

Everyday Transgender Belonging in Transitioning Yangon

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

The Australian National University

March 2016

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Abstract

This research is the first ethnographic study of male to female trans everyday life in Myanmar. My fieldwork took place at the end of military rule and as the state began transitioning to democracy. I focus on the constraints faced by trans in Yangon, and how they overcome them. Within the natal family, trans typically experience multiple forms of violence, anguish and alienation. Negative experience in the family is in large part a result of *anadè*, the Burmese rules of civility. For trans, the social consequences of *anadè* are more pressing problems than state repression.

As a result of repression within the family, many trans exit in order to live openly. Others maintain a masculine appearance, passing as gender normative and thereby do not disrupt their family and work lives. Exit is made possible through entry into units of trans kinship. Trans kinship is formed through multifaceted relations between trans mothers and daughters, husbands and wives and spirits and humans, thereby creating an extensive network of trans space within the interstices of the state. A key feature of trans kinship is the re-creation of *anadè* in a changed form that supports trans ways of being, sex and intimacy. In order to enter the Yangon trans world, intimacy was a necessary element of my ethnographic practice.

Acknowledgements

Firstly I wish to thank my supervisor Andrew Walker, who provided essential guidance, understanding and stimulating input. I am also grateful to my advisory panel of Peter Jackson, Nicholas Farrelly, Ana Dragojlovic and Jane Ferguson for their input and direction in various stages. The Department of Political and Social Change was a wonderful home and community for this project and I am thankful to department members who provided support, encouragement and feedback, particularly Nick Cheesman, Tyrell Haberkorn, Ed Aspinall, Tamara Jacka, Trevor Wilson, Colum Graham and Chit Win. I also wish to acknowledge Lynette J. Chua, who has been an inspiring colleague and discussant.

This research would have been impossible without the informants who were so generous with their time and allowed me into their lives. While I cannot name them, I am forever grateful and I hope I can meet their expectations in what I have written.

I also thank the organisations in Myanmar that have assisted me, welcoming me into their offices and allowing me to observe their activities and meet members of their networks. In particular, I would like to thank Colors Rainbow, the Myanmar MSM Network, Medecins Du Monde, Phyo Pin and the TOP Centre.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and endless patience of my family, Violet Cho, Ron Gilbert and Sue Fisher. It would not have happened without the goading of Alan Robson.

All errors are my own.

Terminology

For brevity, the usage of 'trans' in this thesis refers to people who were assigned male at birth and who do not identify as male. "Trans" and its semantic alternatives are culturally problematic in both Burmese and English, a topic I elaborate on in Chapter one. Unless otherwise specified, generalisations about Burmese trans culture and community do not extend to transmen, who have their own community and culture that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I use the pronouns 'ze', 'hir' and 'hirsself' to refer to trans individuals. The third person pronoun is gender ambiguous in Burmese as the root pronoun *thu* တူ can refer to both masculine and feminine subjects, although it also has a specifically feminine form. This gives some flexibility to gender liminal subjects, who can use the pronoun *thu*, leaving some ambiguity as to the gender of the person being referred to. When Burmese people speak English, it is common to interchangeably use 'he' and 'she', a habit often considered to be a grammatical mistake.

Informants use a range of key Burmese terms and English loanwords in relation to gender and sexuality. For convenience of readers, I use English translations of some key Burmese words, which I mark with italics. In the first instance of using a translated term, I provide the Burmese script and a Romanised version alongside it. Romanisation of Burmese follows the BGN/PCGN system. When informants have used an English loanword, I also flag this through italics. See the glossary for a full list of Burmese terms used.

Introduction

Ahmed¹ is standing, leaning slightly against the wall, between the sink and the far left cubicle door in one of downtown Yangon's underground toilets. Ze smiles at me when I enter; I recognise hir from the footbridge above.² Ze is trendily dressed, wearing factory-ripped jeans, a white t-shirt that displays a few English words in a difficult to read font, and cosmetic contact lenses that make hir eyes look like those of a cat. We chat quietly, conscious of patrons on the other side of the cubicle walls. We turn back to walk up the stairs to the sunlight and the teashop on the footpath above.

For Ahmed, the underground toilet, 'village' (ရွာ *ywa*) in trans vernacular, is a place of work and pleasure. Whenever ze needs money, or when ze is bored, ze descends underground and waits. Ahmed is Muslim and lives in a cramped ground floor apartment in downtown Yangon, in a lane off a minor road with hir sister and niece, who sell vegetables on a foldout table on the side of the road. Ahmed is determined to get married to a woman and have children. Ze sees homosexuality as a sin that can threaten hir place in hir family and Muslim community. Ahmed's family and neighbours do not know about Ahmed's sex life and source of income, and ze has a number of strategies to

¹ I have changed the names of all informants in order to protect their identity. I have also avoided specifying place names in Yangon, where disclosure could reveal the identities of the individuals referred to.

² Part of this introduction was published as 'Familial Transphobia and Kinship of Opens in Myanmar' in the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 18.

keep this part of hir life hidden. Ze only cruises across the other side of the administrative boundary from where ze lives. And ze avoids Muslim men. Later ze introduces me to hir family, checking beforehand that I'm to keep what ze calls hir 'man to man' life confidential.

Ahmed is conflicted between hir place in hir family, hir ethno-religious community, hir gender and sexual desires. Ze meticulously tries to balance status and membership in hir birth family with lovers and friendships in non-gender and hetero normative Yangon. Ahmed also works to separate the rules of civility and moral codes that cause contradiction and conflict between different domains of life. Each domain contains a degree of regulation with regard to categories, such as class, gender, age and profession. Ahmed's everyday life is complicated by hir choice to maintain family membership and thereby carefully regulating hir 'other' life. This is a choice many young Burmese who are trans and same-sex attracted make. Some, like Ahmed, choose to stay in the family, living with the limits that that entails. Others choose to exit, to navigate belonging elsewhere, to be openly trans, and to join trans families and the trans economy.

Burmese dynamics of kinship constitute a central concern in trans everyday life. Within the family, trans typically experience multiple forms of violence, anguish and alienation. As a result, exit from the family is a necessary option for many trans individuals. Trans identity is most often realised within trans kinship units. These units are largely constructed through particular work

*lines*³, where trans daughters enter into mother-daughter relationships that combine intimacy with financial security and vocational training. In addition, trans informants seek out romantic forms of intimacy with gender normative men, although pairings are rarely long-lasting, typically leading to heartbreak from trans partners.

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Yangon⁴ and outlying townships. As Myanmar's most populous city and former capital, it has long been a hub for popular culture, global capital and cultural flows. It is therefore unsurprising that it is also a centre for gender and sexual minority culture, economy, community organising and a destination for trans migrants from across the country.

As is the case with gender and sexual minorities across Southeast Asia and beyond, there is a range of vernacular terms in Burmese and English that denote gender and sexual minority subject positions.⁵ The main subject positions for those assigned male at birth are *open* (အပွင့်၊ *apwint*), *hider* (အပုန်း၊ *apôn*), *homo* and *guy* (သူငယ်၊ *thu nge*). Both *opens* and *hidiers* identify as

³ *Line* (လိင်၊ *laing*) refers to a particular profession, such as the 'beautician line' (မိတ်ကပ်လိင်၊ *make-up laing*) for beauticians or 'spirit line' (နတ်လိင်၊ *nat laing*) for spirit mediums. I will herein refer to professions generally as 'work *lines*'.

⁴ In 1989, the Burmese Government controversially changed many place names and spellings. For instance, 'Burma' was changed to 'Myanmar' and 'Rangoon' to 'Yangon'. I use current, official names for the country and cities. I have however opted to use the adjective 'Burmese' for readability. When discussing history, I have kept the previous names.

⁵ For instance, see Peter Jackson, "An explosion of Thai identities: global queering and re-imagining queer theory." *Culture, health & sexuality* 2, no. 4 (2000): 405-424 and Don Kulich, *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, (1998).

feminine in varying degrees.⁶ *Opens* are individuals assigned male at birth and who act as and appear feminine. For *opens*, hormone replacement therapy, imported from China, is popular although not a rite of passage. Surgical interventions are not yet available in the local medical market, although a very small number of *opens* with access to capital have been able to get surgery overseas. *Hiders* are individuals assigned male at birth and who pass as masculine and are positioned as hiding their inner feminine self. *Guys*, sometimes called 'straight' by Burmese English speakers, are gender conforming and are the primary object of sexual desire amongst *opens* and to a lesser extent, *hiders*.

Differences between *opens* and *hiders* are a cause of some social and political animosity. *Opens* and *hiders* rarely socialize with each other. Some *opens* resent *hiders*, thinking that they do not sacrifice their social standing, economic prospects or familial ties in the way that they do. *Opens* see themselves as living more authentically than *hiders*. For *hiders*, there is risk in publicly associating with *opens*, as it could draw unwanted attention to their subject position. Those who identify as non-gender normative and are attracted to others who are non-gender normative do not fit easily into the categories of *open* or *hider*. The categories of *open* and *hider* operate according to gender binaries, where the *open* or *hider* is feminine and attracted to gender normative

⁶ Given a common identification with the feminine to varying degrees, I use the term 'trans' to refer to both *hiders* and *opens* (as well as to non-gender normative practices more generally). In doing so, I recognise that *hiders* in particular would not necessarily identify as such, and that all category terms are culturally problematic in varying ways. My usage of trans also reflects the privileging of gender identity over sexual orientation in the Burmese context.

men. As a result, the more recent subject position of *homo* has been gaining popularity, particularly in urban areas. *Homo* often denotes men who identify as male and who are attracted to other *homos*, or *guys*, or both. Intimate relationships between *homos* can therefore be characterized by measures of equality and durability not possible for *opens* (or many *hiders*) who are in a position of structural inequality to *guys*, as a result of their femininity and non-normative status. The challenge of intimacy is a common source of discontent, as *guys* often demand material benefits in order to stay with *opens*. Many *guys* eventually give into social pressure to marry and have children.⁷

While *opens* are subject to repression, in particular police harassment and abuse within the legal system, the more immediate causes of violence, shame and anguish take place within the natal family. It is within the family, and in childhood, that non-gender normative informants typically moved into trans subject positions and experience the often violent reaction from other members of the household. In part this is a consequence of the dynamics of gender within Burmese cultural systems. For *opens*, an association with femininity results in a loss of social status as men are 'structurally superior' to women with regard to the Burmese cultural categories of *awza* (အာဇာနည်, moral authority) and *pôn* (အာဇာနည်, psychosocial power) (Spiro 1997, 18). *Awza*, a central form of power in

⁷ Female genders and sexualities are more atomized when compared to their male counterparts, lacking common category terms. While there are similarly structured subject positions among female gender and sexual minorities to their male counterparts, including the equivalent of *opens*, *hiders* and *guys*, there is only a popular term for female masculinity, *yaukkyalya* (ယောက်ျားလျာ). *Yaukkyalya* can be defined as those who "act like men", and is a term that female informants consider derogatory. In urban areas, in the diaspora and online, English loanwords are gaining traction, including *tomboy* and *lesbian*.

Burmese culture, has been commonly translated as ‘influence’ and as ‘diversified authority or awe’ (Steinberg 2001, 42), in contradistinction to *ana* (အာနာ), which means a more physical form of power. In this schema, *awza* involves ruling through consent and *ana* involves force. *Awza* is associated with political authority while *pôn* is associated with moral and religious power. One’s amount of *pôn* is determined by karma (ကံ၊ *kan*) through the accumulation of merit in past lives. Since men have greater *pôn*, shifting from a masculine to a feminine subject position reduces that *pôn*, which can cause a loss of respect and feelings of diminishment. The change in subject position creates a problem for a family’s status, since that status is regulated by the rules of *anadè* (အားနာတယ်).

Anadè is a regulatory framework that governs interpersonal interaction. At its most basic, *anadè* entails the avoidance of speech or actions that cause discomfort or distress in a person who qualifies for the deference that a feeling of *anadè* involves. *Anadè*, in its dominant form, is a problem for trans Burmese because it is gender normative and involves the positioning of them as inferior within gender and heteronormative society. As a key institution for cultural transmission, the Burmese family unit plays a major role in acculturating norms of *anadè* in trans children who suffer as a result. From a young age, children are taught to obey their parents and to support them. In the dominant narrative of a family with a trans child, a key preoccupation of the father is to save face. In such a case, the risk of losing face stems from public ridicule of the trans child.

Transgression of one member of a family reflects on the others. However the father is further implicated because the trans status of his child reflects poorly on his *awza*, that is, his ability to govern the family unit, preventing and correcting any transgressions.

Chit Chit, an informant who used to live with hir parents in a Yangon satellite town, began *opening* (ပွင့်ဝေဝေဝေ *pwinte*) when ze was a teenager. Hir father initially tried to use his influence to goad Chit Chit into being gender normative. When this did not have the desired effect, Chit Chit's father attempted to use corporal punishment, which also did not succeed. Chit Chit's exit from the family thereby challenged hir father's authority. Since *awza* is linked to masculinity, the loss of face caused to the father when a child *opens* can be emasculating and helps explain the virulent reaction of fathers in particular towards their trans children. The diminishment of *awza* thus leads the father to resort to *ana*.

The path from birth family to trans family is exemplified in the story of Lay, an *open* in Yangon. At thirteen, Lay could not bear to live with hir family, after hir father told hir that ze was not welcome if ze kept being trans. Ze was pushed out into the streets, which was particularly difficult at the time as ze was only just coming into an *open* subject position and lacked a place within *open* social networks. To enter trans kinship relations requires certain knowledge and skills, usually acquired through adoption by a trans mother, which Lay did not yet have. So ze wandered the streets. Lay eventually decided

to try and return home, which though oppressive, seemed preferable to life on the streets. Hir parents beat hir with a metal rod when ze returned but let hir stay. Lay continued hir schooling in grade three and helped with hir mother's market stall. Hir father lost his job before Lay could sit the grade three exam so ze dropped out. Lay's own parents became increasingly frustrated at Lay's refusal to be gender normative and their inability to control Lay's *opening* within their neighbourhood. Eventually they told Lay that ze was not welcome in their house if ze continued to be *open* so ze was again exiled to the streets, where ze ended up joining a trans family of *offer* (အော်ဖာ၊ *open, hider, guy* or *homo sex workers*).

It is through moving out of the family home and negotiating new, trans modes of relatedness, involving reconstructions of kinship, that many informants are able to experience a sense of belonging. Kinship is therefore of central importance for trans subject positions and belonging. When individuals are rejected by their natal family, they seek and create new configurations of family that involve relationships of mother and daughter, as well as friendships and romantic entanglements. These familial roles often overlap with relations of exchange in the context of work, teaching or gift-giving. *Opens* in particular relate to each other as common kin and that is a deep, natural support network that acts as a replacement for the natal family. A key difference between natal and trans postnatal models of kinship is the criteria for membership. The natal family is a vertical system of kinship, where entry is based on inheritance and

shared primordial sentiments. Trans kinship is horizontal and diffuse, with entry based on fluid cultural categories of gender and desire.

Since the 1960s, *opens* and *hidlers* have increasingly created an economic niche that has led to important livelihood opportunities and forms of social organisation. Two professions in Myanmar are now associated with *opens*, spirit mediumship and beauty therapy. These professions are colloquially labelled *lines*. The beauty industry is the dominant work *line* available to trans Burmese, superseding but intertwined with spirit mediumship and sex work. Beauty salons function as homes and community centres, pick up joints and nodes in international HIV support networks. Trans work *lines* are the core safety net for trans people, for both those who are young and have recently left home and for older trans mothers who have long since left home and lack the support of consanguineal children. These work *lines* facilitate connections between people across space and time. Nowadays, becoming a beautician (မိတ်ကပ်ဆရာ၊ *make-up saya*) is the most common aspiration of trans Burmese and the industry absorbs more trans people than any other. Those at the top of the industry live glamorous public lives and are the primary object of trans pride in the country. Kinship relations organised through work *lines* are significant as a social structure of trans belonging, given the often-negative experience of natal families.

In trans culture, daughters are obliged to respect, serve and sometimes pay obeisance to their mothers; and mothers are obliged to support and nurture

them, so their daughters can lead independent, successful and happy lives. Support is especially important for young trans like Lay, who are particularly vulnerable until they grow into independent trans mothers, capable of adopting their own daughters. The categories of 'mother' and 'daughter' can be classified on a spectrum. Some mothers are of fundamental importance to their daughter's life and have enduring, lifelong relationships. Others are fleeting so a daughter might have one or two primary mothers and many secondary mothers. In everyday trans speech, 'mother' and 'daughter' are also common pronouns that older trans use to address younger trans and vice versa. While kinship terms such as 'sister' and 'uncle' are commonly used as honorifics in Burmese, 'mother' and 'daughter' as terms of address typically signal a greater degree of closeness than sibling or aunt and uncle terms. In the trans world, mother daughter relations are further instantiated by the common use of the verb 'adopt': mothers talk of adopting daughters and vice versa.

Not all trans exit the family. Ahmed, for instance, chose to stay with his family and carefully hide his trans life. The very different choices that Ahmed made, compared to Lay, can be conceptualised using Albert Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit, voice and loyalty. Originating as an economic study of organisations (including states), Hirschman conceived that a member of an organisation, or someone involved in a transaction, who is unhappy, may either exit or use their voice to change the organisation from within. Hirschman saw loyalty as a key factor that determines whether to invest in and risk change. Those with greater loyalty use their voice to attempt to change the organisation

and those with less loyalty choose to exit (Hirschman 1970). Exit is a dynamic process and not necessarily final or permanent. Within trans Yangon, some exit the family, only to re-enter later when there is a shift in power dynamics and they are in a stronger position to voice their own terms. Others exit but maintain contact. Lastly, Ahmed and other *hiders* choose to stay in the family but nonetheless exit by way of keeping a major part of their lifeworld secret. Ahmed, who lacks voice within his family, is not staying in his family simply as a result of loyalty but rather lacks alternatives.

In this thesis, the concept of belonging is used to analyse and explain key themes in trans everyday life, involving kinship struggles, love, magic and the use of urban space. The concept of belonging is increasingly used in social science literature to explore anthropological, political and philosophical questions of identity, citizenship and community.⁸ Following Nira Yuval-Davis (2011, 4), I view belonging as the "emotional attachment" and feeling "at home". She contrasts this to the politics of belonging as 'specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies' (2011, 4-5). In Myanmar, the state is actively attempting to mould discourses of who is and is not Burmese. An example of this is the exclusion of Rohingya from citizenship (Maung Zarni and Cowley 2014). However, the everyday contestations of trans belonging that I studied largely takes place away from the gaze of the state. Belonging can be defined 'through a sense of experience, a

⁸ For instance, see Cohen 1982; Eng 1997; Gorman-Murray 2008; Grosz 1995; Malbon 1999; Mizielinska 2009; Olaveson 2004; Richardson 1998; Valentine 2009; Yuval-Davis 2006.

phenomenology of locality' which lends itself well to ethnographic study (Lovell 1998, 1). In this sense, it involves a process of negotiating social identity and community rather than an endpoint. Theories of belonging have highlighted the auto-biographical, relational, cultural, economic and legal factors associated with life journeys such as those of my informants (Antonsich 2010, 646). Issues around belonging assist in explaining trans pain and suffering within natal families and the search for safety outside of them, in other words, the choice between exit and voice.

My informants did not identify the state as a central concern in their everyday life. That is in contrast to the political dynamics of other identity-based movements and population groups.⁹ In authoritarian Myanmar, the construction and practice of trans subject positions and the negotiation of belonging happens in the interstices of the state. Agents of the state appear in everyday trans life only occasionally, involving the types of repression notorious in Myanmar. Police watch some of the more public cruising areas downtown, such as bridges and overpasses. They know who the *offer* (rentboys and trans sex workers) are, they see them picking up clients and walking towards short-term guesthouses. Sometimes, usually in response to a serious crime such as assault or murder, they sweep, arresting rentboys who can then be subjected to torture. Two of my informants were arrested and then beaten up and penetrated with batons in an urban police lock-up following a stabbing. The place of the state is of course rapidly changing as Myanmar embarks on

⁹ See South 2001; Harriden 2001; Rajah 2002; Rogers 2004; Sakhong 2010.

democratisation and this will invariably produce new forms of gender and sexual regulation and new expectations from citizens. Notable reforms include new (although limited) rights to protest, the legalisation of independent trade unions, the abolition of the Press Scrutiny Board and the relaxing of currency controls.¹⁰

However, during the time of my ethnographic fieldwork from 2011-2012, my respondents, in their desire and ability to live as *opens* and *hidors*, rarely mentioned the state as an object of concern. *Offer* were the main exception to this. With democratisation, the state will likely become more intrusive with regard to a variety of regulatory mechanisms. As I reiterate throughout this thesis, and in particular in Chapter Seven, one of the principal modes of regulation and barriers to belonging was *anadè*, which is largely a demotic set of values and power arrangements. *Anadè* is a form of power existent within interpersonal relations and while it is not a state form of power, it often functions in the interests of the state through maintaining hierarchical forms of social cohesion. *Anadè* is a central device that ensures the reproduction of the heteronormative family structure within Myanmar.

A brief survey of the field

As an ethnography of trans life in Myanmar, this thesis is part of a

¹⁰ For a detailed overview of political reforms in this period, see Crouch and Lindsey 2014 and Steinberg 2014.

growing field of qualitative studies of non-normative genders and sexualities in South and Southeast Asia. These cover themes that include everyday politics, social movements, identity and public health. As stated above, one of my findings has been that the state plays a minimal role, if any, in relation to trans gender and sexuality. The state is marginal compared to the more pressing social concerns of kinship, intimacy and work. This finding has similarities with other key studies in Southeast Asia. For instance, Jackson has written that state-level homophobia is largely absent in Thailand. Legislation outlawing male and female homosexuality was introduced in 1903, perhaps as an attempt to be 'modern,' although this was later abandoned as irrelevant (Jackson 1995, 37). The lack of state repression, which Peter Jackson has called 'benevolent but unaccepting' can then explain the lack of an organised gay political movement and the subsequent absence of political concerns within trans (and gay) everyday life. Similarly, state governance does not feature in Boellstorff's study of gay and lesbian life in Indonesia, which could be explained by a lack of state repression of LGBTs in Indonesia. Boellstorff (1996) instead describes state-sexuality connections as significant but the connections are abstract. For instance, he argues that the Indonesian government's 'family principle' defines citizens as heterosexual and reproductive, creating desire and pressure amongst *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians to marry and reproduce, although the link is tangential.¹¹

While Myanmar is commonly placed within the Southeast Asian region

¹¹ This is primarily explored in the third section of the book, titled 'Sexuality and Nation'.

and is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), historically the country has been more closely integrated with South Asia. During much of the colonial period, Myanmar was a province of British India. Key cultural influences such as Buddhism, kingship and architecture have also been traced to India (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2013). And as with other British colonies, India and Myanmar share many common laws, including Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that prohibits 'unnatural' sex (The Penal Code 1861). Section 377 has been a key issue within scholarship and political movements of Indian gay and transgender people. In Arvind Narrain's terms, the law is 'the locus of oppression' (2007, 255). While the law was 'read down' by the Delhi High Court in 2009, to exclude adult consensual homosexual sex, a subsequent Supreme Court reversal led to the reinstatement of Section 377 to apply to all homosexual acts (Rao and Jacob 2014). Despite a vigorous debate on the law, there have been few convictions in both India and Myanmar. What is significant, according to some scholars, are the indirect effects of the law. For Ramasubban (2004, 94), the law's 'very existence moulds beliefs and attitudes, and drives the demeaning and abusive treatment meted out to people of alternative sexualities'. Similarly, Arvind Narrain (2007, 257) calls Section 377 a 'worldview', arguing that it has a profound effect on the way LGBTs are viewed in everyday life. Like Boellstorff's analysis of the 'family principle' in Indonesia, the effects of state regulation in India seem ambiguous. While the law, on paper, is repressive, the literature from India does not make it clear how it directly impacts on the lives and identities of gay and trans people.

While the state is a key feature in much 'queer' and trans South Asian research, it is largely described as a negative, repressive force. For example, in the introduction to a major edited volume on sexuality in India, the authors' detail LGBTs as victims of ideologies and structures of oppression and discrimination that permeate social institutions. They then situate the book as 'an attempt to make interventions in as many diverse areas of sexual politics as possible' (Bose and Bhattacharyya 2007, xxix-xxx). The state is essentialised as a singular, repressive force with power directed against LGBTs. Similarly, some post-structuralist writing on citizenship places the state and Hindu nationalism on one side of a binary and LGBTs on the other, with one writer claiming that Muslims are excluded in India so they are therefore queer (Bacchetta 1999). This relies on a clean separation between the state and LGBTs without an account of contingent and multi-level relations that lack coherence across state agencies, institutions and discourses. In these instances, power is conceptualised as negative and repressive. Both the diversity of everyday state interactions with trans and the productive effects that might result from them are absent.¹² Similarly, everyday life itself has been marginalised within studies of non-normative genders and sexualities in Southeast Asia, often foregrounded by other concerns of the state, modernity, media, health and literature.

In this thesis, I focus on everyday life. The state is featured in my research only where it emerged in the context of interactions with informants.

¹² For Foucault (2008) the development of discourses of sexual perversion led to unintended consequences, notably the proliferation of new sexual identities.

This is sometimes repressive, such as in cases of arrests and police abuse; and sometimes positive, such as in some of the efforts of the Department of Health in HIV prevention and treatment in partnership with some local, *open-run* groups. It can also be sexual, as Myanmar's notorious agents of repression, police and soldiers, are also erotic beings. Some are of course non-heteronormative themselves. From the perspective of many of my informants, police and soldiers can be both objects of fear and objects of desire. These state institutions contain immense opportunities for fleeting sex or longer-term intimacy since they are loaded with men. As one informant who lived on an army base commented, 'it's easy to fuck soldiers. You just unzip their pants.' There is even a Burmese trans term for soldiers: 'grape' because of the colour of their uniform. So if someone desires a soldier, they would say 'I want to eat a grape' (eat being the trans word for sex).

The historical scene

This study is of the present rather than the past. While I made some attempts to explore trans history, I was constrained by the almost total absence of primary source materials. An initial study of Myanmar's 'queer' and trans history points to occasional repression, sporadic regulation and a proliferation of trans identities and people in the last two decades. The earliest source I have found is a 1795 royal order that outlaws same-sex relations, with offenders punished by being dressed in the clothes of the opposite gender and exiled (*Royal Orders of Burma* 1986, 13). Following this, records are scanty. In the

1902 colonial census, the British counted five male prostitutes, although it is unclear if their clientele were male or female (Census Commissioner's Office 1901, table XXIII). Later, in the 1970s, a researcher based at Rangoon General Hospital lists 'homosexuals' as a group at risk of venereal disease.¹³ (Tha Hla 1976, 36, 38). These point to some of the ways that *opens* and *hiders* have been subjectified by those in power but not how they have constructed their own subject positions.

Outside of Myanmar, the spread of capitalism and print media has been a key explanatory factor in the history of gay, lesbian and trans identities. In the urban centres of London and New York, gay communities flourished from the early twentieth century onwards, as urbanisation provided productive opportunities for men to gather, organise and hide (Chauncey 1994; Houlbrook 2005). In Southeast Asia, capitalism is a central feature in studies of gender and sexual identities in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. For instance, in *Philippine Gay Culture*, J. Neil Garcia (2009, xix-xxv) uses critical theory to critique the discursive construction of Filipino gay identity over the twentieth century, involving a hybridisation of 'nativist' and Western subjectivities. In Thailand, Jackson traces modern gay cultures to 1970s Bangkok, when in parallel to the West, gay periodicals were established after capitalism became firmly established (Jackson 2009).

¹³ Tha Hla (1976, 38) writes that 'homosexuals may be extremely promiscuous and in addition one has heterosexual contacts. As a risk group they pose difficult epidemiological problems.'

In Yangon, a trans scene grew in the early 1970s. This scene featured private parties, trans spirit mediumship and a prominent all-trans performance troupe, that had a media profile and toured the country, even performing for troops at military bases. The prominence of trans within spirit mediumship emerged at a similar time to new gay cultures elsewhere, perhaps in the 1960s onwards, and is itself part of and facilitated by local forms of capitalism.



Plate i: A trans social gathering in Yangon, circa 1975. Courtesy of Dr. Myint Maw.

Spirit mediums (နတ်ကတော်၊ *nat kadaw*) occupy an ambiguous social position, respected as powerful ritual specialists while also derided by many Burmese as superstitious, self-interested and a threat to Buddhist orthodoxy. Trans spirit mediums are the iconic image of trans Myanmar, featured in

occasional gay tourist and ethnological material. While I have not been able to find textual evidence of an early history of trans roles within Burmese spirit mediumship, older spirit mediums I have spoken to reminisce that up until the mid-twentieth century, the profession was largely a female sphere. This is supported by other academic studies of Burmese spirit mediumship (Ho 2009).

In this study, trans history is discussed where relevant, in the context of everyday life and lived history, such as the history of trans mothers and their mothers. Many informants shared their personal histories, of childhood and past lovers. Some informants also talked of a mystical trans history, of the spirit Ma Ngwe Taung, from whom trans Burmese descended. According to myth, Ma Ngwe Taung suffered infidelity and sexual shame, which led her to develop a special affinity with trans. She is consequently the only spirit that can provide romantic guidance to trans.

In addition to *open* and *hider* history is the wider political context of this research. This research took place just before and at the beginning of Myanmar's political transition from military dictatorship. Since independence from the British in 1948, authoritarian rule has been the norm. In the first decade of independence, Myanmar's parliamentary democracy was characterised by the widespread outbreak of ethnic-based and communist insurgencies, leading to a caretaker military government in 1958 and a successful coup in 1962. Since then, Myanmar was ruled by a socialist dictatorship that was notorious in its repression of political opposition,

although this repression did not apply to a growing and high-profile network of *opens*. A national uprising in 1988 led to a new military regime and eventually, a 'roadmap to democracy' that involved elections and a protracted and tightly controlled constitutional drafting process. While *opens* had some presence in the 1988 protests, through a contingent of beauticians, as a community they avoided overt political resistance until the gradual emergence of an LGBT rights movement in exile in the 2000s (Chua and Gilbert 2015). In 2008, amid much scepticism, a referendum was held in which a new constitution was passed, leading to elections two years later. A new national legislature was formed, in which one quarter of the seats were reserved for military appointees. Against common expectations, the quasi-civilian government, led by former military general President Thein Sein, has been characterised by high profile political reforms, including rights to form trade unions, rights to protest, freedom of the press and progress towards a national ceasefire with ethnic insurgent groups. However during 2011, reforms were gradual and there was still widespread distrust of the government and fear of politics. Political liberalisation has resulted in substantial space for *open* and *hider* human rights activism and dialogue with the state that was not possible previously (Chua and Gilbert 2015). Nonetheless, when I asked informants about government regulation of gender and sexuality, a common response was that the state is unrelated to matters of sex and identity.

The ethnographic scene

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of trans urban everyday life during the early stages of Myanmar's democratic transition. My fieldwork took place in the streets, homes, teashops and festival grounds of downtown Yangon and the sprawling satellite towns that ring the city. The bulk of the fieldwork took place from 2011-2012, with subsequent shorter trips in 2013 and 2015. As an ethnography, it involved participant observation within a wide network of trans informants. Given the regulation of where foreigners could reside, I was not able to live in informants' homes but we met around the city, and satellite townships of Yangon. I also conducted in-depth interviews. A diverse range of informants participated in this study, from multiple classes, professions, ages, religions and ethnicities. What informants had in common was that they were *opens*, *hidiers*, *homos* and occasionally *guys*. The geographic spread across Yangon entailed visiting and following informants across the city and outlying townships, as well as beyond the city limits during times of significant spirit festivals. A lot of informants lived and worked within single townships and would only meet those from elsewhere during special occasions, such as temple festivals (ဆုဇာပွဲ *paya pwè*). For those in financial hardship, the cost of bus fares, which was a catalyst for the 2008 Saffron Revolution, inhibited mobility.

I recruited informants through snowball sampling, which involved recruiting participants through my own social networks, then through the social networks of my initial informants (Browne 2005). My entry into trans Myanmar

was through an LGBT rights group in exile, where I had been a volunteer for some months before starting this research. My fieldwork started in Thailand, at a meeting and human rights training for *opens* and *hiders* from Myanmar. The majority of participants were Yangon-based. I went to Yangon soon after and met up with some of the participants, who then introduced me to members of their networks. Informants are connected through loose and overlapping professional, human rights, HIV and social networks. One exception to this was an informant I met on a bus, after overhearing hir speak trans cant. We started talking and kept in touch. Snowball sampling is a common recruitment method in research with groups that are oppressed and marginalised, and as such, open and random recruitment is not viable. It is therefore used in a lot of trans and queer research (Bell 1997). The majority of my informants are *opens* rather than *hiders*, as I found more *opens* willing to talk to me and invite me into parts of their lives. I also initially aimed to include Burmese female masculinities and women attracted to women in this research, but I had a far harder time recruiting them through the networks I had access to. This is in part because, as male, it is clearly not possible for me to do intimate ethnography in what are female spaces. It is also a result of the comparative lack of social, political and economic organisation of female genders and sexualities, who are not associated with specific professions, are not an HIV risk group and are far less socially and politically organised than their *open* and *hider* counterparts.

Initially, I started this research with the methodology of institutional ethnography. More than a methodology, institutional ethnography is a

normative ethical platform for the conduct of research that is bottom up and aims at uncovering and disturbing relations of oppression (Smith 2005). Institutional ethnography developed in response to the 'objectified' knowledge of mainstream sociology, which according to Dorothy Smith, oppresses marginalised people by de-legitimising their own knowledge of their everyday life, reducing them to the status of 'objects' exploited within sociological theory and research.¹⁴ Institutional ethnography incorporates normative aims of uncovering ruling relations and discourses in society, for the use and benefit of oppressed people working for social change. As a methodology and particular theoretical position, institutional ethnography locates research problems within everyday life to explore how people participate in and are constrained by institutional processes, from their unique standpoint. The position is that they are experts of their everyday life. But, they are nonetheless oppressed by a higher monolithic power.

While I took the approach of locating my research in the everyday life of participants, I abandoned institutional ethnography after a few months in the field. I spent days and nights with trans friends, in workplaces, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), teashops, festivals and street corners, moving around an amorphous urban trans network. I bracketed out my own pre-conceived ideas of an overarching oppressor, in the form of the state and allied institutions, with the expectation that my informants would lead me to what, if any, higher power mattered to them. However, what became

¹⁴ This is explored in Smith 1987 and 1990.

problematic in following the approach of institutional ethnography was the absence of a clearly delineated higher power in the form of an institution that oppresses *opens* and *hiders* in Yangon. Even though Dorothy Smith's approach is bottom up, at some level it maintains problematic power relations since it assumes that there is an external institution that oppresses from above. After some time in the field, I soon realised that formal institutions were of less significance to my informants than the local networks of social relations in their lives, such as parents, lovers, colleagues, teachers, friends and strangers. For this reason, I did not rely on institutional ethnography as a guiding methodology, although some features have influenced the direction of this research, notably the grounding of critique in everyday life.

As I broadened my focus from institutions and state forms of regulation to the personal, micropolitics of the everyday, this study evolved into what is better labelled an intimate ethnography. Intimate ethnography is a loose descriptor for ethnographic studies that tend to be both auto-ethnographic and involve close relationships between the researcher and his or her informants (Lerum 2001). Intimate ethnography is not necessarily related to gender and sexuality but rather is connected to experience-near methodology, both of self and of other (Waterson and Rylko-Bauer 2007). Experience-near involves doing research in a way 'that, however that experience is represented, [...] must retain its vivacity, which means its capacity to elicit another person's compassion' (Hollway 2009, 473). Experience-near practice also involves bracketing theory during participant observation in order to allow 'the experience to make its

impact' (Miller et. al. 1989, 2). The abstraction of everyday experience thorough theorisation can thus create a barrier to intimate field experience.¹⁵ Intimacy is a two-way process, between the researcher and participants, rather than the researcher being a distant observer, which would act against intimacy. Within the context of this particular research, a non-intimate approach would not have been possible because I would not have been trusted and would not have been able to participate in informants' everyday lives. In order to participate in the demotic world of informants' I had to fit into their social mores, which is impossible without intimacy. That meant disclosing details of my own sexual history and desires, participating in nightlife and supernatural activities. It meant watching porn with informants and being a point person when friends were cruising. It involved publically performing spirit medium dances. It once meant mediating the negotiation of commercial sexual services when language created a blockage. I could therefore enter the trans scene as a participant rather than as a social scientist observing from above, although I was still an outsider. Intimate within this context meant becoming as much a part of the group as was possible, without in my case assuming an *open* or *hider* identity. This approach to intimate ethnography entailed what Lois Wacquant calls 'observant participation' rather than participant observation (Wacquant 2011, 87).

¹⁵ In a seminal essay, Clifford Geertz argued that ethnography requires a balancing of experience-near and experience-distant processes, which he illustrates by the contrasting concepts of 'love', which is experience-near' and 'object cathexis' which is experience-distant. Love is used by people in everyday life to understand their own experience, which 'object cathexis' can be used by social scientists to further a theoretical project (Geertz 1974).

When I spoke to informants, they expressed pleasure that those who will read my work in Australia will know about their lives, their trans culture and their suffering. Within the fieldwork context, informants often introduced me as a teacher of *LGBT* issues. That positioned me as someone who acquires knowledge and disseminates it outside of Myanmar. Informants shared stories with me with the expectation that I would then transmit details of the everyday context of trans Yangon to my readers. Thus in addition to the intimate nature of my relationship with informants, there was an important transactional component linked to the witnessing and transmitting of stories of their suffering. For some informants, the sharing of personal stories was a way of reducing ignorance and improving the social standing of trans as a group. As a result, I am obliged to recount what informants shared in a way that is experience near and comprehensible to them.

In moving away from institutional ethnography, I have used pragmatic sociology of critique, associated with the work of Luc Boltanski, as a guide in the study and theorisation of everyday life. Pragmatic sociology of critique is a reaction against the notion of the 'omniscient sociologist' (2011, 23). It involves a determination 'to take ordinary actors seriously, insisting that they possess vital reflexive – that is, cognitive, normative, and evaluative – capacities, by means of which they shape the parameters underlying the daily construction of social life' (Susen and Turner 2014, xxiii). Following this, I attempt to use theory pragmatically to explain what is going on in everyday life. Where

possible, theoretical and normative discussion is grounded in the demotic sphere.

Overview

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In the first chapter, I outline the social construction of the two dominant emic categories of male non-gender normative subject positions, namely *open* and *hider*. In Myanmar, practices of labelling are often unarticulated and local terms are contested, which challenges acts of categorisation and projects of belonging. To better understand Burmese *open* and *hider* subject positions, I analyse key elements of external behaviour, *mind/heart* (စိတ် *seik*) and karma. Then in chapter two, I focus on trans positioning within natal families. The immediate, natal family unit is central to personhood and belonging in Myanmar, and for trans children, it is often a space of violence and shame. I explore family dynamics in relation to the regulatory regime of *anadè*, which pushes trans children to choose between exit and loyalty.

In chapters three to six, I examine the negotiation of trans belonging outside of the family. Chapter three focuses on *open* work as a central part of belonging and the organisation of trans community. In chapter four, I explore intimacy with husbands and lovers. For trans, marriage is important and it is also a common cause of distress and melancholia. In intimate life, *anadè* is a strategic tool that many trans use to sustain relationships, which can also be

exploited by *guys*. In chapter five, I examine forms of kinship between trans people and spirits, in particular Ma Ngwe Taung, the only spirit that *opens* and *hiders* can seek help from in their intimate life. Spirits are an important part of many of my informants' webs of relatedness. Then in chapter six, I explore temple festivals as powerful sites for trans belonging citywide, containing (or attempting to contain) new possibilities, the breaking of norms and the undermining of hierarchies. Finally, in chapter seven, I unpack *anadè*, analysing it as a central form of regulation in trans everyday life. Within heteronormative institutions such as the family, *anadè* operates in a way that represses trans personhood. Within trans communities, *anadè* is transformed in a way that validates and sustains trans belonging.

I have found that the natal family is a central problem in *open* and *hider* everyday life. As a consequence, many trans exit where they have opportunities to enter vibrant trans support networks that are themselves often structured as family units. The development of work *lines* are crucial in creating trans spaces while meeting livelihood needs. Through work *lines*, trans can gain the economic resources needed to become and live as *opens*, without reliance on the natal family. While these trans kinship networks involve the construction of social groups that privilege rather than repress trans personhood, they also reproduce social hierarchies, in this instance governed by trans forms of *anadè*. Myanmar's recent political liberalisation has provided important opportunities for trans in Myanmar to challenge state repression. However, it is the everyday

social and cultural forms of cultural repression, discussed in this thesis, that will likely be the most difficult and enduring struggle.

