who bring discredit on the Administration and cast a slur on the name of Englishmen'. The telegram concluded, 'if a man lives circumspectly, no one will dare raise the finger of scorn at him – and that Mr. C[hisholm] has not done so is I think the reason why the present charge has been made'.⁶³

What, precisely, was the nature of Chisholm's crime? His colleagues generally believed that he had not physically attacked his mistress. Chisholm's worst offence, Crosthwaite suggested, was his failure to control his native subordinates: his abandonment of Britain's moral mission. Mah Gnee's tattoo disturbed Chisholm's superiors not because it testified to British violence, but because it signalled the depths of British ineptitude in eradicating indigenous violence. The British police in Burma should have created the conditions for peace that would render tattooed women obsolete. But the Chisholm case clearly thwarted these expectations. Rather than police brutality, the key issue was one of criminal negligence.

There were several different axes of crime in the Chisholm case, all originating with the failure of the colonial police to regulate both indigenous and white misconduct. The same article in *The Times* that exonerated Chisholm presented the termination of the inquiry as a Pyrrhic victory.⁶⁴ Although the police department was cleared of immediate wrongdoing, its continued failure to crush indigenous banditry proved more embarrassing.⁶⁵ Even as the Chisholm investigation drew to a close, British forces launched new military operations against the Chins: the tribe best known for its perennially tattooed women.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Mah Gnee's tattoo said more about the limits or collapse of colonial policing than about the commission of an individual crime. As the face of Mah Gnee suggested, British Burma was a particularly pointed example of what Antoinette Burton has termed 'unfinished business', suggesting the ways in which modern colonial regimes were frequently disrupted and always in process.⁶⁷

Tattooing in British Burma had acquired a range of meanings and misapplications, from the protective to the punitive. The investigation of Chisholm had prompted new concerns first about the potentially violent archaism of colonial officers and then about the laxity of these officers toward indigenous violence. Furthermore, tattooed women in Burma highlighted the problem of reigning over citizens who seemed, at least in terms of gender roles, not uncivilized, but entirely avant-garde. The ethnographic analysis of tribal women exposed the persistence of indigenous resistance to British rule. And the relatively privileged position of women in Burma, especially among the tattooed hill tribes, provided a challenging paradigm for metropolitan feminists: one that underscored the ways in which British feminism fell short. The Chisholm case had underscored the fragility of British power in this particular colonial site as well as the broader ways in which British observers – both Anglo-Burmese administrators and professional ethnographers – regarded tattooed women as emblems of their own failure to rule effectively.

After the Chisholm case, then, tattooed women in Burma signalled a series of crises in British authority. This theme was developed in new ways as the tattoo became increasingly popular among well-born metropolitan women. The British tattooing 'craze' was often attributed to royal precedent: the tattoos of Edward VII, acquired during his pilgrimage



Fig. 2. This 'Tally Ho' tattoo was described in its original publication as being from the forearm of the most popular Master of Hounds in England. From Albert H. Broadwell, 'Sporting Pictures on the Human Skin', *Country Life Illustrated* 7, 27 Jan. 1900, p. 110.

to Jerusalem,⁶⁸ and those of his son, George V, acquired in Japan.⁶⁹ According to the American psychologist Albert Parry, the tattoos of 'Mayfair denizens' differed in cost, design and intention from the crosses and love tokens familiar to soldiers and sailors. These new clients, 'wanted to stamp their own aristocracy and wealth upon themselves . . . They ordered their own coats of arms tattooed upon their skin, or the names and emblems of their exclusive clubs, or reproductions of money-bills, or scenes of foxhunts in full cry' (fig. 2).⁷⁰ But nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British scholars of tattooing emphasized that the real power of the aristocracy in this period was less than secure. Such investigators focused on two factors in explaining this unprecedented fashion for tattooing: first, the political, social, and economic disempowerment of the aristocracy in Britain, and second, the broader patterns of decline that characterized Britain's view of its global powers.