Chapter one: Categories

I am standing on a crowded bus, travelling down one of Yangon's busy thoroughfares, stuck near the door and holding onto a handle bearing an advertisement for flu medicine.¹⁶ My travel partner is 'Maung Maung,' who is tall, with shoulder-length hair and is sensitive and jovial. Ze's tied hir hair back in a ponytail and has some *thanaka*, the ubiquitous Burmese make-up made from wood, daubed on a few spots of acne on hir cheeks. We're on our way back from the northern DIC (drop-in centre for HIV prevention and treatment) for *MSM* ('men who have sex with men' or, in Burmese English, ('man sex man').

Maung Maung works as an *MSM peer educator*, whose job involves travelling around the city on buses, identifying other *MSM*, giving condom demonstrations, providing safe sex gear and extending invitations to visit the *DIC*. The program for which Maung Maung works is designed around the idea that the most effective method of HIV prevention and behavioural change is peer-to-peer contact. So Maung Maung has been trained in basic health education and is now under pressure to meet program targets that quantify how ze reaches out to *MSM* in hir network and identifies *MSM* who have not yet been to the *DIC*.

¹⁶ An earlier version of this chapter was published as 'Categorising Gender in Queer Yangon' in *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28, no. 2, 241-271.

I have been with Maung Maung on outreach all day. This is our fifth bus trip together since morning; we've caught a series of buses north into newer working-class parts of Yangon. We visited three small beauty salons and the home of a spirit medium. At each location, Maung Maung delivers a non-descript black bag of condoms for distribution through local networks in the quarter and township.

We arrive back at the DIC just before 4.30, and Maung Maung sits on the floor with other peer educators who are completing paperwork. For reporting purposes, Maung Maung must separate the peers whom ze contacts according to the organisational taxonomy of *MSM*. Hir organisation uses three categories: *open*, *hider* and *guy*.¹⁷ An *open* is a person assigned male at birth and who acts as and appears feminine. In contrast, *hidere*s are people who are assigned male at birth and appears and acts in a masculine way but identify as feminine. *Hiding* commonly signifies passing as a 'man' in public and in certain spheres of life. Typically, when a *hider* walks down the street, ze is indistinguishable from other 'men' in the public eye. *Hidere*s often pass as men in family and work settings. *Hidere*s and *opens* perceive themselves as having a commonality in the sense of an inner, feminine *mind/heart*, but they diverge in outer appearance. This is comparable to *cit-cay* in Thai, which Megan Sinnott defines, in reference to female-to-male transgender, as a 'transgendered female with a core, inborn masculine soul' (Sinnott 2008, 134). Because of this commonality of mind/heart

¹⁷ Other organisations use alternative systems of classification. The Myanmar MSM Network, for instance, defines six 'types' of MSM. A literal translation of *thu nge* could be 'he who is young'. While the phrase emphasises youth, it is used colloquially to refer to men of a range of ages.

between *opens* and *hidens*, I refer to both as *trans*, although there is no comparable term in Burmese.

The third category, *guy*, denotes someone who is gender-normative but has a preference for *opens* and *hidens* as well as for women, typically as the penetrative sexual partner. Some Burmese familiar with English define *guys* as 'straight'. However, this designation is made in the context of Burmese gender codes, and so 'straight' signifies gender-normativity, including a penetrative sexual role, rather than a sexual orientation to the same gender. *Guys* are the usual partners of *opens* and *hidens*, and it is unusual for *opens* and *hidens* to desire each other erotically, although there is a growing *homo* culture where *homos* (a synonym for *hider*), desire each other, in addition to or instead of *guys*.

Maung Maung must meet weekly and monthly targets. Today ze reports contact with four *opens*, none new. I ask hir about numbers but ze gives me a quick frown and quietly tells me not to ask now. Ze clocks off work, and we walk up the narrow street to the busy thoroughfare where we catch the bus. We're on our way to meet members of a volunteer group, the only one in Myanmar that attempts to include the full range of both male and female genders and sexualities. In the context of the group, Maung Maung is *LGBT* (a loanword from English – lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). The term '*LGBT*' is often used without consideration for what the letters stand for. Maung Maung is not compelled to identify with one letter only (such as 'g' for gay or 't' for

transgender). When Maung Maung is out, talking to friends, gossiping, ze uses Burmese trans vocabulary: *hider*, *open*, *guy*, *ingahlan* (အင်္ဂလန်),¹⁸ *dry* (အခြောက်), *achaut*) or *aiming to be woman* (မိန်းမလုပ်၊ *meinmalya*), with the latter two being synonyms for *open*. It is these terms that are most commonly used in everyday life in Yangon and that I, as a non-Burmese researcher, have been learning as part of my immersion in local trans networks.

'Open' and *'hider'* are terms specific to Burmese trans. The trans signification of these common words and their synonyms are mostly unknown in the general Burmese population. They are not deployed in state discourse, which has its own vocabulary of subjectification. It is in this peripheral city space, in conversations on street corners and buses, that Burmese trans vocabulary delineates a dynamic and creative autonomous sphere within an semi-authoritarian, democratising state and society. What Maung Maung and I speak about remains incomprehensible to the rest of the bus.

I want to find out how Maung Maung views hirself within this trans vocabulary. This is a difficult matter to raise in a language in which 'identity' most commonly refers to ID cards (မှတ်ပုံတင်၊ *hmatpôntin*). When Maung Maung fills out hir report form every afternoon, ze instinctively knows who is a *hider*,

¹⁸ *Ingahlan* is a case of word play, literally meaning 'the reversal of reproductive organs', which sounds like the name of the country 'England, although the spelling of the two words are different in Burmese. *Ingahlan* denotes a category of *guy* whose members have a preference for being sexually penetrated. The term implies that this is 'unnatural', as being the receiving partner in anal sex involves the reversal of the use of reproductive organs from the purpose for which they ought to be used. The term is commonly used by *opens* and *hidiers* in a derogatory manner, and I have not yet come across a *guy* who uses the term self-ascriptively.

who is a *guy*. Ze does not need to ask hir *peers* how they categorise themselves. Can I also categorise people in the way that Maung Maung and hir *peers* at the DIC do, intuitively? Doing so would conflict with my 'Western' sense of individual autonomy and identity politics. I am ambivalent. Will I cause offence to Maung Maung by asking what hir identity is? Is asking a person's identity somehow to misunderstand the local context of subjectivity?

After some thought and while still on the bus, I ask Maung Maung what gender categories ze identifies as. In my question, I use the Burmese word that translates as 'type' (အမျိုးအစား *amyoasa*). 'I am Maung Maung', ze says laughing. Then ze refers the question back to me, using Burmese categories. 'You tell me. What do you think I am?' This question suddenly makes me anxious. What if I get it wrong? What's at stake here?

How do I make an attribution of gender, without being fully aware of the criteria? The only certainty is that Maung Maung is not a *guy* as ze is oriented towards *guys* and acts with a degree of gender ambiguity. The question is whether Maung Maung is an *open* or *hider*. I look at Maung Maung, thinking about the comments from past informants about the importance of *image* (ခံပုံ *pôn*) and appearance, that which is externally visible, as a leading factor in our categorisation of others. Is it on external appearance that Maung Maung relies when ze categorises hir *peers*?

Maung Maung does not cross-dress unless performing at an event, such as a private party or *LGBT*-related anniversary. Ze's wearing baggy Thai pants and a nondescript t-shirt. Ze doesn't take hormones, and so hir body has not been biologically altered. Ze has long hair, is wearing some *thanaka* and behaves in a way that is feminine.

However, consideration of the internal self is also required when making an attribution of identity. This internal self is perhaps reflected in talk, in disclosure, in intimate knowledge. I've known Maung Maung for six weeks. I know that ze has a *husband* (ယောက်ျား *yaukkya*), a *guy* who is working in Malaysia. Maung Maung lives with hir mother and two sisters in an apartment located in a middle-class inner-city township of Yangon.

'I think you're not quite *open* but not a *hider*, and then... maybe...' I struggle trying to navigate Burmese vocabulary of sexuality, gender and subjectivity on this sweaty bus. Ze sees me choking on my words and laughs again. 'You see', ze concludes. I smile at hir, pondering what ze means. 'You see?' Is it a rejection of explicit subject positions? Or somehow, a parodying of them? Or a demonstration of the problem of the articulation and ascription of categories of identity?

The bus crosses a large roundabout, named after an ancient kingdom, and stops on the other side. We get off, and walk towards the group meeting, a small enclave of *LGBT* space.

Southeast Asian categories

'What do you think I am?' Thinking back, a year on from the bus trip, I realize that my difficulty in answering the question was related to two problems. The first was the problem of operating within Burmese practices of subjectivity, which involves the consideration both of external factors related to individual appearance and behaviour, such as *image* and *resemblance* (ဆန့်၊ *san*), and of the internal *mind/heart*, which may or may not be congruent with the external. For Burmese Buddhists, these elements of personhood are determined by past karma and therefore unchangeable in one's current life. A second problem, both in my interaction with Maung Maung and in any discussion of this subject, is that of word choice in a context in which both Burmese and English options are contested.

Identity involves the construction of categories, whether stated or unstated. As categories are constructed and exist in specific cultural contexts, it is necessary to explore local processes of categorisation with reference to those contexts. A researcher of trans Myanmar cannot avoid coming to terms with these categories, if they seek to understand the local trans context and to represent or analyse it for readers outside the local context. For the outsider in Myanmar, this hermeneutic process presents a particular challenge. Modes of identification are often not explicitly articulated. The fact of non-articulation allows for fluidity between categories, as individuals can move between *hider* and *open* positions without needing to effect a radical shift of position.

Discussing the life-world of informants in this setting in a culturally accurate way proves difficult. The question of terminology is a common problem for researchers and activists, as work related to non-normative gender and sexuality inevitably involves a labelling process. This process entails the categorisation of individuals, as well as the organisation of the broader social field into categories. The use of terminology is an often overt political choice within the literature. This choice positions researchers in the long-running debate on the globalisation and/or Westernisation of genders and sexualities (Altman 1996; Altman 2001; Erni 2003; Jackson 2000), as well as in relation to local and regional actors for whom word choice is a strategic part of struggles for human rights and health.

Acknowledging these challenges, the following discussion begins by exploring category use within the broader Southeast Asian 'queer' studies literature. It then unpacks Burmese practices of categorisation and discusses the problematics of *open* and *hider* categories.

Gender and sexual categorisation in much of the literature on Southeast Asia often rightly involves the adoption of the terms that informants themselves use – whether terms derived from English (such as *gay*, *gay king/gay queen*, *lesbi*, *tomboy*, *tom/dee*) or terms with origins in Southeast Asia languages (such as *bakla*, *cewak*, *khatoey*, *mak nyahs*, *waria*,) (Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005; Garcia 2009; Jackson 1995; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Sinnott 2004; Wieringa, Blackwood and Bhaiyā 2007; Teh Yik Koon 2002). In these cases,

word choice is generally justified by the fact that a particular term is used in the context of a given study. For instance, in *The Gay Archipelago*, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff investigates the Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* world. Describing the terminology *gay* and *lesbi* as simultaneously 'remarkable' and 'mundane', he justifies the use of these terms by writing that they are 'taken up and lived in the Indonesian context' (2005, 6). Boellstorff also makes use of more specific categories of personhood, such as *waria*, *tomboy* and *cewek*. He explains the use of emic categories, in the case of *waria* for example, as 'the term[s] they prefer' (2005, 9). Megan Sinnott, in her pioneering study of 'lesbian' Thailand, deploys the localised English loan-words *tom* (from 'tomboy') and *dee* (from 'lady'), as 'culturally and historically specific interpretations of both female homosexuality and transgenderism that exist within a range of possibilities' (2004, 4).

Word choice has sometimes been understood to involve a categorical split between gender and sexuality. This split often sees the use of indigenous terms (sometimes posited as 'traditional') for male-to-female transgender categories and English-derived terms for sexualities. For example, Garcia (2009, pp. 56-60) uses the term *bakla* to refer to the 'identity of the effeminate and/or cross-dressing male' and the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' for sexual orientation.¹⁹ Peter Jackson challenges the separation of gender from sexuality in the case of Thailand by linking a multitude of historically shifting *Thai* categories to *phet*, a Thai concept for 'eroticised gender' (2004, 409). The absence of a common 'Western'-style culture of self-labelling in Myanmar

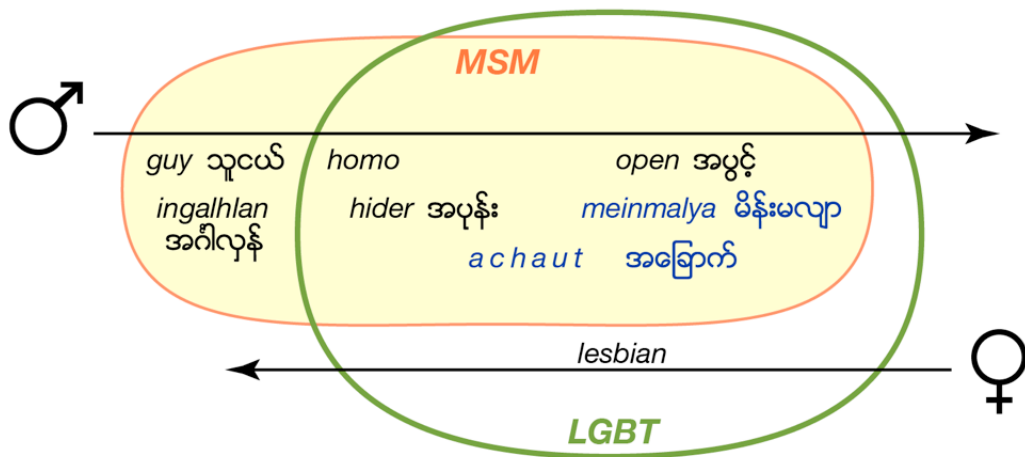
¹⁹ Also see Morris (1994).

makes the simple adoption of Burmese modes of categorisation problematic. Furthermore, emic terms such as *open* and *hider* are locally contested and carry their own problematics. For instance, some who are ascribed *hider* identity by others reject the term themselves and do not identify as psychically feminine. They are not, therefore, *hiding*. Maung Maung and other informants, for example, either eschew local terminology or use multiple terms with contested meanings.

In some studies, authors opt to paper over local diversity and complexity through the use of the meta-categories MSM, LGBT and queer. The term 'MSM' originated in public health discourse, as a way to categorise men who have sex with men without identifying as gay. From its origins in the United States, the term has been globalised as part of the response to HIV/AIDS. Governmental bodies including the Ministry of Health in Myanmar, NGOs, United Nations agencies and activists throughout Southeast Asia now use the term (Gosine 2006; McNally et. al. no date; Young and Meyer 2005). The signifier 'MSM' refer to non-heteronormative sexual behaviour, while avoiding the attribution of identity. The authors of a recent article on the use of the Internet by Burmese 'MSM' explain choosing to use the term 'not only to achieve a broad coverage, but especially to deal with the ill-defined construction in Asian context' (Khin Soe Lin and van der Putten 2012, 36). Similarly, activists often deploy the acronym 'LGBT' strategically for purposes of simplification, to refer to a complex of local gender and sexual constructions, and/or to tap into global

LGBT movements.²⁰ While the terms ‘MSM’ and ‘LGBT’ are useful in facilitating public-health and human-rights work, in Myanmar they are not frequently used outside of social-movement and NGO contexts.

Figure i: The connection between the meta-categories MSM and LGBT and local terms, on a spectrum from masculine to feminine. Terms in black are in trans cant and terms in blue are used in standard Burmese.



Myanmar’s trans subject positions

In order better to understand labelling in trans Myanmar, it is important to analyse local practices of gender and sexual subjectivity, along with the

²⁰ Examples include Cambodian Center for Human Rights (2010); Human Rights Watch (2012); and international organisations active in the region, such as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and International Lesbian and Gay Association. For recent discussion on the use of ‘Western’ categories *LGBT* as political strategy, albeit in a different context, see Currier (2012).

related semantic fields. The absence of trans ethnographic research in the past makes this task particularly important. *Open* and *hider* subject positions involves three core elements:

1. The external, involving *image* and *resemblance*.
2. The internal, involving *mind/heart*.
3. *Karma*.

The literature on Myanmar has featured only limited discussion of non-normative gender and sexual networks and little in-depth research on cultural constructions and practices of labelling and self-ascription. One 1992 study uses the Burmese term *achaut* (*dry*), which its authors broadly define as ‘cross-gender behaviour’ (Coleman, Colgan and Gooren 1992, 313). While *dry* is a Burmese term, it is unclear if it was used by informants themselves or whether the authors chose it on the basis of its popular usage, which is often derogatory. In an article on Burmese categories of homosexuality, George van Driem (1996, 93) identifies three important terms: *meinmalya*, which he translates as ‘gynæcopath’; *dry*, which he translates as ‘nat-possessed one’ and *gyi-pôn* (ဂျီပွန်), which he translates as ‘hiding muntjack deer’. When I asked informants about these terms, I received different answers to that of van Driem: *dry* literally means ‘something dry’, and informants variously interpreted it as referring to the dryness of anal sex or the idea that *dries* do not have semen. In the phrase *gyi-pôn*, ‘gyi’ can refer to the letter ‘g’ in the English term ‘gay’, and *pôn* means ‘hidden’. The term *meinmalya* can be translated to refer to a man acting as a woman.

Van Driem found no ‘instances of discrepancy between the category to which a homosexual saw himself as belonging and the category which he was assigned by other Burmese’ (1996, 93). This finding is contrary to the findings to which fieldwork has led me. These suggest widespread discrepancies between standard Burmese terms for non-normative gender and sexual categories and terms principally used and understood within trans networks. In an article on gender and sexuality in representations of Myanmar’s spirit cult, Tamara C. Ho criticises the ‘inconsistent transliterations’ and ‘misleading translations’ of past texts, including the articles by Coleman et. al. and van Driem. She writes that these mistakes ‘exacerbate confusion between terms and cultures’; they presumably result from researchers’ limited Burmese language skills (2009, 298).

Scholarship on trans Myanmar has suffered from a lack of cultural contextualisation and of the ethnographic and linguistic work needed to analyse ways in which categories of gender and sexuality are constructed and put into operation.

Image and resemblance

A common way in which Burmese people differentiate between *hiders* and *opens* is in terms of categories of *image*. So the subject terms *hider* and *open* are often translated into ‘straight’ Burmese as ‘image of man’ (ယောက်ျားပုံ၊ *yaukkyapôn*) and ‘image of woman’ (မိန်းမပုံ၊ *meinmapôn*), respectively. *Image* in

Burmese, as in English, is a complex term. The Myanmar Language Commission give a number of core definitions for *image*: '1 form; shape; figure. 2 example... 3 picture; diagram; illustration; figure. 4 tale; story. 5 appearance; manner...'
(မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2008). When Burmese speakers discuss *open* and *hider* as images of woman and man, the emphasis is on the surface, exterior appearance and mannerisms. An *open* is not a woman, and the term *image* closes any possibility of transitioning to and being a woman. Instead, femininity is 'performative' (Butler 1990), dressed up, made up and shaped by the *open*. Femininity can be seen and represented in *opens*, but 'woman-ness' is absent. Similarly, masculinity is represented, performed and shaped by a *hider*. This understanding implies a separation between appearance and performance on the one hand and the inner self on the other.

The mode of representation in constructing the *image of a woman* or *image of a man* involves physical attributes: *shape* and *comportment*. Shaping relates to body shape. A piece of wood is carefully carved into the image of a spirit. In order for it to be recognisable, the artisan must follow artistic norms of body shape, dress, colour, hair and facial features that in combination signify which spirit is being represented. This shaping is gendered and the gender of the spirit is an important factor in recognition. Each spirit can be represented in multiple forms, but the shaping must be done in accordance with cultural norms in order for the statue to be interpreted correctly. Similarly, *opens* and *hiders* shape their bodies in a way that expresses their individuality even while following gendered cultural norms. For *opens*, discussion of *image* commonly

involves an attraction to beauty and an urge to look pretty. Beauty is a feminine attribute. This desire for beauty often starts at a young age, as one informant, 'May', explained.

As far as I could recall from my childhood memory, I wanted to be pretty like a girl since I was young. I did the same thing as girls, put *make-up* on. When I was studying [at school], a male teacher used to ask me not to wear lipstick, but I would still wear it slightly. I only made friends with girls. I would have been around six or seven years old. I didn't wear girls' clothing – in the village we had short pants, shirts and sarongs. Normally, I wore male clothes but I would also wear *make-up* and *thanaka* (သနပ်ခါး).

Another informant described the way in which ze gradually developed a feminine aesthetic and, intuitively, skills in beautification: 'When I turned sixteen and seventeen, I was an expert at how to decorate myself. As an *MSM*, I have grown the *mind/body* of wanting to be pretty, so I end up wearing make-up everyday.' Shaping also incorporates body modification, such as growing hair longer or using hair extensions and hormone therapy. At the time of research, sex-reassignment surgery and silicone breast implants were unavailable in the country. For a *hider*, shaping involves maintenance of a masculine physique and the wearing of male clothes.

Manner (comportment), on the other hand, involves practices of enactment. So an *open* enacts femininity, and a *hider* enacts masculinity through speech and movement, each component of which can be read within a system of Burmese performative classifiers: *manner of speaking* (ပြောပုံဆိုပုံ၊

pyawbôn saingbôn), *manner of going* (သွားပုံလာပုံ၊ *thwabôn labôn*), *manner of eating* (စားပုံ၊ *sabôn*), *manner of sleeping* (အိပ်ပုံ၊ *eikbôn*) and *manner of being* (နေပုံ၊ *nebôn*). These terms have an aesthetic reference. They are often used by spectators who are interpreting the actions of actors in a film or play. The process of acting involves the deployment, conscious or unconscious, of these concepts in relation to what one wants to project to the viewer. For *opens* and *hidiers*, manner involves either the enactment or suppression of *nwè* (နွဲ). A dictionary definition of *nwè* includes ‘to sway, move sinuously... dainty, enchanting, languid, weak, deficient’ (မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2008). The term is associated with femininity. *Nwè* is perhaps an equivalent to *ngondhek* as used in parts of Indonesia, which Tom Boellstoff defines as ‘effeminacy... manifested above all in practices of bodily comportment’ and considers a core part of one’s *opening* oneself up to the Indonesian gay world (2005, 166). All of my *open* informants discussed becoming *nwè*, often from a young age, as part of the *opening* process. *Hidiers* on the other hand suppress *nwè* when they are *hiding* their gender and sexual identity. One *hider* informant described suppressing *nwè* at his workplace: ‘I need to always think, ‘am I acting like a man’, and watch that my wrist doesn’t do this’ (showing me a floppy wrist). The suppression of *nwè* therefore involves the performing of masculine mannerisms and is an essential part of *hiding*. *Nwè* is a fundamental component of *open* and *hider* manner. It is reflected in speech and movement, through enactment, in the case of *opens*, or suppression, in the case of *hidiers*.

The Homo Dictionary, a project of a Burmese on-line social networking site, is a participatory glossary of Burmese and English trans slang with Burmese definitions. The dictionary's existence displays the contested and unstable nature of Burmese trans vocabulary. It is simultaneously a project in meaning-making, an attempt to formalise and preserve an oral culture through writing and a strategy to resist the heteronormativity of Burmese dictionaries currently in print. The presence of the dictionary in an interactive Web forum and the statement early in the text that the way to say *gay* in Burmese is the subject of an open and continuing argument, demonstrates its radical and pluralistic approach to meaning-making (www.mymgedu.com no date). At the time of writing, *The Homo Dictionary* contains a short definition of *open* and *hider*.

To open means to *resemble a woman* [မိန်းမဆန်၊ *meinmasan*]. It is obvious that they are people who like the same sex... *To hide* is people who do not live in a way *resembling women* so it cannot be known right away that they are people who like the same sex (www.mymgedu.com no date).

Here the Burmese term *resemblance* [ဆန်၊ *san*] is used. According to the Myanmar Language Commission's *Myanmar-English Dictionary*, this term means 'resemble, be like, be similar to (usually of ways and manners)' (မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2008). This act of *resembling* differs from 'image' in two ways. First, there is an emphasis on behaviour. This emphasis makes *resemblance* more dramatic than image, as the latter privileges

physical, bodily appearance. Second, *resemblance* involves copying, faking and parodying. To *resemble a man* means that one is not a man but is rather pretending.

In the Burmese cultural context, *resembling* can be interpreted as the performance of an 'other' rather than a representation of one's 'true self'. In contrast, an *image* can be original and authentic to one's self. So where does this leave Maung Maung's question? What do I attribute to hir? Hir *image* and *resemblance* are physically masculine. It is obvious that ze was assigned male at birth. Ze is dressed in masculine clothes, in a plain t-shirt, baggy pants and plastic thongs. However hir *manner* is often feminine. Ze speaks and moves in a way that is *nwè*, and this *nwè* manner is obvious to anyone familiar with Burmese (or 'Western') gender codes.

Mind/heart

While the above elements of subjectivity focus on outer appearance and social interaction, a second crucial dimension of *open* and *hider* subject positions is the internal dimension of *mind/heart*. A study by James Matisoff on 'psycho-nouns' and collocations found that mind/heart phrases are common to a number of languages in the region, including Thai, Tibetan and Chinese. 'Mind/heart' as a psycho-noun refers to 'a mental process, quality or state' (1986, 9; also see Reason and Bradbury 2006, 87-88). In Burmese, *mind/heart* forms the first word of a large number of compound words, including 'to be

angry', 'to doubt' and 'disposition'.²¹ *Mind/heart* collocates with the nouns *man* and *woman* to form *man's mind/heart* and *women's mind/heart*.

Amongst informants, *mind/heart* is commonly used when talking about sexual desire and gender identity. One informant described the history of *opens* in relation to *mind/heart*, desire and gender performance: 'Opens come from the big *meinmalya* of the past. They started to say 'hey we are open about ourselves and [our *mind/heart* is] that we like to be fucked, openly live like women and openly suck cock.'

Opens and *hiders* often described *mind/heart* in a similar way. They said that after the age of 10, one has a *mind/heart* to be with men and 'to be fucked', a term that has its own one-syllable verb in Burmese (ခံ ကံ). This verb literally translates as any of 'to catch, receive, endure, tolerate, withstand and enjoy' (မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2008). It is etymologically unrelated to the verb 'to fuck' (လို့ လို). *Mind/heart* determines the desire to have a feminine appearance. This desire can be so strong that it leads to physical sickness. As one informant explained, 'when I was young if people made me wear short pants and a shirt, I didn't have good health. I was healthy if I wore a skirt and gown. That's how I grew up.' A 'woman's *mind/heart*' is therefore a key determinant for Burmese trans personhood.

²¹ The Myanmar Language Commission Burmese to English dictionary lists 122 compound words under the main entry of *mind/heart*. မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2008

One way of talking about becoming an *open* or *hider* centers on the female *mind/heart* entering or growing in one's self. As one informant commented, 'Women's *mind/heart* has grown inside me since I was young. I really liked female beauty and I played with clay pottery. I didn't play ball with boys. I liked selling things and making fake snacks.' Some informants describe women's *mind/heart* as something that can be caused by environmental factors. One informant in his 60s understood his *opening* thus: 'Since I was very young, I lived with my aunts and they put *thanaka* on my face and put lipstick on me. I obtained a lot of female *mind/heart* from living among my aunts.' Another informant attributed the origins of his *openness* in part to wearing *thanaka* under his parents' influence, which led to an interest in beautification:

[My parents] encouraged me to wear *thanaka*. They didn't like it if I didn't wear it. They thought I didn't look good with an empty face. So they were happy about me wearing *thanaka*, but people in the village were not familiar with with make-up, so they didn't appreciate the look. They asked me not to wear it but I did anyway, especially with my friends when we went out.

The Nobleman Who Can Wear a Sarong of 19 Lengths (ဆယ့်ကိုးတောင်ဝတ်မင်းသော့ကျုံး၊ *Sèko Taung Wut Min Yaukkyà*), a 2007 Burmese film, tells a similar story of the origins of *openness*. It also represents the (mis)gendering of *mind/body* as largely determined by environment. The main character, a young orphan boy, becomes an apprentice to a popular dancer under the condition that he dresses and acts as a girl. He has no choice but to comply. Dressing and

behaving as a woman gradually affects his *mind/heart*, and he grows up to be an *open*.

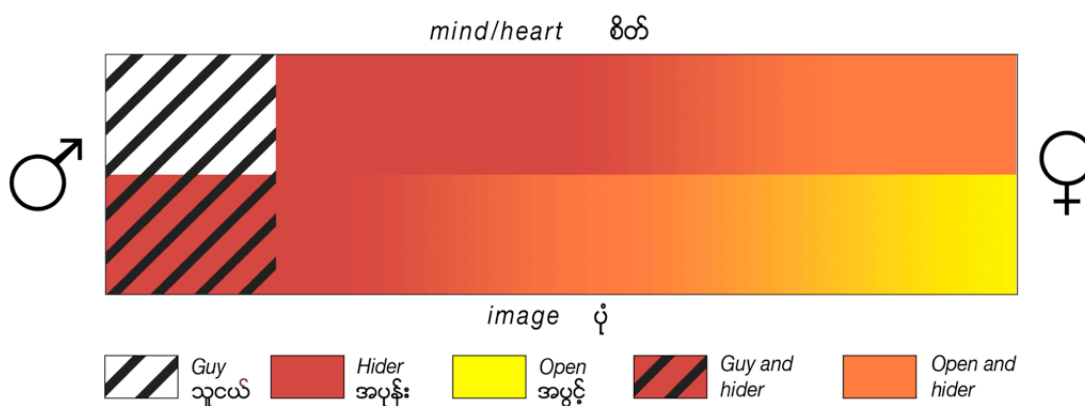
In contrast, other *opens* believe that *image* develops naturally from *mind/heart*. One informant explained, 'When someone with a man's body, with male sexual organs, wants to stay with other men and wants to be beautiful, he has a woman's *mind/heart*. He wants to comb his hair, put cream on himself, wear nice clothes and have a husband. This all starts from that *mind/heart*.' Here, wanting men and femininity leads to a clear causal relationship between *mind/heart* and *image*.

Burmese popular writers also use *mind/heart* as a way to understand gender difference and to pathologise those who deviate from social norms. We can see examples of this process in the titles of manuals on sex and gender, such as *Women's Mind/Heart Manual* (မိန်းမစိတ်ကျမ်း၊ *Meinma Seik Kyan*) and *The Manual of Virgin Girls' Mind/Heart* (အပျိုစိတ်ကျမ်း၊ *Apyo Seik Kyan*) (သုခမိန်၊ [Thu Kamein] 1958။ ပီမိုးနင်း၊ [Pi Mo Nin] 1969). These books describe the gendered nature of *mind/heart* as deterministic of a broad range of traits, from taste (women like sour and spicy) to emotion (women are jealous). However rather than taking a binary view of women's and men's *mind/heart*, some Burmese writers see them as a common essence and interconnected. For example, Pi Mo Nin, a respected writer active during Burma's socialist era (1962-1988), wrote that 'The origin of men's *mind/heart* and women's *mind/heart* is the same.

They are not different. What differs is [a matter] of deep and shallow, light and heavy, big and small, and these are all on the surface' (1969, 6). He later wrote, 'Every man has a bit of women's *mind/heart*; every woman has a bit of man's *mind/heart*' (1969, 81). Atta Kyaw, a contemporary writer prominent in *hider* and *open*, went further in his defence of trans rights. In a guide for teenagers, he counselled, 'To be a strong, bright and healthy normal person, I think that person should have an equal balance of man and woman's *mind/body*' (2004, 185).

In Burmese discourse, the notion of the gendered *mind/heart* has been used both for recognition of trans and for stigmatisation. Atta Kyaw, for instance, calls for greater acceptance of gender fluidity, whereas Than Pay Myint argues derogatively that trans are those who cannot suppress their female *mind/heart*. Than Pay Myint compares men who act out their *women's mind/heart* to humans with the *mind/heart* of animals (1997, 58). In these texts, gender liminality is often discussed as denoting the *mind/heart* of the opposite gender (မအိ [Ma Ei] 2009, 278-80; သန်းဇေဇွန် [Than Pay Myint] 1997; ပီမိုးနင်း [Pi Mo Nin] 1969, 81-4). Figure two shows *mind/heart* and *image* on a spectrum from masculinity to femininity. Along the spectrum, *hider mind/heart* is distinct from *guy mind/heart* and converges with *open mind/heart*. In contrast, *hider image* converges with *guy image* at the masculine end of the spectrum, while *opens* solely occupy the feminine end of the spectrum.

Figure ii: Mind/heart and image on a spectrum from masculinity to femininity.



The construction and enactment of *image*, constituted through a self-awareness of *mind/heart*, is crucial to an understanding of the convergence and divergence of *opens'* and *hiders'* subject positions. One's *image* may or may not be a 'true' representation of the *mind/heart*, particularly in the case of *hiders*. *Hiders* are generally viewed by *opens*, and often view themselves, as having a women's *mind/heart* while maintaining a masculine exterior. One informant, a well-educated *hider*, explained that *opens* and *hiders* have the same *mind/heart* but different bodies. Ze is disdainful towards *opens* who 'behave in such an exaggerated manner' but identifies with them on a deep, inner level. Other informants also recognized that *opens* and *hiders* shared a common, gendered *mind/heart* but that the two groups sharply diverge when it came to outward expression. However, there is a significant range of views regarding the

meaning of an individual's *mind/heart* and of *mind/heart* in relation to common subject positions (see Figure II).

I asked some of my informants to position *open* and *hider* on a spectrum with male at one end and female at the other. Most often, they placed *open* in the middle, between male and female, and *hider* between male and *open*. When I asked informants to point to *open* and *hider mind/heart*, some identified them as occupying a common position, while others saw them as further apart. For one *open* informant, *hider mind/heart* is the original state from which *opens* diverge:

'San': There is *hider mind/heart*. From there, we become *open*.

David: Does that mean *opens* and *hidere*s have different types of *mind/heart*?

'San': They are the same. *Opens* start out as *hidere*s. People are really aware that they have woman's *mind/heart*, and they start wearing women's clothes, combing their hair and growing it long. We can call this *opening*. For *hidere*s, they dress in men's clothes so if you don't know you will think that they are men but their *mind/heart* is *nwè*.

David: So does that mean the appearance of *hidere*s and *opens* are different, but their *mind/heart* is the same?

'San': Yes

David: So what is *open* and *hider mind/heart*?

'San': There are times when we want to be fucked. There are times when we want to be beautiful. But [*hidere*s] take a man's image and worry that

people will look down on them. They are scared of people having a negative perception of them; so they live secretly without other people realising that they are trans. I am very direct, open and everybody knows, the whole country knows that I am an *open*.

Mind/heart is therefore a crucial aspect of *open* and *hider* subjectivity, in the sense that it is a complex dimension that may be obscured from others. *Image* is of course observable. But it is not possible to say with certainty whether a person's *image* is an authentic representation of *mind/body*, particularly in the case of *hiders*. At the same time, some informants also criticised *opens* for *opening*, in order to capitalise on the beauty industry rather than to have an *image* authentic to themselves. Maung Maung did not attempt to hide his desire when he was with me in public. He talked openly about sex and his husband. His manner has also often been *nwè*. He is comfortable moving within both *open* and *hider* networks. I wondered if his *image* was congruent with his *mind/heart*.

Karma

A final important dimension of *open* and *hider* subjectivity is the notion of *karma*. In Burmese Buddhist thought, life is cyclical, a process of birth, death and rebirth. One's social position is determined by *karma* at birth, as accumulated in previous lives through deeds involving the body, tongue and *mind/heart*. If a person can control his or her mind, do good deeds physically and verbally, he or she accumulates positive karma. Karma is perhaps the

deepest element of subjectivity. It is predetermined and very difficult to change in one's current life, in contrast to other dimensions of subjectivity already discussed. *Image* and *resemblance* are fluid, and *mind/heart* which may be worked on, can be altered and improved through projects like meditation. In Burmese Buddhist practice, there is a belief that sexual sin in a past life causes boys to become *opens*. Similarly, in Thailand karma is often used to explain one being a *kathoey* (transwoman) (Jackson 1998, 89; Winter no date; Nemoto, Iwamoto and Areesantichai et. al. 2011) and a *tom* (transman) (Sinnott 2004, 93-9). Sexual sins include adultery and sexual action involving monks, be it fantasy, seduction or intercourse. This notion of living out the consequences of past sexual sin, and its connection with *mind/heart* and *image*, was eloquently put by the main character in the novel *Smile as They Bow* by Nu Nu Yi (Innwa) (2008). Daisy is a spirit medium, an *open* and a character based on a prominent Burmese spirit medium who has since died. Ze reflects on hir life when ze suspects that hir lover is cheating on hir.

Even as men, we're one step lower down... It's our karma. Maybe I insulted someone's wife in the past; so now I'm half a woman in this life. We may be men in body, but we're really and truly women in our minds. We want to dress, eat, live, speak, sing and think just like women. And yes, we also want husbands ... The *meinmalya* mark is on us from the moment we're born (2008, 42).

The element of past *karma* therefore adds a sense of fate to Buddhist *open* and *hider* subject positions. One informant, in hir 70s, spoke of this matter with a strong sense of despair: 'I don't want to be a *dry* again in my next life. It's too

hard. It comes with too much suffering.’ While the dynamism of subjectivity lies in the realm of *image* and *mind/body*, past karma may serve as the background for individuals’ sense of self, agency and possibility.

In relation to the process of ascription, *karma* is least useful in my predicament with Maung Maung on the bus; I obviously cannot look into Maung Maung’s past lives. However Burmese Buddhists may see any *open/hider* subject position, in themselves or others, as determined by past karma. This belief has important implications for constructions of trans personhood. If *open* and *hider* subject positions are a consequence of karma, they are therefore fixed and natural (albeit punitive) elements of the lifecycle.

Queering ascription

Subjectivity, in the Burmese context of *opens* and *hiders*, has three linked dimensions: *image* and *resemblance*, *mind/heart* and past *karma*. *Karma* from previous lives determines one’s current life, including *mind/heart*, sex assigned at birth and any divergence between the two. Individuals often refer to *mind/heart* when discussing the desire to construct a feminine *image* and their attraction to men. The external world may also produce a *women’s mind/heart*. So where do these considerations leave Maung Maung’s question, ‘what do you think I am?’

Perhaps a first step in answering the question is to determine whether ze falls within the space that *opens* and *hiders* occupy. One determinant is sexual orientation. Maung Maung talks to me about love, from which I can deduce that ze desires men and uses hir body to act on that desire, by engaging in sex. In the first three months that I knew Maung Maung, ze would often lament hir long distance relationship. Hir husband was at that time working as a migrant labourer in Malaysia. Despite the distance, ze would display material signs of their relationship, most notably an Android phone with a sim card at a time when sim cards cost more than US\$500 in Myanmar. 'He gave it to me so he can call me everyday', ze told me. Maung Maung's phone and masculine benefactor resulted in some gossip and envy among hir colleagues. Maung Maung expressed desire and love for hir husband in talk and objects. Ze is attracted to *men*. This attraction is a reflection of hir *mind/heart* as expressed through talk. According to emic classification, Maung Maung's *mind/heart* is not that of a *man*, and so Maung Maung is therefore in-between *man* and *woman*. Maung Maung's image involves *nwè*. When ze speaks, ze often softens hir voice and enunciates in a style that is *nwè*. However ze maintains a masculine body, mostly wears male clothes and has a masculine voice. If ze needs to, ze can *hide*, as ze does to some degree in the presence of hir mother. When I asked if hir mother knew that ze was trans, Maung Maung replied that ze probably did. But ze never talked about it with hir mother, and hir mother never asked, which is in part, a function of *anadè*.

Five months after our conversation on the bus, Maung Maung's husband is back from Malaysia staying with hir in hir family's apartment. I follow hir home to meet hir husband for the first time. As we walk up the bare, narrow concrete stairs of the apartment complex, Maung Maung stops and turns to me: 'Don't refer to my *husband* in front of my mother. You can call him my *friend*.' Does this request mean that Maung Maung is a *hider*? For Maung Maung, and others, the binary nature of *open/hider* categories makes identification problematic.

Open/hider boundary

Open and *hider* are binary oppositions of liminal gender and sexual subject positions. The dichotomy privileges *opens* and works as follows

<u><i>open</i></u>	<u><i>hider</i></u>
authentic	fake
strong	weak
brave	afraid
unified self	fragmented self
image of woman	image of man
receptive partner	receptive partner
<i>Women's mind/heart</i>	<i>Women's mind/heart</i>

Opens often represent themselves as 'authentic' vis-à-vis *hiders*, the assumption being that if one is solely attracted to men and a receptive partner, then one's natural subject position, appearance and behaviour are a performance of the

feminine. Being feminine is therefore 'authentic.' Those who deny this 'truth' are *hidden*, from the public and from their true selves. Some *opens* accuse *hidiers* of being 'fakes'. In this way *opens* take a superior moral position against *hidiers*. They are 'real' and 'true' to themselves and those around them. They have made sacrifices. These may include financial loss, as limited possibilities for livelihood are available to *opens*. One *open* informant explained: 'Some *hidiers* have a *mind/heart* that they want money, they want to get as much as they can from people. A *mind/heart* like this is a *hider mind/heart*. They only become *open* when they are older.' Another informant made a similar comment. 'Today *opens* are *hidiers* and only become *opens* in their old age [when they have less to lose].' However, some *opens* are also accused of inauthenticity. As one informant explained, 'There used to be only a few *opens*, but after people see the success of famous beauticians people just become *opens* for money.' *Hidiers* and *opens* can both misrepresent themselves to others by not showing their *mind/heart*. However, it is *hidiers* who are more commonly accused of inauthenticity.

Open subjectivity involves sacrifice, *opening* oneself to possible abandonment by family, multiple forms of violence and severe limitation of employment opportunities. *Openness* therefore collocates with strength and bravery. *Hidiers*, on the other hand, have continually to manage their social relations and behaviour for fear of being uncovered. This fear can be associated with weakness. In the context of the *open/hider* dichotomy, it takes strength to walk down the street in high heels and a skirt, *opening* oneself to the public

gaze and family shame. *Hiders* do not sacrifice their social position in the way that *opens* do. *Hiders* can walk through the streets of Yangon, their gendered subject position taken for granted. But *hiders* also suffer from the self-regulation involved in *hiding* and the risk of shame and a reduced social status if they are found out.

Some activists have identified the *open/hider* dichotomy, and the divisiveness that it causes within trans networks, as a cause of disunity and a barrier to pushing forward claims for trans rights. This issue has been addressed in workshops and through the strategic use of terms such as *MSM* and *LGBT*. While these acronyms may bracket local distinctions within institutional and organisational settings, the *open/hider* dichotomy persists on the street, in the bus and overall, in everyday life.

Betwixt and between

My difficulty with Maung Maung's question is a problem of articulation, attribution and vocabulary. Maung Maung knows who ze is, who ze is attracted to, what *image* ze wants to have, all without aligning to a term that has an analogue in 'Western' discourse. My difficulty in answering Maung Maung's question mirrors a wider challenge for the researcher. Often, highly contextualised studies of queer Southeast Asia (and elsewhere), which Garcia (2009, xix-xxv) terms 'nativist' and 'localist', are written using local categories, whether those categories have etymologies in Southeast Asian languages or

English. The use of 'local' terms in the literature draws attention to the problem of simply applying 'Western' categories and to the mis/un-translatability of culturally embedded terms that describe complex processes of subject-making and identity. However, simply reproducing terms for local category in the literature and in fieldwork encounters is insufficient for individuals who occupy a gender-liminal space that has no name, with subject positions for which there is no term. I cannot speak or translate that which is not uttered. This gender-liminal space sits between and encompasses binary terms *open* and *hider*. Maung Maung's subject position queers the distinctions.

When Maung Maung challenged me to label hir as either *open* or *hider*, neither of which fit, ze was demonstrating the flaw in these subject terms. There is no need for hir to name hir subject position. Ze can strategically move in and out of the meta-categories *MSM*, *LGBT* and *those who love the same gender* (လိင်တူချစ်သူ *leintuchitthu*). Maung Maung can be a *hider* at home, and in the office, and *open*, fully cross-dressing, when participating in a festival or meeting.

Nearly two years after our first encounter, I'm sitting in a meeting of *LGBT* individuals preparing to participate in an international conference. The facilitator is dividing those in attendance into three groups: gay (*hider*), transgender (*open*) and lesbian. As ze reads out Maung Maung's name in the transgender group, hir group leader laughs at the facilitator's choice: 'You made Maung Maung an open.' This remark highlights the imposed nature of these

categories. Maung Maung smiles, unfazed. After the meeting, I ask hir how ze felt being put into the *open* group. 'I can be an *open* or a *hider*, gay or transgender' ze replies. Maung Maung is not compelled to fix hirself in one category. Ze can remain in-between and move between fluid terms, occupying multiple positions simultaneously or depending on how ze is labelled by others in the institutional processes in which ze participates.

Outside of the DIC, the meeting and the ceremony, there is the gender-liminal, betwixt and between, space that is acknowledged without the need to name it. This space consists of expansive networks, street corners, parks, toilets, teashops, houses. Networks of individuals can move in and out, and alter their *image* without articulating their subject position. Through *image*, action and speech, individuals like Maung Maung can enter networks, gain recognition, learn the common norms that coalesce around or between *hiders* and *opens*. In everyday life, on the bus, after work, Maung Maung is simply Maung Maung.

Interlude

It is May 17, 2011, International Day Against Homophobia and a group of Burmese *opens, hiders, lesbians* are putting on a ceremony in the ballroom of a resort in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The audience is mostly made up of members of the many Burmese exiled organisations located in the city, joined by a contingent of Thai HIV activists connected to the co-host, Mplus+. The event takes place in the large ballroom and the audience are seated at round tables, as they would be if it were a wedding. While the objective of the event is to continue conversations in the public sphere about and against homophobia, as part of the international LGBT rights movement, the event is private and by invitation. It's the start of democratisation and a large delegation has travelled into exile for the event and concurrent meetings and trainings. They are there discreetly, aware that there are still potential risks when they return to Myanmar, as human rights is still a politically dangerous domain and human rights activists face arrest under the various laws the regime uses to persecute dissidence. In Chiang Mai they are joined by Burmese exiles and migrant workers, some of whom are undocumented migrants in Thailand and at risk of arrest and deportation by Thai security forces. It is midway through the night, where a collaborative play is scheduled to be performed by a large part of the delegation from

Myanmar, who have been rehearsing all week. This play, which they have written, is illustrative of *anadè*.

The narrator sets the scene. Daw Kye and U Tote Gyi are anticipating a baby son. Daw Kye is in her last stage of pregnancy, ready to give birth. She walks over, bent over in clear discomfort. 'There's pain here, pain there. Oh Ko Tote Gyi!'

'If you give birth, give birth to a son' U Tote Gyi commands. 'Then we'll be parents of a son and we'll have a good reputation amongst our relatives. When the son grows up, we'll make a donation and sponsor him to enter the monastery. Think how happy we'll be!'

'What are you talking about? I'm hurting here!' Daw Kye snaps. They walk off, having established the beginning of what would become a tragedy should the child turn out not to be male and gender normative. What is not stated here is that the other side of joy at the birth of a son is the fear that a son could grow up to be trans. The Burmese notion of *pôn* dictates that men are of higher status than women, a result of greater merit in past lives, although this power is vulnerable. It can be reduced or lost through contact with a woman's vagina, what Spiro (1997) terms the 'myth of the polluting female', or through emasculating behaviour, such as being the receptive partner in anal sex.

Offstage, Daw Kye starts groaning, shouting and cursing as the pain of labour increases until she finally gives birth. The baby screams. U Tote Gyi is pacing nervously. As soon as birth is complete, he asks the gender. The voice of the nurse, offstage, proclaims that it's a boy. U Tote Gyi shouts with joy. 'Really? A boy?! I've become the father of a son!' He raises his fist in the air for victory. If only he knew what was coming.

The narrator announces: Ko Tote Gyi is very satisfied with the birth of his son. Then sixteen years later...

Ko Tote Gyi's son skips onto the stage with abandon, singing 'it's our time to explore different things...' Ze has long hair, is wearing lipstick and a blouse.

U Tote Gyi addresses the audience with scorn. 'Oh audience, look at that. I gave birth to a son but he turned out to be a *dry* who can't be relied on. In his free time, he decorates himself, puts on make-up and puts on lipstick. My son is wearing a skirt and I am so ashamed about this. I'm not sure what to do.' He turns to his wife. 'Look at him! Who's going to discipline him? I'm ashamed to be associated with him in our neighbourhood.' Daw Kye calls her son over, who skips towards her mother and answers with an extended

'shiiiiin', the polite, feminine particle. U Tote Gyi is riled by this. 'Look! He even has to respond like that! I'm going to do something about this!'

'What's wrong with you dad? I'm your daughter.' U Tote Gyi shakes with fury. 'You've become spoilt. Even though I told you not to act like that, you still do it.'

Daw Kye asks her husband what is wrong.

U Tote Gyi gets physical. He kicks his child, who falls to the ground in mental and physical agony. U Tote Gyi walks off. The situation is still contained within the family. Daw Kye pulls her child's arm, 'Get up darling. Don't cry, you have to go to school'. Ze limps off the stage, scarred.

Daw Kye begins a monologue about her son. She enacts the mother figure who is moderately tolerant, with a meek acquiescence to her husband who is the overarching authority of the household: 'Oh well, he's my offspring. Whatever happens I love him. He doesn't drink, he's not on drugs, he doesn't gamble. And he does whatever I want. If I ask him to sing he sings. Sometimes he even helps me cooking at home. How will he ever manage to get married?'

The scene switches to school. We learn that the main protagonist's name is Chit Chit, meaning 'love'. Chit Chit is being bullied by three boys. They talk amongst themselves about teaching hir a lesson, as ze is a 'boy with something missing'. They taunt hir, call hir a hermaphrodite and a *gandu* (गण्डू)- a derogatory term for transgender that derives from a Hindi slang term for anus. After the verbal assault, Chit Chit is left shrieking and crying and is consoled by running into a *guy* whom ze propositions. They move behind the curtain and have noisy sex. Momentary intimacy seems to provide validation to Chit Chit amidst the oppression of everyday life. However unknowingly, one of the bullies witnesses the sexual act and reports hir to the teacher. One of the bullies links everyday belonging at school to citizenship. He proclaims that a person such as Chit Chit should be excluded from school and country because ze causes shame to all with whom ze is in contact. The teacher summons Chit Chit's parents.

Daw Kye and U Tote Gyi meekly stand before the teacher as the teacher stumbles to recount the incident: 'I'm very *anadè* to tell you this, I'm ashamed to say it, but your son is having same-sex sex.' The parents both scream in exaggerated melodrama and Daw Kye holds her heart in shock. The teacher continues: 'He's trying to have sex with all the boys at school so I can't allow him to keep studying here. I've expelled him.'

U Tote Gyi is livid. He stamps his feet and makes a fist, punching his hand with explosive rage. He shouts at his wife, 'We can't even keep our pride anymore. Our pride has been destroyed! Our son has no reputation' he screams.

He pushes Chit Chit onto the ground and hits hir. Daw Kye asks him to stop but U Tote Gyi does not listen.

U Tote Gyi exclaims: 'Are you going to leave or act like a man? Tell me now!'

Daw Kye cries. Chit Chit cries.

Chit Chit responds forcefully: No I'm not going to change. I'm not going to act like a man. I didn't insult anyone or cause anyone trouble. If you don't accept me here I'm going to leave the house now!'

U Tote Gyi storms off. Chit Chit, having defied hir parents and broken hir *anadè* obligations, leaves the parental home for hir life as an *open*.

Chapter two: Kinship Networks

Beginnings

I first meet Lay on a stiflingly hot day, mid rainy season. The sky is grey but it's not yet raining. I am with Than Than, a trans friend who has invited me to spend time in hir home, in one of Yangon's satellite towns. We are wandering the neighbourhood, visiting trans friends when we stumble upon Lay, asleep on the concrete floor of a friend's house. It is a square unit in a narrow complex of eight single room houses, each separated by thin bamboo mesh.

I'm immediately struck by how young ze looks. Ze has a very quiet voice and seems to take up minimal space, as if ze wants to make hirself invisible, perhaps as a survival strategy.

Lay answers a rapid fire of questions as Than Than builds a picture of the person staying in Kyo Kyar's room.

This is what I pick up.

Name: Lay

Age: 15

HIV positive.

Homeless

Jobless.

Lay has been staying with Kyo Kyar but is scared there. Kyo Kyar is an *offer* who passes as a woman. It's a risky job. Ze attracts clients who think ze's a women and don't realize otherwise until mid-session, when more often than not they panic and end the transaction after ze's extracted payment. Kyo Kyar's boyfriend is violent and they fight a lot. I see evidence of that a few days later when Kyo Kyar reappears with a long scar across hir cheek where hir boyfriend hit hir. Kyo Kyar does not want Lay to stay with them but Lay has nowhere to go. Kyo Kyar has allowed hir to stay longer.

I can see Than Than's expression shift to one of grave concern, and recognition of hir younger self in Lay. Than Than turns to me and says we should talk with Lay more in order to help hir, and for me to document hir situation as emblematic of the abjection of trans youth, in a way similar to the protagonist in the play described in the interlude. Lay is emblematic of trans suffering because of hir conflict with hir parents and hir HIV status. Than Than also repeats that trans help each other, as they have in common a recognition of each other's suffering. Ze turns back to Lay and says reassuringly, 'we'll help you, don't worry. You don't need to stay here anymore. Come and we'll chat about it.'

Trans relate to each other as common kin, a deep, natural support network, that in the words of Marshall Sahlins (2013, 2), involves a 'mutuality of being'. The definition is helpful because it leaves an opening to the diversity of configurations available, allowing for agency in the construction of kinship

and decentring models based on biology. Trans kinship acts as a counter to the natal family. A key difference between the two models of kinship is the criteria of membership. The natal family is a vertical system, where membership is inherited. Trans kinship is horizontal and diffuse, entry based on fluid cultural categories of gender and desire. Horizontal here does not mean that trans kinship has a flat power structure. The dominant kinship structure in Myanmar, the stock or lineal family, is a model whereby a family unit consists of immediate ancestors, with the grandparents at the head of the family, extending to the grandchildren or great-grandchildren (Spiro 1977, 58-61). As the elders pass away, the identity of the stock and who is included thereby evolves. Hierarchically then, trans models of kinship resemble a stock, where members are beholden to and identify with those who are older

The concept of envisaging identity in horizontal and vertical terms was developed by the writer Andrew Solomon, in his book *Far from the Tree* (2008). As the title suggests, kinship, the tree, is at the centre of Solomon's work. Key to the vertical and horizontal schema is a distinction between categories of identity that are shared between parents and children, and those that are divergent. Shared or vertical identity categories include ethnicity and religion, which are typically inherited from parents and common amongst consanguineal kin groups (Solomon 2008). As David Romesburg (2014, 2) explains, horizontal identities are characterised by a radical difference to one's natal family that 'disrupt the supposedly seamless vertical identities of reproduction, familiarity, and generational passage'. Of my *open* and *hider* informants, not a single one

was born to a trans parent. Solomon used trans as a case study of horizontal identity for that reason (other case studies include dwarfism and deafness). Solomon finds that parents struggle to come to terms with their children's horizontal identities, which are unfamiliar and 'whereas families tend to reinforce vertical identities from earliest childhood, many will oppose horizontal ones. Vertical identities are usually respected as identities; horizontal ones are often treated as flaws' (Solomon 2014, 4).

The refashioning of horizontal kinship by trans Burmese has parallels to *hijra* kinship in India. In India, *hijra* define kinship as 'our people' and central to that is 'caring' and 'being there' (Reddy 2005, 151). In India, entering a *hijra* kinship network involves being part of a 'house' and having a mother (Reddy 2005, 58, 125). For trans Burmese and *hijra*, operating outside of a kinship network is virtually unthinkable. Rather than kinship being a choice, as Kath Weston (1991) describes in the context of gay and lesbian families in the USA, trans kinship in Myanmar and India is an essential part of life. While trans kinship in India and Myanmar is a hierarchical system, with rules and constraints, the system is configured to validate and support trans identity and everyday survival, rather than to repress it, as is the case in natal families.

Lay gets up, re-ties hir sarong, picks up a small plastic bag with hir belongings (mostly pharmaceuticals), puts on hir slippers and we walk back in convoy past the doors of Kyo Kyar's neighbours, some open with people sitting staring out. Right at the narrow path, across the fence line, down another

narrow circular path and we're back at Than Than's home. We climb the ladder and sit on the floor. Than Than continues questioning Lay, this time in a more relaxed pace, probably for my benefit so I can better follow the conversation.

Lay talks about his parents. His father is Rakhine, Buddhist from western Myanmar. He's very conservative and has only had a few years of school. Ze describes his family as 'so poor'. Ze goes on, 'things are not going well for me at home. My parents don't like me being *a dry*. I was thirteen the first time I left home. I didn't have any friends or a place to go.'

Lay had entered the interstices of kinship systems, between the political economy of consanguineal kin and trans fictive kin. Each system includes a system of exchange with physical and emotional security, crucial given the absence of a welfare state. It was thus a precarious position. When ze was younger, his sense of home and place-belongingness was with his family, a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment (Antonsich 2010, 646). Ze was Burmese, part Rakhine, gender normative, identified with his family and recognizable in their image. Ze was expected to meet the usual societal expectations: enter the monkhood and gain merit for the family, work and provide an income and other means of support to his parents as they age. Ze was also expected to get married and have children. There were nonetheless clear material benefits in his living with his family, despite their impoverishment, such as free housing and free meals. Verticality refers to kinship identity as top-down, inherited from grandparents and parents and

passed down to children and grandchildren. There is of course an important temporal aspect here, as identity is historical, originating in familial history and extending into the future in a linear chronology. As Lay grew towards adolescence, ze moved more boldly into a trans subject position, an identity that was new and divergent to that of hir parents, with a less clear chronology and thereby 'horizontal.'

While Lay had a disposition to femininity when ze was young, it was not taken seriously by hir parents and rather considered as innocent play. 'I was a *dry* since I was young. My mother didn't pay attention to it. She tolerated it because I was a kid and ze didn't think it would last. I used to wear skirts when I could and if I'd see a beautiful blouse, I'd wear it. My mother saw me wearing girl's clothes before but ze was ok with it. As I got older ze couldn't stand it anymore.' With age, Lay's position in hir family became uncertain as hir *opening* became more tangible, and the repression directed at hir increased as a consequence.

Then when ze was 10 year's old, ze was raped. Ze was sleeping and a man working for hir uncle dragged Lay away and penetrated hir. It was the first time ze had sex. Ze didn't like it but it also consecrated hir identity as an *open*, as it meant ze had experienced an act that is considered an essential part of trans personhood. Unlike in the West, where trans gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation, Burmese trans identity involves the desiring of men. For my trans informants, the acknowledgment of being penetrated is a key part

of belonging to the cultural identities of *open* and *hider*. The violent act of rape signalled the beginning of Lay's *anal sex age* (ပင်ပန်းခါး *pinkan thet*), a trans measure counted from the loss of a person's virginity, regardless of whether it was consensual or not. In addition, being penetrated involves the diminishment of *pôn*, which in the case of Lay and many others, is already greatly reduced through cross-dressing. *Pôn*, psychosocial power, is a popular concept of power framed but not restricted to local forms of Buddhism. As Spiro (1997, 20-21) describes, 'since males alone are born with [*pôn*], they are innately higher than females intellectually, morally, and spiritually'. Given the intertwining of *pôn* with dominant Burmese understandings of masculinity, becoming trans entails loss of *pôn* and loss of patriarchal privilege.

At thirteen, Lay could not bear to live with hir family, after hir father told hir that ze is not welcome if ze kept being trans. Ze was pushed into an abyss, the painful beginning of hir re-birth, thrown out of one kinship network and not yet accepted into trans kinship. The latter required certain knowledge, skills and networks for entry. Lay wandered the streets. Ze ended up near Chinatown, in one of the city's centres of the sex trade. 'I saw a lot of trans there but none of them spoke to me or helped me because they didn't know me. I just kept walking, wherever my heart led me.'

Ze met a man who was a driver. He asked hir to follow him and ze stayed in his car all night, having sex with him and staying off the street. Scared ze would be picked up by the police, trusting strangers seemed safer. Early morning, the

driver dropped hir at Hledan junction. A police officer approached hir, asking where ze lived and was going. Ze got on a bus and ended up in Bodawpaya Pagoda. Wandering the city, ze found a job at a teashop, on the condition that ze work as a 'boy'.

Lay was in the teashop for a month. 'It's hard there, given that I am an *open* and had to act like a boy, so I ended up leaving the job. You have to shout a lot there, shout orders from a distance and talk a lot to customers. I'm not comfortable doing that.' Working in the teashop was painful for Lay, as ze was an *open* and softly spoken. Ze also did some casual sex work and that is how ze contracted HIV. Ze did not carry condoms and relied on clients for protection. While some took precautions, others did not.

Lay decided to try and return home, which though oppressive, seemed preferable to life on the streets. Hir parents beat hir with a metal rod when ze returned home but let hir stay. Lay continued hir schooling in grade three, and helped on hir mother's food stall in hir free time. Hir father lost his job before Lay could sit the grade three exam so ze dropped out. Like the parents in the play, described in the preceding interlude, Lay's own parents became increasingly frustrated at Lay's refusal to be masculine. They told Lay that ze was not welcome in their house if ze was *dry*.

Than Than asks Lay which clinic ze goes to.

Lay says ze goes to Thazin, the Burmese name for a large international medical organization, which is a species of flower. Lay says ze has qualified for treatment and has been taking anti-retroviral medication for three months already. Hir treatment has been irregular however. Ze does not have the funds or perhaps motivation to go to the clinic, which is far away across the river.

Than Than boils some water in an electric kettle. Ze pours it into three plastic cups and carefully opens sachets of three-in-one coffee.

Than Than asks Lay if hir family know that ze is HIV positive. *Ze* explains,

My family didn't know that I had the disease. When I returned from a trip out of town to dance with a troupe, I went back home. I got sick and was getting very thin. We went to the clinic, concerned that I would have heart failure and I got an x-ray but nothing showed up. One aunty suggested that I have a blood test at a clinic near the post office and as soon as mother knew that I had that disease, ze kicked me out of the house. I've been away from home for about 25 days now.

While Lay's flight from hir parents' home was spurred by hir gender identity, sexuality and hir HIV status, Lay sees money as a key factor in keeping hir separated from hir parents. Ze says 'I didn't have a job to support them, so all I could do was leave the house.' The Burmese culture of *anadè* obligates the receiver of deeds or objects to be deferential to the giver. For Lay and other

trans, this means separation from kin group is not necessarily the end of the narrative but rather a temporary state that can be overturned with access to financial capital. So in this context, economy can trump culture, religion and morality. Income is thus crucial for Lay to attempt to overturn hir familiar family dynamics, should ze wish to.

Than Than looking very concerned, gets down to practicalities. 'Do you know how to cut hair?'

'A bit' Lay answers.

Than Than explains that *opens* help each other so ze need not feel down or demoralized, in part reassuring hirself as well as Lay. Ze says we have friends who are hairdressers. Ze tells Lay that we can ask if they want help so Lay could get a place to live and work, hinting for me to assist. Ze tells Lay that ze would have to try hard if ze were to live in a shop.

I ask Lay what ze wants to do. Lay says that hir ambition is to apply make-up to people, to make them beautiful and that ze left home with a desire to work as a beautician. But ze is disconnected from the expansive networks of *open* beauty parlours. Explaining hir preference, ze says that ze knows that ze can be independent doing hairdressing. That would allow hir to be autonomous from hir natal family, and also alter their relationship, since Lay would be in a position to provide financial support, thus shifting the rules of obligation.

The conversation moves to the immediate predicament of safe housing. Lay says that Kyo Kyar's husband was very drunk last night and tried to do something to hir. He was also hurting his wife. Than Than acknowledges that Kyo Kyar is a good person but hir husband is dangerous. Lay warns that Kyo Kyar is seeing another man so their relationship is explosive.

Than Than turns to me and summarises. 'Lay has no place to live. Where we were earlier isn't suitable for Lay and ze's in danger from the *guy* there.' Lay says ze doesn't want to go back and stay with the drunk husband.

Than Than and Lay discuss house rental and associated expenses. At the outer edges of the satellite town we're in, there are rooms for about \$20 per month. Than Than looks at me and I take the cue and offer financial support. Than Than suggests that it would just be for a few months, until ze is established. Than Than turns to Lay to approve the arrangements and Lay thanks us both. Than Than adds that it makes me Lay's mother. Lay is now my daughter. Financial exchange is one of the often overlapping domains of kinship dynamics in the construction of mother-daughter relations, along with work *line* apprenticing and life guidance. Despite being an outsider, I was able to become part of a trans kinship formation, enabled by the relative openness of their horizontally-based membership. While mother-daughter relations involve vertical power structures, they are still horizontal in a temporal sense since they are not predicated on chronologies of descent. In the relationship between Lay and I, elements of exchange were an essential component. I provided some

support and Lay received it, connecting hir to me through *anadè*, with its logic that positions the receiver as beholden to the giver. *Anadè* thereby orders relations of exchange. Obligation through exchange and age differentials, combined with a shared identity (or in my case, an association with a particular identity), tie together individuals into trans kinship units.

Than Than tells Lay that in the meantime, ze can stay in a house nearby with hir husband, brother-in-law and mother-in-law. Hir husband's brother is also an *open* and Lay can stay for free and help with the housework. Lay agrees, looking relieved. We all leave the house and walk up to the main road, where we catch a series of buses to Than Than's husband's house.

On the way to Lay's new temporary place, we discuss the practicalities of finding Lay a hair and make-up apprenticeship that would involve a mother and accommodation. While mothers are abundant and an individual may have multiple mothers in their lives, the relationship with the mother who provides entry to a work *line* is often the most enduring attachment. It is the work-mother that individuals honour throughout their lives by worshipping them in obeisance rituals and providing social and material support in their old age.

Than Than suggests I call Zar Ni, a friend who lives in a middle class, inner city township with prominent beauticians. I call hir from a kiosk as we are changing buses on the way to Than Than's husband's house. I assumed that placing Lay in a beauty salon would be easy so I was surprised by Zar Ni's

lukewarm response, saying it is difficult for hir to help and questioning why Than Than cannot find a beautician to take Lay in. Zar Ni says trust is the essential challenge. Lay is unknown in trans networks, as someone who is only now moving into trans identity. Ze is motherless, without a trans mother who would have responsibility for her. In this sense, mothers are also gatekeepers. In this case, the risk is that a beautician keeps expensive things, such as make-up, clothes, jewellery, equipment, as well as cash, and a recognised mother provides security. If Lay were to steal from a salon, there would be no way to recover the losses without a mother in the background who is easily traceable and has hir own reputation to maintain.

So in order to enter the trans world, work *lines* and trans kinship, trust is a crucial currency and kinship structures provide access to collective trust. Therefore, despite being called Lay's mother, I was still an outsider so I was an insufficient guarantor to enable Lay to be trusted and move into the make-up work *line*. I ask Zar Ni to consider ways Lay can be supported to enter work and consequently, new kinship networks and allied housing and living support. Zar Ni, sympathetic to Lay's abject state, agrees to talk to hir friends, thereby bringing hir reputation into the mix. Ze talks to a friend of hers, who has a larger beauty salon in another satellite town, who agrees to take Lay. I'm to bring Lay to Zar Ni the next day and hir friend will take hir in. Arrangements are made for a first meeting between Lay and hir new mother, from when Lay will begin hir apprenticeship and move into the new shop.

We arrive at Than Than's husband's house. Hir husband is out and we are greeted by hir mother-in-law and sick brother-in-law. Than Than introduces Lay and asks them to put hir up. On Than Than's request, I leave some cash for extra food costs. It's getting dark and after some small talk, we are back on our way, Than Than to hir home alone and myself on the long bus trip back to downtown.



Plate ii: A trans beauty salon on the western outskirts of Yangon.

As a researcher, my position providing financial support to Lay meant limited entry into trans kinship relations. In trans Myanmar, kinship structures are pervasive and well-established, with divergent rules to those of the wider society that they are counteracting. For instance, trans kinship networks are headed by mothers rather than fathers. Rules of civility in trans kinship require rather than restrict trans norms of gender and sexuality.

I was not able to conduct this ethnographic study without entering into trans kinship relations. Exploring the intimate worlds of trans in Yangon involved structuring my relationship with informants through trans models of kinship, as a sibling, a son/daughter or mother. Without such familial intimacy, it would otherwise have been impossible to enter intimate spaces and gain intimate knowledge, knowledge that necessitated trust. It would have been a significant challenge for informants to entrust me with intimate knowledge if I were outside kin relations.

Entering kinship networks involves navigating relations of exchange, and thereby having to internalise the grammar of *anadè* (see Chapter Seven). Through the provision of rent support, in which I became a mother, I was positioned in a relation of exchange with Lay, in which *anadè* was a structuring affect. *Anadè* denotes the English concept of 'face', which itself derives from the Chinese concept of which there are numerous cognates (Ho 1976; St André 2013). *Anadè* as 'face' describes rules of civility in interpersonal relations, central to which is exchange and the navigation of obligations fundamental to

relations of exchange. An exchange positions the receiver with a sense of *anadè* towards the giver that requires repayment, either in material terms or otherwise. Longer term relations of *anadè* involve the positioning of two parties in variants of patron-client relationships, such as parent-child and teacher-pupil. The giver may provide material support, security, knowledge and skills and the receiver offers support, loyalty, labour and perhaps pleasure. In trans terms, this is most commonly instantiated in the relationship of mother and daughter.

From exit to return

Individuals with non-normative genders and sexualities have limited options with regard to how they deal with their identity in relation to their families. Following Albert Hirschman's (1970) typology in *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, there are the options of exit from the family, or voice within the family in order to create changes that make it possible for one to remain. According to this schema, loyalty determines the choice, so where there is a high level of loyalty, an individual is more compelled to use their voice for reform. Where there is a low level of loyalty, an individual is more likely to exit. This schema is inverted in the context of trans Burmese. Those who want to fulfil their gender and sexual desires have no choice but to exit, cancelling out the possibility of loyalty and voice. However, *hidors* are an exception. They stay loyal, which entails a silencing of voice in relation to the expression of gender and sexuality within the family.

Thus, the dominant move for someone who is trans and *opening* is basically to exit. In adolescence or early adulthood, when a child's agency vis-à-vis their parents is diminished and options for voice are limited, exit is the obvious choice. Loyalty and voice have a low chance of success or are too painful, as Lay experienced. In the choice between exit and voice, *anadè* is a crucial ordering principle that creates a profound barrier for individuals to move into an *open* identity, because *anadè* trumps authenticity. The obligation to one's parents overrides the possibility of being true to oneself, within the context of family. This reflects the diminished place of authenticity within Burmese folk psychology and the privileging of familial equilibrium over interiority and individuation. Unlike Hirschman's schema, exit need not be permanent. Paradoxically, the dominant structure of *anadè* can be modified through economic gain on the part of the transgressive child. This means the tragi-narrative can be reversed, through the function of a change in economic status (rather than a change in gender or parental consciousness of gender diversity).

Kyu is a beautician in hir mid-30s, with a small neighbourhood shop east of Yangon. I meet hir at one of the intermittent trans beauty pageants, where ze was a runner-up. We get talking and ze invites me to visit hir place. When I arrive, ze is relaxing with hir husband in the back room of hir narrow shop. Ze orders him to get cold drinks before we visit hir home. Ze shows me hir shop, proudly pointing out the waiting area with a reclining chair for customers. Ze

has had hir own shop for five years' after time working in other shops around Yangon. Kyu's husband reappears with bottles of fizzy drink and we walk down the street to hir home. Hir husband leaves us, going back to his casual work as a rickshaw rider. We arrive, walk up a few steps to the entrance and sit in the living room.

I ask Kyu about hir background and childhood, cognisant of hir parents in different parts of the house. Ze begins, seeming happy to talk about hir life. Ze was born in the Yangon township where ze lives, the oldest of two siblings. Hir sister is a *yaukkyalya* (transman) and married a girl, before migrating to China. Ze was not getting on well with the family, because of hir different *mind/heart*. Kyu explains that ze has a female *mind/heart* that makes hir act softly whereas hir sister has a male *mind/heart* that makes hir act tough. Hir sister was into rock music and used to make a lot of noise, whereas others at home are quiet.

Kyu tells me that when ze was young, ze had to constantly suppress hir femininity. Ze was obviously 'soft', was attracted to beautiful things and only made friends with girls at school. That led to conflict with hir parents who 'hated' hir feminine way of being. Kyu's parents are Buddhist, hir mother from central Myanmar and father from India. Ze had no choice but to attempt to live 'as a boy'.

Ze points outside. 'There! Mother is coming. She used to hit me so much but ze doesn't now because ze can't win anymore' ze says laughing. 'Our roles

have been reversed. She's like a daughter and I'm the mother at home.' Kyu's mother laughs in agreement, suggesting the role reversal is an ongoing joke in the house. 'Mother always told me off for being a *dry* and father regularly beat me, telling me not to be like that. He would slap me and also hit me with a stick.' Hir father bought weights and forced Kyu to exercise with them in order to develop a more masculine physique. He would make hir walk around the house with weights, sit and stand and do chest exercises. Hir father would tell hir that trans die of AIDS and warned hir that ze would die young if ze were an trans. Kyu's parents broke up when ze was in primary schools and Kyu moved between hir parents' homes. Hir mother remarried. Kyu soon developed work skills, selling sugarcane with hir mother and knitting. 'I knew that to survive I had to learn to make a living. I had to work hard' ze says. Hir mother sometimes beat hir with the sticks of sugarcane when ze would walk in a feminine manner. Kyu stayed in school until year 8 and then went to work with hir mother. Ze also met other *opens* and started to learn dancing, haircutting and make-up from them.

When Kyu was 16, hir parents forced hir to ordain as a monk as an attempt to 'solve' Kyu's perceived transgressions of masculinity. Hir parents asked hir to ordain for three years and Kyu explained that ze agreed out of both fear of them and a desire to receive their blessing. Kyu found life in the monastery too hard and wished for freedom. As is standard in Myanmar, ordination involves pledging that one is a 'real' man. Kyu explains that ze did not want to be a hidden *dry* in the monastery. While it is common for monks

who desire men to hook-up in secret, Kyu made the decision to only be *open*. Kyu says the abbot knew ze was *dry* and gave hir some flexibility in order to contain hir, although make-up was forbidden.

After a year ze felt like ze could no longer live in the monastery and decided to run away. Kyu had met a number of *opens* who went to work in Thailand and had heard it is a place where *opens* can get work and live as they please, so ze decided ze would try hir luck there. Kyu particularly admired one friend of hirs, who ze describes as 'beautiful with long hair' who was able to send money back to hir parents. After being disrobed, ze went to stay in a friend's house to organise hir trip. However hir mother heard of the plan and went there, asking hir to return home. Kyu obeyed and decided to try again with hir parents.

Kyu's parents were deeply disappointed. Their ambition was for Kyu to become an abbot and they were encouraged by positive feedback on Kyu's scholarly progress while at the monastery. Living at home, ze began to make friends with more *opens* and was adopted by a beautician nearby. Ze worked full time and learnt hair and beauty skills. Ze was also adopted by a spirit medium and was able to develop both lines of work. 'I became more *open* when I was around 22. I kept *opening* and had a husband at 23.'

Kyu shows me a pack of progesterone ze has been taking, imported from China. 'Why don't you try some' ze says to me, joking.

Kyu's trans mother turns to me: 'They're torturing you'. Everybody laughs. Kyu tries to convince me: 'You'll be beautiful. Your skin glows and these will grow on you' Kyu says, pointing to hir breasts. Kyu has been taking hormones since the mid-2000s intermittently, two months on, six months off.

Kyu's mother and stepfather listened to parts of my conversation with hir. They also joined in, joking with Kyu and validated parts of hir story. Hir parents even teased hir about hir desire for sex as leading to hir failure as a monk. Kyu's stepfather has even learnt *open cant*.

Kyu's husband rides back to the house. I ask about their marriage and Kyu says ze has been with him for four years. Ze met hir first husband when working as a spirit medium. His mother was holding a festival where Kyu danced, and they met and he became hir husband.

Kyu's mother tells me to ask Kyu why ze separated from hir previous husbands. I ask and Kyu replies: 'They said I don't have ovaries' as they all laugh. Hir stepfather adds that it was because ze was unfaithful, keeping other young husbands at the same time. Kyu agrees, saying ze lacks the desire for monogamy.

Like some other *opens* who have been able to gain financial autonomy through work *lines*, Kyu has been able to reintegrate hir family into hir life. By

providing them with financial support, ze shifted the dynamics of *anadè*, repositioning hirself in a way that neutralises the power of hir parents to diminish hir. When Kyu was young, ze struggled between hir desire to please hir parents and being an *open*, choosing exit so as not to compromise hir gender and sexual identity. However, loyalty remained and as ze moved into a position where ze could financially support hir parents, hir power of voice effectively resulted in the reform of hir natal family that enabled ‘place-belongingness’ (Antonsich 2010, 646). Kyu’s parents moved into a space where they could not only accept hir but appropriate features of *open* culture, such as speech and the very different mores that permit open sex talk.

Fathers and power

In the life histories of Lay, Kyu and other trans informants, both trans and consanguineal mothers are the primary figure of identification. They play a key part in bearing and transmitting norms of civility, including *anadè*, within trans social contexts and dominant society respectively. This reflects the cultural dynamics of Burmese families more broadly, where mothers bear the day-to-day responsibility for childrearing, including discipline for less serious transgressions. The institution of the family and the moral domain of *anadè* is inherently patriarchal, and mothers play a key role in the transmission of patriarchal values. Fathers are involved in discipline as a last resort, and paternal discipline often involves a greater use of overt violence. The experience of profound attachment to the mother and the punitive role of the

father is expressed in a play produced by a group of *opens* and *hidors* as part of commemorations for International Day Against Homophobia play in 2011. The play, described in detail in the interlude, revolves around Chit Chit, a young *open* who is abused by his father who is threatened by Chit Chit's transgression of gender norms and is reactive to the spectre of public shame. U Tote Gyi, the father figure, steps in to discipline his 'son' when the mother's means of control proves ineffectual. While the father is petulant, the mother is forgiving and does not want to see her trans child being abused. She even seems to like having her son with her in the feminine spheres of the household. It is obvious that the writers of the play identified with and were sentimental for their mothers but found it unbearable to live with their fathers. Preferential attachment to mothers over fathers is also reflected in the representation of mothers in popular culture.²²

The position of fathers within trans life narratives is therefore highly ambivalent. While trans informants, like all Burmese, have to grapple with the obligation to respect, pay obeisance and materially provide for parents in their old age, fathers can be feared, resented and avoided, especially when trans lack economic power. This can largely be explained by the patriarchal structure of the Burmese family and consequently, the gendered dynamics of *anade*, both of which are encapsulated in the allied Burmese concept of *awza*. *Awza*,

²² For instance, see the songs စိုင်းထီးဆိုင်၊ အမေရှင်ရည် [Sai Htee Saing, *Mother's Appearance*]; ထူးအိမ်သင်၊ ကြွေးဟောင်းဆပ်ခွင့်ပြုပါအမေ [Htoo Ein Thin, *Let me Repay an Old Debt, Mother*]; ထူးအိမ်သင်၊ မေမေနေကောင်းလား [Htoo Ein Thin, *Are you Well, Mother?*]; ထူးအိမ်သင်၊ ကျေးဇူးပါမေမေ [Htoo Ein Thin, *Thank you, Mother*]; ရှိလေး၊ အမေ [G Lay, *Mum*]; ထွန်းထွန်း၊ အမေအတွက်သီချင်းတစ်ပုဒ် [Htun Htun, *A Song for Mother*].

'influence', is a primarily masculine and ethical form of power, acquired through recognition of one's moral leadership within a particular social setting, such as the state, businesses, unions and the family. Within the family, *awza* defaults to fathers who are responsible for discipline and morality within the family. A father who can maintain his *awza* is able to effectively contain and steer his family. As a leader of the kin group, any public transgression of a family member suggests a father's absence of *awza* and is a source of shame and loss of face. Transgressions in this sense involve disobedience and disrespect. Such acts can include swearing and untidiness, as well as transgressions of gender and sexual norms, which are therefore treated as moral errors that a father has a responsibility to correct.

The cultural effects of *awza* and *anadè* therefore create a profound domain of conflict between trans children and their fathers. Trans children make a choice to live in a way they desire, that reflects their gendered sense of self. Fathers invariably view that as disobedience and a moral error, which they try to correct through punishment. Continued resistance threatens a father's authority and *awza*, and when trans children are publically *open*, the father's lack of *awza* becomes public. This can then lead to increasingly violent responses as a father attempts to prevent his continued loss of face. In such cases, trans children resist the regulatory domain of *anadè*, which is supposed to prevent actions that cause discomfort in others, particularly one's superiors. Whether or not informants struggled with the physical violence of their fathers, they all struggled with the symbolic violence of *anadè*. That symbolic violence is

however extinguished where, as in Kyu's case, an individual can invert the terms of *anadè* through the acquisition of financial capital.