The tattooing 'fad' in Britain required new interpretative frameworks that integrated ethnographic accounts of tattooing in the colonies with

the sociology of metropolitan decline. Frequently, these models juxtaposed the financial crisis of the aristocracy at home with lucrative, if short-lived opportunities for ‘gentlemen emigrants’ in colonial locales; the empire was one last site of success for a class staving off its creditors and selling its land.⁷¹ Did aristocrats adopt the tattoo in order to make visible their connection to the colonial worlds that might save them from ruin? Or had they taken up a low-status practice in order to highlight their own loss of domestic prestige? British investigators entertained both possibilities. One of the first major bids in this field of scholarship was the essay ‘Aesthetic Evolution in Man’, written in 1880 by the naturalist and novelist Grant Allen. Allen sought to make sense of tattooed aristocrats by stressing the growing affinities between ‘civilized’ Britons and ‘savages’.⁷² He decried the efforts of Western missionaries to outlaw tattooing among colonized peoples, suggesting that the presumption of an antithetical relationship between the tattoo and the civilizing mission was in need of serious reevaluation. Instead of striking down the savage love of ornament, Allen argued, the principle of beautification should be extended to other forms of property beyond the body: huts, gardens, and children. If the aim were to remake the Burmese or the Maori as modern British citizens, then surely this implicit love of property expressed via the tattoo should not be suppressed.

The notion that tattoos represented a variant of or counterpart to personal property, the absence of which had long troubled European travellers in the colonies, was shaped by ongoing debates about ownership and possession in Britain. Allen described the tattoo as a permanent form of property in a world where other forms of aristocratic property – namely, land – had been destabilized.⁷³ One anthropologist’s interview with a Maori man exemplified the appeal of the tattoo to the increasingly disenfranchised British aristocrat:

‘You may lose your most valuable property’, explained Netana, ‘through misfortune in various ways; you may lose your house, your *patupounamu*, your wife and other treasures – you may be robbed of all your most prized possessions; but of your *moko* you cannot be deprived except by death; it will be your ornament and your companion until your last day.’⁷⁴

Here, the tattoo established an affective bond between European and non-European worlds. The tattoo – far from dividing the savage man from the civilized – in fact represented a unique form of civilization *within* non-Western societies. For Allen, the tattoo was the first sign of Western impulses within the savage heart; as such, British colonizers should embrace it. At the same time, Allen’s notion that the tattoo served as a primer in property education had particular resonance in Britain in the 1880s: a period of experimentation in property rights for married women as well as the

tentative resolution of the Irish and Scottish land wars.⁷⁵ If the tattoo 'marked' anything for Allen, it was the newly enigmatic processes of ownership and possession.

Early in 1880, a media scandal broke out over a rumour that the princes of England had had their faces tattooed. It seems likely that Allen's essay was partly intended to address this controversy, although he did not mention the princes by name. The British were already familiar with facial tattooing among both the Burmese and the Maori; they referred to the Maori practice as *moko* (the full term was *mokomakai*). *Moko* was interpreted in Britain in a number of different ways: as a form of signature, as self-portraiture, as an equivalent to a royal or aristocratic seal. In short, it was seen as a visual tie between Western and non-Western forms of individual identity. Major H. G. Robley, a scholar of Maori tattoos, stated that *moko* was completely analogous to European heraldry, with one crucial distinction: the European coat-of-arms attested to the merits of one's ancestors, while *moko* illustrated the merits of the person illustrated with it.⁷⁶ This evaluation of Maori family connections stressed the superiority of European intergenerational ties: a Maori man was an 'aristocrat' only for his own lifetime, whereas the privileges of Western aristocracy were hoped to be permanent. But now, the English princes seemed to have acquired their own *moko*. The British, French, and American press published reports that Edward's sons, Albert and George, had been tattooed with anchors or arrows on their noses during their voyage as midshipmen aboard the H.M.S. *Bacchante*.⁷⁷ The princes were still out to sea when the story broke, and the reports went unchallenged for several days. One biographer noted that the rumour originally extended to all of the cadets, and was assumed to have been an episode of military hazing or a voluntary expression of *esprit de corps*.⁷⁸

The case of the tattooed princes – and the apparent inability of continental authors to integrate this episode into their existing frameworks of criminological tattooing – highlighted the anomalous position of Britain in medico-legal scholarship.⁷⁹ Although the tale of the tattooed princes has often been repeated, I invoke it to demonstrate a gendered hierarchy that has been overlooked in this case: masculine morals versus feminine fashion.⁸⁰ At first, the story of the tattooed princes functioned as a morality play about power and authority within the Royal Navy. The princes had proved that they were transcending the aristocratic Grand Tour by submitting to this reworking of their appearance by their fellow cadets. But *The Times* soon suggested that this prank, in which irreverent midshipmen 'invaded the awful majesty of princely noses', was ultimately driven by feminine tastes. The editors speculated that British ladies had bribed the midshipmen into committing this transgression so that they could tattoo their *own* faces, claiming only to follow a royal vogue. The fact that the princes had been professionally tattooed in Japan, though on their arms and not on their faces, was never mentioned in these reports. Instead,

reports of the *mokoed* princes focused on excessive female influence on the centres of British authority.⁸¹ Behind the spectre of the tattooed British monarch was the notion that metropolitan women would disfigure their rulers to suit the caprices of high society. Since most European tattoos were visible only when the subject was partially disrobed, facial tattooing was a particularly devalued form for the British royals.⁸² Like Mah Gnee's marked face, the reports of the tattooed princes represented the violation of contracts between rulers and ruled. Upper-class British women were blamed for manufacturing their own corrupt vision of the fashionable (and disempowered) monarch.

British fiction of the period – such as Fergus Hume's *Tracked by a Tattoo* (1896) and Robert Leighton's *Gipsy Kit, Or the Man with the Tattooed Face* (1906) – indicates a new interest in the phenomenon of upper-class metropolitan.⁸³ Many of these tales address themes of illegitimacy and catastrophic loss in the higher echelons of British society. Leighton's novel, in particular, dramatizes the abjection of the British aristocracy. At the heart of this tale is a broader question about the circuitry of colonial and metropolitan cultures: were the colony's effects ultimately curative or pathological for those who were losing power in the metropole? In this story, a long-lost peer, Uncle Charlie, turns up in England to rescue his impoverished aristocratic family, his face marked with mysterious 'barbaric' whorls. He is disfigured, made foreign – though also fabulously wealthy from pearl fisheries in the Pacific. Charlie uses his colonial cash to halt his family's downward mobility, receiving the compliment that he is 'wooly a gentleman'. He refuses his rightful place in the House of Lords, leaving his nephew in charge of the family estate, and retreats to the South Seas. Charlie is a hybrid of two vulnerable figures at the start of the twentieth century: the colonial explorer in a post-Boer War era and the British aristocrat at home.⁸⁴ In 1912, not long after the publication of Leighton's tale, the Lib-Lab politician Arthur Ponsonby concluded about the aristocracy that there was no role for a 'purely ornamental' class in a modern state.⁸⁵ But Leighton's Charlie underscores the political value of the ornamental. He sustains those precariously positioned and highly decorative British aristocrats who – if they govern at all – must govern anonymously and govern in exile.

In these late nineteenth and early twentieth-century sources, the upper-class tattoo in Britain was linked to narratives of familial and national decline. This connection intensified after the First World War. Consider, for example, the 1926 spy novel by William Le Queux, *The Letter E*. The book explores the effects of war on the British aristocracy, and particularly the effects of war on highborn women, who had been deprived of their virtuous male counterparts. In Le Queux's mystery, a beautiful aristocratic English girl makes a grave mistake. Because of her misguided love for a German prince, who doubles as a jewel thief, she falls in with the wrong crowd. When she realizes the error of her ways and tries to return to England,

the gang forcibly tattoos her. Specifically, they mark her with the letter 'E' (for *espion*, or spy) on her shoulder. A gallant English detective rescues her from the gang; she happily marries him, but is compelled to cover up her shameful tattoo every night before bed. The Letter E portrays bands of vicious aristocrats, severed from their prewar role as arbiters of justice and policed by their social inferiors. For Le Queux, the British aristocracy is restored after the war, but only after considerable disfigurement and sacrifice of honour. The function of the tattooed aristocratic woman in his tale is to remind his readers of these irreparable losses to the nation.⁸⁶

Several other fictional texts dealt specifically with tattooed female characters, and the notion that highborn British women had a passion for the tattoo was well in place by the 1890s. The two major Continental scholars on tattooing, Cesare Lombroso and Alexandre Lacassagne, treated the tattoo in Europe as an outward manifestation of a deep connection between the modern deviant and his savage ancestor, although only Lombroso explicitly described the tattoo as an atavistic marker of criminal identity.⁸⁷ Such interpretations were notably absent in Britain, perhaps because they failed to explain fully the phenomenon of tattooed women aristocrats. Indeed, many Continental investigators commented on the incongruity of seemingly powerful British citizens adopting what had been perceived as a decidedly low-status practice.⁸⁸ Although George Burchett, the celebrated Edwardian tattooist, noted that he found Lombroso 'very helpful', his tales of his own adventures as a British tattoo artist – replete with highborn ladies and millionaires – would have been alien to Continental criminologists. He complained about greedy and decadent British flappers who demanded the names of their lovers tattooed on their toes, and compelled him to buy expensive modern art books and plates of heraldic devices to copy.⁸⁹