Hiding at home

Lay and Kyu, in different ways, have confronted parental authority in their respective families, destabilising the moral domain of *anadè* in dominant kinship structures. While at the time of writing, Lay has exited, Kyu has returned and re-entered the family after successfully instituting change. *Hiders* who stay within their natal family choose neither voice nor exit, but suppress their gender and sexuality. In an important way, *hiding* entails giving in to the moral 'policing' of *anadè*. 'Policing' is a concept used by the social theorist Jacques Rancière that refers to any domain where inequality and exclusion is organised and maintained. Policing is based on a 'distribution of the sensible', 'a system of defining modes of being, doing, making and communicating that establishes borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible and inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable' (Rancière 2004, 93). The distribution of the sensible is therefore related to the policing of sensibility, to what can and cannot be said and experienced.

In Myanmar, the family is a primary micropolitical unit where this occurs because of the fundamental and overriding importance of *anadè*, which acts as a policing, regulatory, device. *Anadè* polices the degree to which a boy is allowed to express something counter to heterosexuality and masculine gender norms.

Opens and *hiders* both experience and suffer from the distribution of the sensible in different ways. Whereas *opens* explicitly resist the gender normative power structures of the family, *hiders* yield, implementing strategies that avoid loss and shame and suppressing overt claims to individual identity and autonomy. Within the family, the outward expression of *hider* gender and sexuality is 'invisible, inaudible and unsayable'. *Opens* exit while *hiders* hide, pretend, pass and mislead, facilitated by the parental avoidance of conflict. This is a partial acquiescence, where *hiders* maintain multiple worlds, where they traverse the spectrum of gender expression, from 'reminding myself to keep my wrist from flopping', as one *hider* informant described the process, to cross-dressing and becoming a *wife* when away from the family gaze.

I will revisit Ahmed, who I described and discussed in the Introduction. I first meet Ahmed in the *village*, the trans term for the now vanishing network of underground toilets that are a core place of work for *guy* and *hider offer*. On a visit to the toilet one day, ze greets me, a mutual recognition from above ground trans networks, in which we've previously crossed paths. After confirming that I am not a client, we move upstairs to a friendly teashop. Ahmed is keen to share hir story.

Ahmed likes to explore the city and became friendly with a *hider* working as an *offer*. They exchanged phone numbers and became friends. Ahmed could discreetly learn about the *hider* world via text messages and build up courage to move into the *offer* work *line*. This was after Ahmed dropped out of school after

finishing year nine to work in a fashion accessory shop, selling hair accessories and mostly plastic jewellery. Ahmed was adopted by his friend, who became his mother and taught him how to work as an *offer*. That involved learning about safety, security and of course sexual skills. Secretly attracted to men, it was a chance to experiment as well as earn more income.



Plate iii: The entrance to an underground toilet in downtown Yangon that was a popular cruising site for guys and hiders. It has since been closed down.

Ahmed is determined to get married to a woman and have children: 'Homosexuality is a sin and those who say otherwise are speaking against the Koran.' Ahmed's family and neighbours don't know about Ahmed's life in the *village*. I ask if ze is afraid of running into neighbours or relatives while he is working. 'I keep it separate' ze explains.

Ahmed uses a number of strategies to seek autonomy from hir community. 'I never work beyond a particular street and they never come here.' The city, with its many township boundaries is an ideal hiding place, creating the possibility of leading a double life, even within a 20-minute walk from home. Ze also avoids Muslim clients where possible. 'I keep myself distant from Muslim clients. I worry that the news would spread. I have a few Muslim clients but they do not pose problems as I rarely see them.'

Ahmed invites me to visit hir home. We walk the blocks away from the city centre to a maze of lanes that is a core part of hir Muslim community and vertical identity. One of six siblings, ze lives with hir mother, sister and niece. Hir mother and sister earn a living as vendors. I arrive in hir townhouse but nobody is home. Wanting to introduce me to hir relatives, Ahmed takes me over to the stall, reminding me on the way to be discreet about how we met and hir other life.

As I spend time with Ahmed, it becomes clear that maintaining a double life is the cause of some stress and anguish. Ahmed avoids contact with *opens* in

public, which I experienced at a popular street festival that I visited with hir, when I ran into someone I knew from the drop-in-centre circuit. Ahmed was anxious and embarrassed and tried to keep a distance and pull me away, in order to not have hir gender and sexuality suspected through public association with an *open*.

While *opens* often exit the family at the initial stage of *opening*, they are able to re-enter the family when their economic circumstances change, through shifting the dynamics of *anadè*. Because Kyu could achieve a higher income than hir parents, hir position in relation to *anadè* changed and roles were reversed. Where previously ze was an outcast, now ze was able to re-enter the family network as a result of hir wealth. Hir parents were obligated to hir and subsequently, ze takes on the maternal role previously occupied by hir consanguineal mother. *Hiders*, such as Ahmed, in contrast, do not exit, staying loyal to their natal family and compartmentalising parts of their lives. In some areas, they can *open* and in some areas they remain closed. Loyalty therefore silences voice rather than amplifies it (Hirschman 1970). For Ahmed and many other *hiders*, this involves a trade-off: ze can stay loyal to hir family, fulfilling hir obligations to support them and not cause them shame. That involves a deep, internal repression of hirself that is the cause of anxiety that hir family and community could discover hir *hider* self. What is at stake is particularly fraught for Ahmed as ze sees hir religion and religious community as having unambiguous sanctions against same-sex sex, citing Sodom and Gomorrah.

Ahmed's acquiescence to policing within his family leaves him in a bind that is very different to the experience of Lay and Kyu. While detachment from the home can be painful and traumatic, it can also be liberating as exit results in autonomy that is difficult under the parental roof, at least in the initial stages of *opening*. Ahmed still enters liberating spaces but they are fleeting, such as the underground toilet cubicle and the guesthouse room.

Hider informants like Ahmed, and those partially *hiding*, like Maung Maung (discussed in the preceding chapter), struggle with and suffer from the regulatory constraints within the family, which silences the explicit voicing of non-heteronormative gender identity and sexual desire. This has parallels with studies of gay identity in India. Parmesh Shahani (2008), in a study of gay men in Mumbai, found that family was an identity that often superseded gay identity. Some of his informants were more public about their sexuality, leading to family conflict, while others kept their identity hidden, which could lead to implicit acknowledgement and acceptance by family members (Shahani 2008, 225-6). Jeremy Seabrook (1999, 47), in a study of men who have sex with men in India, found that gay identity is often a minor 'constituent of their identity'. Kinship is described as something that 'controls – and sometimes smothers' (Seabrook 1999, 90). For many *hiders* in Myanmar, family may be given primacy but that is often the result of family as a structure that regulates and constrains identity, resulting in misrecognition. In some cases, such as that of Maung Maung, his family is almost certainly complicit in the *hiding*. While parents may be aware that their child is trans and/or attracted to men, they have a greater interest in

leaving things unsaid, as long as their son is successfully passing as heteronormative. *Hiding* entails maintaining the status quo, and certain privileges that go along with that, such as undisturbed relations in the family and community and far greater education and employment possibilities, compared to *opens*. However, as in Ahmed's case, these privileges are counterweighed by the discomfort and uncertainty of suppressing part of oneself that is never far from the surface.

In all three biographies discussed in this chapter, *anadè* is central to the process and decision of whether or not to exit. A key variable in calculations of *anadè* in the circumstances around trans exit is the level of shame brought upon the parents by *opening* and exiting. That is not to say that informants are ashamed of their own trans personhood. Informants would rather talk about their gender and sexuality as inevitable. Rather, of primary concern was how their gender and sexuality, if made public, could affect their parents' status in their community and how that could be reconciled with filial obligation. A similar dilemma is faced by parents. As seen in Lay and Kyu's case, shame of transgressing gender and sexual norms is a key factor that underlines parental responses to their trans children, such as violent repression, exclusion or more muted forms of disapproval. Such disapproval is reversible through shifts in the political economy of kin groups. Parental acquiescence comes when trans children are in a position to financially provide for their parents, thus reversing parent-child power dynamics.

The radical shift of power between trans children and their family mean individuals such as Kyu are able to re-enter vertical kinship networks, albeit in a different role to when they left. In such cases, horizontal kinship ties endure and individuals are attached to two kinship networks, the horizontal being dominant in domains of work. Upon re-entry, vertical and horizontal networks can merge and mix, as happens when the consanguineal mothers of trans children move in trans social and work spaces, living with and sometimes working for their children.

Chapter three: Work

Work and work *lines* are a crucial aspect of trans everyday life, the spaces, livelihoods and identities available and social reproduction over time.

The far right corner of May Khine's beauty salon contains a carefully arranged selection of sacred images. Hanging on the wall, most prominently, is a portrait of Taunggyi Aung Aung,²³ now deceased, formerly one of Myanmar's leading celebrity beauticians. Ze watches over the shop, visible to all and recognisable because of hir media profile. In hir heyday in the 1990s, ze was often featured in fashion magazines, giving hair and make-up tips and hir views of life. Taunggyi Aung Aung was May Khine's mother, apprenticing hir to be a beautician and, as a mother, providing hir with guidance in life and love. As a daughter of Taunggyi Aung Aung, May Khine traces hir lineage back four generations to Make-up Khin Saw Win, one of the three founders of the contemporary trans beauty industry in the early 1970s.

Slipped into the bottom left-hand corner of the frame is a small image of Ma Ngwe Taung. The image is potent in containing the soul of the spirit. Through offerings to the image, Ma Ngwe Taung provides protection and assistance in love, health and wealth. She can become dangerous and vengeful when disrespected. I ask how May Khine relates to Ma Ngwe Taung. 'She's my

²³ Among trans, it is common for beauticians and spirit mediums to include their profession in their name. That demonstrates the importance of work to identity.

sister' May Khine says. Below the framed photo is a small square table, where May Khine has placed a large pot of plastic flowers, and a black and white photo of hir parents.

May Khine's hierarchy of images represent three intersecting relations of kinship, which ze displays, respects and from which ze draws power. In this spatial arrangement, hir mother Taunggyi Aung Aung is both highest and largest. Ma Ngwe Taung, a spirit sister, is second, and May Khine's consanguineal parents are third.

May Khine sits on a chair near the entrance to hir shop, on a side street near one of Yangon's congested thoroughfares. It's just after seven, already dark and two of May Khine's daughters sit against the wall fanning themselves. May Khine shows me some of hir work, which includes hair and make up for a pop diva that has been memorialised on a pop music album cover. Other photos ze shows me are of make-up ze has done for actors and rock stars. Since Taunggyi Aung Aung passed away, May Khine has been able to create a high profile career. Ze is part of an upper class within the beauty industry and has gained some celebrity herself as a result of the high status of some of hir clients. The beauty industry is one of the three dominant intertwined work *lines* open to trans Burmese, along with spirit mediumship and sex work. May Khine is near the apex of a national network of shops, ranging from main road franchises to local bamboo studios. This trans political economy is central to everyday life. Shops function as homes and community centres, pick up joints and nodes in

international HIV networks. Trans work *lines* are the core safety net for trans individuals, such as for young people who have recently left home and older retirees who lack the support of consanguineal children. Work *lines* provide a crucial connection across trans space and time and a coherence to trans life narratives, connecting early realisation of being trans to moving into trans subject positions. Nowadays, becoming a *make-up saya* (*make-up* artist or beautician) is the most common aspiration of *opens* and the industry absorbs more transgender people than any other. Those at the top of the industry live glamorous public lives and are the primary object of trans pride in the country. Many across the three *lines* of work are connected to each other through vast overlapping kinship networks of mothers and daughters, across the country. These kin relations are significant as a social structure of trans belonging, given the common experiences of abuse, discrimination and sometimes outright rejection by consanguines.

The meshing of kinship and work is analogous to other contexts in trans Asia. For instance, in India, Serena Nanda (1999), in a classic ethnography of *hijra*, found that trans models of fictive kinship played a crucial role in social organisation. This involved the roles of guru and disciple, an essential relationship for initiation into the *hijra* community and for apprenticing into *hijra* work *lines* (Nanda 1999, 39-48). While in Myanmar, work *lines* are pre-eminent and non-territorial, *hijra* are initiated into one of seven houses, each consisting of members in multiple work categories, within a given territorial area. In India, 'houses' are thus 'both a kinship group work group', and serve a

crucial as a crucial emotional support since *hijra* cannot ordinarily (Nanda 1999, 46). This dual role of kinship as work unit and as an alternative to the totalising gender normative family is also an important feature in the southern Philippines, with greater specific work *lines* playing a greater role, according to Mark Johnson's (1997) ethnography of beauty parlours. Unlike the *hijra*, who are not bound into specific work *lines* through kinship, the beauty industry in the Philippines is a dominant work *line* amongst trans in southern Philippines. In beauty parlours, relations are largely 'cast in the idiom of kinship and family', rather than the more professionalised practice of master-apprentice, or through 'houses' in India, which transcend any single work *line*.



Plate iv: An open from rural Myanmar, living temporarily in a Yangon salon.

Mummy Poe

From May Khine's shop, it takes an hour by bus to get to the northern satellite town. Mummy Poe, like May Khine, is on hir way to living the trans dream of recognition and celebrity through work. Ze is now in hir early 40s and has had hir own beauty salon for 8 years. Before *make-up*, ze was an *offer* and a performer at festivals. From a working class family, ze went into exile on the streets of Yangon when ze was 14 in order to escape the constrictions of hir family home. When ze was eighteen, ze was adopted by Mummy Tha, who taught hir hair and make-up and gave hir a stable home. Mummy Tha, who has since passed away, was part of the second generation of trans beauticians in the 1980s and had a relatively successful, although not well-known business. In 1991, Noe went to Ruili, China with 15 other trans migrant worker hopefuls from Yangon. Ze stayed for two years, dancing in a cabaret and collecting fees for posing in photographs with tourists. Ruili is possibly the most popular destination for trans migrant workers in central Myanmar. The town is notorious in China as a centre of gambling, sex work, crime, and at the beginning of China's HIV epidemic, the supposed site of the majority of infections (Spaeth 1999; Yan, Yao and Yinan 2001). Mummy Poe lifts up hir sarong and turns hir back to me, revealing a scar on hir upper thigh. 'A souvenir from Ruili' ze says, explaining a fight ze got into with another trans migrant worker from Yangon, when competing for work.



Plate v: Trans daughters at work in a Yangon salon. Their trans mother watches on, outside the frame.

Mummy Poe's biggest of four salons is on a busy side street in one of Yangon's new northern townships. The shop has two sections. It is larger than other salons I have visited in the area. The front area, an added extension with glass frontage facing the street, has two stools along a bench, against a large mirror. Across the shop's original threshold, the larger studio has low wooden chairs along one wall, where we sit, opposite a further three stools alongside benches with mirrors. In the corner are two recliners in front of sinks for washing hair. Two customers are in the shop, one having her hair dyed 'coffee brown', the other tinting her fringe. Burmese pop music videos are playing on a small TV hooked up to a VCD player, next to a spirit shrine housing Ma Ngwe Taung.

I ask about the shrine. Poe explains, 'Ma Ngwe Taung is the *dry* spirit. If you really love a guy, worship Ma Ngwe Taung and then he'll love you.'

Ze shows me a glass cube, with two teddy bears inside sitting on chairs. She has put a very small toy umbrella over it, which has ears. 'This was a Valentine's present from two years ago from my husband' Poe explains. 'We give Valentine's presents every year. Last year I gave him a sarong'.

Mummy Poe's business has expanded to four salons across the new working class townships of the city's outer north, making hir one of the most successful trans entrepreneurs in the area. Ze attributes hir success to the spirits that ze worships: Popa Medaw, the flower-eating ogre spirit and mother of Mingyi and Minlay (Older Governor and Younger Governor), who are the famous Taungbyone brothers. Popa Medaw is associated with the beauty industry. Mummy Poe and many other beauticians from across the country descend on Amarapura annually for a spirit festival for Popa Medaw. While Ma Ngwe Taung assists in intimate relationships, Popa Medaw provides economic protection, the viability of a local salon and steady custom. While Ma Ngwe Taung is a sister, Popa Medaw is a mother.

Mummy Poe's success has allowed hir to become mother to a growing number of daughters, of which ze currently has ten, all of whom are *opens*. Hir daughters work in hir four shops and are at varying degrees of proficiency in

beauty skills. Ze also has daughters who have left to establish their own careers. Current and former daughters honour Mummy Poe annually with a *kadaw pwè*, a ceremony where Theravada Buddhists pay respect and give thanks to parents and teachers by worshipping them and providing gifts, such as clothes and food. I ask if ze is worshipped as a teacher or parent. 'Both. The roles are mixed'. Three of Mummy Poe's daughters live with hir in hir shop. The youngest is seventeen. Their duties include cooking and cleaning. The daughters inform Mummy Poe when they go out at night and ze keeps track of their whereabouts, providing a degree of security as parents commonly do. Of the three daughters in the main shop, two are from the city, exiled from their homes, and one is from a village in the Irrawaddy Delta, all therefore excluded from the economic security of the natal family. Rather than paying a monthly wage, Mummy Poe provides accommodation, food and a share in profits. Ze provides guidance on everything from hair straightening techniques to love, sex, spirituality and personal fashion.

Poe Sein

Poe Sein lives and works close to Mummy Poe and has a far less successful business. Poe Sein has a ramshackle salon on the main road, one room with a loosely secured tin roof. The salon is set back from the side of the road behind a deep gutter traversed by sheets of bamboo.

Poe Sein is from a village in the Irrawaddy Delta and started getting into make up as a hobby, practicing on himself. Unlike Mummy Poe who got a break from a famous mother, Poe Sein started in his village joining a mother who worked freelance, mostly for weddings and ceremonies using products ordered from Yangon.

Poe Sein moved to Yangon for more opportunities and became the daughter to a new urban mother, living and working across the western river. Like many daughters, Poe Sein saved money to fund product, equipment and rent (35,000 kyat per month) in order to open his own place.

Income is irregular, depending on numbers of clients, ranging from nil to 30,000 kyat per day. I do not see any clients when I visit and Poe Sein seems happy to sit and chat. Ze has two daughters helping him.

Poe Sein's shop is popular as a site of sociality within local trans networks. As ze tells me,

Friends drop in a lot when they see we don't have clients and when they're passing by. We *MSM* talk and share news such as what day festivals are on and make arrangements to go. Sometimes when there are events on at the DIC we also tell each other and go. There's no day off for us so we can only go when we're not busy.

One international HIV NGO has capitalised on Poe Sein's shop as a locus of trans community. His shop is on the outreach schedule, so when peer educators go on

visits they drop by hir shop. Poe Sein is particularly familiar with NGO culture, having previously volunteered as an HIV educator before returning to hir professional passion of *make-up*. In a typical visit, two peer educators arrive in a white van. If Poe Sein is free of customers, they sit and gossip for about 20 minutes. They talk about arrests, new trans residents, business and love. The peer educators leave one or two large boxes of condoms, as well as a handful of small tubes of water-based lubricant and a stack of business-card sized 'information communication technologies', a full colour fold-out in Burmese of sexually transmitted infections and proper preventative measures. *Opens* in the area, from across the professions, know Poe Sein often has a free supply of condoms ('presents') and drop by regularly.

Despite an expansive network of shops in the township, cooperation rather than competitiveness is the norm:

We drop by each other's shops. We don't need a reason. There are a lot of shops, I don't know all of them. Some are opened by people from out of town as well. We're friendly with each other and try and visit each other when we can. When we see and recognise each other as trans, we are friendly and can understand each other. We share a lot of experiences.

Spirit mediums

Paing Paing works as a spirit medium and lives in a two-story wooden house with hir sister, near to Mummy Poe. We sit downstairs surrounded by hir

expansive collection of wooden spirit images, and two promotional banners of hir, life-sized and in full colour, dressed as the spirit Ko Kyi Kyaw with a flowing sarong. He was a prince and the philandering lover of Ma Ngwe Taung, who eventually broke her heart.

Paing Paing became a spirit medium because of hir predisposition: 'the *mind/heart* of spirit mediumship grew inside me since I was young and started attending festivals' ze explains.

Spirit mediums are ritual experts and their role is to officiate at spirit festivals, call spirits and channel them in order to facilitate access from their clients. They are the authorities on spirit culture, on the life histories of spirits, on the rules of worship and the gatekeepers of entry to mediumship for apprentice mediums. Many also engage in counselling and fortune telling. Their primary income is through officiating and performing at spirit festivals, where they are paid by sponsors, either for local private and community events or within the annual calendar of festivals.

A large proportion of spirit mediums are trans and Paing Paing estimates that only a minority are gender-normative women or men. '*Dries* are more interested in spirits than others and when they hold festivals they do it properly' ze says. I ask again why *dries* are better at holding festivals than gender-normative women and men. 'Because we love spirits more' ze says.

Each trans spirit medium has their own network of daughters and younger male lovers who assist with daily tasks. The size of a spirit medium's entourage depends on their success and wealth, as it is the medium's responsibility to pay for all expenses and provide an allowance to their assistants. Tasks that the assistants carry out include cooking, cleaning, shopping, make up, dressing, preparing offerings and serving guests at the spirit palace. During possession, sons and daughters will facilitate the stages of the ritual, order and distribute offerings and collect money. After gaining some experience, mothers support their sons and daughters to channel spirits by themselves. They coach them and find them financial sponsorship for the performances.

There are two types of spirits festivals: (နတ်တနားပွဲ) *nat kana pwè*) and *pwè daw* (ပွဲတော်). *Nat kana pwè* are held on demand by private sponsors, either in a home or a 'palace', which is what temples for spirits are called. In a *nat kana pwè*, the officiating medium calls many of the most important spirits in succession and those in attendance placate them in order to receive blessings and assistance with what they need. Annual festivals are held in accordance with the Burmese ritual calendar on anniversaries that are important to the specific spirit being honoured. They are large-scale, multi-day events held in places that are important to each spirit, such as their place of death.



Plate vi: A spirit medium before a performance.

Paing Paing explains that ze has a network of daughters in Yangon and the northern townships that ze calls on when there is a festival. The irregular nature of spirit mediumship work makes livelihood more precarious for all except the very small minority with a following amongst the wealthy and famous. The *line* therefore cannot sustain young trans sons and daughters in the way that the beautician line can. Many of Paing Paing's daughters are in the beauty *line* and work under Paing Paing as a hobby, without necessarily

wanting to become a professional spirit medium. Some of hir daughters are seeking to enter spirit mediumship as a profession and do part-time beauty work in order to secure income while apprenticing.

At festival time, Paing Paing calls at least five of hir daughters to help with proceedings. At the bigger festivals, Paing Paing can make up to around one million kyat (approximately \$1200), which ze then uses on the considerable expenses of maintaining hir own palace, food for hir entourage and guests, transport, orchestra and the festival fee. Hir children end up with approximately 5000 kyat (\$7) per day, as well as food and accommodation. At around fifteen festivals per years, Paing Paing is able to earn a steady income. In the rainy season, when spirit festivals are not commonly held, Paing Paing supplements hir income doing astrology. Some spirit mediums supplement their income through additional work such as performing in dance and theatre troupes or running a retail shop from home.

As well as hir own sons and daughters, Paing Paing has the support of May Khine and May Khine's daughters for hair and make-up. Established beauticians who attend festivals to worship and dance also help with pre-festival hair and make-up preparations as a way of supporting spirit mediums in their personal network.

Becoming a spirit medium involves being 'chosen' and 'seduced' by a spirit, learning the ritual skills, dance and the knowledge required from an

experienced spirit medium. Participation in a ceremony involves a blessing from an older spirit medium for protection (Brac de la Perrière 2009).

Becoming a spirit medium can involve marrying a spirit.

The social standing of spirit mediums is far more contested than beauticians, as they are often derided as overly superstitious and contrary to Buddhist orthodoxy. The debasement of spirit mediums as frauds, exploiting the superstitions of Burmese people is a feature of popular culture. For instance, in Nu Nu Yi (Innwa)'s novel, *Smile as they Bow*, the main character, based on a deceased prominent spirit medium, is portrayed as deeply cynical of hir profession (2008). The novel is set during the Taungbyon festival, which is the country's largest on the annual calendar. It is in honour of Mingyi and Minlay and held in a village close to Mandalay. The novel revolves around the difficult relationship between Daisy, a spirit medium in hir 60s and hir young lover and assistant, who falls in love with a girl ze meets at the festival. In Daisy's commentary on the proceedings at Taunbgyone, ze describes other spirit mediumship as largely inauthentic, as spirit mediums 'cook up crazy stories... and hope' for financial gain (2008, 34). Describing hir own practice, ze says 'the more froth I spew, the more money I get' (2008, 24). While spirits mediums are beholden to spirits, they are nonetheless dependent on their patrons for material survival.

While transgender views of celebrity spirit mediumship is more mixed than the overwhelmingly positive views of celebrity beauticians, spirit

mediumship is still a source of pride. Pride is expressed in two ways. Firstly, there is pride in trans who acquire wealth and achieve professional success. Secondly, there is pride in the successful queering of the profession, giving trans people a sense of territoriality over it.

The experience of being trans involves boundary-crossing and transgression and many use that to their advantage professionally. This connection between gender and professional boundaries is explained by Ward Keeler (2015, 8), based on his ethnographic fieldwork in Mandalay:

In either case, an individual crosses a boundary – between male and female gender, or between human and spirit that most people cannot or choose not to transgress. In either case, there are trade-offs. Giving up the male gender role has negative implications for one’s social standing, laying a person open to derision and even contempt. By the same token, to give one’s self up to a spirit means subordinating oneself to him or her in a way that is in and of itself compromising.

Tamara Ho (2009) explains the ubiquity of trans in spirit mediumship as a result of a transgressive performativity. According to her interpretation, the trans spirit medium ‘simultaneously orchestrates and ritualizes a marginalized, yet autochthonously sanctioned, space of counterhegemonic subjectivity —a communally inflected queer relationality that challenges autocratic power and masculinist hierarchies’ (Ho 2009, 282). So even if they are the subject of stigma and discrimination in other fields of work, spirit mediumship, as well as the beauty industry, provides a form of power, an outlet and security, even for

those uninterested in the profession. Pride in spirit mediumship is somewhat ironic given the mixed position of the profession in Burmese society. Anecdotal evidence points to a disjuncture whereby many more Burmese claim to not believe in spirit mediums than those who do not believe in spirits.²⁴ There is therefore pride in a profession that is powerful but undesirable.



Plate vii: A spirit medium channeling the spirit of Ko Gyi Kyaw at the Taungbyon Festival.

Tun Tun, a highly successful spirit medium in his early '30s embodies this irony. He takes pride in his work and treats it very seriously. However he openly tells me that he does not believe in most spirit mediums: 'Most of them cheat' he says. 'People either become spirit mediums because they are

²⁴ See Spiro 1967, 56-7.

interested in the tradition or because they are searching for money' ze says, placing himself in the former category.

The rise of work *lines*

Hairdressing and *make-up* constitute a recent profession in Myanmar. Trans are dominant in it. The origins of the beauty industry are unclear. Some trace the genealogy to the last queen of Burma, Suppayalat, who was exiled after the final wave of British colonisation in 1885. According to trans folklore, Suppayalat learnt of European cosmetics through international contacts and was the first in Myanmar to start importing and using make-up. This therefore led to a demand in people who can creatively apply the new products. Curiously, colonial history is absent from the beautician origin stories of my informants, who talk of a distant and glorified pre-colonial past, or a far more recent history of the work *line*. For Ko Lin, the birth of the profession is far more recent. Ko Lin, for instance, is a second-generation beautician. Her mother is May Khine and May Khine's mother was Taunggyi Aung Aung, one of the preeminent trans beauticians in the history of this particular work *line*. Ze remembers a time when there were only a handful of trans beauticians in Yangon. According to Ko Lin, as well as another informant working in the 1970s, the make-up business started in the 1950s and 1960s in inner city Yangon with enterprising 'modern' women opening salons. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, *opens* came on the scene with three founding cosmeticians. At that time

they were self-taught; experimenting with new styles and learning from images they got from film and print media flowing in from overseas.

While *make-up* is the most common profession for *opens* in Yangon, spirit mediumship comes in second. The relationship between spirit mediumship and *make-up* is complex however, and not one where 'traditional' spirit mediumship was overtaken by 'modern' cosmetics. In fact, just as *make-up* was originally a profession run by women, so too, seemingly, was spirit mediumship. In the 1950s, the majority of spirit mediums were women, a ratio that was reversed in the 1970s and 1980s when *opens* came to dominate the profession. Spirit mediumship is therefore not a 'traditional' role for *opens* but has become a socio-economic space that *opens* have been able to claim as their own and in which they have achieved a degree of autonomy. This is to the consternation of older female spirit mediums, some of whom complained to me that the rise of *opens* has tarnished the practice, through a new popular association between spirit worship and transgenderism.

For some, the combination of male and female attributes gives *opens* and *hiders* an advantage over those with only one gender. As Ward Keeler (2015, 4) found,

meinmasha are especially good at making women up, I was told, because they can look at women with both men's and women's eyes. In this view, mein- masha have women's minds and so are sensitive to what a woman's

experience is like. But at the same time they are, after all, male and so they know what in women looks beautiful to men.

One informant explained this to me as a result of having ‘two brains.’ Ze says that ze has exceptional ability because ze has a male and female brain. When ze sees a client, hir ability to rationally solve a case stems from hir male brain. But hir ability to counsel hir clients in a caring way, sensitive to their difficulties, comes from hir female brain.

The first beauticians gained a positive reputation early in their careers and soon found themselves with celebrity and high society clients. The reputation, fame and creation of work space by and for *opens* at this time coincided with the establishment of the country’s first *open* vaudeville troupe. First established by Rangoon University students in the closing months of the 1960s, *Mokyo Ngetngémya* (မိုးကြိုးငှက်ငယ်လေးများ၊ *Little Thunderbirds*) soon went on to perform at temple festivals and military bases. The founders and leaders become media personalities, appearing in the press and on television. While the group had a stable coterie of full-time leaders, membership was looser and included some of the leading names in the early *make-up line*, such as Ko Lin and Khin Saw Win. Ko Lin explains that until hir retirement from the troupe in the late 1980s, ze was able to divide hir time between hir increasingly successful *make-up* career and the demands of performance and touring with the group. From the leading founders of *open make-up*, the line of work has been associated and dominated by *opens*, including those who can trace their



Plate viii: Ko Mar, a prominent beautician, at *work* in 1978. Courtesy of Ko Mar.



Plate ix: Trans performers on a visit to Monywa, 1968. Courtesy of Saw Nanda.

ancestry to the beginning, like May Khine and Ko Lin, or those like Poe Sein who learnt from other more recent and less prominent genealogies.

From the outset, the *make-up* profession has been associated with modernity. Cosmetics are largely imported from Thailand and China. There is ample cultural capital in the use of big global brands of cosmetics such as Shiseido and Revlon. Beauticians have pioneered the use of Chinese-made hormone treatment, which results in a feminine physique. And it is beauticians who have experimented with new fashion such as ubiquitous high heels, mini-skirts, tight tops and *fancy*, the Burmese term for glittering hair accessories and cheap jewellery. In trans slang, this 'modern' style has come to be known as *hot-shot*. *Hot-shots* often dress fully in female clothes in public.

Beauticians are often perceived as more modern in contrast to spirit mediums, who are associated with a more conservative trans tradition. *Open* spirit mediums, when not performing, commonly wear sarongs, male or female, dress casually and primarily use *thanaka*, Burmese wooden paste as make-up. Spirit mediums follow more closely Burmese conventions of polite behaviour, as part of their role as upholders of tradition, source of spiritual knowledge and overseers of ritual. One informant summed up the difference between *make-up* artists and spirit mediums by standard terms of address: beauticians are commonly addressed as *mummy* (မိမိ), a loanword from English, the language associated with cultural change. Spirit mediums are addressed as *amay* (အမေ), the standard Burmese term for mother.



Plate x: Make-up Khin Saw Win, Ko Mar and Saw Nanda (right to left). Date unknown.
Courtesy of Saw Nanda.

Writing about Indonesia, Tom Boellstorf (2005, 46) criticises a trend in Western scholarship that frames what he calls ‘Ethnolocalised Homosexual and Transgendered Professionals’ as authentic, thereby rendering ‘modern’ *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities as invisible. However in Myanmar, such a binary is complicated by recent history. Trans spirit mediumship is a modern

phenomenon, embedded in urban trans culture and market forces. So trans simultaneously claim an ancient link to spirits but can also talk of their role in spirit mediumship as a recent phenomenon. The growing, contemporary professional role for trans in Myanmar differs from the findings of Michael Peletz (2009) that both the diversity of gender and sexual identities; and the political space available for variation; was greater in 'early-modern' Southeast Asia compared to the present. I have found a lack of evidence to support this claim in the case of Myanmar.

The relationship of spirit mediumship to seemingly secular work *lines* is one of interconnectedness and hybridity. This rise of trans spirit mediumship was national in nature (although more confined to the Bamar-majority central plains) and multi-ethnic, therefore not necessarily 'ethnolocalised.' Spirit mediumship is linked to an idea of 'tradition' through the medium's role in relation to ritual and knowledge; however the trans as ritual specialist has a contemporary basis. Lastly, these professions are not bounded but interconnected. Buddhist beauticians, May Khine and Ko Lin, as well as those from the satellite towns and their daughters, overwhelmingly are connected to spirit mediumship, whether through assisting in hair and make-up, or casually channeling spirits at festivals.

The decline of lemon medicine performance

Lin Myat lives in a one-room house at the end of a street in one of the northernmost townships of the city. Hir bamboo built house backs onto rice fields that stretch into the horizon, with the occasional tree. Lin Myat lives with hir husband and supports him, which at the moment is a particular burden given various health issues. They have been together for thirteen years. Lin Myat makes hir living as a 'lemon medicine seller', a nearly defunct trans career path. *Shaukthisaybya* (ရှောက်သီးဆေးပြား) literally means lemon medicine, a popular snack of dried lemon skin. Those who 'sell' lemon medicine walk the streets and perform, with dancing, singing and dramatic skits. Payment is given for the performance, not for the lemon medicine, which is given as a token in exchange. Lin Myat has been in the job since 1979.

Lin Myat offers to bring me along with hir on the street, however ze wants to keep hir distance, worried that if ze is seen with a Westerner, hir customers might think that ze has a *sponsor* and does not need payment. I arrive at hir house just after 6am. Ze has no phone and gave an ultimatum that if I'm not there by seven in the morning, ze would leave. Ze is sitting up putting on eyeliner, wearing a tight sparkling dress, covered with sequins. Hir husband sleeps beside hir under a mosquito net. Ready, we walk down the unpaved road to the main road, a few blocks away. Three buses and nearly ninety minutes later, we're in an inner city township and Lin Myat gets to work. Entering a local market, ze walks row by row, announcing hir arrival: 'Lin Myat is here! Line

Myat is here!’ People stop and stare, many laughing and pointing. Customers call hir over and Lin Myat starts performing. At the end, ze collects payment of around 300 kyat per performance, and hands over a small packet of lemon medicine, which serves as a memento from the monotony of the market.



Plate xi: A lemon medicine seller performing at a Yangon market.

At the height of this profession in the 1980s, there were never more than two-dozen lemon medicine sellers in Yangon, according to current and former performers. Although few entered the profession, it has been highly visible. For instance, lemon medicine sellers have featured in films.²⁵ A lemon medicine seller even performed at a birthday party of Tay Zay, one of the country’s

²⁵ Examples include *The Nobleman Who Can Wear a Sarong of 19 Lengths* (ဆယ့်ကိုးတောင်ဝတ်မင်းလောကျ်း၊ Sèko Taung Wut Min Yaukya) and *Kanasi Ma Pyone* (ကန္တာစီးမပြုံး).

richest men and son-in-law of Myanmar's former military head of state Than Shwe. Lemon sellers feature in Yangon's popular imagination at least in part because they were able to cover large public areas of Yangon townships, in particular markets and main streets. At the time of writing, there were only two practicing lemon medicine sellers left in Yangon, including Lin Myat. While from the same mother, they work alone. Neither have daughters they are apprenticing into the profession. When they retire, it will mark the end of lemon medicine selling in Myanmar's trans culture and the only form of theatrical and musical street performance in the city. Part of the popularity of these performers is their ability to provide comic relief to a wide audience.

Lin Myat is not at all sentimental about the approaching extinction of his profession. Ze explains it as an outcome of the incredible proliferation of the *make-up* industry, which has provided easy access to employment, training and livelihood for young transgender people. The beauty industry provides something of a 'trans dream', namely the possibility to become rich and famous, although few reach such a position. Lemon medicine selling, in contrast, takes place on the street and each exchange is worth from two to five hundred kyat, providing little opportunity to amass wealth or fame. Within emic transgender hierarchies, lemon medicine sellers are close to the bottom. This is in large part because work takes place outdoors. When I went out with Lin Myat, it was late April, the hottest month of the year. Like much of Southeast Asia, fair skin is commonly considered beautiful, in turn reducing the desirability of work in the sun, such as lemon medicine selling. Hair and make-up work happens indoors,

in social spaces that enable rest between clients. When I ask informants about reasons for the end of lemon medicine selling, a common explanation is that the work is physically exhausting. Work that takes place outdoors also has a lower status. This is in part because those working outside are more tanned and there is greater social capital in having pale skin.

In practical terms, lemon medicine selling operates in a way that is not amenable to its reproduction. In the beauty industry, established beauticians are often in a position to take on daughters, allowing them to service more than one client at a time, to rest, to build a family and to acquire status. Lemon medicine sellers, in contrast, work alone. More than one performer on the street means a proportionate drop in income. Lin Myat did have his own mother from whom he learnt the trade. His mother introduced him to a route through inner city markets and bars that Lin Myat continues to roughly follow. But Lin Myat is not interested in finding a daughter of his own and does not think that any of the young *hot shots* would be interested.

Lemon medicine selling occupies a position of ambivalence within trans networks. It is recognised as a historical trans work *line*, however it also involves trans as spectacle and as objects of humour. When I ask why young transgender people do not want to become lemon medicine sellers, an answer that sometimes comes up is that dancing in the street is demeaning. Some trans therefore see the profession as perpetuating negative stereotypes. No

informants expressed a sense of pride towards lemon medicine sellers, a common sentiment towards accomplished beauticians.

In everyday lemon medicine selling, there is far more ambiguity, between front and back stage, and between performer and spectator. Lin Myat's navigation of the busy morning markets and township streets is itself a performance. In costume with heavy make-up, ze turns heads and those who are not hir audience, in the more formal sense, are still spectators. As I trail behind, I hear a lot of comments, teasing, laughter and some of the derogatory terms that signal acknowledgement of Lin Myat's status as trans. While no informants blamed lemon medicine sellers, there was a view amongst some that lemon medicine selling involves being positioned in public as inferior to their gender normative counterparts.

Success in lemon medicine selling can take place when performance crosses over to a formal, theatrical setting. Lin Myat's performance at Tay Za's birthday is a recognition of hir ability, as is the case with other lemon sellers who often sing and dance with performance troupes at temple festivals. However these examples involve separation from the key tenets of lemon selling performance, notably performing on the street, in public, for individuals. The power and value of such performance is in the spontaneity, the unexpected time and place and the short-lived intimacy that performers can build with their micro-audience.

Offer

Down the road from Poe Sein's shop, at the southern edge of the township, June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin congregate after dark. Nearby is the bus interchange for buses on the route between the outer northern township and downtown; for pick-up trucks that run across the neighbouring townships to the markets and industrial zones; and for buses running past the many military bases to the outer north-east. Here motorbike taxis compete for customers, marking the end of bike-free metropolitan Yangon. Around the corner from the brightly lit intersection is a long straight road, off the main bus route that heads into the township towards the industrial zones. A few metres up, there is a toll booth. A few Chinese trucks are pulled over on the side of the road, where drivers are resting and hanging around. Some of them do the long routes north to China.

June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin work as *offers*. They work most nights on this road, two bus stops away from where they're staying. I go to visit one night and they are dressed up, in high heels, skirts and dresses and carefully arranged hair and make-up. They work together, for safety and so they can socialise between clients. Many of their clients are truck drivers, the trucks providing a comfortable location for sex. They go into the bush with other clients, such as motorbike taxi drivers and other men from the neighbourhood. A transaction is typically 3000 kyat (\$3.20).

Working at night, June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin are vulnerable to the 'in the shadows law'²⁶ that makes them liable to arrest and up to three months imprisonment for congregating in a dark place without an explanation. However the three are able to exploit a loophole in local administration. The road that they are on marks the border of two townships. The most omnipresent police on the streets are from the lowest township level of administration, only holding authority within their township. By working the border, *offer* have increased mobility and protection. If township police come from one side, they can simply evade them by crossing the road to the other side and walking into another township. Pursuing them across the border would then involve district level police and coordination between township stations.