While statistics on tattooed women in Britain are to be treated with caution, one source described 'hundreds' of British ladies being tattooed every day.⁹⁰ Lombroso was greatly disturbed by this British craze, which he saw as a dangerous anomaly within civilized Europe. By 1895, Lombroso was offering long diatribes against British aristocratic women, who appeared to spoil many of his criminological claims. His response was to broaden his arguments. The aristocratic tattoo was proof that all women were fundamentally at odds with modernity: 'it is very much', he said, 'like returning to the trials by god of the middle ages'. He concluded with an attack against the true enemy: not just atavism, but fashion itself: 'O Fashion!' he said, 'you are very frivolous; you have caused many complaints against the most beautiful half of the human race! But you have not come to this, and I believe you will not be permitted to come to it.'⁹¹ The fatal flaw of highborn women – namely, their susceptibility to ephemeral crazes – must be corrected or restrained by more rational social forces. Thus, the transgressive aristocratic woman, rather than the low-class criminal, became the true source of savagery within Britain.

In Lombroso's analysis, criminals and aristocratic women were linked by their propensity to mark themselves in irrational and painful ways. But the tattoo served a very different function in Britain's literatures of fashion. Whereas tattooing on aristocratic British men was typically linked to themes of loss and degeneration, British women's tattoos encompassed a wider and more complicated range of associations. High-end journals like *Tatler* and *Vanity Fair* offered women a range of new tattoo motifs. In addition to the delicate birds and butterflies by tattooists trained in Japan, 'ladies who like to keep pace with the times might be adorned with illustrations of motor cars', or images of the Jazz Wave, the Great War, and Prohibition.⁹² One artist presented the tattoo as 'an alternative for women to spending spare time posing in front of the camera, reclining her head in the dentist's chair, or placing herself resignedly in the hands of her coiffeur'.⁹³ The tattoo was associated in Britain with leisured pastimes dedicated to the improvement of female appearance: linked not only to commemorative and representational art, but also to relatively new technologies of self-portraiture. The aristocratic female tattoo – often quite an expensive endeavour – signalled the hyper-modernity of the female body itself.

The special role of tattooing in Britain was of great interest to scholars who focused primarily on continental Europe and the United States. Early twentieth-century theorists like Adolf Loos tended to exclude European bodies from their accounts of tattooing and evolutionary theory.⁹⁴ According to Loos, tattooed Europeans had fallen prey to one of the key dangers of modern ornamental styles: an excess or surplus of the impulse to decorate that constituted its own form of vandalism.⁹⁵ In some sense, the story of the tattooed princes could be explained by Loos's theory; fashionable British women had remade the British rulers into aestheticized objects of derision rather than effective political leaders. The key difference was that for Loos, the notion of surplus ornamentation was associated with the bourgeoisie: specifically, with what he called the 'bourgeois fad' of the Art Nouveau. But in Britain, this 'surplus style' (in which tattooing was conceived of as relentlessly modernist) was associated almost exclusively with the aristocracy. The British bourgeoisie played virtually no role in ethnographic or sociological investigations of tattooing, except perhaps as stern critics of decadent aristocratic practices. Repeatedly, continental scholars such as Loos invoked the British 'craze', but failed to explain this phenomenon in ways that altered their own fundamental association of tattooing and criminality.

By the 1920s, a new explanatory model for British aristocratic tattooing was emerging across the Atlantic, an important alternative to the Lombrosian critique. In the interwar years, Albert Parry began to link these British tattoos to a host of female philanthropic endeavours, such as settlement work. His argument was that both the tattoo and the settlement house offered proximity to the energetic worker's body, transfusing vitality

into an enervated aristocracy. Parry theorized that since the tattoo was a sign of strength, and women were responsible for guarding against sterility and senility, upper-class women were obvious candidates for the tattooing craze.⁹⁶ The female aristocratic tattoo thus represented an attempt to invigorate a devalued class, a dying breed. In a class in which men were routinely targeted for their effete-ness and their non-productiveness, women were key to making aristocracy *à la mode* again.⁹⁷ Again, gender was a critical axis for interpreting the sociopolitical meanings of the tattoo. Parry gave British women a moral, if paradoxical imperative; the 'savage' tattoo was the only hope for the aristocracy to modernize, the only way to stay viable in an anti-aristocratic age. The female aristocratic tattoo marked a call to arms in the new war against hierarchy. Other scholars stressed the tattoo's function for aristocratic women in delineating patterns of inheritance and blood, citing a British marchioness who bore her family coat-of-arms between her shoulder blades.⁹⁸ The kinship between 'savage' tattooing and European heraldry was already well established by Allen, but the idea that British aristocrats required a physical indicator of their own lines of descent was new. The psychic traits associated with tattooing – cynicism, indifferent fatalism, and gloom – seemed especially appropriate to Britain's interwar upper classes.