A core risk for June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin is from clients, who may assault them, rape them or refuse payment. The greatest risk is gang rape. Sometimes individual clients negotiate, then take *offer* to a pre-designated, isolated place where other men are waiting. On this road in the last month of my fieldwork, an informant who does occasional *offer* work was taken into a pick-up truck at knife-point by three men, who then raped hir, causing internal bleeding. This informant, and others who have faced similar abuse, do not see any avenues for justice. Working in a group of three therefore gives a measure

²⁶ The colloquial phrase for Section 30(d) of the Rangoon Police Act of 1899 and 35(d) of the Police Act of 1945.

of safety as they are able to discuss the merits of clients and inform each other of where they will go. They leave for home together each night.

Within trans hierarchies of work, *offer* are at the bottom, the object of emic stereotypes of criminality and deviance. Many with higher status in trans networks blame *offer* for the perceived low social status of trans in Myanmar. *Offer* are associated with crime, typically theft and sometimes violent crimes that are occasionally reported in Burmese media.²⁷ Working in public, selling sex, is further seen by some as immoral. This is seen as a trans community problem, since public association between trans, sex work and criminality affects all trans people. *Offer* are therefore gossiped about and blamed for negative social attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities. This is a form of internalised transphobia that keeps attention away from structural forms of oppression.

Older trans claim that *offer* is a new profession and give a sentimental image of the 1970s and 1980s when *opens* had high social status and acted (in public) in accordance with moral norms. One older informant disputes this. Ze describes working as an *offer* on and off since the mid-1950s. Ze also gives ample detail of hir experience stealing from clients. At the beginning, many clients were foreign sailors, before Myanmar's long period of isolation, so ze was able to acquire an extensive collection of foreign watches. Ze estimates approximately twenty other *opens* were living and working on the streets in the

²⁷ For instance, see မုခင်းသတင်းဂျာနယ် [Crime News Journal] 2013 and မောင်ပြည်သူ [Maung Pyithu] 2014.

1950s and 1960s, although not all were engaged in sex work. It is however highly likely that the post-1988 period has seen a rapid spike in the number of *offer*.

Some *offer* express disappointment and shame at the common association of *offer* and stealing. Habib, a *hider offer* who has worked downtown for a decade talks about the difficulty of being tarnished as a thief: 'now many young people are entering the *offer* line and causing trouble.' It is not only reputation that is at risk however. Cases of theft lead to renewed police scrutiny at known cruising sites, which can lead to arrest and police abuse. Those who are arrested for theft receive little sympathy within urban trans networks, as they are presumed guilty. Within the country's first LGBT legal support project, there was strong opposition to even providing representation to those charged with stealing. The *offer* as thief is internalised as the figure of 'queer' deviance, and this has given rise to collective suffering from which it is hard to escape. The *offer* is cast as the negative 'other' of the trans community and that allows the rest a sense of superiority. *Offer* as a group become a container for the projection of shame from the rest of the community.

Some identify as *offer* who steal. I meet Toe Toe and Sein Lin in one of their friend's rooms in a north western satellite township of Yangon. The room has a thin wooden partition with a family renting the other side. As such, there is no privacy and those on the other side can hear everything said. We whisper and use trans slang. Toe Toe and Sein Lin are in hiding. They have been working

the northern township, around where June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin congregate. Toe Toe can convincingly pass as a girl. Ze says ze always looked feminine, greatly accentuated by the hormone treatment ze has been on. Toe Toe and Sein Lin used to work together with a third friend, Aye Myat.

Their modus operandi is as follows. Toe Toe and Aye Myat try and chat up drivers, particularly those on the bus routes to China who have ample cash for petrol and tolls. When they are invited into the truck or car, they look for money and valuables and throw them out the window, and their remaining friends drive by on a motorbike and pick them up. Recently, a truck driver reported them to the police. Aye Myat was arrested and has been sentenced to prison. Since then, they suspect that the police are after them so they are staying away from the north and keeping a low profile. 'Those who pass as girls and steal are one type of *offer*' Toe Toe says. They divide *offer* into a taxonomy of *opens* and *hidors* and those who steal are a sub-category of both *opens* and *hidors*. They estimate that there are around fifteen *offer* who use similar strategies as them. *Offer* who pass as women also earn money through deceiving male clients. As Toe Toe explains, 'the man picks us up thinking we're girls. When we start the act they realise we're *opens* and are shocked. We threaten to make a scene and demand payment and can get away without having to do anything.'

Passing as a woman was a strategy of Moe Moe, a friend and colleague of Toe Toe and Sein Lin. In mid-April 2013, as the country was shutting down for

Buddhist New Year celebrations, Moe Moe was in police custody in line for a heavy sentence. A month earlier, ze was at an inner city temple festival on a Saturday night. Moe Moe had some casual work performing in an *open* performance troupe and after hir act, ze wandered around. Outside ze met a man who offered hir a ride and, according to police reports, they went to a few destinations across the city, the driver thinking that Moe Moe was a 'real woman', only to realise that ze is an *open* when ze left the car. He soon realised that a substantial sum of money had disappeared (he claimed 7 million kyat) and reported it to the police.

When Moe Moe was caught, ze had already bought gold bracelets, a necklace and Chinese smart phone and lent some of the cash to friends. Ze was picked up on hir way out of the city, at one of the long distance bus stations, purportedly setting out on a pilgrimage. The story had mass appeal. For instance, Moe Moe was the cover story of *Crime New Journal*, a weekly 'educational' tabloid put out by the Myanmar Police Force. Hir photo is displayed in full colour and ze is staring at the camera wearing a blue dress against a red backdrop. On a table displayed in front of hir are the goods in question: 5000 and 1000 kyat notes, purse, phone, bracelets and necklace. To add to Moe Moe's abjection, the article describes hir as looking like a '*kalar*' the derogatory term for those of Indian descent (မှခင်းသတင်းဂျာနယ် [Crime News Journal] 2013, 1).

Livelihood strategies that involve dishonesty and theft, of which Moe Moe's is a particularly dramatic example, are what trans in 'respectable' work *lines* find so threatening. Within make up and spirit mediumship, status is in part linked to stratification that is intrinsic to the group. The mother has knowledge and skills, which she passes down to her daughters. Any future successes of her daughters reflect back on their mothers. Belonging to a kinship group in the spirit mediumship and beautician work *lines* means ceding a degree of autonomy to the trans group and accepting a trans mother's authority. This authority has an important moral dimension, that involves the regulation of conduct. This is done in a way that fits with trans personhood – so expressions of trans gender and sexuality are obviously permitted but swindling is not.

Offer are also threatening to trans order simply because as a work *line*, they are far more atomised. Like lemon medicine sellers, they are not bound by working hours, by geography and by the many rules of conduct, such as their counterparts in the beauty industry and spirit mediumship. They can work when and where they want, or not at all. They do not need to depend on others and be subservient to others in their work *line*. In a much broader sense, they are free from the constraints of kinship and that makes them dangerous.

Connections

'We all work in unity. If a beautician needs anything, spirit mediums will help and if a spirit medium needs anything, beauticians will help. These jobs are not separated' - Paing Paing, spirit medium.

In the northern satellite town after dark, beauticians, spirit mediums and offers from the area congregate at an intersection near the township market, either at a teashop or beer station. The various 'lines' come together: *make-up*, spirit mediumship and *offer*. Conversation skirts around relationships, passers-by and friendly teasing, as well as professional and economic concerns. The ubiquitous nightly presence of *opens* in these teashops points to their in-between status. Teashops are a domain of male sociality, particularly after dark.

Sometimes local HIV peer educators also join in. They are former beauticians and *offer* and combine socialising with work. Work in the teashop involves collecting data on new arrivals in the area who might not be connected to HIV prevention, support and treatment services, and who have yet to receive a *session* on sexually transmitted diseases, and therefore may unknowingly be putting themselves at risk. They invite the others to intermittent 'parties' in the drop-in-centres. Some parties are themed, such as World AIDS Day and Buddhist New Year. Others are more regular, such as a monthly 'tea party' or karaoke. The parties serve an objective of bringing people to the drop-in-centres, where they can then get a blood test, access counselling and support

networks. Parties also involve 'edutainment', safe sex related drama, song, games, awards and more direct educational speeches. Through mixed social spaces, *opens* talk about a sense of unity across the work identities that are central to everyday life.

Trans Burmese are connected through wide, stratified networks across the city. Those in the highest positions are beauticians and spirit mediums who service the rich and famous. Close proximity to the famous and powerful often leads to celebrity status within the general public, especially for beauticians who appear in glossy magazines and even on television. Unlike glossies in the West, photo shoots of Burmese models commonly clearly attribute the name of the hair and make-up stylist. One tier down from the few trans with public profiles, there are a much larger number of beauticians and spirit mediums, who have a prominent profile within trans networks because of their high position within one of the key professions, which does not necessarily stem from servicing celebrities. Film make-up and wedding make-up are seen as two distinct sub-*lines* within the beauty scene and while mainstream fame comes from the former, those in the latter sub-group are able to become famous within trans networks.

The kinship of work involves a mother adopting one or more *daughters*, who may work full time or part time. The role of a mother in any of the trans professions involves the transmission of knowledge and skills, the provision of material remuneration in the form of wages and a share of profit, food and

accommodation, and guidance more broadly in relation to trans everyday life. Mother daughter relationships in the context of work are a central element of trans sociality and are strong and enduring. So, for example, older beauticians such as Ko Lin maintain relationships with many of hir daughters. Ze is proud of their accomplishments and, in turn, hir daughters continue to visit hir, pay respects and Ko Lin can expect material support when ze is older and unable to work.

The trans kinship of work *lines* is driven by normative concerns for the welfare and autonomy of trans individuals. It is a moral economy, in the sense that the operation of work *lines* is embedded in a particular 'view of the norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community' (Thompson 1971, 79). Work *lines* overlap with what James Scott (1976, 167) terms 'a shared moral universe' in defining 'moral economy'. Indeed as has been noted, 'moral economy' need not apply to antagonism, such as protests and riots, but rather can be used to theorise the maintenance of a common, moral system (Unger and Chan 2004, 3-4). In the context of Myanmar, trans concerns are not surprising. Burmese illiberalism has been primarily felt, in a repressive way, in the political sphere rather than in the social and economic dynamics of the household. While the economy remains illiberal, state power and regulation directed at the urban household and small business can be characterised as passive neglect. This is markedly different from the extensive regulation of everyday economic life in liberal democracies, from tax and consumer protection to health and safety and labour protections. Tax in

Myanmar is collected sporadically and unevenly and is disproportionately felt by peasants in the form price controls (Taylor 1987, 351-2). 'Personalised influences' have a major impact on the Burmese economy (Steinberg 2002). One comparative study summed up the state of the considerable informal economy:

Most ordinary citizens in Myanmar live outside the reach of the state taxation system and receive only very limited benefits of state provided... Despite living in a country that functions far below its economic and social potential, they make their way. One reason... is that the government is concerned primarily with maintaining social stability and seeking economic benefits for state-managed enterprises and privileged groups. Thus, the state does not interfere directly in the informal economy unless there are political ramifications or challenges to the military government's core economic interests (Babson 2001, 86).

This description of everyday economic life suggests an absence of what Habermas (1987) calls the colonisation of the lifeworld, which becomes dissected through the forces of marketization and bureaucratisation. In the absence of such colonisation in the Burmese lifeworld, family fills the gap as a primary regulatory institution. Through the moral economy of the Burmese family, members can find a safety-net, accessing food, shelter, income and care, essential in a state without a functioning welfare system and with a low standard of healthcare.

For *opens* who lack or cannot expect support from their consanguines, an alternative economic system is essential to provide the path from the realisation of being *open*, to exit from the family in order to live free and openly. In this sense, work *lines* are like a subsidiary economy within a broader system that allows for the incorporation of *opens* into the economy.

For those who are lucky, work provides access to relative wealth and with it, economic forms of power that can transform relations of belonging. Informants commonly identify wealth as a source of power available to them and one that has a huge impact on relationships with consanguineal parents and lovers and it involves the ability to gain recognition. In terms of relationships with parents, it is common for *opens* to move out of the family home while they are young (teenagers, early twenties). Those who have some business success have been able to financially support their parents, and some informants have continued living with their parents. Typically, once individuals can financially support their parents, they are no longer subject to physical and verbal abuse, often on the part of the father in an attempt at gender correction. In terms of marriage, many rely on financial power to 'keep' a husband long term. And lastly, at the community level, money expended on neighbourhood causes, such as road building, the support of novices and community festivals can significantly alter attitudes towards trans residents.

Work *lines* are central to trans relations across the city, providing a degree of trans autonomy outside of state and social forms of regulation

through identity-based livelihood opportunities, trans forms of knowledge, training, welfare and sources of credit. In the absence of a commercial trans leisure industry or significant social movement space, an expansive network of work places have become safe sites. In places of work, trans community forms through the coming together of friends, opportunities for cruising, the dissemination of news and gossip and the making of trans-friendly homes. Work place as community space happens largely outside the gaze of the state, as beautician salons and spirit mediums' houses are private and inconspicuous and invulnerable to the 'hiding in the shadows' laws that put those working on the streets at risk. The exception are those who work in public and on the streets: lemon medicine sellers and *offer*. *Offer* are most at risk as they often work at night and their work routine therefore involves strategies to manage the threat of arrest and evade police.

For many trans Burmese, work is the subject of trans pride through the success of the few through widespread recognition and the construction of a trans Burmese dream, that if one tries hard at work then it is possible to attain success like May Khine and Ko Lin, even though the apex of the work *lines* is highly constricted. Conversely, *offer* are perceived by some trans as a risk to assimilation and recognition as a result of the image of *offer* as 'deviant'. This sets up a dichotomy between the good rich and famous beauticians and spirit mediums and the bad *offer*, the latter of which have become an object of blame for acts of stigma and discrimination directed at trans people in general.

The organisation of work, since the beginning of the 1970s, has involved the queering of the beauty and spirit mediumship industry, leading to a rapid increase in the trans population of those work *lines* in the 1990s and beyond. That is largely a result of opportunities and possibilities to live out trans lives and even accusations that some become trans in order to exploit trans livelihood opportunities. In this context, lemon medicine selling, which takes place outside of trans kinship networks and without an autonomous private place, is in rapid decline.

The northern satellite township is a microcosm of trans Yangon. Trans are able to migrate and find work, family and livelihood. This is the path followed by Mummy Poe, Poe Sein and their daughters, as beauticians; Paing Paing as a spirit medium; and June, Sein Hla and Poe Tin (more precariously) as *offer*. These individuals are in close networks of relatedness with each other as friends, mothers and daughters coming together in teashops, in each other's work places and at spirit and temple festivals. For these individuals and many in Myanmar, trans work *lines* provide possibilities for trans forms of community, autonomy and the potential to live out horizontal identities. These possibilities are structured through work *lines*. My ethnographic data on work suggests that work *lines* provide a linear connection through recent trans history, enabling social reproduction over time. Trans work *lines* also facilitate stratification within and between work *lines*. Containment within *lines* perhaps provides Paing Paing's feeling of unity, however this functions within rigid hierarchy. Despite this hierarchial verticality, work *lines* are still part of horizontal

identities, since entry is not prescribed by birth. They are rather essential in facilitating entry into horizontal trans identities, enabling new generations of non-gender normative individuals to live as trans. *Work lines* connect trans individuals within the satellite town, across the city and beyond.

Chapter four: Intimate worlds

With all my love for you, Maung
I only want to give it to you, Maung
I have never loved anyone like you, Maung
Why? Is it because the power of love is formidable?
I've come to love you; with love I've never felt before.
Why do we need to leave our love? Let's hold hands together, face
our troubles.
We can face all difficulties.

Really, all we need is love.
Why aren't you brave?
To our old life we can't return
What more do you need, Maung?
Really, all we need is love.
Why aren't you brave?
Why do we have to be apart because our lives are different?
We don't need an explanation, really all we need is love.

- Chan Chan

In the music video, *All We Need is Love*, Chan Chan, the singer and protagonist, is anguished at the break-up of her relationship. The narrative presents a cultural divide. Chan Chan is poor and her lover is wealthy. She is a

'modern' woman, assertive, independent and stylish. She smokes, goes to clubs, speaks in slang and carries tampons. He is conservative, unwilling to risk potentially bringing shame and dishonour to his family. Despite the love they have for each other, Chan Chan's transgression of conventional gender norms become too much when she tries to kiss her boyfriend in public. He soon dumps her by phone, leaving Chan Chan crying and heartbroken. All Chan Chan needs is love, but her boyfriend is more concerned about family, honour and status. In the song, Chan Chan repeats in a melancholic voice that all she needs is love. But love eludes her.

Out of the plethora of Burmese pop songs released over the last few years, *All We Need is Love* is the song that trans Burmese most identify with. While the narrative is of a gender normative couple, the song, as one *open* informant explained, 'tells our experience, our feelings'. While there are plenty of love songs with happy endings, it is a song that expresses tragedy and the impossibility of reconciling difference that has captured the Burmese trans imaginary. Like Chan Chan's song, trans love rarely has a happy ending.



Plate xii: A spirit medium poses with hir husband.

Soe

Soe is a spirit medium and lemon medicine seller in hir forties whom I met through a mutual friend. Chan Chan is Soe's favourite singer. I meet hir in a teashop one day and ze explains hir experience of intimacy and sex, which I will quote at length:

I've had about four, five, ten husbands and I only get fucked by men I live together with, such as my own husband now under the same mosquito net. If I want to have sex, I have sex. I don't want to get fucked by guys who are violent and smell of shit. I don't get fucked by guys who have scabies. It is not hard for me to have a faithful relationship with one *guy* but for them

it's difficult. I have a desire to faithfully love someone until I die and stay with that person but it's not easy for them. As soon as they see pussy, they want to dump you. No matter how much they love you, if they start having a relationship with a pussy, they dump you. That's the attitude of *guys*. It's rare to get *guys* when you're older. You don't have your looks anymore but the thing is, if you have money and give them money, they fuck you. In that way, they are easy to get but you must possess a youthful look and also have money. As a trans, you never get love. To get fucked, you need to hit someone with money. But there are some guys who have an understanding towards *dries* and there are also guys who pay to fuck you. But they are scarce and that only happens to *dries* who are young and beautiful. I would say that in the life of a *dry*, there are some examples of people who love each other and stay together until they die. But it doesn't exist anymore, only in the past. Nowadays, people just *fuck, steal, run*.

Ze contrasts that with a longing for an intimate past:

In the past, there are people who would love you and even carry water to clean your bottom. But now, you can't find that sort of thing anymore.

Guys now come and join with you for a short time, they'll ask you to buy what they want and also ask you to dress them up and then they'd fuck you. When we don't have anything left, they'll just steal what they can from us and run away. They *fuck, steal, run*.

Soe met hir first husband, Htut Htut, when ze was 21. He was eighteen and

ze met him through his grandfather, also a spirit medium. Soe danced at a few of the grandfather's spirit festivals, and at one local festival, ze met Htut Htut. He fell in love and proposed to hir on that day. Soe reminisced how he was the first person to 'open my *package* (broke hir virginity)'. They lived together as husband and wife after that. They did not have a formal wedding ceremony, which is common for trans-*guy* couples. However, after some years, hir first husband left and joined the army after pressure from his parents to marry a gender normative woman and have children. He joined the army in protest.

Soe found another husband soon after. They lived together but that too ended when hir husband left Soe for a gender normative woman. Then it happened again. And then again.

'I don't remember how many I had but I didn't get fucked by every guy. If a relationship breaks up, I try and take another husband. My more recent husbands also left. None of them last. The most recent husband left me on Valentine's Day.'

Like the men in Chan Chan's song, Soe's husbands are not 'brave'. Even though they might have an intense and loving relationship, they succumb to the many pressures from family and friends to build a conventional family with a gender normative woman and consanguineal children.



Plate xiii: A couple near their home.

Soe's intimate biography, and Ma Nilar's narrative below, illustrate the tragi-drama of trans intimacy. Securing a loving and intimate romantic relationship is unsurprisingly a key life goal for many trans individuals. However, time and time again, intimacy is shattered by an array of regulatory forces. Externally, the demands of heteronormative kinship units, through *anadè*, pressure husbands to break off relationships. That is in addition to the life objectives of husbands, which can of course involve having consanguineal children. The dynamics of *anadè*, internal to trans romantic relationships, militate against intimacy. As Soe mentioned, using the rules of *anadè* to favour the trans partner is a key strategy for relationships to endure. That is done primarily through the ability of the trans partner to make their husband

beholden to them through gifts and financial support. *Anadè* can also favour trans wives if they are older than their husbands and if they provide professional training to them, positioning themselves as teacher. However as Soe's narrative demonstrates, relationships built on *anadè* are insecure. While the power of *anadè* can work in favour of the trans partner, it rarely endures, thus the tragedy. As a result, an allied strategy is to keep multiple lovers, as insurance against potential break-up, which further risks matrimonial intimacy.

Home

I visit Ma Nilar on hir day off. Ko Soe is at hir house, busy doing renovations. The bamboo platform outside hir kitchen, where ze keeps a drum of water and does washing, has come loose. Some of the poles are cracked, in part from the unstable ground under hir house that has turned to mud. Ko Soe is replacing the bamboo floor boards, re-fastening them to the foundation of the house. He works hard, fastening the replacement bamboo with twine and nails. Housing construction and maintenance is typically the responsibility of husbands in rural Myanmar, where houses are built largely with bamboo and thatch that requires regular rebuilding to withstand the rains. Ma Nilar tells me with pride how rural men can do so much more than city men: 'a husband from Yangon can't help like this', ze says. Ze is derisive about Yangon *guys*, whom ze characterises as selfish and exploitative. By taking charge of renovations, Ko Soe has positioned himself as a reliable and serious spouse.

Ma Nilar is ecstatic that Ko Soe is fulfilling a particular gendered role that ze has not dared to expect. Ze wants me to witness their domestic scene: Ma Nilar preparing a meal of rice, pork and eggplant curry and fermented fish paste while Ko Soe labours on the house. Ma Nilar seeks my acknowledgement that the scene is special, that it demonstrates love, luck and Ko Soe's good character. As soon as I arrive, Ma Nilar and Ko Soe perform the role of host. This involves greeting me, providing me with a drink and later food. I try to participate, to help with cooking and building work but they decline, positioning me as guest whose role is to rest, be served and thereby bring merit to the hosts. I am therefore part of the scene, playing a particular role within the intimate space that Ma Nilar and Ko Soe are creating. I am also an observer, documenting and recording the scene, which Ma Nilar is acutely aware. Ze presents their relationship to me as an ideal example of trans intimacy.

When living with their consanguineal parents, trans are commonly restricted in the material expression of their trans selves. Living independently from the natal family therefore involves opportunities for trans personal expression within a different intimate space. Vinyl wall hangings with pictures of spouses and one's self are a common feature of trans homes that are decorated as spaces autonomous from the constraints of the natal family. Photos on display are often hyper-feminine, with hair, make up and clothing that is out of the ordinary. Ma Nilar says hir family does not approve of hir as trans and in hir restrictive childhood home, ze was discreet. Now, a giant wall hanging of hirself with heavy make-up and a sarong is a celebration of a very

personal form of freedom that is possible when one occupies one's own home.

Ma Nilar lives in a split house, occupying the back section. Ze has two rooms: a main room where ze sleeps, eats and relaxes. The main room is about three metres square, and the second room ze uses largely for storage, where ze keeps hir clothes and other belongings, many of which are carefully organised in large khaki metal cases. Opposite the entry, Ma Nilar has a large vinyl hanging of hir first husband, superimposed on an abstract pattern that gives him an intergalactic sparkling rainbow aura. Ma Nilar explains that ze will always love hir first husband and that ze wants to keep his presence in hir home to remind hirself of him. In the corner is a television set, with a lace cover on top and an arrangement of ornaments, many of which are presents from past lovers and friends.

Creating a domestic life is a common and enduring challenge for trans Burmese. Home signifies an enclosure that is one's own and that ideally has a positive effect on the inhabitants, as a space of safety, shelter and autonomy to live out a trans life without the judgement and regulation that is commonly experienced. In trans everyday life, an autonomous home life is important in facilitating intimate relationships. Long term relationships, colloquially referred to as *marriage* (ယောက်ျားရှိတယ်၊ *yaukkyashidè*), are built through the construction of a safe and private space, both for intermittent contact and cohabitation.



Plate xiv: A couple at home. Their wedding picture hangs on an adjacent wall.



Plate xv: The wedding picture of a trans-guy couple, hanging in their home. Trans Burmese, like their gender normative counterparts, largely aspire

towards having a lifelong companion. However, unlike gender normative Burmese, the majority of *opens* and some *hiders* are sexually attracted to gender normative men, referred to as *husbands*. *Husbands*, as part of gender normative society, have to navigate societal expectations of gender normative marriage and sexual reproduction within their trans domestic partnerships, thereby residing in an in-between space that often causes uncertainty, insecurity and anguish to their trans partners. The anguish of trans intimate partnerships makes home an ambivalent place, the object of expectations that are rarely attainable.

Beginnings

Ma Nilar met Ko Soe at the Taungbyone spirit festival in August 2011. Ko Soe's brother is a spirit medium so Ko Soe and his mother went to offer support. They met in the carnival square, first making eye contact before Ma Nilar introduced himself. Ma Nilar was there because he goes every year, because he is trans. Ko Soe is tall, well built and has a calm manner. He drinks without getting boisterous and avoids violence. He's from rural Bago District, where his family once had a small farm before moving to the city when he and his brother were adults. For Ma Nilar, *tawtha* (တောထဲ rural) is a positive descriptor of him. 'Rural *guys* are simple and honest and they don't cheat like city *guys*' he says. Ma Nilar also adds that his farming background gives him a desirable, strong body.



Plate xvi: A trans bride on hir wedding night, Yangon, circa 1970. Courtesy of Dr. Myint Maw.

Ko Soe and Ma Nilar spend time together during the Taungbyone festival and then continue seeing each other after they get back to Yangon. I first meet Ko Soe in September. They have been together a month and Ma Nilar is feeling confident about the relationship. So ze decides to introduce me to him. I have known Ma Nilar for three months and being introduced to hir new *husband* makes me feel like I have passed a sort of test with hir. Ze has adequate trust in me that I can meet hir husband without risk of embarrassment from any potential cultural misunderstandings. We meet at hir house in Yangon's north.

When I arrive Ko Soe is frying pork on an electric frypan and Ma Nilar is sitting cross-legged, cutting morning glory vegetables on a heavy chopping board on hir bamboo floor.

First crisis

One month later, I catch a bus across the city to Ma Nilar's work, for a casual visit. When I arrive, ze greets me, waiting near the gate of hir work. Ze suggests that we go out and talk and is clearly distressed. We cross the road and sit down at a teashop. 'I'll tell you the story' ze says. 'The story started yesterday' ze says, leaning forward, talking quietly so others cannot overhear.

Ko Soe lives part-time with his brother and mother. Ko Soe does business with Ma Nilar, buying dried fish from a rural wholesaler and selling it in town for a profit. One day he goes out to sell dried fish and his brother spends his savings on groceries, leaving Ko Soe unable to restock his supplies and continue the business with Ma Nilar. Ma Nilar got angry with him for letting his brother come between them. Ko Soe then explains that his brother does not like him staying with Ma Nilar and says while Ma Nilar is at work, he has to wage war with his family over the relationship. Ko Soe's family look down on Ma Nilar and talk badly of hir. Ko Soe defends hir, thereby creating conflict and a division with Ko Soe and Ma Nilar on one side and Ko Soe's family on the other. Ko Soe says that things will only improve if his brother, who has advanced tuberculosis, gets better or dies. Ko Soe tells Ma Nilar that if they can't be together, he will

spend the rest of his life as a monk.

Ma Nilar stares into the distance. 'What can I say? I love him. Some families, some communities don't understand the meaning of trans and trans nature'. Trans 'nature' for Ma Nilar collocates with freedom. Ma Nilar's notion of freedom includes sexuality; to be with *guys* how and where ze wants, and the freedom of gender identity. Ma Nilar explains:

Opens want to have freedom and adventure, to live a happy life by themselves and not live with and rely on parents and relatives. When relatives are included, they complicate the play. Most of us, once we realize that we are trans, try to live independently without being influenced by our relatives. Most of us don't live with our parents but try and have our own private life. Like that, I want to live away from family. I love Ko Soe and I married him. I took him but his family came along and things became too complicated.

Ma Nilar has been pained at how to account for the needs and wishes of Ko Soe's family, in part because it is a reminder of hir own sometimes traumatic struggles with hir natal family, and the attempts ze had made earlier in hir life to escape. The institution of family is therefore identified as a primary constraint to autonomy and thereby to happiness and intimacy. Freedom to be intimate is fought for and regulated through local, informal relations of power. For Ma Nilar and many other trans, the family is tragic because it stands in the

way of the desired relationship, causing a feeling of loss, anger and shame. As Ma Nilar's current crisis illustrates, the family is a formidable threat to intimacy.

Ko Soe is caught between obligations to his sick brother and his wife, Ma Nilar. Ko Soe's brother's illness carries affective power, as Ko Soe tries to avoid defying him, lacking the bravery that Chan Chan sings about. Ko Soe's feeling of *anadè* leads him to neglect his relationship with Ma Nilar in order to fulfil his feeling of responsibility to his brother. He offers a compromise whereby he stays five nights per week with his natal family and two nights per week with Ma Nilar, but Ma Nilar does not want to accept that. Ze explains that if Ko Soe is being pressured to stay away, then the two nights they have together can easily be lost.

Tears form in Ma Nilar's eyes as ze keeps talking. 'He was crying and said he can't break up with me. We love each other so much don't we?' Ma Nilar asks.

'You do love each other and you're really sweet together. He seems to have a really good heart' I reply, telling Ma Nilar what ze wants to hear, trying to provide the limited comfort I can as Ma Nilar debriefs and seeks acknowledgement.

'We love each other so much but because of family, we have to stay apart' ze says, stating the links between family, *anadè* and tragedy.

This is a far cry from a few months earlier when Ma Nilar accompanied Ko Soe back to his village. 'People loved me there' Ma Nilar says. 'We saw his older sister, her daughters, his nieces, other relatives. He introduced me as his wife.'

For Ma Nilar, the possibility of divorce as a result of family pressure is worse than if hir partner fell out of love with hir, or was unfaithful. Ze knows he loves hir and he is committed to hir. Ma Nilar trusts Ko Soe. It is mutual love and trust that is so difficult to establish in trans-*guy* relationships, which makes the possibility of an externally imposed separation particularly painful. That the external threat is from the natal family makes Ma Nilar all the more distraught, given the efforts ze has made to escape hir own natal family and the constraints family has imposed on hir identity and sexuality when ze was younger. Despite being able to escape hir own family, ze has to suffer as a result of the familial obligations of hir intimate other.

Ma Nilar takes a step back. 'You can use this for your thesis right? You wanted to know about issues with our relationships.' Ze describes hir problem in dramatic terms. 'There are international and Burmese plays about this. Like Romeo and Juliet. They were kept apart despite loving each other' says Ma Nilar.

Meanwhile, Ma Nilar keeps Ko Soe's photographs as a consolation. 'I have lots of his pictures' ze says. 'I can use them as an antidote when I miss

him.'

The next time I see Ma Nilar, ze is happy again. Ko Soe has promised to spend half the week with hir and defy his brother. Things go back to normal and Ma Nilar does not want to dwell on it.

Endings

I am still in bed when Ma Nilar calls. Ze speaks euphemistically, and tells me that something has happened to Ko Soe. Ze warns me that if he calls me, not to meet with him or lend him any money. It is the second crisis of their year-long marriage. I ask Ma Nilar if ze wants to meet and talk and we make a time later in the day. I offer to come to hir place but ze says there are problems in hir neighbourhood and ze will come downtown. We arrange to meet on a street corner. A few hours later I am waiting at a street corner near Sule Pagoda. Ma Nilar arrives with a pained look and seems almost traumatised. We walk over to a nearby teashop.

We sit down and Ma Nilar starts to explain what happened. Ze has been out of town for a week at a spirit festival. Ko Soe was staying in hir house, looking after it. Ze called him a few times while ze was away and he said everything was fine. However, when ze called the day before, to ask him to meet hir at the bus station, he was not there. When Ma Nilar got home, a man who lives near hir house called hir over, devastated and enraged. Ko Soe was

sleeping with the man's wife. It happened when Ma Nilar was at work and one day another neighbour saw them together and reported it to the woman's husband. The couple had a fierce row and the woman left, saying that she is going to go away with Ko Soe. The neighbour tells Ma Nilar that he will kill Ko Soe and is looking for him. Ko Soe is in hiding, presumably with his female lover. The man is left with two young children. This is the most serious incident in Ko Soe and Ma Nilar's intense relationship, from which a positive outcome seems unlikely. Ma Nilar is devastated both that hir husband is unfaithful and that ze brought Ko Soe into hir neighbourhood, precipitating the breakup of a family.

In the months that I have known Ma Nilar during hir relationship with Ko Soe, ze has often asked me for acknowledgement that their relationship was special and at least as good as a heteronormative relationship. Ze has asked me if they make a strong, solid couple, if Ko Soe is a good match for hir, if their love for each other is obvious to me, and if I can see how much he loves hir, cares for hir and is devoted to hir. Each time ze would ask, I told hir what ze wanted to hear. What is of primary importance are the obligations that are associated with *anadè*, discussed in detail in chapter seven. *Anadè* can be defined as civility but it is more than that. In the context of Ma Nilar, what mattered in relation to *anadè* was that I not cause hir distress. To do so would breach the rules of *anadè* in our relationship, which would hurt our friendship. I joined hir in hir optimism and said that they are lucky to have found each other and that Ko Soe is a faithful and devoted husband. That their love for each other is evident. Providing this validation was however an ethical challenge. I never felt easy

validating their relationship, wondering if it would inevitably end in heartbreak as I am so often told is the fate of trans couples. My sense is that Ma Nilar's seeking of acknowledgement implied an underlying anxiety that the relationship was as temporary as other trans intimate relationships. Even though ze might worry that the relationship is short-lived, I imagine that it was meaningful to hir that I was able to witness and document mutual love between them.

Tea is served and Ma Nilar explains that ze heard from a mutual friend that Ko Soe is arranging to move out of the city with the woman and that is why he might ask to borrow money from me. The warning positions me as a key financial resource for their marriage, which I have been cautious about. I lent them money occasionally when needed and covered most expenses when we were out. The latter was a previous source of shame for Ko Soe. Ma Nilar informed me that after one trip to a temple festival, when I had paid for some food we shared, Ko Soe had scolded hir after they returned home, telling hir that ze should be *anadè* to me because I am a guest and that ze should not let me pay all the time. Ma Nilar said that the comments demonstrated how good and honest Ko Soe is and that he has a high level of civility. It made hir proud that he was concerned, however ze still expected that I pay for their expenses when out.

Ma Nilar compares hir own love story to Shin Mwin Lun and Min Nandar, which Ma Nilar sees as a Burmese equivalent to Romeo and Juliet. Shin Mwin

Lun was a princess, the daughter of the king of Thanlyin (formerly known as Syriam) and Min Nandar was a prince, son of the king of Dagon (later Yangon). They fell in love at first sight, but their families did not agree and forced them apart. The two kingdoms were separated by a wide river. The prince defied his family and went to the bank to cross the water so he could be with his love. He rode on top of a crocodile. An evil crocodile became jealous and attacked the crocodile that Min Nandar was riding. The good crocodile put Min Nandar into his mouth to protect him, but accidentally swallowed him, killing the prince. The king was frantically searching for his son and when he saw the good crocodile, he beat him, demanding to know where Min Nandar was. The crocodile threw up the prince but the life left in him was as fragile as a thread of string, and he died. When Shin Mwin Lun heard of her lover's fate, she died of a broken heart. Their bodies were burnt on their respective sides of the river, and they were reunited as smoke in the sky. Ma Nilar sees this as analogous to her current condition: the love is unplanned, real and intense, but due to the constraints of family, the lovers met a tragic end. The tragedy is inescapable.

Ma Nilar is hurt and angry but also worried about Ko Soe's safety after the death threat from her neighbour. I am worried for Ma Nilar's safety and ask if the neighbour blames her. Ma Nilar says he does not but Ma Nilar feels a mutual sense of victimisation, along with her neighbour, both victims of their intimate others. However, unlike the gender normative neighbour, Ma Nilar is also struggling to manage the vulnerability of being an *open* in her home neighbourhood. Ma Nilar's construction of home, as a safe and intimate space,

crucially entails strategies of building relations with neighbours. Ma Nilar feels a personal burden to prove to hir neighbours that trans can be local assets rather than the stereotype of trans as morally corrupting curiosities. Ma Nilar has tried to be a good neighbour by helping around the neighbourhood. The object of Ma Nilar's distress is Ko Soe's betrayal and the impact it has on hir attempts to garner respect for trans people through neighbourliness. Ma Nilar worries that even after the crisis calms, hir sense of home and status in the community will have diminished. Ze says that I can write about this, so others understand how bad *guys* are. Ze sees the story as a case study of the tragedy of trans intimacy. Ze moves between a personal confessional space to a performative third person narrative about hir place in a living, spiralling plotline, in which ze is the victim in a melodrama. Ma Nilar talks about hir relationship with Ko Soe as a hurt that is common to trans experience. Ze draws some solace from the fact that I documented it and that it would therefore raise awareness of trans suffering. Throughout our conversation, Ma Nilar repeats how ze keeps thinking of hir neighbour's children who have been left without a mother. Ze too is now alone.

Infidelity as strategy

To survive the intimate challenges that Ma Nilar and many other trans face, individuals use various strategies to prevent heartbreak. One strategy that trans partners deploy to cope with the risk of marriage breakdown is the establishment and maintenance of secret casual relationships. Such

relationships work as a shield to reduce loss and hurt by providing a form of intimate back-up.

That Ma Nilar has other lovers soon became evident to me during our urban wanderings, which would often end up in casual sex with motorbike taxi riders, *guys* in bars or teashops, *guys* at temple festivals. Ma Nilar has been clear, however, that ze expects Ko Soe to be faithful and is careful to hide hir secret sex life, sometimes reminding me to keep it secret when I see Ko Soe. For Ma Nilar there was clearly a different standard for hir and hir husband that I wanted to explore, although discussing it could be fraught. I wanted to explore hir reasoning in a way that did not suggest disapproval and did not test hir trust in me.

One evening, after the second crisis, I went to Ma Nilar's house. Two of hir friends from the neighbourhood, both *opens*, were there and we all sat on the floor in a semicircle, with Burmese pop music videos playing on the TV in the corner. The conversation moved to the topic of *guys* and casual sex. I ask Lu Lu, a local beautician in hir early thirties, about the difficulties in keeping *guys*. Lu Lu answers in general terms, using the term *MSM* for my benefit, although principally referring to *opens* and perhaps *hiders*. "There are some *MSM* who don't want to have a long term relationship. They know that because they're not women, *guys* won't marry them. So before they get hurt, they'll try and get together with another person, so if one leaves them, they'll have someone else. Long term relationships involve marriage and faithfulness and they know they

will get hurt.' Ze uses an automotive metaphor, saying it is like keeping a spare tyre.

Ma Nilar disagrees. 'I would say that trans would have a serious relationship with one *guy* and also keep other lovers. The other lovers are just for a short time and not serious.'

Lu Lu adds, 'So in the community, people think that trans are incapable of faithfulness.' They all laugh. It is a line I've often heard from gender normative Burmese friends, warning me that entering Myanmar's trans world is dangerous because infidelity can be contagious and warning me that I might get infected. In fact, for Ma Nilar and Lu Lu, infidelity can be a form of power that they can exercise and control in their everyday life.

Ma Nilar goes on: 'You can never let the husband know that you also *eat guys* sometimes. You have to do it secretly. If they know it will cause a fight.'

Lu Lu explains: 'I *eat* with a slim chance of being caught.'

Lu Lu also uses her seductive prowess to deal with homophobic *guys*. Ze recounts a story of seeing some *guys* in a teashop. 'They stuck their noses up at me. One guy said he felt disgusted with *opens*. A friend I was with overheard and told me what the *guy* had said. My friend got very upset and felt bad for me. I got angry which is normal and I said 'who the hell is he to say he feels disgusted with me? What makes him feel that way? He's no different to me and

he's not even that handsome.' Lu Lu says that at that moment, ze decided the man had to become hir husband. Ze used a range of methods including love letters, gifts and flirtation. Using a theatrical metaphor, ze explained that the plot developed well and when ze was drunk one day they got together. That was six years ago.