For Parry, the example of tattooed 'Mayfair denizens' supported his claim that lower-class tattooing was on the decline both in Britain and in the United States after the First World War, especially among sailors. He theorized that better-educated and less superstitious men had joined the naval forces during the war, and the navy was now full of 'pastry-devouring sheiks who refuse to be tattooed at all'. The main hope for the tattooing industry was from women, especially those who sought cosmetic facial tattoos: 'more women ordering Eastern stars on their intelligent hips and the present crisis will be successfully passed! Another final step towards the absolute excellence of permanent blush and eternally red lips, and the tremendous gains of the rouge and lipstick trade will be gloriously shared by the tattoo-men'.⁹⁹ The ethnographic depiction of tattooed women in Burma and the Lombrosian account of the tattooed European criminal shifted to make way for the modern tattooed aristocrat.

What were the lessons of Burma for metropolitan observers, especially for those mysteriously decorative aristocrats? Were highborn women of the metropole being asked to adopt the Maori *moko*, or perhaps the punitive tattoos of Mah Gnee? Clearly they were not. Rather, a different element of colonial tattooing was being evoked here. Parry's description elicited the lessons of the Chin, which was that tattoos – rather than marking a population as hopelessly primitive – could make anyone into a modern woman. In Parry's vision of the postwar tattoo, tattooing would reach its feminized and commodified peak, ushering in an era of 'opulence and influence' for tattooists that linked them to the new public spaces of feminine beautification: that is, the beauty parlours.

Other commentators suggested that aristocratic British women were most likely to adopt facial tattoos in order to cure their 'unfashionable' Victorian pallor.¹⁰⁰

In the Chisholm investigation, there were multiple disturbing elements of Mah Gnee's tattoo. Although British authorities deplored the absence of 'outward signs' of their rule in Burma, signs such as these were clearly undesirable. The tattooed face of Mah Gnee testified to an act of British brutality that both mimicked and misinterpreted indigenous techniques of judgment. The Chisholm case, as well as its broader ethnographic apparatus, compellingly illustrated the multitude of ways in which British colonizers might fail to achieve anything like a civilizing mission. Ultimately, accusations of negligence supplanted those of direct violence, but a sense that Britain's grip on the region was tenuous continued to pervade the press coverage of Chisholm and his accusers. At the same time, the ethnographic machinery surrounding the case served to acquaint metropolitan readers with women who were legitimately and voluntarily (rather than forcibly) tattooed. The tattooed women of the hill tribes signalled the survival of indigenous resistance to foreign rulers, exposing the ongoing roadblocks to British annexation. Yet, considering the extent to which tattooed women in Burma outshone their British counterparts in terms of social and economic rights, the tattoo itself could not be safely relegated to a 'primitive' practice. After all, according to Britain's own ethnographers, who was more modern than the tattooed women of Burma? If Mah Gnee's testimony brought to light the most egregious ways in which Britons had failed to act as modernizers in Burma, then the tattooed faces of the Chin women positioned an indigenous population as more modern than the British themselves.

Both in the metropole and in the colony, then, tattooed women dramatized narratives of British decline. The 'craze' for tattooing in Britain is best understood through an analysis of its specific colonial precedents, which in the case of Burma went beyond exoticist travels or conquests to a more complex type of encounter. The colonial memories evoked by metropolitan women's tattoos spoke to a recent history of British abjection on a domestic and a global scale rather than one of triumphant conquest. It was a history in which women – white Europeans, Burmese, and tribal – had played a highly visible role in challenging both Britain's military dominance and its claims to act as a modernizing force. In 1889, Chisholm's apparent reversion to an outmoded system of law and punishment – in short, his legal atavism – had highlighted the juridical primitivism of the British. By the 1920s, the problem of the female tattoo in the metropole was quite the opposite, although still linked to a theme of collective decline. The metropolitan fashion for tattooing was strongly associated with the historical processes that had been literally and figuratively deadly for Britain's ruling classes: the economic and political disempowerments of the prewar period, as well as the incalculable losses

of the war itself. The key difficulty with tattooed women in Britain was not their atavism, but the fact that they were so tragically, irreversibly modern.

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