During my fieldwork, I became an active participant in Ma Nilar's strategy of seeking extra-marital sex, as a way to offset the possible loss of hir partner. As our friendship developed, Ma Nilar took the initiative to orient me to Yangon's *open* world. We made regular trips to teashops, bars, temple and spirit festivals, as well as other places of significance in Yangon's after dark *open* landscape. When I first started following Ma Nilar on night-time excursions, ze was more formal and serious, like a teacher educating hir student. Ze soon became more relaxed as ze calculated the risks of association with me, such as the potential on my part of causing social embarrassment. After I had known hir for a couple of months, ze started cruising for *guys* in my company. Sometimes ze asked me to wait when ze would approach *guys*, calculating the possibilities with them before introducing them to me. Ze would introduce me as a student studying the trans situation in Myanmar so I can go and teach others in Australia about the life and tribulations of *trans*. I became a support person. Ze would point out *guys* and ask me what I thought. This signalled a new level of intimacy I had with hir, a sharing of aesthetic opinion and I would respond in the *open* and *hider* cant that I had learnt: *guys* were either *asin* (အဝင်္ဂ်, handsome, refined) or *awli* (အေဝ်လီ, rude, bad-looking). Ma Nilar used my

research as a way of getting approval from hir husband in order to go out at night. Ma Nilar would therefore regularly meet new *guys*, with whom ze had casual sex. For Ma Nilar, it was a strategy of diversification. Ze loved Ko Soe and was serious about hir relationship with him. However, ze was also aware that their relationship would likely have a low success rate. Maintaining casual intimate relationships with other *guys* gave hir a sort of emotional backup should things collapse with Ko Soe. Ze did not need to solely rely on him for pleasure and companionship. This strategy of keeping multiple partners was common amongst my trans informants and contrasts with observations in Laos. In a study on sexuality in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, Chris Lyttleton (2014, 158) observed that trans in Lao regularly changed partners, but explained it as a result of a 'social identity' that is highly sexualised, so a single partner would generally not satisfy.

My attempt to learn about Ma Nilar and Ko Soe's intimate relationship thus paradoxically enabled Ma Nilar to seek other, secret lovers. Ma Nilar's recruitment of casual lovers in my company deepened our own friendship as greater trust was expended between hir and I, such as when I would consequently meet Ko Soe and have my loyalty tested when he would ask about our outings. I would give vague answers to his questions. While I felt *anadè* to Ko Soe, my own relationship and sense of obligation to Ma Nilar overrode that. This was one instance of the fraught and ethically challenging fieldwork relationships that involves positions from which it is impossible to be a distant observer. Conversations such as that between myself, Ko Soe and Ma Nilar upon

returning home involved taking sides and aligning with particular nodes of intimate networks: that of Ma Nilar over hir lovers.

As a result of my relationship to Ma Nilar, it became apparent that Ko Soe could not be a key informant. An intimate researcher-informant fieldwork relationship with Ko Soe would call into question my obligations to secrecy. I could not be an equal friend and researcher of both partners. A choice was therefore required between being allied with Ma Nilar or with Ko Soe. These dynamics played out repeatedly with my trans informants. If I were to identify as a *guy*, I would likely be positioned as external to Ma Nilar's close friendship networks, as a confidant of Ko Soe or as a potential sexual partner. I may have been able to gain close knowledge of Ko Soe but that would have come at the expense of acquiring knowledge of Ma Nilar and other *opens*. While as a non-Burmese and non-*open*, outsider status was inescapable, there was nevertheless a crucial methodological, personal choice to make in terms of gender and sexual identification. In intimate research, it is not possible to be a distant observer. Relationships with informants are demonstrated through adherence to specific (in this case trans) cultural codes.

Anadè as strategy

Anadè is a key strategy that trans partners use to form and maintain intimate relationships. As Ko Soe explains, it involves the use of power differentials that favour the trans partner and make the husband beholden to

his wife. In part, this is a status differential. If the trans partner is older and has a higher education than his husband, the trans partner can expect increased power in the relationship. This is combined with relations of exchange, where trans partners give gifts, housing, food and even income to their husbands. Trans report that *guys* are well aware of the economic benefits of trans marriage and expect and demand material benefits. This exchange component of intimate *anadè* is what Yum (1988, 379) refers to as 'asymmetrical reciprocity'. In a study of Confucian interpersonal communication, Yum found that 'the practice of basing relationships on complementary obligations creates warm, lasting human relationships, but also the necessity to accept the obligations accompanying such relationships' (Yum 1988, 379.). However as mentioned above, trans rarely achieve lasting relationships.

Burmese heteronormative relationships that are constructed through *anadè* contrast markedly with 'Western' ideals of love and intimacy, as theorised by Anthony Giddens, in important ways. For Giddens (1992), the 'pure relationship' marks a move away from what he saw as pre-modern objectives of marriage, that served economic and political objectives of the broader kinship groups of the couple involved. Giddens defines a 'pure relationship' as 'a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (1992, 58). For Giddens and other theorists, open communication is an essential aspect of

intimacy. Jamieson calls this 'disclosing intimacy', where trust and disclosure are crucial to the boundedness of a relationship (1998). However, Giddens' conception of intimacy is highly Euro-centric, and runs counter to the regulatory effects of *anadè* that favours indirect communication to avoid discomfort and conflict. The latter form of communication 'helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and each other's face intact' (Ock Yum 2012, 117). This is not simply a matter of individualism against 'communalism' (Ting-Toomey 1991), since trans relationships are formed on the basis of love and emotional need.

In contrast to their heteronormative counterparts, trans relationships in Myanmar more closely fit Giddens' model of the 'pure relationship' and the angst many of my informants' experience, especially those who are older, can thus be a form of ontological insecurity from the disruption to the sense of 'continuity and order' in heteronormative, reproductive 'traditional' relationships (Giddens 1991, 243). Each relationship can be joyous, loving and intense but also fragile, as it is apart from the regulatory forces of extended kin, social models of parenting and the political economy of reproduction that bind heterosexual families.

The social regulation of trans relationships contrasts with the greater regulatory intensity that applies to Burmese women and girls. Unmarried women and girls commonly live with their parents and, as with trans children,

contend with parental pressure, through *anadè*, to maintain a moral and 'virginal' external appearance. Public moral transgression hurts the status of one's parents. Regulation of women's bodies within kinship units can be formidable and involve curfews and restrictions on freedom of association. *Opens*, in contrast, are free to express and experiment with their sexuality and be intimate, typically without the intrusion of their immediate kin. Male partners in heterosexual relationships therefore have to contend with these familial pressures. Pre-marital sex carries status risks and heterosexual divorce typically involves far more people and reputational expenditure than divorce in trans relationships.

Intimate domains

Intimacy was a central concern for all my trans informants. For older informants, strings of failed intimate relationships were a source of bitterness and regret. For those who were younger, intimacy was a regular source of hope, joy, wishful thinking, regret and heartache.

Within heteronormative intimate relationships, *anadè* acts as a shield to intimacy. The rules of *anadè* detract from the key elements of the 'pure relationship' – that is self-disclosure between partners and the equality between partners that self-disclosure implies (Jamieson 1999). Inequality is a standard feature of heterosexual relationships in Myanmar, as 'it is proper, according to Burmese cultural norms, that the husband should be dominant

over the wife' (Spiro 1977, 271). Spiro sees that as self-evident given the wider Burmese ideology of male superiority. A wife, in such a relationship, is obliged to serve and make sacrifices for her husband in many ways, which inhibit the sort of intimacy that theorists like Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013) focus on.

Trans forms of *anadè* paradoxically engender intimacy, solidifying relationships, even if temporary. As Layder (2009, 173) observes,

Because even optimal or mutually satisfying intimacy involves at least some traces of gentle manipulation or other 'unfair' means, encounters between lovers or friends have a constantly shifting balance of power and emphasis, as individuals employ different resources, skills and ploys to elicit loving, caring responses from one another'.

So trans *anadè* facilitates a form of intimacy that is unequal and manipulative but one that is deeply carnal and passionate. Similar dynamics have been observed in Laos, where trans *khatoey* intimate relations are often age stratified, with the *khatoey* partner being older. In this case, 'the appeal is both emotional and material as the *khatoey* is expected to 'take care' of his younger charge' (Lyttleton 2014, 152). One of the hallmarks of trans *anadè* is that sex is uncoupled from the wider kinships dynamics of *anadè*. However, carnality does not detract from a lingering sense of tragedy in the fragility of their relationships.

The transience of intimate relationships with men is also a feature of *hijra* relationships in India, to the extent that *hijra* do not count husbands as part of their kinship networks. Gayatri Reddy (2005, 151) explains this as stemming from *hijra* definitions of kinship as 'being there' and 'caring' and found that *hijra* laughed at her when she asked questions about whether husbands can be part of *hijra* kinship. Husbands of *hijra*, much like husbands of trans Burmese, are notable for their unreliability and absence. In research on sexuality in Laos, Chris Lyttleton (2014) noted a similar ephemerality in trans intimate relationships. He saw the temporariness of intimate relationships with *kathoeys* as a result of gender dynamics that limit the opportunities for heterosexual sex. Trans relations are therefore 'experimental and situational' (Lyttleton 2014, 151).

During my fieldwork, I was asked questions on multiple occasions that seemed to demand recognition and even reassurance that relationships are real, special and certainly no less valid than the intimate relationships of their heteronormative counterparts. In customary terms, the informal, everyday recognition of trans intimacy is what makes a marriage real and distinct from casual relationships. Given the ambiguous role of the state in regulating heteronormative marriage, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is non-judicial interpersonal recognition that counts.²⁸

²⁸ According to Burmese Buddhist customary law, a marriage is legal when seven neighbours on each side of one's house recognise it as such. However, when the courts adjudicate divorce and inheritance cases, this has only been applied to heterosexual couples.

Chapter five: Spirit kin

Near the beginning of my fieldwork, I was invited by a friend I met through Myanmar's LGBT rights networks to accompany her and three other beautician friends to Pyay (formerly Prome) for a spirit festival they attend annually. They went to seek blessing for the success of their businesses. Pyay is an historic, medium-sized town in central Myanmar, a four-hour bus trip from Yangon.²⁹

During my first experience of a spirit festival, my companions kept me beside them, not wanting me to talk to strangers and ask questions. They were concerned that I might do something to offend spirits or other worshippers given my own lack of knowledge of the cultural codes. They feared that my asking questions would interfere with and dampen the intensity of the rituals. They were right. In that context, in the midst of excitement, questions would have been out of place or even dangerous in offending the spirits. In retrospect, I was confronted by two almost opposed systems of *anadè*, one being the *anadè* of the heteronormative world and the other being an *anadè* of spirits and of the spirit world. The former is about civility and the restraining of affect and the other is almost about the unleashing of affect. I found myself in a position where

²⁹ The anthropological literature on spirits is vast. This chapter is an ethnographic and autoethnographic account of spirits in Burmese trans everyday life, in a particular time and place. Rather than examining the culture of spirits per se, my focus is rather on spirits within the demotic sphere of my trans informants. For a general account of spirits in Burmese culture and society, see Spiro 1967; Brac de la Perrière 2015a; Brac de la Perrière 2009; Brac de la Perrière 2005 and Nash 1966.

I had to be inhibited in a space of seeming disinhibition. My companions were seated, transfixed, and the last thing they wanted to provide was commentary. Their ostensible purpose was very instrumental: a brief offering then back to the guesthouse. The experience was therefore confusing, as I lacked the cultural codes to interpret the stages of the ritual. The event took place in a bare hall. We kneeled down and my companions put their hands together to pray. The music reached a crescendo as a woman sang into a microphone, accompanied by cymbals, drums, xylophone and a pipe, in front of a narrow space where two mediums were taking it in turns to perform. One medium, with a large chunk of raw steak hanging from hir mouth, jumped surprisingly high, the tail on hir dress spinning to the side as ze kicked it away mid-air.

It turns out I might have offended the spirits. After observing the ritual, I joined my companions in an auspicious meal made from food that was offered to the spirits. After the spirits have their fill, their human subjects can eat the leftovers of the blessed food. Within a few hours, I was violently ill with gastroenteritis that lasted for a week. Perhaps this was my punishment for offending the spirits by being a distant observer rather than a participant. None of my companions were affected by the meal.

After twenty minutes at the multi-day festival, we were in the back of a pick-up heading towards Pyay city. Homebound, my companions discuss the connection between themselves as trans and the spirit world. 'What have trans got to do with spirits?' asks Lin Lin, hir voice shaken by the vibrations of the car.

'It's tradition' replies Ma May.

'No, spirits don't have anything specifically to do with trans' argues Ju Ju.

'They're an important part of Myanmar culture.'

'But why are so many *dries* spirit mediums?' questions Lin Lin.

'We're good at performing' says Ju Ju, with a hint of cynicism.

Lone Lone weighs in: '*nats* love trans.'

Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to make sense of the place of spirits within trans society and my first negative experience of a spirit festival. Initially, I had difficulty thinking of spirits as substantive entities. Under those cognitive conditions, I was a detached observer. As I entered the spirit world, something profound changed. Bruno Latour captures this well. He writes of religious talk as

such sentences judged, not by their *content* – their number of bytes – but by their performative abilities. These are mainly evaluated only by this question: Do they produce the thing they talk about, namely *lovers*? I am not so much interested here in love as *eros*, which often requires little talk, but in love as *agape* [spiritual love] to use the traditional distinction. In love's injunction, attention is redirected not to the content of the message but to the container itself, the person-making. One does not attempt to decrypt the sentence as if it transported a message, but as if it transformed the messengers themselves (2005, 29).

Latour is writing about Catholic rituals but this applies equally to the world of Burmese spirits. The point is that the process of spirit worship is both

performative and transformational. It is what Latour labels *transformation* talk' as against *information* talk that is of relevance in trans everyday life (Latour 2005). *Information* relates to so called facts and *transformation* talk relates to so called beliefs.

Spirits are central to the culture of trans kinship and provide a fundamental source of recognition to their followers. Spirits love their trans followers, who are positioned as their children, younger siblings and mediums. Part of the affinity between spirits and trans is a similar culture of diminished regulation of affect, which is a reversal of the way in which *anadè* restrains the expression of affect in the heteronormative, human world. Within the spirit world, social regulation requires the open expression of affect as a positive characteristic of spirithood, and by extension, personhood. This mirrors what I refer to as trans *anadè*, where sex and desire is regulated to be openly expressed rather than repressed. So while the spirit world can seem dangerously disinhibited when viewed from heteronormative society and according to norms of heteronormative *anadè*, it is in fact regulated in certain ways that mirror the trans social context.

Journeying into the spirit world

After Pyay, my next big festival was Taungbyone. I walk seemingly endless loops of the festival grounds, stopping intermittently to greet trans contacts I've met in Yangon who have come as mediums, worshippers and

revellers. I am looking for a way of immersing myself into the festival, as a participant and not just a distant observer. The point is to explore what spirits have to do with trans everyday life. In other words, why do spirits matter? Time and again in Yangon, trans subjects have told me about spirits: their favourite spirits, festivals, private and public shrines, and offerings. They have used possessive pronouns to talk about spirits and spirit festivals, such as referring to particular spirits as 'our spirit' or festivals as 'our festival'. This use of collective pronouns is one of the most common instances of a collective trans expression of taste, orientation and kinship (as spirits have an affinity with the amorphous body of trans Myanmar often expressed in kinship terms). This implies a sense of collective ownership and identification between trans and spirits, with spirits conceived of as parental figures to their human trans children. For many, spirits are therefore immanent in trans life. Spirits speak and are spoken to, they love and are loved, they eat and they possess physical space through their embodiment in the three-dimensional statues that are representatives of them. Spirits live, they have names and histories, personalities and desires. They are an integral part of trans community. They figure within individuals' networks of social interaction and are also an integral part of trans kinship networks.

When informants talk of spirits, they use the verb 'love' (ချစ် *chit*), as in 'spirit x loves me' or 'I love spirit x'. Human spirit relationships are a potent form of attachment. When humans make a promise to care for a particular spirit, it involves continued emotional investment and care. Spirit love is

grounded in the everyday affectively and materially. Spirits are present and need to be acknowledged and spoken to during the day. They watch their followers as they work and eat. When individuals love a spirit, they love specific spirits over others, and build an emotional investment in those spirits. Love of spirits is therefore comparable to relationships of love between spouses and family: personal, intense, unpredictable and transactional.

Entering the spirit world as a researcher involved overturning my initial preconceptions of what I imagined to be separate trans fields, namely that the field of spirit mediums would be disconnected from the 'modern' urban trans scene. My initial preconception was based in part on recent 'queer' literature on the 'global gay' (Altman 2002), which as a 'modern' and secular cultural form, is detached from parochial supernaturalisms. In this literature, the modern and secular 'gay' contrasts with localised spiritual trans cultures, such as Bissu transgender ritual specialists in the Indonesian island of Sualwesi (Davies 2007). This split between tradition and modernity is a problematic opposition, part of a teleological worldview of modernity that displaces a pre-modern age. This is seen in discourses where 'modern' and 'Western' sexual identities are perceived as superseding 'pre-modern' constructions of (trans)gender, albeit in diverse ways.³⁰

My initial dismissal of the centrality of spirits was also based on assumptions I had of the dynamics of trans politics. I did not initially

³⁰ See Altman 1996 and subsequent debate in the Australian Humanities Review 1997.

understand the place of spirits in trans political life. I did provisional research with Myanmar's foundational 'LGBT' rights group, exiled to Thailand, who have been building a rights-based movement and training activists. In this network, spirit mediums are largely absent. This can be explained by key differences in conceptions of morality and power between the LGBT rights movement and the spirit world. The LGBT rights group makes political demands on the state and members hold a normative view on how trans ought to behave in order to justify the rights they claim. In contrast, spirits, and the mediums they communicate through, do not make any demands on the state and do not take account of the moral and social context of the individuals they interact with. Rather than being of a political nature, relations between spirits and their followers are affective. Disinhibition is part of an altered form of *anadè*. In fact there is an obligation not to suppress certain affective registers related to sexuality. Within transgressive *anadè*, obligatory systems unite them, it is not the case that obligation ceases. Rather, there is an obligation to be disinhibited.

I thought at the start of my research that there was a cultural clash between a contemporary LGBT scene on the one hand and the culture of spirit worship. The dominant categories of modernity and pre-modernity proved not very useful.³¹ There appeared to be no clear boundaries between what can be characterised as traditional modes of belief on the one hand, and what might be perceived as 'modern'. In fact, practices merge in a way that makes it difficult to

³¹ See Latour 1993.

apply binary categories.³² In the shops and homes of the first Buddhist beauticians that I visited, I noticed many wooden figures of spirits, with an array of offerings in front of them. I asked about them and the owners were happy to talk about them and show me how to make offerings. Within weeks of arrival in Yangon, Maung Maung, an HIV peer educator, introduced me to four urban spirit mediums. Maung Maung argued that if I wanted to understand Myanmar's trans world, I had to learn about the culture of the spirits. Maung Maung identified spirits as a core part of his trans culture. For Maung Maung, spirit mediums are an important link to an enchanted transgender heritage, that is both mystical and exciting. To Maung Maung and many others, the period since British colonisation of Myanmar, and the subsequent destruction of the monarchy, is seen as disenchanting. State politics were radically secularised and as a result, Maung Maung and other informants cannot envisage any new spirits being added to the pantheon. As Myanmar liberalises, spirit mediumship has been displaced within the economics of transgender work *lines* in favour of creative industries, such as hair, beauty, fashion and floristry. The spirit world depends on mediums as a key mediator between spirits and humans. As Myanmar has opened up, spirit mediumship has become less attractive, largely because it is less profitable than other industries that are integrated into global capitalism. However, spirit worship remains widespread.

³² John Law (2004) using 'mess' as a descriptor of a methodology. Here it may be worth thinking of the ontological lifeworld of my respondents as messy, namely a mixture that is not amenable to discrete intellectual categories which John Law describes negatively as an ordering exercise.

Spirits also provide a link between trans community and a national imagining of Burmese culture and cosmology within which spirits are a recognised and visible component. Within trans culture, established trans spirit mediums are positioned as mothers. Maung Maung's spirit medium mothers are all part of his HIV peer education network and it was during the work of peer education that I was first introduced to them. The first four spirit mediums that Maung Maung introduced me to had never spoken to an interested foreigner and were enthusiastic to talk to me about the spirit cult, seemingly for the recognition it afforded to the spirits and themselves as ritual practitioners. I asked one medium where individual spirits operate, wondering if they are god-like and omniscient and omnipotent or if they are confined to a particular geographic area. Kyaw Thein, a middle-aged and charismatic medium for the spirit of the sea, guardian of sailors, laughed at my questions, exclaiming that 'spirits can travel anywhere; they can even go to your country. They don't need visas or airplanes.'

Myanmar's thirty-seven *nats*

Myanmar has a range of spirit traditions of which one of the most central is that of the thirty-seven *nats* (often translated as lords). The thirty-seven *nats* are the dominant spirits of the plains, the territory most influenced by the succession of monarchical polities that preceded colonialism. Being of the centre, the thirty-seven *nats* intersect in important ways with institutions of power.

Thirty-seven *nats* are spirits of living beings that generally died a violent death. Their status as spirits was officiated through inclusion on lists of the thirty-seven *nats* kept by the monarchy, starting in the Pagan period. According to the dominant historical narrative, the cult of the thirty-seven *nats* was brought under state regulation during the reign of King Anawrathra in the eleventh century. He was a model Burmese king who made Buddhism the official religion and who unified the core territories of what is now Myanmar. According to the royal chronicles, Anawrathra's recognition of spirits was a way of taming the threat they posed to his rule (Brac de la Perrière 1996). That is illustrated in the most famous spirits, Mingyi and Minlay.

Mingyi and Minlay were Indian Muslim brothers whose father was a trader and whose mother was a flower-eating ogre. Their power came from their father who had purportedly eaten the dead body of a hermit. They were in the king's army and became heroes fighting on a military expedition in Yunnan. On their way back, the king ordered his troops to build a Buddhist temple at Taungbyone, just near Mandalay. He decided that he did not trust the brothers and had them killed, part of the evidence being that two bricks were missing from the inside of the pagoda. The angry spirits of Mingyi and Minlay stopped the king's boat as he sailed down the river. To appease them the king decided to build a palace for them next to the pagoda in Taungbyone. He also ordered local residents to worship them. The king therefore managed to domesticate dangerous rival powers, turning them into tutelary spirits.

In a similar way, local spirits were co-opted by the monarchs, who built palaces, awarded territory and attempted to place spirits loosely under their control and attempted to make them subservient to Buddhism. In this way, the state could co-opt and govern spirit worship, ensuring that it does not become a rival form of moral and political authority (Brac de la Perrière 1996). Spirits continue to pose a perceived danger and many Burmese have an ambiguous relationship with spirits, where they suspect them as having a polluting effect on Buddhism, while simultaneously being wary of their power and trying to placate them.

Spirits have an ambiguous relationship to space and place. Spirits are associated with local places, where they were born and more importantly, where they died, the latter being the location of the custodians of each spirit and the place of annual festivals that honour them. However, spirits also have a national community of worshippers and mediums and are worshipped anywhere, thereby enabling productive connections within Burmese trans society. Spirit worship takes place at multiple levels, in the privacy of one's home, and at the village and regional level. Annual spirit festivals, the biggest being at Taungbyone for Min Gyi and Min Lay, connect the local domain with spirit mediums and worshippers from across the country. All of these levels are in turn connected to the royal authority, the lists that recognised the thirty-seven *nats*. After the fall of the monarchy in 1885, the practice of spirit worship has been self-sustaining.

Embracing Ma Ngwe Taung

Ma Ngwe Taung stands out as the most significant spirit for trans worshippers. While trans are connected to a range of spirits, depending on their interests and occupation, geography, family and dreams, Ma Ngwe Taung is an important figure in trans and spirit relations. She is the only spirit that supports and protects the intimate, romantic world of her trans followers. After my first negative experience of a spirit festival in Pyay, I realised that I needed to become a participant in trans spirit practice rather than a disconnected observer. I did this by attempting to build a relationship with a spirit and the obvious choice was Ma Ngwe Taung. When I ask informants about her, my interest is often perceived by others as a reflection of my own gender and sexuality. At this sort of juncture, which happened frequently in my research, I did not assume an outsider status. Even if I had wanted to, the questions I asked, knowingly or unknowingly suggested to my informants that I was on the way to becoming an *open* or a *hider*. 'Why do you like Ma Ngwe Taung?' is a stock response. My answer is that she helps find *guys*, which is invariably received with approval. A discussion of the spirit Ma Ngwe Taung with my informants helped foster trust and friendship. During my second spirit festival, the husband of an informant took me to buy a statue of her. It was about 50 centimetres high, carved out of wood and painted pink. Later, other informants in Yangon talked about the fact that I possessed a statue of her and joked that I might become a spirit medium myself.

The story of Ma Ngwe Taung, as an oral history, is told in multiple ways by different people. She was a Hindu woman of Indian decent, born in either India or Sri Lanka. Some say she lived during the reign of King Anawratha in the eleventh Century. She lived on the plains of central Burma and fell in love with Pakan Min, a local ruler notorious for womanizing, drinking and gambling. Pakan Min was married but kept Ma Ngwe Taung as a lover, but she was unfulfilled and jealous of Pakan Min's wife, Shin Bo Meh. Once Ma Ngwe Taung went on a pilgrimage to see Pakan Min. Pakan Min did not want to see her and scolded her for coming, causing her to feel rejected, angry and ashamed. Ma Ngwe Taung was broken hearted.

On her return, she saw her brother Shwe Kyauk San in the distance and mistook him for Pakan Min. They looked alike and both played the harp. Some say she spoke romantically to him, some that she tried to embrace or kiss him. This caused incredible shame, and, from their position at the top of a hill, either her brother kicked or pushed her, or she fell, and died a sudden death. The sudden, violent death, known in Burmese as *green death* (အစိမ်းသေ၊ *aseinthay*) caused her to become a spirit. Her name comes from the hill from where she fell to her death from, Silver Mountain (Ngwe Taung), 'ma' being a feminine term of address that means older sister.

Ma Ngwe Taung has come to represent a dominant narrative in trans Myanmar of tragedy and suffering. The experience of so many trans in Myanmar

is one of pain and Ma Ngwe Taung is both a symbol of this and the object of identification. Identifying with her somehow gives the suffering a spiritual dimension. In this, the suffering of Ma Ngwe Taung is particularly significant for my informants because her pain stems from a narrative of forbidden sexual desire and unrequited love. As a spirit, Ma Ngwe Taung is perceived as directing her anger at men as the primary object of her vengeance. Trans identification with Ma Ngwe Taung also provides a sense of catharsis from their suffering from *guys* who invariably divorce them for women.



Plate xvii: A trans spirit medium, dressed as Ma Ngwe Taung, at the Ma Ngwe Taung Festival.

One informant, a beautician, explains the consequences of Ma Ngwe Taung's shame in connection to trans: 'She died from a love affair. Because of

her experience, she hates men and loves *dries*. So she helps *dries* with love, by making *guys* love them. She fell in love with a *guy* and had a bad experience, filling her with regret. That's why she loves *dries* so much. We can rely on her.' Her anger at men can cause them danger if they transgress rules of behaviour. For example, it is dangerous for *guys* to eat food offered to her, because it can make them *hidors*. Ma Nway explains, 'she loves *dries* because she doesn't want her husband to love other women. She doesn't want men to be real men. Ma Ngwe Taung wants *dries* to have *guys* and she also loves our *guys* but she doesn't like us to give our *guys* what we offer her.'

To Toe, a well-known Yangon spirit medium, explains Ma Ngwe Taung's deep connection with *opens*. 'Before she died, to punish herself for mistaking her brother for her lover, she condemned herself to be trans in her future lives as penance [for her transgression]. We have to dance for her in every *pwè*.' Mother Love tells this differently, that Ma Ngwe Taung condemned herself 'to marry one thousand monks and to serve all men before she dies'. Popular interpretations of Ma Ngwe Taung's struggles emphasise the sexually transgressive nature of her life. This explains the affinity that female sex workers and women working in massage and karaoke bars have towards her. Ma Ngwe Taung is the only spirit they can pray to for help in finding male patrons.

Some extend this to interpret *dries* as Ma Ngwe Taung's creation. Maung Maung says 'in the past there were only real men and real women and some

became spirits. There were not any *dries*. *Dries* only came into existence in this era because Ma Ngwe Taung created us. It was her prayer that brought us into existence.' One of the core ways Ma Ngwe Taung is involved in trans everyday life is in helping trans find husbands. Bo Bo, a spirit medium in his 70s explains: 'she loves all *dries*. She makes *guys* love us and also helps keep the relationship together long term.' Harun, one of the few Muslim spirit mediums, similarly says 'Ma Ngwe Taung can look after your love affairs. You can pray to her to be able to stay with your lover permanently.' Another medium adds, 'those who feel diminished because they don't have a husband worship her to get a husband and she can win over any man.' Ma Ngwe Taung is thus positioned by trans informants as their mother and the equivalent of a guardian angel and patron saint. While Ma Ngwe Taung may not be the chosen spirit with whom trans informants have a primary bond (by way of being selected by a spirit in a dream), she nonetheless plays a crucial role in trans everyday life that is unique amongst spirits.

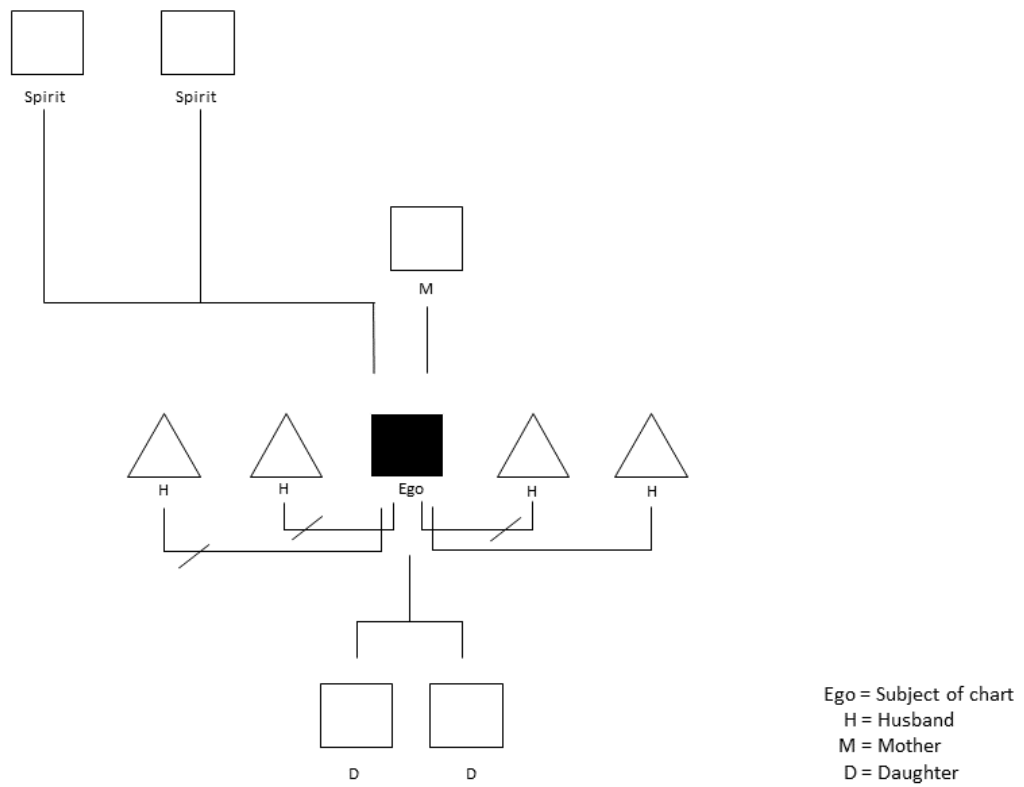
Ma Ngwe Taung and other spirits are part of a trans interactional network. This network is a network of kinship relations. Spirits are positioned as mothers and fathers, older siblings or wives of their trans worshippers. The Burmese term for spirit medium literally translates as 'spirit wife' or 'concubine' so marriage is a core form of relatedness between spirits and their mediums. Spirit medium informants tell me that they are only allowed to marry female spirits and are forbidden from marrying male spirits. This creates something of a disjunction between the social practices of marriage between

humans, and that between spirits. In human-to-human relations, there is a fair degree of fluidity whereby individuals can take on the role of husbands or wives within same-sex relations. It is not long before relationships are labelled as marriage in the trans world. Human-spirit marriage by contrast operates according to essentialised gender categories based on sex assigned at birth. As Zaw Zaw, an *open* spirit medium bluntly put it: 'We're men so we don't marry male spirits.' So while female mediums are able to marry Mingyi, Minlaw and Ko Gyi Kyaw, trans connect to spirits according to other modes of relatedness. For Zaw Zaw, the relations of significance are with Popa Medaw and Amay Yay Yin. 'We [*opens* and *hiders*] are in the place of sons and daughters of Popa Medaw, also as the sons and daughters of Amay Yay Yin.'

For trans who marry spirits, Ma Ngwe Taung is of primary significance as the only spirit that is marriageable. As Mother Love, one of Ma Ngwe Taung's spouses explains: 'I got chosen as a husband by Ma Ngwe Taung. She helped me and that's why I became successful, and became a spirit medium. People marry Ma Ngwe Taung but no other female spirits.' Ma Nway sits next to Mother Love nodding in agreement. Ze continues on from her, explaining marriage relations further to me: 'He married Ma Ngwe Taung and got power from her. Ze gives her the skill of fortune telling. When Mother Love predicts that a business will be successful, it is so. It is Ma Ngwe Taung's special power that makes her a successful spirit medium.' The act of marriage ties a spirit medium to their spirit spouse, giving them a deep channel of communication with their spirit and a position of greater legitimacy for the spirit to speak through the medium,

where, as Zaw Zaw put it, the spirit's words can be heard in one's brain. The ability of spirits to communicate through hosts such as Zaw Zaw attests to the malleability of the butterfly soul. This has important economic implications: 'For me, marriage is for business. It means I can preach and do fortune telling because I married this *mother*. She is with me and I can know the thoughts and wants of those who I deal with. I can predict the future.'

Figure iii: Trans kinship diagram, showing three categories of kin relations: that between a trans individual (ego) and spirits; mothers and daughters; and husbands.



Trans spirit mediums therefore have the option of marrying Ma Ngwe Taung or of entering into a wider field of kin relations, as a daughter or sister. Mediums can use kin terms to relate to spirits casually, and officiate deeper relations through ceremony. Marriage involves serious commitment and so human-spirit marriage comes with rules of behaviour that, if broken, can lead to serious consequences for the reckless spouse. Marriage with spirits does not involve sexual desire and spouses are not restricted from taking human lovers, including other husbands or wives. Spouses talk about a deep feeling of love towards their spirit spouses, although a central component of spirit love is the act of exchange. As Zaw Zaw says, 'I love spirits because spirits love me. They look after me and protect me from trouble. So if there is a car accident for instance and many people die, I would be safe because of the protection of spirit.'

Rather than marriage signifying an orientation towards a gendered other, marriage with spirits involves similitude, not only of gender but of identity, whereby the spirit spouse takes on the identity of the spirit. Mother Love explains: 'When we got married, I had to dress like Ma Ngwe Taung and obtain her spirit. My husband chose to help and support me through the marriage and stayed with me for seven days. I stayed with him and only ate food that Ma Ngwe Taung likes, such as oily rice, fried fish and fried banana.' Mother Love's marriage to Ma Ngwe Taung therefore involved a merging between her person and Ma Ngwe Taung. It was made possible because of Mother Love's status, biologically as sexually opposite but with a common

mind/heart as Ma Ngwe Taung, and replicating her *image*. 'I dressed like a woman. I have a female *mind/heart* because Ma Ngwe Taung chose me.' Ma Nway adds, 'Ma Ngwe Taung wishes that everybody she chooses would lose their masculine *mind/heart*, and have it replaced with feminine *mind/heart*. She has ensured that I do not desire women.' Marriage with Ma Ngwe Taung is therefore institutionalized as a trans practice. Human marriage is codified by the British colonial regime as a heteronormative institution, however the customary nature of marriage has enabled non-heteronormative couples space to marry, at the interstices of law and social practice. The act of marriage with the only permissible female spirit is starkly different, a possibility that excludes all but a minority of non-gender normative males.

One of the key ways individuals relate to spirits is through keeping small spirit shrines in their private homes. A shrine can be as simple as space on a bench and consists of a wooden statue of the spirit to which prayers and offerings are made. The relationship, like all relations of *anadè*, is one of rights and obligations, in this case mediated through gifting, which obliges the spirit to provide something in return, creating a cycle of reciprocity. As this all takes place in the intimate space of home, the relationship between spirit images and their human keepers is also intimate and not mediated by any greater human authority such as a spirit medium. Through maintaining a shrine and following the rules of spirit *anadè*, which regulate the interpersonal relationship, trans are thus able to bring into their home an important source of power, recognition and love.



Plate xviii: A shrine to a spirit on the bench of a beauty salon.

Rather than being an abstract representation of a higher power, in the way a crucifix is, spirits are actually immanent in their wooden statues. The potency of statues stems from a ritual conducted by a spirit medium where the spirits soul is trapped inside the image. This involves a ritual connecting the statue to its owner through the winding of string around the owner and statue. The eyes and ears of the statue are pricked with a pin, in order to activate its sight and hearing. The ceremony transforms the statue from shaped wood to a powerful object that through its embodiment of a particular spirit can cause danger if mistreated. It therefore provides a direct channel to the spirit. It is potentially dangerous if disrespected. Statues allow individuals to bring spirits into the domestic sphere and the spirits are a living part of everyday life for

those who keep them. Relations with spirit statues are therefore personal and rules of *anadè* apply.



Plate xix: Artisans making spirit statues at the Taungbyon Festival.

Lay offerings to spirits are made on a regular basis up to the discretion of the keeper of the statue. Offerings can therefore be daily, or intermittent. More intricate offerings, sometimes involving blessings from a medium, are made during the time of a spirit's festival. An offering first involves the preparation of items. A person making an offering then places the items in front of the spirit

and asks for blessing. What is offered depends on the history, culture and personality of each spirit and one of the tasks of spirit mediums is to learn the rules for each of the many spirits. Some spirits that are Hindu or Muslim must have their own religious dietary rules respected. Mingyi and Minlay, who are Muslims, therefore cannot be offered pork. Ma Ngwe Taung, as a Hindu, cannot be offered beef.

Ma Ngwe Taung is omnipresent in trans homes. Hay Man, an older Yangon spirit medium, explains whilst making a larger offering to Ma Ngwe Taung, during a festival:

We have to prepare oiled rice and on top of that we have to place a soft fried egg. Fry banana. You don't need to fry it with batter, just fry it softly without anything. And then there's *nga gyin* fish. You can't cut open the belly of the fish but cut rings into it and fry it. If you cut its belly open, money won't enter anymore. You have to give Ma Ngwe Taung seven fish, seven fried bananas and seven fried eggs. As soon as you offer that she would open up luck for you.

I ask Hay Man how to communicate with Ma Ngwe Taung. 'You can only ask for things, like health and business. You can't talk with her. You can't say, 'How are you?' and 'have you eaten?' You can say, 'I want money so give me money' and 'I want to be healthy so take care of me.' With regard to intimate affairs, Hay Man explains, one cannot talk to Ma Ngwe Taung about love, but one can ask for her support to find a good partner and thus marry with a strong

foundation of love. Soe Aye, a factory worker and occasional *offer*, talks about hir *offer* friends worshipping Ma Ngwe Taung:

There are some *dries* here who go out at night and before they go they pray to Ma Ngwe Taung to bring guys to them. They pray like this, 'Ma Ngwe Taung! Make me popular tonight so many *guys* will be attracted to me', then at night that *dries* will be surrounded by so many *guys*.

Ma Nway, who is listening, adds a note on the transactional importance of human-spirit relationships: 'you can't get that without doing anything for her though. You have to offer her oily rice and fried fish.' Ma Nway's point is about the rules of reciprocity that are innate in all forms of *anadè*, including spirit *anadè*. Worshipping Ma Ngwe Taung, giving her the food that she likes and making her happy obligates her to reciprocate in return, with protection and by fulfilling the desires of her followers.

Back on the spirit festival circuit, two informants from Monywa and Lashio, disparate parts of Myanmar, are chatting with me about the importance of festivals to their lives and to trans culture more broadly. Monywa is an important site for spirit festival, as a transit point to three key festivals that honour Amay Yay Yin, Ahlone Bodawgyi and Ma Ngwe Taung. The informant from Monywa sees the festivals as a time where local *opens* connect with those from across the country, including some of the nationally famous beauticians from Yangon and Mandalay. Ze likens the festivals to the secular mobilisations ze has heard about in other freer places and times. 'Spirit festivals are very important for trans because unlike other countries there are no festivals here

for trans. Trans can only be free, happy and enjoy their life in spirit festivals.’ The informant from Lashio adds, ‘It’s a time where we can be fully *open*. We can share our beauty and show off.’ The informant from Monywa continues, ‘We can really *open* so we love spirit festivals. We love our big brother, little brother and big mother [referring to key spirits]. I feel so satisfied when I go to a spirit festival. In countries like Brazil and France, there are shows for trans and a lot of rights and opportunities. Here we can’t hold parades or protest. We can’t even parade to show off our beauty. The only place we can do that is at a spirit festival.’

In festivals, mediums, their entourage and attendees come together from across central Myanmar. At the key festivals such as Taungbyone and Yadanaku, large numbers come from Yangon and congregate with those from the dry zone cities of Mandalay, Monywa and Pakokou, as well as further afield: the Shan hills, Kalay and Mawlamyine, creating national trans connections. While *opens* only ever seem to make up a minority of festival attendees, they have far greater visibility than in everyday urban streetscapes. So much so that the biggest festival of Taungbyone is colloquially known as a ‘gay festival.’ Again, Ma Ngwe Taung, through her deep connection to her trans children, helps ensure this, and it is exemplified in one senior spirit medium’s reading of Taungbyone’s recent history. During the Socialist period, former President Ne Win, acting on Ma Ngwe Taung’s wish, re-established Taunbgyone as a spirit place for *opens* and *hiders*.



Plate xx: Ma Ngwe Taung in her central palace, near Monywa, during the annual festival held in her honour.

At the festivals, those from the heteronormative world can defer many of their social mores. As Sarah Bekker has aptly observed about the festival in 1964, 'release of aggression is socially sanctioned... [and] the tensions relating to *anadè* and its taboos are suspended – no behaviour can be considered insulting but only humorous and full of good will' (1964, 378). However rather than *anadè* being suspended wholesale, in the festival space, heteronormative *anadè* collapses and the *anadè* of spirits and trans become the norm. For a few days, the forms of social regulation that trans live by are not only tolerated by

the majority of heteronormative festival goers but are adopted as the norm and awarded recognition. The spirit festival is an ecstatic place of trans belonging.

Spirit *anadè*

According to Sarah Bekker, author of the only extant study on *anadè*, one of the key dangers that spirits (and by extension, spirit mediums) pose to polite society is their disinhibition:

Expression of strong emotion of any sort is abhorrent to the Burmese...

The *nats*, however, are expected to express themselves more strongly than humans do, and to feel more strongly... [*Nats* are] less bound by compassion and attitudes relating to *anadè* than humans; their emotions are stronger, wilder, and more direct, and because of this, they are less likely to keep their obligations. One must be on one's toes in dealing with them and be watchful for the least signs of displeasure. *Nats* have no means of curbing their anger and so can be very destructive (1964: 387-9).

She goes on,

the *nat* is assumed to express himself more forcefully than the human, but to be unmoved by the subtleties of human feeling. He is not capable of imposing limits upon his behaviour and emotions as humans are. In this respect, dealing with the *nat* is easier than dealing with the human, because one always knows exactly where one stands with him. On the

other hand, because *nats* cannot control themselves, they do not remember obligations and will change their mood from one moment to the next (1964: 391).

Bekker is right in drawing a distinction between civility in human society and the world of spirits. There are indeed fundamental differences between norms of behaviour between the two groups. Where she is wrong is in the normative judgements she makes regarding the nature of civility in Burmese society. In Bekker's thesis, a homogenous view of *anadè* in Burmese culture is presented. Social groupings that break the norm are positioned negatively, as out of place or as lesser social beings. This is a view from above, in which what she refers to as 'respectable society' is the benchmark, which leads her to conclude that *anadè* can be suspended in the presence of spirit society, namely spirit festivals. This conclusion is to be expected given the period in which she did her research. However what Bekker misses is that spirits do indeed follow particular norms of *anadè*, however they run counter to the *anadè* of heteronormative society. Spirit *anadè* in a way is an *anadè* from below, a reaction to and resistance against the constraints and inhibitions of heteronormative *anadè*.

The annual calendar of spirit festivals is where the dominant culture of *anadè* is suspended, replaced with counter forms of *anadè*: that of spirits and of trans. Viewed from the norms of heteronormative *anadè*, the disinhibition that characterises spirit festivals is subversive. This disinhibition is often cast

negatively in heteronormative society. However different contexts involve different normative social criteria. In spirit and trans society, negative judgement is placed on those who are inhibited. What marks out these spaces is the intensity of affect. Not expressing affect goes against spirit and trans *anadè*. Disinhibition therefore has high cultural value.

When viewed within contextualised normative social criteria of trans and spirit *anadè*, the affinity between spirits and trans becomes clearer, providing another answer to Lin Lin's question in Pyay: 'What do spirits have to do with trans?' While trans subject positions are positioned negatively within heteronormative contexts, such as the family, they are fundamentally recognised and thereby validated in the presence of spirits. *Anadè* is a hierarchical system that favours social superiors. Thus spirits, as superior to humans, are able to set the social norms of *anadè* within contexts where they interact with humans, such as in spirit festivals. Trans, many of whom perceive themselves as the favoured social group, loved by spirits and created by Ma Ngwe Taung, are empowered in the presence of spirits, who love them for who they are rather than positioning them as transgressive of the hetero-norms. Spirit *anadè* legitimises trans *anadè*. That is to say, spirits being social superiors award respectability and even normalcy to trans ways of being. Conversely, trans social practice could also validate spirithood by countering the ambivalent, uncomfortable and even negative way in which many in the heteronormative world view spirits. Perhaps it is unsurprising that spirit and trans *anadè* share a commonality in the normalisation of affective expression

and intensity. Common to the Burmese trans narrative is the search for freedom, namely freedom from the regulative constraints of the heteronormative. In an important way, spirits are able to provide some of that freedom.

Chapter six: Temple Festivals

For trans in Yangon, annual spirit festivals, spread across the central plains, are difficult and expensive to get to. Those not involved in spirit mediumship might go to important festivals once or twice per year. In contrast, temple festivals are readily accessible and a core site for the performance of *opens* and *hider* belonging. Temple festivals are held in Yangon throughout the dry season and are a ubiquitous, impermanent part of the landscape. For many *opens*, temple festivals are the only regular urban place where they can feel free.

The temple festival site is part of everyday Yangon. It may be on a field that residents walk through to get to the bus stop. Or it may be on a suburban road. It can be on the edge of a township market, the vicinity of a suburban side street or the land in front of a temple. It is part of neighbourhoods, of local economy and embedded in the political and cultural ideologies that constitute social relations. Bakhtin described the carnivalesque as an important interruption to the misery and oppression of daily life. During carnival, 'in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contract reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age... Therefore, such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit' (Bakhtin 1984, 10). The temple festival has an energy unlike elsewhere in the city, of new possibilities, the breaking of

norms and the undermining of hierarchies. It is a natural space for urban queering.

Monique Skidmore, in her ethnographic study of fear in Burmese everyday life, sees forms of amusement as a means of respite from both the poverty and repression of everyday life in the country: 'The majority of urban Burmese... adopt a strategy in which their 'minds' leave temporarily, while waiting for change.' Comparing this to Cinderella, Skidmore (2004, 186-187) sees amusement as a fleeting reprieve 'from the drudgery of everyday life and from the never-ending babble of nonsensical propaganda and threats of violence'. Skidmore uses the metaphor of Cinderella's ball for temple festivals, since they provide momentary pleasure and escape for people before they are drawn back into the hardship of everyday life. I was not in Yangon long before *open* friends took me to a temple festival, and night time journeys across the city quickly became routine. My visits to temple festivals began during the first stages of transition and continued through the rapid political liberalisation of 2011 and 2012. With liberalisation, festivals are moving back to downtown Yangon. With democratisation, the Shwedagon Pagoda temple festival was re-established in late February 2012, the first time since the 1988 uprising.



Plate xxi: Outside the entrance to a trans performance at a temple festival, Magwe, 1981. Courtesy of Saw Nanda.

Temple festivals as a key leisure site have a long history in Myanmar and have often been commented on by colonial officials, travellers, journalists and writers. The importance of festival space outside the temple grounds is noted in a 1919 *Weekly Rangoon Times* article on the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival: ‘the fun of the fair, however, was to be found on the vacant lot to the east,’ the site of the market stalls, smaller areas of performance and rides and games (cited in Withey 1978, 574-5). In the colonial period, British anxiety about temple festivals centred on their potential for disorder, both in the form of crime and sexual transgression. Colonial authorities were particularly concerned about the freedom of speech at temple festivals, which they saw as a threat to the

state. The inebriety of local police, who attended festivals as participants was also a concern to the state (Withey 1978, 578-9).



Plate xxii: A dramatic performance put on by a trans performance troupe during a temple festival, Mandalay, 1981.

Bakhtin's notion of carnival space is better envisaged as a network throughout Yangon. There is no centre but many squares. Each temple festival can constitute a carnival square, a single node in a network of carnivalesque space. A temple festival site is a centre of carnival. Each temple festival has a market area for congregation, laughter, gossip, eating, drinking, fun and performance.



Plate xxiii: The market square of a temple festival, Yangon.

Within trans Yangon, the temple festival holds a particular importance as a public gathering point. They are where trans individuals from across the city have fun and pursue often temporary sexual relationships. The sexual experience of temple festivals involves *opens* and to a lesser extent, *hidens* picking up *guys* in the vicinity of the festival, if the landscape provides sufficient cover. Or they might take a *guy* home for the night. The potential for intimacy can then also turn into a longer-term casual relation or marriage. Intimacy is possible because of the relative lack of regulation in the festival. While trans everyday life is characterised by the often painful barriers to lasting intimacy, the temple festival contains the potentiality of pleasure and escape. In contrast to the atomisation of trans space through private work *lines*, the temple festival

is public and cuts across the professional, geographical and class divisions within trans Yangon. While in everyday life, public presence is often low-key, the temple festival, by nature, is a space to dress up and play with *openness*.

One night in Mingaladon

I arrive at Toe Toe's house at 7pm. Ze greets me without looking at me, as ze is busy putting on make-up. Ze sits cross-legged in the corner of hir three metre square bamboo room. Saturn sits in the opposite corner watching video clips, a Burmese version of Shakira's song *Waka Waka*. Saturn is dressed in a floral skirt, the first time I have seen hir like this. Toe Toe is wearing hir trademark skin-tight jeans, a padded bra (since ze has long been off hormones) and a frilly black top. Hir hair is permed and ze has put on a full layer of make-up, including toner, lipstick and eye shadow.

Toe Toe checks the time on an oversized watch and starts shuffling us out the door. It is just after 7pm. 'There won't be many *opens* until about 9pm' Toe Toe tells us. We walk down the bamboo steps onto a path of coconut husks dug into the earth as stepping stones left from the last rainy season, when the area floods. We walk through the market to the main road, busy with Chinese trucks traveling back and forth from the industrial zone down the road. We catch a bus a couple of stops to the intersection down the road, get off and look for a pick-up truck.

We climb on the back of a very crowded pick-up that takes us north; past golf courses, military bases, and an army hospital on wide newly paved roads. The road is mostly dark and empty but as it curves, some lights and people appear in the distance. We descend from the pickup truck, into the temple festival. Toe Toe is keen to go and see which of his *trans* friends are milling about. We enter the first path to the square.

The path is narrow and lined on both sides with vendors, who are cooking and selling pancakes, boiled tripe, sweets, an assortment of plastic toy automatic weapons, punk and emo T-shirts, country and western-inspired fashion and betel nut. The path is crowded with people walking, browsing and shopping. 'That betel nut seller is a sex worker' Toe Toe points out. I ask how ze knows. 'Because she's wearing make-up. But there aren't many sex workers here, mostly *offer*'. This becomes obvious as the gender ratio shifts as the night progresses, with mostly *opens* and *guy* remaining late in the night. As we near the square, Toe Toe starts running into people ze knows, from *open* networks. 'Mother!' ze shouts out, feigning drama, at a group of three *open* friends ahead. They turn around, acknowledge us and walk over. 'This is Thet Paing'³³ Toe Toe says, introducing me. 'He's from Australia learning about *open* in Myanmar so he can teach people about our issues there' Toe Toe says by way of explanation.

³³ 'Thet Paing' is a Burmese nickname I was given by some trans friends. It literally means 'holder of life'. Astrology is a key determinant in name choice. Letter choice is dependent on the day of the week one is born.

We chat. Both Ei Ei and Sandar are beauticians, members of the trans middle class with their own shops and income, enough to adopt a number of daughters each. I ask them why they've come to the temple festival. 'To look for *guys*' they say in unison. We move on, up the path, past a jumping castle and a stall selling plastic masks of monsters, animals and superheroes.

A moment later, we are in the centre of the market area, the nucleus of this and perhaps every temple festival. On two edges of the square are a series of open air eateries, consisting of a collection of low tables and stools, a display of noodles and a deep fryer for gourd. Boys in their early teens hover around, taking orders and serving soft drinks and sweet milk tea. Alcohol is prohibited inside the temple festival. At the back of each shop sits a TV set playing video clips, the songs blaring through loudspeakers competing for customer attention.

In the middle of the square, where paths converge, there are betel nut stalls. And on the far end of the square is a high bamboo complex, which forms the entrance to a *zat pwè* (ဆာတ်ပွဲ), a genre of Burmese performance that mixes song and dance, comedy and drama. It consists of a wall of bamboo, with an arch opening for the entrance and exit, and a window for the ticket booth. The bamboo wall is decorated with vinyl sheets, declaring the name of the troupe and a picture of performers. Catherine Diamond (2000, 233), in one of the few pieces of writing examining the contemporary temple festival, notes that 'during the pagoda festivals, the *pwè zay-dan*, the rows of bazaar stalls are as much a part of the theatre as the backdrop and bamboo stage'. Here the bamboo

wall marks a boundary between a formal structure of performer and audience, and the blurring of roles outside.

On the other side, further up the path, sits the pagoda. Pagodas are sacred as a result of Buddhist relics contained inside. That makes the pagoda an object of worship with an 'aura-like... "heart" (Spiro 1982, 204 and fn. 12). As Spiro (1982, 229) notes,

it would be wrong to assume that the most important, let alone the exclusive, motive for participation in a pagoda festival is "religious"; motivation aside, there are important extrareligious consequences attendant on participation. Pagoda festivals are gay, colourful events. After paying homage to the Buddha, which requires no more than a few minutes, the participants spend their time (and money) making purchases in the temporary bazaar, eating at the food shops, attending dramatic performances, etc.

Spiro makes a distinction between spirit and temple festivals, commenting that '*nat* festivals are often disrupted by rowdiness and by drunken and obscene behaviour which, for all its country-fair atmosphere, would be unheard of at a pagoda festival' (Spiro 1982, 231). While the trance-like public dancing that is a feature of larger spirit festivals are absent, alcohol, sex and general conviviality are as much a part of the temple festival as the more formal acts of donation to the pagoda.

Toe Toe pulls me over to a low table where five opens are sitting. The table is one of about 30, mostly occupied by young men, although two women stand out in the scene. Toe Toe tells me that they are sex workers. After a round of introductions, the conversation moves to men and sex. 'I ate a guy last night who was *big cake*' Maw Maw says, high-fiving Lin Myo. 'How big?' Lin Myo questions. Maw Maw puts hir arm out, signalling up to hir elbow, laughing. Others laugh, commenting on the wideness of Maw Maw's 'o'. They compare notes while checking out the available men on other tables. One *guy* moves to a nearby table of four men. All at the table are *make up sayas*, working in stalls around Yangon. I ask why they have come to the festival. 'For fun' Maw Maw says. 'We can forget about work and relax' ze adds. 'And to look for guys' Lin Myo quickly adds.

We move on. Toe Toe and Saturn are keen to have a drink and find some *offer* friends of theirs. We walk out to a minor road, along the back of the temple complex. Groups of men crouch and lean against parked motorbikes, hanging out, chatting and smoking. Many are soldiers, mostly in plain clothes. We walk back out to the street. There are few cars and the occasional pickup truck packed full of people. We turn right and start walking along the side of the road. There are dozens of men hanging around and some *opens* bantering flirtatiously. Toe Toe and Saturn acknowledge all *opens* we pass. By the entrance to a closed petrol station, a group of *opens* are sitting in a circle, along the concrete edge of the driveway and against the low, closed gate. They are *offers* and beauticians who are talking about relationships, and complaining

about the never-ending problem of exploitative *guys* who just want to be supported.



Plate xxiv: Guys congregating in the central square of a temple festival, Yangon.

We finish our loop up the festival paths, to the square and then along the periphery of the festival space. It is the periphery that is the greatest draw to open networks. It is an in-between space, just off the festival grounds, but away from the central square.

We turn the corner, walk down a dark road and then turn left, through some bushes, into a makeshift bar. Alcohol is prohibited in most temple festivals so enterprising locals sometimes set up temporary speakeasies. The bar

consists of a fold-up metal table set up on a mound of dirt, with a few bottles of Burmese whiskey and beer on display, alongside plastic jars of dried fish, nuts and pickled tea. Opposite is a karaoke shack, made of bamboo with a cut, plastic rice sack across the entrance. All around, large square bamboo mats are laid out, occupied by groups of men and *opens*. In the opposite corner from the karaoke shack are a couple of low bamboo frames covered with sheet plastic, dug into the earth at the edge of a decline, making up the public urinal.

'The owner here loves *dries*' Toe Toe tells me, as ze greets the two women serving at the table and introduces me. The bar is set up every year for the week of this particular festival. The owner is the wife of a military man, who is nearby, in an army jacket, checking on customers. 'We come here every year. If there are bad *guys* who abuse us, the owners take care of us and kick them out. Isn't that so?' Toe Toe says, turning to the older of the two women. 'Yeah we're like family' she replies.

I peer around the corner and there are seven *opens* and 'in between's' sitting on low wooden stools around a table crowded with whiskey bottles, sweet drinks and snacks. There are others I've met over the course of my fieldwork. I notice Aye Myint sitting at the head of the table wearing a fluffy scarf, almost like a feather boa. Ze sees me, gets up and gives me a hug. 'Long time no see! How's your thesis?' ze asks. Aye Myint has postgraduate education and has always been sympathetic to my project, because ze also wrote a gruelling thesis for a master's degree at a local university. Afterwards, ze

decided that hir real passion is fashion design, and ze started hir own business making wedding gowns in various period styles.

When I first met Aye Myint, ze told me emphatically that ze is a *hider*. Ze lives with hir mother and, apparently unbeknownst to hir, Aye Myint's husband. When I first met hir, ze told me that ze used to have *open* staff but fired them because they were too loud and would sometimes run to the door and shout when *guys* would walk past. Aye Myint thought that could harm hir reputation.

Now ze is the most *open* I have seen hir, with shoulder length hair, a debonair dress and carefully applied eye make-up. 'You look great' I say. 'Thank you. This is our time to come out, be ourselves and relax' ze replies. Ze introduces me to hir friends at the table, all of whom are fashion designers and beauticians, *open* and in between.

Toe Toe calls me over. Ze's now sitting on a cane mat with a quarter bottle of whiskey, a jug of water and a small plate of dried fish salad. Saturn is sitting with hir and they've started drinking and discussing the choice of *guys* at other tables. The sound of a drunken *guy* singing a Burmese version of a Scorpions song wafts out of the Karaoke shack. A few feet away, three *guys* are sitting drinking and checking us out. Toe Toe calls out to them 'come and have a drink with us.' They say something to each other and then one guy gets up and comes over. He introduces himself and sits down next to Toe Toe, who leans into him and puts hir arm around his knee, seductively.

The *guy*, who Toe Toe later refers to as 'Soldier' is from a nearby base, and works in logistics. He's Karen, from a village east of Naypyidaw. He is much drunker than he first appeared to be and Toe Toe wants to lose him. 'He's an *awkawli'*, ze tells me, constructing a double trans slang term by using the system of alterations on the trans term *awli*. 'We've got to go now' ze tells Soldier, grabs my hand and quickly gets up and walks out. 'What an *awli'* ze repeats to me as we walk out quickly, back to the road towards the festival centre. Toe Toe looks back, making sure *soldier boy* isn't following us, and then slows hir pace. Acting the trans guide, ze points at the road beyond the speakeasy. The temple wall on one side and bushes on the other. Its dark and we can only see a few dozen metres before it merges into black. 'We go down there, into the jungle, to *eat guys*' Toe Toe comments. 'We can hide there.'

Its 2am and we decide to head back, despite earlier talk of staying until dawn. We head out to the main road, past the Ferris wheel, now closed for the night, and the pancake sellers, sitting on the ground occasionally fanning their coal stoves to keep them alight.

Sony Lover

A week later, on a Tuesday night, I'm with Toe Toe on the other side of town, in the township of Thakita, a densely populated strip of land, between the Pazundaung Creek and the Bago River. This festival has a more urban feel

compared to the one in Mingaladon, surrounded by houses, shops, bars, pedestrians and uneven roads. It feels like the rest of Yangon, in contrast to the somewhat surreal location of the festival in Mingaladon, which is surrounded by expansive military space along a wide, perfectly paved and demarcated highway. This is Toe Toe's home township, where ze was born, grew up and from where ze went into exile. But we are here for the temple and there are different rules. Things are more open and freer.

The temple, around which the festival is hosted, is unique in Yangon. Rather than a golden spire, it is almost triangular, with decorative steps leading up to the tip, all decorated with colourful shapes. The temple occupies a small but dominant area of the festival. We take our shoes off, walk through an open gate and onto the sacred ground. Toe Toe goes over to one side and kneels down, praying for a minute or so, then gets up and hurriedly walks around the outside circumference of the temple, then exits out the same gate.

One of the drawcards of this particular temple festival is Khin Lei Lei Oo, a band of performers, all of whom are *opens*. They have set up on one side of the carnival square, a large bamboo structure with vinyl prints of the performers and the name of the troupe in giant, stylised letters. Khin Lei Lei Oo, the head of the troupe, is in the centre of the picture. We pay 500 kyat at the ticket office, a square opening by the entrance, and walk through. It is early and the show hasn't started yet. Large overlapping cane mats have been laid down for the audience, in front of a makeshift bamboo stage. We climb onto the stage and

then down the side, a privilege for *opens* who have back stage access. The lighting operator, sitting beside the stage, acknowledges us with a nod. Backstage, along the outer wall off the enclosure, there are open partitions, some closed with curtains, that form the dressing rooms and sleeping areas for the performers. In the dressing rooms performers are applying make-up, getting dressed and rehearsing moves.

Toe Toe introduces me to Lone Lone, who is one of the last remaining lemon medicine seller in Yangon. Ze is wearing a black evening gown, getting ready to perform a soft pop love song. Everyone is busy getting ready so we depart.

We walk back to the intersection, where there is a side street that curls around the pagoda. Nway looks over across the road. A man is standing there, in brown work pants and a white T-Shirt. He looks reflective. Nway yells out and waves: 'Hey! Come over here!' He looks up, pauses, then crosses the road. Toe Toe introduces himself and asks him to come for a drink. 'I can't I'm waiting for a friend who's coming from work' he explains. 'It's OK - your friend can find you in the bar' Toe Toe says. 'And if he hasn't come by now, he probably won't come' ze adds, trying hard to be convincing. 'I like you' ze says. He obliges and they make a quick acquaintance as we walk towards the bar. His name is Aung Myint and he works as a supervisor in the construction industry. Right now, he's building a Sony factory. He had a wife but is now divorced. Toe Toe notches up the flirtatiousness as we arrive at a roadside bar, sitting beside him and

leaning into him. 'Have you ever slept with a *dry?*' ze asks. 'No I haven't' he says, in a matter-of-fact tone.

We move back to the square for a snack, to talk and take in the atmosphere. Later, Toe Toe suggests we walk a loop of the carnival. It is past one in the morning and the crowds are slowly thinning out. Some of the vendors have packed up for the night, and some are in the process of closing as we walk past. Toe Toe takes Aung Myint's hand and they walk together, as a new couple. Toe Toe puts hir arm around him and turns to me: 'Do we make a good couple?' I agree. Ze looks happy and Aung Myint seems to be having a good time, going along with it. Toe Toe invites him to come back to hir room, across Yangon. Aung Myint is worried about getting to work the next morning. They speak very quietly and I walk ahead to give them some privacy. However, Toe Toe doesn't seem to want discretion, and tells me that he will come back to sleep with hir tonight, and we can all get a bus back to Sule Pagoda. Then they will continue north. We continue walking on a dark path, largely empty now with a few stalls covered over with tarpaulins, and the occasional outline of a limp body sleeping underneath. Toe Toe calls out to me: 'Thet Paing. Take a photo!' I take out my small digital camera and frame them. They entangle themselves in each other and start a slow kiss. I take a couple of pictures and Toe Toe calls me over to check. We keep walking and they stop every now and then, to kiss in the middle of the path. We exit the gate and walk back towards the main road, where a line car waits for passengers to make the trip back across Pazundaung Creek, down the largely empty, barely lit streets to its destination of Sule Pagoda.



Plate xxv: Toe Toe and Aung Myint embracing at a temple festival.

The next day I see Toe Toe again, who is tired but happy. 'That *guy* is so *sindè* (စင်စင်) isn't he', ze says, using the trans term for a good-looking *guy*. I agree with hir. 'And he's *cake* (ငွေငွေ *keik*, *large penis*).' Ze pulls out a digital camera and shows me some a series of pictures. They are close ups of his genitalia and of his body, waist down, discreetly avoiding his face. 'I will call him Sony Lover' Toe Toe tells me. 'Sony Lover' ze repeats, seemingly content with the nickname. In the coming weeks, we discuss Sony Lover every now and then and Toe Toe tries to get in touch with him through a nearby public phone but without luck.

Temple festival as risk space

Carnivals can be dangerous because of the loosening of societal norms and the possibility for disorder seeping beyond carnival space. An additional element of carnival danger is sexual risk. The festival is a site to make offerings to the temple, as a way of collecting merit. It is a site to have fun, to meet friends, to eat snacks and to ride the Ferris wheel with children and lovers. And the space is a cruising zone, where *opens*, *hidere*s and *guys* gather, seduce, negotiate and have sex. During carnival season, the temple festival becomes a target of NGO intervention, as peer education teams divide their time between key festival sites after dark. At the DIC, Myo is sitting at hir desk in hir upstairs office, wearing a stained polo shirt bearing the name of hir NGO. Ze is the night outreach coordinator and is tasked with gathering intelligence on the numerous temple festival around Yangon and making a schedule of sites to visit with a roster of peers. Tonight's plan is to go to a second major festival in Mingaladon, a few weeks later. Myo is coming along with four *peers*. 'This is one of the most popular temple festival for trans' ze tells me, as ze shuts down hir computer. 'We need to send teams there every night while the festival's on.'

Myo walks outside to check preparations. The other team members are putting small packets of condoms into bags. Along with an abundant supply of condoms, the peers have a more tightly rationed stockpile of lube. Kyaw Yee comes up and hugs me and the other peers tease us that we're breaking rule number seven: 'no sexual contact within the drop-in-centre.' They point to a

large white sign nailed to the wall with a list of rules written in Burmese with a black marker.

I chat with Myo, who is waiting by the van. 'Is there any problem with trans going to festivals?' I ask. 'No. They are public events and trans are public so nobody can say anything' ze explains emphatically. 'What about the outreach teams – any issues? Do you need to ask for permission?'

I know some *kawpaka* (trustees of the temple) but I never talk about that with them. They are not interested in this issue. Their main interest and what they do is how to make the temple festival happen, how to bring income to the monastery and what sort of group they have to form in order to implement the temple festival. They don't care who comes, if trans come, if sex workers or if other members of the public come.

Anyone can come.

Most temples have a trusteeship group made up of lay people and headed by a trustee. They act as an interface between monks, the Department of Religious Affairs and local government and police. They organise temple festivals, in addition to public events. Trans space within the temple festival is therefore implicitly tolerated. Opening something to recognition or permission can challenge individuals in authority to regulate and forbid.

'But what about arrests' I ask. 'Aren't trans arrested sometimes?' Myo dismisses this. 'If people break the law they're arrested, if you don't break the law, nobody will be arrested.' I find this surprising, as if Myanmar is an

advanced liberal democracy. During my fieldwork, one informant was arrested with a group of *opens* at a temple festival. When I enquired amongst hir friends, nobody I asked knew why ze was arrested or thought that there needed to be any particular reason.

We enter the van and the driver cranks up a tape of Burmese soft rock, starts the engine and drives off. We drive down a potholed side street towards one of Yangon's main thoroughfares going north. At the edge of the section, a couple of police are standing on patrol. Aye, one of the peers, calls out: 'Hey handsome! Why don't you come with me? The police smile back, enjoying the attention. 'Give me your phone number and we'll be lovers' Aye adds. The road is clear so we drive off, with Aye waving goodbye. 'Those *guys* are a *sin!*' ze says. 'I bet they are *cake*' Maw adds.

Its early evening and we pass crowded bus stops and packed buses. We drop two of the peers at their home to dress up while the rest of us go to a teashop and have some noodles on low stools by the roadside. I ask Myo more about hir background. Ze has a well-connected family, with one family member holding a key position in the regional government. 'My family know about my job and they are happy' ze tells me. I ask if they know that ze is trans. 'They don't know' ze says.

Myo is a *hider*, on the masculine end of the spectrum of informants. Even in trans company, ze does not *nwe*. And unlike other *hider* informants, ze rarely

engages in sexual banter and gossip. Although hir work requires hir to 'identify' as trans, ze maintains clear boundaries between hir work and personal life.

'Why aren't any sex worker peers coming today?' I ask, after we get back in the van. 'There aren't many sex workers at the festival' Myo says. 'It is mostly MSM.' 'Sex workers can't compete with MSM' Sunny adds, in a tone that suggests tension between the female sex worker and MSM peers in the drop-in-centre. 'We are better at getting *guys*. And cheaper.'

We arrive at the festival and park the van near the pagoda entrance, beside a small curry shop. The festival grounds are across the road. We split up and I follow Myo and Sunny. Sunny has a plastic bag full of condoms, along with two business card-sized booklets secured with rubber bands. One has cartoon images of sexually transmitted diseases, with commentary in Burmese about risk and safe sex. The other is information about the drop-in-centre. We start walking down the outside main road, between the festival grounds and Yangon's main infectious diseases hospital, which has the primary remit for advanced cases of AIDS and tuberculosis.

Soon enough, we come to a group of trans. 'Heh!' yells out Sunny to get their attention. Three *opens* walk over, all made up wearing tight clothes and high heels. 'Do you have some *candy* for us?' Sunny holds out the bag and they dip into it, one by one, taking a handful of condoms. Discreetly, they open the boxes, put the condoms in their handbags and throw the cardboard and

Burmese language instructions over the fence. 'Why don't you come to our centre' Sunny says. 'We're having a monthly party next week and you can get tested and have a check-up.' Ze hands out the cards with the Centre's details and map. 'Ok we'll come and visit' one of the *opens* says. 'When you come, ask for Sunny' ze adds. Sunny notices hir interlocutors checking me out. 'This is The Paing' ze says pointing at me. 'He's studying *MSM*.' I say hello and shake hands, trying to avoid a chat, aware that I'm slowing Sunny and Myo down. We keep walking.

Their visit to the temple is structured by paperwork and reporting requirements. They need to document how many *trans* they meet, whether they are new to them or not and how many condoms and mini tubes of lube they have distributed. They also record the number of HIV peer education sessions they have given. A session involves sitting with a target *trans*, going page-by-page through a flip book of cartoon pictures and diagrams about safe sex, HIV and risk behaviour. Sessions are conducted at the Centre as part of the Voluntary Confidential Counselling and Testing routine, as well as sometimes on outreach, especially when the DIC workers come across trans from rural areas, who have less access to HIV education. Tonight, they leave the flip chart in the car, opting for a rapid blitz-like approach, which also means ending work earlier.

Myo calls me over to another group of *opens*, congregating on a dark side lane. A group of *guys* are standing nearby, talking quietly to one another and

checking us out. Myo greets them and opens hir plastic bag, so hir peers can take a handful of condoms each. They seem to not want us hanging around, to interrupt the exchange taking place, so we move on.

As we near the steps going up to the pagoda, an emaciated man hobbles up to Myo and talks quietly to him. He is a patient from the infectious diseases hospital up the road. The hospital is only for those with very advanced stages of HIV, and we meet a few patients begging at the temple festival. The AIDS beggars are a reminder of the sense of immediacy of the peer intervention, although according to Myo, little deterrence against sexual risk. 'If we weren't here, these *opens* just wouldn't use condoms' ze tells me. The mood of the festival shifts, and it becomes rowdier. It is time to return to the drop-in-centre.

Categories of belonging, as social practice, are intimately tied to place. Place is not simply a backdrop but rather an actor within a complex of relations that make categories such as *open* meaningful at any given moment. A growing awareness that space is an active component in the construction of genders and sexualities has been explicated within a sub-field of gender and sexuality studies and its intersections with history and geography. As Gavin Brown et. al. (2007, 4) wrote in the opening to one of the foundational collected works on queer geography:

Sexuality – its regulation, norms, institutions, pleasures and desires – cannot be understood without understanding the spaces through which it is constituted, practiced and lived... sexuality manifests itself through

relations that are specific to particular spaces and through the space-specific practices by which these relations become enacted.

The networks of relations that produce the category and social practices of *openness* are embedded in and contextualised by the temple festival, one of the key locations of the trans world in Yangon. In everyday life in the city, interaction between opens is largely limited to private and semi-private locales of home, workplaces and NGO drop-in-centres. In the absence of permanent *open* and accessible public leisure sites, such as bars, clubs or districts, as has been so important in the history of Western gay cultures, temple festivals have emerged as the critical trans local places for *opens* to come together from across the townships that make up Yangon. They are central nodes of connectivity in the diffuse networks of trans Yangon.

Like the medieval carnival, the temple festival provides relief from the repressive hierarchies of everyday life. In the context of trans Yangon, the primary hierarchies transcended are those of gender. In the temple festival, trans have relative autonomy to dress up, to be *open* and to come together as a community, thus constituting a public presence that can carry risk of shame and violence outside of the festival. The potential for intimacy in the festival is short-lived. Temporary intimate relationships can sustain hope for lasting relationships, and as such, perpetuate feelings of despair when *guys* scatter as the sun comes up. For Toe Toe, there was a thrill imagining the possibilities with Sony Lover, transforming into loss as the weeks passed. He never did call and all ze was left with was a blurry picture.

Chapter seven: Queering *Anadè*

I first learnt about *anadè* in interactions with refugees in the Burmese diaspora in Australia. *Anadè* may be regarded as a framework of rules and obligations in social interaction that blurs the lines between morality and civility. As a symbol of the supposedly refined norms of civility and morality, *anadè* is an object of pride for many Burmese, who think of it as untranslatable and as unique to Burmese culture. The meaning and practice of *anadè* therefore emerged in numerous conversations with Burmese friends. *Anadè* would come up as an issue in the minutiae of everyday interactions, visiting friends' houses, eating together and in casual conversation. Within the Burmese diaspora, cultural conservatism is linked to nostalgia for home. Being disconnected from cultural change in the homeland can intensify feelings of *anadè*, as a way of maintaining a sense of being Burmese.³⁴ For instance, a number of my Burmese friends in Australia have been particularly didactic in conveying Burmese rules of civility and *anadè*. *Anadè* in the diaspora involves stricter prohibitions on sex talk and vulgar slang, which are cast as signs of disrespect. This contrasts with Anglo-Australian culture, where vulgar slang and disobedience to teachers and parents is common. This is shocking to many Burmese exiles. It also contrasts in complex ways with the political repression in Myanmar from which friends in the diaspora are escaping.

³⁴ Reactionary, nationalist and conservative dynamics within the diaspora discourse and the diasporic condition has been noted by Dirlik, 2004 and Clifford, 1997. Also see Sinatti, 2006.

Exiles use *anadè* to position themselves favourably in relation to the Myanmar state. Dissidents can position themselves as morally superior by avoiding forms of resistance that transgress norms of politeness. An exception to this was a feminist campaign, Panties for Peace, that posted used women's underpants to Burmese embassies. The aim was to threaten the *pôn* of the male state (Dibley and Ford, 2014), which drew discomfort and criticism from some members of the opposition. Thus my introduction to Burmese politics and culture included the importance of *anadè*, as a source of pride and as a key form of everyday moral regulation. In the context of Australia, the reinforcing of *anadè* is especially important for many as a way of remaining Burmese within a dangerously *anadè*-less culture, and for some, Burmese notions of civility are regarded as superior to Western norms of behaviour.

Anadè is a regulatory framework that governs interpersonal interaction. The regulatory aspect of comportment in social interactions bears some similarities with *lek* in Javanese, which Clifford Geertz (1973) conceptualises as 'stage fright', a feeling to be avoided by acting in accordance with another's status during interpersonal interactions (Keeler 1983). At its most basic, *anadè* entails the avoidance of speech or actions that cause discomfort or distress in a person who qualifies for the deference that a feeling of *anadè* involves. An oft-cited example is in an educational context, where students might avoid asking their teacher questions that could be perceived as challenging and thus a cause of discomfort (Seekins 2006: 66).

Since *anadè* is a core element of being Burmese and the family is a key unit for the transmission of *anadè*, the gender normative family therefore plays a crucial role in the production of citizens. This is somewhat comparable to the effect of the 'family principle' in Indonesia, although in the Burmese case, it does not emanate from the state as is the case in Indonesia. In Indonesia, the 'family principle', is a state discourse that connects a particular, ideal model of family with what it means to be Indonesian (Boellstorff 2005). This pressures some non-gender normative *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians to hide their gender and sexual identities and to enter into gender normative marriage, so as to avoid bringing shame to their family, and by implication, to avoid threatening their sense of national belonging (Boellstorff 2005, 111-13). Tom Boellstorff describes the family principle as a 'state ideology' (Boellstorff 2005, 117). It constrains *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians and they also 'dub' into their everyday lives, for instance by basing their model of romantic love around heterosexual marriage. In Myanmar, *anadè* is also a clear cause of suffering for trans Burmese, and it is similarly adaptable within trans models of kinship. Trans forms of *anadè* are critical of normative *anadè*, which has parallels with the Indonesian 'family principle'. However, trans *anadè* is provocative in undermining gender normative forms of *anadè* because it does not support the heterosexual family or the imperative for monogamy. However, the centrality of trans models of kinship themselves set up what could be called a trans family principle.

Anadè has a grammar that works as follows. *Anadè* is a verb and requires a human subject and a human object, a typical construction being ‘I *anadè* x’ or ‘x *anadè* y’ and in positive form implies avoidance and constraint on the part of the subject. The use of *anadè* in the negative, as in ‘I don’t *anadè* x’ implies disinhibition of behaviour. Feeling *anadè* entails adhering to the rigid rules that govern normative modes of behaviour in a Burmese context. One key area to be avoided is the psychical internal world of interlocutors. Uncovering an individual’s inner feelings can leave them vulnerable, hurt and dependent and weakens their *awza*.

Anadè involves the positioning of oneself and others within a hierarchy of deference. If the other is of a superior position, then one is obliged to avoid causing distress to them. *Anadè* always works in a way that involves a person in an inferior position having to pay deference to someone in a superior position. In the diagram below, those in the left column are obligated to be *anadè* to those in the right column.

Inferior	Superior
Young	Old
Poor	Rich
Uneducated	Educated
Host	Guest
Employee	Boss
Non-Western	Western
Woman	Man

Anadè is not external to a social context. It makes no sense for there to be a feeling of *anadè* without an appropriate object, namely an individual positioned as superior within a social interaction. Furthermore, the status distinctions in the table are not of equal importance. For instance, substantial age differentials commonly trump the other social categories. The categories constantly shift, relative to whom one is interacting with, so each social context requires an assessment of inferior and superior positions and thus how *anadè* is to be navigated.

The correct management of social obligations is central to *anadè*, however the nature of obligations differs between trans and gender normative contexts in important ways. Little academic research has been carried out on heteronormative *anadè* and there has been no study of *anadè* in trans sociality. The only substantial work that focuses on *anadè* is a thesis published in 1964 by Sarah Bekker. Bekker describes *anadè* almost exclusively as a set of values that governs social life. Virtually all other literature on *anadè* references it in passing,³⁵ or presents it in the context of etiquette guides for foreigners. According to Sarah Bekker, one of the core elements of *anadè* is the ‘maintenance of balance of obligations; being aware of obligations to family... feeling distressed when unable to fulfil obligations to a benefactor’ (Bekker 1981, 21). Bekker is referring to the heteronormative family, characterised by the stock, where the oldest (usually male) member is head of the family. Individual identity is limited by obligations to the family, as seen in the pressure

³⁵ Examples include Kawanami 2013; Steinberg 2006; Houtman 1999

trans people are put under to conform to gender norms. Bekker argued that *anadè* has a positive result on family dynamics but that it can also be isolating. While individual family members live in close proximity, it is uncommon for them to share their trouble and anxieties. Bekker found that if one family member appears troubled, *anadè* prevents others from probing the issues involved, for fear of causing distress. Similarly, *anadè* prevents the troubled individual from sharing their problems with other family members, for fear of causing distress. This can create the semblance of a harmonious family home but *opening* invariably breaks the equilibrium, and thus the field of related obligations.

Anadè is not only a key variable in the biographies of *opens* and *hiders*, it is a methodological challenge that affects the fieldwork process. Ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar necessarily involves learning and negotiating *anadè* in interactions between the researcher and informants. *Anadè* involves positioning between interlocutors, so early interactions with informants are important as precursors to how *anadè* functions in future interactions. The outcome determines levels of formality and what information, if any, is shared, thereby deeply affecting research data. In the context of my fieldwork, initial interactions with informants involved positioning related to gender, sexuality and age.³⁶ Gender and sexuality related positioning involved tests of whether I

³⁶ This discussion is informed by 'positioning theory'. As Langenhove and Harré (1999, 20) discuss, 'the most basic distinction is that between first and second order positioning. First order positioning refers to the way persons locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space by using several categories and storylines... second order positioning occurs when

was an insider or outsider and as a result, whether trans norms of sociality and trans *anadè* applied or not. If positioned as an outsider, meetings would become formal. If positioned as an insider, I could spend time with participants informally, during everyday activities such as leisure time and work time. Age-related positioning determines the level of deference within interactions. If I am positioned as younger, conventions determine that I show deference to my interlocutor. If I am positioned as older then they show deference to me and if I am positioned as roughly the same age, then we can position each other as friends and communicate with a relatively low level of formality.

When initially planning this research project, I intended to explore ways in which state regulation bears on the everyday life of *opens* and *hiders*. It was based on an assumption that state authorities had a desire to regulate the gender and sexuality of citizens and that their sex lives and gender subversions would be of political concern, as it often is in the West. Certainly for Myanmar's LGBT human rights activists, the state is the primary focus. Activists emphasise the broad-brush effects of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' for instance (The Penal Code 1861). One study interprets that law as being a key cause of the everyday struggles of *opens* and *hiders* in their families, schools, workplaces and in public, the sort of repression that Chit Chit experienced in the play (Colors Rainbow 2013). Colors Rainbow's campaign against Section 377 is

the first order positioning is not taken for granted by one of the persons involved in the discussion.'

strategic. Section 377 is undoubtedly a homophobic law and should be repealed, a worthy and achievable campaign target. However, as I spent time with *open* and *hider* individuals, it became clear that the most formidable regulatory constraints were cultural, social and demotic rather than political. In other words, they are intrinsic to everyday life, not a function of institutional politics. At the centre of many of my informants' anguish were their natal families who repressed them and compelled them to escape. This form of regulation is fundamentally gender and hetero normative, the aim of which is that the trans family member should be corrected of their supposed transgression and thereby made 'normal'. The core institutional practice in this context is *anadè*.

***Anadè* as trans problematic**

Anadè is a problem for trans Burmese because it is gender normative and involves the positioning of trans as inferior within gender and heteronormative society. As a key institution for cultural transmission, the Burmese family unit plays a key role in acculturating norms of *anadè* in trans children who suffer as a result of it. From a young age, children are taught to obey their parents and to support them. For instance, in kindergarten one of the first passages that children learn to read and recite is a poem titled 'Children's Ethics' (သားသမီးဝတ်စုံ *Thathami Wut*). The poem is very short (and thereby easy to memorise) and outlines five ethical principles that children ought to follow throughout their lives:

Never fail to provide food,

Manage and fulfil duty,
Be worthy of inheritance,
Donate and share,
Preserve your kin,
These are the five ethics,
Do practice them, children (ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန [Ministry of Education] 2014,
41).

These ethical principles clearly create a tension between the heterosexual family and *open* children who can easily find themselves in breach of most of the ethical precepts as a result of *opening*. Firstly, the line on the pre-eminence of duty creates a fundamental problem when duty is applied primarily to heteronormative institutions and thus entails obedience to and respect for authority figures who are enforcing gender norms, such as Chit Chit's father. Following that is the exhortation to be worthy of inheritance. If trans children fail to meet their duty, and if they bring shame on their parents, they can be seen as less worthy of inheritance. This was the case with one informant, a *hider* who was disinherited after ze refused to commit to a gender and heteronormative life. Asked indirectly if ze was going to enter a heterosexual marriage and have children, ze responded that ze would not and was thereby disinherited by family elders. Heteronormative rules of inheritance are also reinforced by the last two ethical principles of sharing and donating. The exhortation 'to preserve kin' can be interpreted as referring to biological reproduction.

The five ethical principles are established as norms of behaviour. A child is deemed naughty and disobedient if they disobey those norms, thereby breaking the rules of *anadè*. In such cases, parents have a duty to punish their child. If the naughtiness of a child becomes known in the community, it reflects badly on the parents, as it is the parents' responsibility to bring up a morally good and obedient child. Disobedience when made public therefore shames the parents, resulting in their loss of face and discomfort.³⁷ *Anadè* mitigates against such shame and discomfort by compelling children to obey their parents, teachers and other superiors. Children are taught that they must feel *anadè* to their parents and teachers by behaving in the correct manner and thereby ensuring that authority figures do not lose face.

In the play described in the interlude, Chit Chit is constantly told by his father to stop being effeminate. By continuing to act in a feminine manner, Chit Chit is being disobedient and it makes his father angry because he sees it as a transgression of *anadè*. When his moral authority is being questioned and it becomes public, he experiences shame and loss of face. As time passes and Chit Chit is increasingly more *open*, his father attempts more severe forms of punishment in order to force his son to be obedient. As his shame increases, so does his violence until he and Chit Chit break the conventional storyline. It

³⁷ 'Face' is a dominant affective trope within east and Southeast Asia. The semantic field of face intersects with that of shame. The observance of *anadè* values ensure that causing shame to the superior party in a social interaction is avoided. See Ho 1976; Pharr 1990 and Ting-Toomey et. al. 1991.

becomes untenable and Chit Chit ends up confronting his father, stating clearly that he will not change his core way of being in order to be an obedient son. The culture of *anadè* in such a case positions the parent and child so powerfully against each other that the only way of resolving it is when either the parent banishes their trans child, or their child runs away to re-establish themselves with a trans family.

In the dominant storyline of a family with a trans child, a key preoccupation of the father is to save face. In such a case, the risk of losing face stems from public ridicule of the trans child. Transgression of one member of a kin group reflects on the others. However, the father is further implicated because the trans status of his child reflects poorly on his *awza*, that is, his ability to govern the family unit, preventing and correcting any transgressions. *Awza*, a central form of power in Burmese culture, can be translated as 'influence', in contradistinction to *ana*, which means 'authority'. In this schema, *awza* involves ruling through consent and *ana* involves force. In macropolitical terms, these two terms provide a means of contrasting the power of the military dictatorship with that of Aung San Suu Kyi, the subject of Gustaaf Houtman's (1999) key study of the cultural frameworks that background Burmese politics. The dictatorship has negligible popular support and effectively held power through brutal repression and fear. In contrast, Aung San Suu Kyi had formidable *awza* but no *ana*. While *awza* has been used in a range of studies for the analysis of Burmese politics, it has been less studied in micropolitics and sociological studies of everyday life. However, definitions of *awza* clearly apply

to all social groupings, as seen in this classic dictionary definition: '*Awza* is a function of relationships, the important thing being that in every group there is someone who has *awza*. In every family, class, community, office, organisation, political party, nation, there is one person who has *awza*' (Pye 1985,147). As Houtman explains, *ana* and *awza* are not opposing binary oppositions but rather 'blend into one another' (1999, 169). Influence leads to authority and vice versa.

The spiralling interplay between influence and authority can be seen in how Chit Chit's father reacts to his child's trans personhood. He initially tries to use his influence (*awza*) to goad Chit Chit into being gender normative. When this does not have the desired effect, Chit Chit's father attempts to use *ana*, through corporal punishment, which also does not have the intended effect. Chit Chit's exit from the family thereby implicates his father's *awza* and *ana* (although *awza* is of primary importance since it is morally good, as opposed to *ana* which is morally neutral). In the context of the family, the ability to command *awza* positions one at the head of the family. While much has been written on the high status of women in Burmese society, in particular when compared to gender relations in the region, the overarching authority in conventional families is patriarchal. Since *awza* is linked to masculinity, the loss of face caused to the father when a child *opens* can be emasculating and helps explain the virulent reaction of fathers towards their trans children.

In such a context of the formidable power of *anadè*, *hiders* hold a vastly different position to their *open* counterparts. While *opens* are positioned by authority figures as bad, disloyal and disrespectful, *hiders* occupy a very different place in the demotic cosmology. *Hiders* are positioned as morally good and obedient, and possibly one reason that some *opens* resent them is for their lack of sacrifice. *Hiders* compartmentalise their varied spheres of life, so in some spheres they abide by accepted gender norms, and in others they can position themselves wherever they want along the gender spectrum. By not being *open* at home, in the neighbourhood and at school, they do not bring shame on their parents and can live by the ethical principles that they learn in primary school. In turn, their parents do not cause their *hider* children to lose face by confronting them on their gender and sexuality. For instance, Maung Maung, whose story I discuss in Chapter Two, lives with his husband in his parents' apartment and *opens* in parties and trans public events. While his parents might realise that Maung Maung is a *hider*, confronting him would be counterproductive since the status quo means both Maung Maung and his parents can remain in their respective positions in the family.

In the instances where trans children are driven from their families, familial obligations are substantially weakened or nullified. For instance, it is common for *open* individuals to move to townships far from where their family is located. This allows them freedom from familial *anadè*. Firstly, they do not need to grapple with familial disapproval through vastly reducing the possibility of meeting their family members in public, or neighbours who would

report their activities to their parents. If a trans individual is disapproved of by their family, ze is positioned as bad for causing harm to hir parents and for failing to meet hir obligation of deference. Moreover, the exclusion of trans children from their families has profound economic implications. When made unwelcome at home, trans children have no choice but to find a home where they are welcome. They also find a means of survival, most commonly, through entering trans families and work *lines*. The obligation for children to financially provide for their parents can still endure, even in cases where trans children have been subjected to violence and exclusion. Inability to fulfil those obligations causes guilt, shame and suffering. While those who have attained financial success in work *lines* can support their families, and gain acceptance through meeting their economic obligations, many cannot. This is especially the case for young *opens* who apprentice into work *lines* and therefore have very limited income. By separating from their families and moving outside of the neighbourhoods where they grew up, they can avoid their financial obligations to their parents. Living close to one's parents and maintaining communication means confronting these obligations, which cause distress if unfulfilled. Within the moral framework of *anadè*, exit from the family is a safe strategy when it is not possible or desirable to meet familial obligations.

Trans *anadè*

'Are you *cake*?' This is a question I was asked many times in journeys through trans Yangon. *Cake* is the trans term for large penis, especially in

relation to girth. The question was commonly posed during introductions, in the way individuals meeting for the first time might inquire about each other's age, profession and place of origin. When I was first asked this question, I was amazed because it seems to flaunt the strict rules of Burmese civility that I had been acculturated into, encapsulated in the term *anadè*. While I initially wondered if the question was a sexual advance, conversations soon moved to other topics, as if the question was asked in accordance with very different rules of civility. It was often asked along with comments about others present in the exchange, 'X is *at* (အဝဲ)' or 'Y is *cake*'. Penis size banter is often accompanied by laughter and perhaps discussion of husbands and lovers. It can also extend to the sharing of sexually explicit photographs of lovers for those with mobile phone cameras. However, all that leads from the initial question, 'are you *cake*? As I observed others and gained proficiency in trans conversation, I experimented with my responses. I learnt from informants that there are three main responses, *at* for small, *medium* (an English loanword) and *cake*. There are also mixed categories so it is possible to be '*medium at*' or '*medium cake*'. So I first tried responding honestly. I also tried an exaggerated response after more observation. More common responses are to exaggerate upwards, demonstrating size with one's hands, showing saucer-sized girth and the length of one's forearm. When I tried responding that I was exaggeratedly *cake*, it was met with welcoming laughter and approval, thereby enabling me to continue my ethnographic research with an increased level of informality and intimacy.

In an important way, size talk is a test of whether an individual external to a particular trans social grouping can be extended membership to that group, or is to be treated as an outsider of trans sociality. *Opens* and *hiders* I spoke to regularly tested me, especially when meeting them for the first time. Testing involved observing my response to sexual taunts, including the questioning of my penis size. Passing a test positions the subject in the trans social world, where trans *anadè* applies, sanctioning sexually explicit talk and rendering it as mundane as enquiring about an interlocutor's health in the gender normative world. This is significant since sex talk in the gender normative world is risky as it can easily lead to embarrassment and shame. The fact that trans individuals can easily move rapidly from being strangers to a heightened level of intimacy demonstrates the familial nature of trans sociality.

Tests of outsiders such as myself that centre on sex talk are perhaps unsurprising since sexuality is central to who does and does not belong within trans culture. There are therefore two important criteria for evaluation by interlocutors who regulate entry into trans social contexts for social outsiders such as myself. Firstly, is offence taken and does the subject respond in a way that signals anger, shame or embarrassment? Secondly, does the subject understand the trans language used in the question and respond correctly? Failure to pass the test means that gender normative rules of civility apply and one is positioned as outside of trans society, limiting the level of intimacy possible in social interaction. Those who are tested are outsiders. These include gender normative individuals and trans who are new and *opening*, such as Lay,

who Than Than questioned on hir sexual experience during their first meeting. So while *opens* are more narrowly defined as those who are internally and externally feminine, it is possible for non-*opens* to move within *open* social space as long as trans cultural norms are adhered to.

Doing ethnography in the trans world thereby entailed being re-socialised into new norms of interpersonal relations and civility that run counter to the dominant rules of *anadè* that I had learnt. This meant that 'intimate ethnography' was mandatory and that doing trans ethnography involved being part of trans social contexts, which would have been impossible as a distant observer. Since those contexts are fundamentally sensual and intimate, it is impossible to conduct ethnography without talking about things that are personal, intimate and sexual. For instance, if I answered questions about penis size in a way that suggested shame, offense or self-consciousness, I could not have done the fieldwork that I did.

Anadè organises certain norms specific to Burmese interpersonal relations. This is the *anadè* written up in tourist guidebooks. What I came to realise is that there is also another *anadè*. It has certain features in common but is specific to interpersonal relations between trans individuals. To a casual observer, this is not *anadè* at all because it flaunts the norms of what I shall call heteronormative *anadè*. This difference in types of *anadè* is illustrated in the question, 'are you *cake*?' The question was surprising when I first began fieldwork. What was surprising was not just that the question is asked but that

asking it is consistent with trans social norms. Therefore, what would be a shocking question in gender normative society can be transformed within a trans social context into something polite and mundane. What I shared with *opens* who had just left their natal family was the process of being socialised into what appeared to be a counter-intuitive form of *anadè*. This process involved sometimes subtle changes to rules of behaviour.

Cake is one example of key differences in the rules of what counts as civility in trans society compared with gender normative Myanmar. The question 'are you *cake*' is part of a broad discursive field of sex and carnal desire. The field includes talk of genitalia (particularly penises and anuses), individual sexual history, sexual predilections and fantasies. Within a trans context, such talk is open and matter-of-fact rather than salacious, in a way that often characterises sex talk in heteronormative Burmese society. One informant, for instance, collects photos of the genitalia of *guys* that ze sleeps with. The images, captured on hir phone are framed shots of an assortment of men from the waist down to the upper thigh, some naked, some with their sarongs lifted up. At hir workplace, a large salon in inner Yangon, ze shows new images to hir colleagues, describing the men, the sexual positions, how ze picked them up and how many times they ejaculated. Hir friends pass around the phone and discuss the anatomical size of the lovers, whether *at* or *cake*.

In the conversation in the salon, the Burmese verb *to eat* (စား *sa*) is used, as a trans word for 'sex'. *To eat* differs from the standard terms for sex in

Burmese, which differentiates between insertive and receptive sex, thereby suggesting equality between sexual partners, although standard verbs are also commonly used in trans social contexts. Trans usage of the term 'eating', literally an essential, primal act necessary for human survival, demonstrates the radically different status of sex between gender normative and trans social groups. The permissibility of sex talk is one example of rules of civility and social obligations operational within trans society. Standard work on *anadè* explores *anadè* as it applies to heteronormative social groups. However, rules of civility apply to non-heteronormative social groups as well. Many of the rules are the same, but broadly speaking, rules that affect trans personhood, those related to gender and sexuality, are different. The difference is enough to warrant terming this non-heteronormative bound set of rules as 'trans *anadè*'. Both forms of *anadè* are regulative but in heteronormative *anadè*, trans ways of being are cast as a violation of *anadè* norms. Conversely, in trans society, what is considered a violation of heteronormative *anadè* is mandated.

Figure iv: Key distinctions between trans *anadè* and gender normative *anadè*.³⁸

Trans	Gender normative
Trans superiority	Male superiority
Subversion and flouting of sex taboos	Adherence to sex taboos
Privileging of mother	Privileging of father
Boldness in new social situations	Timidity in new social situations
Break from traditional kinship group	Observance of traditional kinship values and obligations

While *anadè* creates an often intractable conflict between *opens* and their parents, it is conversely beneficial to *hiders*. *Anadè* enables *hiders* to live comfortably within their family home with minimal risk of confrontation, even if their *hiding* is suspected or known by others in the household. This is because *anadè* prevents others from inquiring directly into the personal matters and internal anguish of individuals, which can cause shame, conflict and despair. If concerned, parents may ask others about their children, such as friends and neighbours but rarely the children themselves. This enables family members to live comfortably with each other without loss of face. As Bekker (1964) observes, it does not suggest that Burmese love or care for their children any

³⁸ Diagram adapted from Bekker 1981, 22.

less than others. Love and care rather prevent any direct communication that could harm the parent – child relationship. The exception is when children move towards *opening*, publicly displaying a feminine identity, thereby causing parental shame and reprisals. Similar family dynamics have been observed amongst LGBT Chinese, who increasingly adopt the identity *tongzhi*: ‘The problem for parents is not just the acceptance of their child as a *tongzhi*, but how to “face” their relatives, neighbours, and ancestors. Parents would feel wronged and shamed through the loss of face if a *tongzhi* child came out’ (Wah-Shan 2001, 34). The avoidance of causing parental shame is one factor that discourages *tongzhi* and Burmese *hidors* from ‘coming out’. *Hidors* control their external image to mitigate parental shame, modifying their behaviour and sometimes their dress depending on context. In familial contexts (including around the local neighbourhood), *hiding* involves maintaining a masculine image. Outside of the familiar, *hidors* can *nwe* and also cross dress.

One informant cross-dressed at public trans events and lived with hir husband in hir parents’ apartment, with two sisters. The couple shared a room together. When I asked if hir parents knew they were a couple, ze looked puzzled and said ze does not know and that ze simply told hir family that hir husband is a friend. When I ask other *hider* informants if their parents knew they were *hidors*, I got similar puzzled responses. Talking to one’s parents about their sexual orientation and gender identity (‘coming out’ in a Western context) is not something that would occur to them, as it is unnecessary and counter-productive. This is logical since avoiding the inflicting of shame to one’s

parents is often a key motivation for *hiding*. The rules of *anadè* ensure that the relationships between *hidèrs* and their parents can endure, as long as each plays their role, *hidèrs* by maintaining a masculine appearance and keeping their romantic relationships private and parents by not confronting their children on what some presumably suspect is the non-heteronormative status of their children. *Hidèrs* therefore straddle two distinctive social spaces with opposing norms of *anadè*. They switch between the two; that of their gender normative kinship group (and often, place of employment) and that of the trans world.

While trans *anadè* involves a radical repositioning of the parent – child relationship, the formation of close-knit groups is still a primary mode of social organisation. Within a trans context, a kinship group that consists of a mother and daughters is one of the dominant structures, along with peer friendship groups and marriages that consist of a gender normative husband and trans wife. What is radically different about trans kinship groups is the way in which intimacy is constituted as central to social interaction, even between family members of different status.

Within gender normative families, *anadè* has a distancing effect. The internal anguish and desires of individual members are suppressed. The disclosure of personal problems can create discomfort and is to be avoided. Sex is also taboo. Discussion of sexual desire with elders (as well as siblings of the opposite sex) is improper and *anadè* mitigates against it. The gender normative

family constitutes a highly repressive space, especially in relation to sexuality and difference. In contrast, intimacy is at the centre of trans families. Jacques Rancière (2004) is helpful in thinking through hierarchical aspects of boundaries and boundary maintenance. His key concepts are 'distribution' and 'policing'. *Anadè* distributes sensibility in terms of what forms of sensibility are permissible and what forms forbidden. This is done through the act of 'policing' and in this context, this process is implicit in both *anadè* and trans *anadè*, and is in fact intrinsic to all codes of civility. Policing 'is defined as an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions' (Rancière 2004, xiii). It is thus a highly regulatory process. It is clear that the distribution of the sensible is radically altered although ever-present as one moves from gender normative *anadè* to trans *anadè*.

Within a trans context, the primary status differences are age and wealth, since commonality of sexual orientation and gender identity is a given. Within each trans family, the senior individual with status, the mother, possesses the *awza* and therefore overarching authority. Where *anadè* mitigates against open sexuality and intimacy in gender normative contexts, it does the reverse in trans families. Thus, in a trans context, *anadè* requires individuals to talk about sex, their bodies, their desires and their anguish. If an *open* found such talk and the consequent intimacy distressing, they would be positioned by others as an outsider, as not fully trans.

In a gender normative family, *anadè* provides a framework to balance parent and child obligations. Parents have an obligation to nurture their children, providing them with an education and a means to form their own family and in return they expect obedience, deference and support in their old age. Obligations are similarly implicit in trans mother – daughter relationships, albeit with a much shorter time span from birth to adulthood. It is expected that a daughter will grow to be a mother, acquire wealth and adopt her own daughters. When a trans mother is older and can no longer work, she can expect support from her daughters. This can include housing, food, money and companionship. The mother-daughter relationship also has a spiritual dimension, in the form of obeisance ceremonies held during *Thadingyut* festival where children prostrate before their parents and pupils before their teachers. They make offerings to them, in honour of their perceived generosity and sacrifice, and to ask for forgiveness for any disrespect. Offerings include snacks, fruit, medicine and cosmetics.³⁹ Within the trans world, *kadaw pwè* has also become a form of collective social action. One group organises an annual LGBT *kadaw pwè* where trans elders are seated en masse before trans youth who prostrate, give gifts and donate money. This is a way of paying respect to and honouring older trans, who are positioned as collective mothers and teachers for the trans population in Yangon. It is also done in recognition of their disadvantage at growing old without the security and companionship of consanguineal children.

³⁹ For a description of a typical *kadaw pwè*, see Brac de la Perrière 2015b.

The *anadè* of trans marriage

In social interactions between husbands and trans wives, a particularly trans form of *anadè* is at play, structuring trans intimate relationships differently to the social norms in heterosexual couples. In gender normative marriages, husbands have greater moral power and are thus superior to their wives. In part this can be explained by the patriarchal nature of *awza*, which by default is concentrated and exercised by the male head of the family. Men also have *pôn*, which separate men from women, positioning men as of a superior moral order to women. When other power differentials come into play, such as age and class, power dynamics are blurred but typically men rule as the superior person in a marriage. In trans marriage, these dynamics are reversed and the husband is typically positioned as the inferior person in the relationship, with the trans wife possessing the *awza* in the relationship. One informant in his sixties explained that trans must choose husbands that they can dominate in order for relationships to succeed, and even then they are unstable as they see it as inevitable that husbands will leave for a woman in order to have children. Ze explained that the trans partner must be wealthier and older than their husband. Being wealthier means that the trans partner is also like a mother to his husband, providing material support that can include income and training (if the trans wife has a business), housing and regular gifts such as clothes, food and luxury items.

The greater experience, age, wealth and gifting of the trans wife positions the husband as deferential. According to rules of *anadè*, he is therefore expected to avoid causing distress to his wife, which can result in a husband postponing separation in order to marry a woman, something many *guys* are pressured into by their parents. *Guys* in trans marriages typically feel a debt to their wives as a result of being the economic beneficiary of the relationship. The authority that trans wives can exercise and the power of trans *anadè* to make marriage endure is however fraught, as *guys* live within the dominant heteronormative culture of marriage and children. Given the taken-for-granted fact of the family pressure to conform, it is very difficult to break away and stay with trans partners for life. During my fieldwork, I never met trans couples whose relationship had lasted into old age, and older trans informants complained bitterly of *guys* who had never stayed.

One of the greatest challenges in my fieldwork was dealing with the interface between the trans and gender normative worlds, where there was a blurring of social norms. This was particularly the case with gender normative husbands, parents and relatives of trans informants. *Guys*, as gender normative, have their own cultural norms of behaviour. Conversation between trans is often about shared experience, of relationships, family and work, and gendered interests such as beauty and pop culture with feminine appeal. Between *guys*, conversation is also affected by the experience of gender. Trans relationship and sex talk is about orientation towards the feminine. For guys, shared *wathana* (ဝါထာနာ), the Burmese notion of predilections that reflect inner

mind/heart, diverges significantly from their *trans* partners. Therefore, recreation often involves talking about, playing or watching football and an interest in more masculine forms of pop culture. For *guys*, *dry* is a confrontational insult, much the way 'faggot' is in English. While trans are brought together as a minority group, *guys* are not. Being the husband of a trans spouse does not create a common subject position, nor does it signify a minority position and de-privileged status within social relations of oppression, elements that have created an impetus for trans people to organise both politically and socially. I therefore had to be especially careful when interacting with *guys*, to avoid causing discomfort.

There was no social setting where I could get to know *guys* while maintaining my rapport with *opens*. My entry was always through their trans spouses as someone interested in learning about Yangon's trans world. While I could make polite small talk with *guys* at home, I had to be cognisant not to position them as non-heteronormative for fear of offense and therefore proceeded carefully. Any missteps on my part could fall back on the trans partner, a potential risk for relations that are often temporary and precarious. This caused me to feel *anadè* and thus mitigate risks by keeping interactions with *guys* superficial.

Nostalgia

Kyi Aye is an *open* in hir fifties and a highly successful beautician, featured in glossy magazines. Like many *opens* of hir age and class, ze laments what ze sees as a moral decline amongst *open* youth. It is a complaint that I have heard many times during my fieldwork and Kyi Aye puts it succinctly: ‘They become *offer* and they steal [from gender-normative people], they don’t respect others and give us [trans] a bad name.’ The way Kyi Aye talks suggests *anadè* has evolved full circle, subverted from the family into a trans *anadè*, only to be re-cast again into a parental value of moral disapproval. For Kyi Aye, and for the many disapproving Burmese fathers, moral transgression is a personal reputational problem that requires containment, and the inability to contain and correct the transgression of others causes personal anguish. Kyi Aye sees youth crime as the primary barrier to societal acceptance and assimilation. This concern is highlighted by the occasional featuring of trans petty crime in popular journals. The figure of the trans youth in crime makes their acceptance ever more elusive.

Some older trans argue that during the Socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s, trans had high status in society, only for that to be undone by unruly generations of youth. In this view, *anadè* works at a macro level. Successful trans beauticians and spirit mediums at the apex of trans society feel shame when other trans interact with the gender normative world in ways they see as immoral. Supposedly immoral acts include stealing from *guys*, infidelity and

even for dressing scantily. Like a collective loss of face, they feel *anadè* to the gender normative world. They want acceptance but lack the means to discipline their children's generation, beyond attempts to spread a moral message and to teach respect and *anadè*. Desire for trans moral correction has been taken up by Myanmar's growing LGBT rights movement as part of their political cause. One category of demands in an earlier draft of an advocacy report was directed at the 'LGBT Community': 'Respect societal values and norms as long as they are not harmful to any individuals or groups and act with respect of dignity and rights of others in the society' (personal correspondence 2013). This demand arguably stems from a feeling of *anadè* towards gender normative society and the desire for normalcy, a meta-level response to the injustice of the everyday experience of trans who are positioned as inferior based on their gender and sexuality, and a growing desire to redress that positioning.

***Anadè* journeying**

Throughout my research, *anadè* emerged as a central regulatory mechanism in everyday life, involving social and moral domains that are deeply intertwined. For example, *anadè* involves a social demand to respect one's elders and respect for father is an important part of this. If a child is effeminate and is chastised by his father for effeminate behaviour, the punishment is for a social rather than a moral transgression. The transgression of *anadè* clearly takes precedence over the moral hurt of being chastised. In the trans world, *anadè* structures modes of relatedness between trans individuals, their

consanguineal parents, their trans kinship networks and their intimate relationships. *Anadè* involves a sense of right and wrong forms of behaviour in interpersonal interactions.

ရိုက်နှက်ပြီးဆွဲကြိုးလုယူထွက်ပြေးခဲ့သည့် မိန်းမစိတ်ပေါက်သူ အမျိုးသားသုံးဦးအား ဖမ်းဆီးရမိ

မန္တလေး ဖေဖော်ဝါရီ ၁၉

မန္တလေးတိုင်းဒေသကြီး အောင်မြေသာဇံ မြို့နယ် ဒေါနဘွားရပ်ကွက် စံနန်းတော်တိုက် တန်းတိုက်ခန်းအမှတ်(R)နေဦးခင်မောင်ဝင်း ၆၂ နှစ် သစ်ထုတ်လုပ်ရေးမန်နေဂျာ (ငြိမ်း) သည် ၂၀၁၃ခုနှစ် နိုဝင်ဘာ ၂၄ ရက် နံနက် ၅ နာရီခွဲက နေအိမ်ရှိခွေးများကို လမ်းလျှောက်ထိန်းကျောင်းရာမှ နေအိမ်သို့ပြန်လာပြီး ဇနီးဖြစ်သူ ဒေါ်လှလှမြင့် (ခ) ဒေါ်ခင်မိုးက ခွေးများကို အိမ်နောက်ဖေးခွေးလှောင်အိမ်အတွင်းပို့နေစဉ် အိမ်ရှေ့ခွေးဟောင်သံကြားရသဖြင့် ထွက်ကြည့်ရာ ဦးခင်မောင်ဝင်း၏ဦးခေါင်း ယာချီစောင်းတွင် ရိုက်နှက်ခံရသည့် နှုရောင်ဒဏ်ရာများရှိကာ ၎င်း၏လည်ပင်းတွင် ဆွဲထားသော အလေးချိန် ၅ ကျပ်သားခန့်ရှိ ရွှေဆွဲကြိုးတစ်ကုံး တန်ဖိုး ငွေကျပ်သိန်း ၃၀ ကျော်ခန့် လုယူခံရကြောင်း သိရှိရပြီး ၎င်းမှာ ဒီဇင်ဘာ ၄ ရက်တွင်ရရှိသောဒဏ်ရာဖြင့် မန္တလေးဆေးရုံကြီး၌ သေဆုံးခဲ့သည်။

အမှုမှ တရားခံဖမ်းဆီးရမိရေးအတွက် တိုင်းရဲအကူတပ်ဖွဲ့ ခွဲမှူးခင်အကျွန်ုပ်မှ ဒုတိယရဲမှူးသန်းဇော်ဝင်းဦးစီးသော ဒုတိယရဲအုပ်စောမင်းသန်းနှင့် တပ်ဖွဲ့ဝင်များသည် အမှုနှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ သတင်းစုံစမ်းဆောင်ရွက်ခဲ့ရာ အောင်ကျော်စိုး(ခ) ရှုကီရာသည် ဆွဲကြိုးဖြတ်လုယက်မှုကျူးလွန်ထားကြောင်း မသင်္ကာဖွယ်သတင်းရရှိ၍ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီ ၁၄ ရက်က ပြည်ကြီးတံခွန်မြို့နယ် သင်ပန်းကုန်းရပ်ကွက် ညဉ-၂၄ တွင် တွေ့ရှိ၍ စစ်မေး

ခဲ့သည်။ စစ်ဆေးချက်အရ လွန်ခဲ့သည့် သုံးလခန့်က နံနက် ၅ နာရီခန့်တွင် အောင်ကျော်စိုး(ခ) ရှုကီရာသည် သက်အောင်(ခ)ဂျာနယ်မ၊ သဲသဲတို့နှင့်အတူ ကျူးအရှေ့ဘက် သုဓမ္မာဇရပ်တန်းအနီး ဦးခင်မောင်ဝင်းအား ခွေးနှစ်ကောင်နှင့်တွေ့ရှိ၍ စကားရပ်ပြောနေစဉ် သဲသဲက ဦးခင်မောင်ဝင်း၏လည်ပင်းမှ ဆွဲကြိုးကိုဖြုတ်ပြီး အောင်ကျော်စိုး(ခ) ရှုကီရာက အနီးတွင်တွေ့ရသော တုတ်ချောင်းဖြင့်ဦးခေါင်းအား နှစ်ချက်ရိုက်ရာ လဲကျသွားသဖြင့် ၎င်းတို့သုံးဦး(အပေါ်ပုံ) ထွက်ပြေးခဲ့သည်။ လုယူရရှိသော ရွှေဆွဲကြိုးကို မန်းမြို့

ဈေးတွင် ငွေကျပ် သိန်း ၂၀ ဖြင့် ရောင်းပြီး အောင်ကျော်စိုး(ခ)ရှုကီရာက ငွေကျပ် ၁၀ သိန်း၊ သက်အောင်(ခ)ဂျာနယ်မနှင့် သဲသဲတို့က ငါးသိန်းစီခွဲဝေယူခဲ့ကြောင်း စစ်ဆေးပေါ်ပေါက်သဖြင့် ရွှေဆွဲကြိုးရောင်းရငွေဖြင့် ဝယ်ယူထားသော အဝတ်အထည်၊ အလှကုန်ပစ္စည်း၊ ဆိုင်ကယ်တို့ကို သိမ်းဆည်းပြီး အောင်ကျော်စိုး(ခ)ရှုကီရာ ၂၀ နှစ် တ-၂၃ သင်ပန်းကုန်းရပ်ကွက်၊ သက်အောင်(ခ)ဂျာနယ်မ ငွေကျပ်ရပ်ကွက်၊ သဲသဲ ၂၀ နှစ် ဒေါနဘွားရပ်ကွက်နေသူတို့အား အမှတ်(၁) ရဲစခန်းမှ (ပ)၂၀၁၄/၂၀၁၃ ပြစ်မှုပုဒ်မ ၃၀၂/ ၃၈၆ အရ အရေးယူထားကြောင်း သိရသည်။

မောင်မြည်သူ

Plate xxvii: Article in by Maung Pyithu in *Myawaddy*, 19 February, 2014. The title translates as 'Three Men who became Female, Arrested for Stealing a Gold Necklace and Running Away'.

As a moral and social regulatory framework, *anadè* is a constraint on all transgressive behaviours. One set of behaviours deemed transgressive is that of being trans. *Anadè* commonly entails the positioning of trans people as inferior because of the perceived hypersexual nature of trans in Myanmar and the resultant shame brought on parents of trans. *Anadè* is fundamentally about conformity and, within a gender normative society, that includes conformity to gender and sexual mores. Any deviation from the norm stands out and is perceived negatively.

In everyday social interaction, *anadè* involves the positioning of interlocutors in inferior, superior or equal positions. Trans commonly feel diminished in these positionings based on their gender and sexual non-conformity. Furthermore, sexual talk is highly restricted within dominant rules of civility. Within trans social groupings, this sense of inferiority is reversed. Trans position themselves as a superior gender and sexually explicit talk is not only tolerated but is an essential element of trans to trans social interaction. Given the importance of sexuality in Burmese *open* and *hider* identities, rendering sex talk as polite rather than forbidden and shameful is fundamentally validating. I refer to the subversion of the norms of *anadè* as trans *anadè*. Trans society therefore queers *anadè*, turning norms of civility, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, upside down so taboos that repress trans individuals in gender normative interactions become standard forms of behaviour in the trans world.

Conclusion

In 2014, a ceremony between two *hidlers* made international news. In the ballroom of a mid-range Yangon hotel, the couple performed many of the rituals associated with middle class, Burmese marriage. They wore Konbaung era outfits, involving a long wrap-around sarong and headdress. They sat together on heavy wooden chairs on stage. And they had a champagne tower, and a white tiered wedding cake. In the days that followed, the marriage was reported as Myanmar's first gay marriage. To many, the event epitomised Myanmar's dizzying transition to democracy. The *Huffington Post* reported that 'taboos around homosexuality have begun to be relaxed after a quasi-civilian government replaced military rule three years ago' and called the event 'the latest sign of changing social mores in the Southeast Asian nation as it emerges from the shadow of military dictatorship' (Agence France Presse 2014).

While some journalists positioned the marriage ceremony as a first because it was 'public', in fact it was not the case. The event was held in the private space of a hotel ballroom, invitation only, although the carefully selected media presence blurred the lines between public and private since that ensured a wider audience. It was simultaneously a private act of love from one partner to the other, and a loud claim for the recognition and legitimacy of that love. However, that recognition was social, not political. The couple were not making explicit demands of the state to recognise their marriage. In fact, it is precisely

the absence of political demands that has shielded trans from concerted state persecution over the last decades.

'Public' and 'private' in trans Myanmar

Media coverage of the ceremony contributes to a wider view that democratisation correlates with greater social and political space for LGBTs. This is based on a conflation of different spheres. While it may represent democratisation in the public sphere, the private sphere for trans in Myanmar has consistently been a place of oppression within the conventional family and liberation within trans families. Omar Encarnacion (2014) argues that gay rights correspond with democracy because of the freedom to organise and because of greater social freedom. Eve Sedgwick (1990) similarly connects closeting with state oppression. When I began this research, I received comments from colleagues expressing surprise that it would be possible to conduct 'queer' research in what was perceived as a highly repressive state. While state political repression is well-documented, the relationship between the state and everyday politics is more ambiguous.⁴⁰ To apply Omar Encarnacion's argument to Myanmar, it is indeed true that democratisation has

⁴⁰ When I began this thesis, the only ethnographic study that examined the everyday lives of women, including sex workers, was *Karaoke Fascism* by Monique Skidmore. There has also been limited study of everyday politics. An important exception is Ardeth Maung's study of Karen communities (2012). She examines what she calls the 'Other' Karen who live and survive within the Burmese state. Although they account for the majority of the Karen population, they are largely absent from literature, which focusses on Karen in the borderlands and Thailand and the serious human rights abuses that they suffer. As Ardeth has demonstrated, the study of demotic space can provide crucial insight into the micropolitics of power and survival at the intersections of the state and society.

opened up political space for LGBT activism that was previously absent. As a result, an LGBT rights network has formed and activists are pushing for law reform (Chua and Gilbert 2015). However, trans social space has existed for decades.

The research for this thesis took place between May 2011 and April 2014, during the closing months of dictatorship through to the rapid shift to a state in transition. It was a time when there was still widespread fear of the government and pessimism about the substance of political reform. The democratisation process had begun a decade earlier and was tightly controlled. During the time of my fieldwork, the culture of authoritarianism began to diminish. Given the lack of freedom, it is no surprise that the potential for ethnographic study had been limited as a result of state surveillance, tight visa restrictions for non-citizens and the repression, isolation and neglect of local universities.⁴¹ I had to grapple with these challenges to varying degrees, although far less so by the end of my period of fieldwork.

Throughout the decades of dictatorship, the Myanmar state has been unsurprisingly preoccupied with the repression of politics conceived of as a realm of antagonism that involves civil society. For Laclau and Mouffe, for example, politics is statist and inevitably antagonistic where antagonism might lead to social change (2001). In an authoritarian context, this type of politics is

⁴¹ Notable exceptions are Skidmore 2004, Carbine 2011 and Jordt 2007. In contrast, Burma was a field site of deeply influential ethnographic studies in the first decades of independence (Chit Hlaing 2008).

clearly threatening and in Myanmar it was largely absent. In Myanmar, the state typically repressed the political through violence: torture, imprisonment, surveillance, censorship and, in remoter areas, killings, rape, enslavement and the destruction of property. Trans politics in Myanmar takes place largely in the demotic, which is the space of everyday life, a sphere that has been neglected by scholars of Myanmar politics, who have rather focussed on statist politics and the very serious abuses inflicted on those labelled oppositional (Maung 2011). To borrow from Deleuze (1980), trans sociality is rhizomatic rather than arborescent and thereby characterised by horizontal, shifting forms of loosely networked social units. These units are those of trans kinship groups and individuals. This is distinct from the power of the state, which is made up of both a vastly powerful military machine, newer civilian institutions and the beauraucracy.

In everyday trans sociality, the family is a primary site of struggle. Chit Chit, as described in the Interlude, resists paternal power and attempts to fight back. Hir tactics include non-cooperation and alliance-building with hir mother. When that fails, ze opts for separatism, going underground and eventually entering trans space, where ze can experience a greater degree of freedom and sexual sustenance. In democratising Myanmar, *opens* and *hiders* get space and also lose space. The LGBT rights movement has gained momentum and trans activists are speaking of gender and sexual rights (Chua and Gilbert 2015). But democratisation also means Yangon's underground toilets have been closed. These toilets were once a key beat where *hiders* could find partners and have

sex in the dank cubicles beneath the city. A group of *hider offers* I spoke to talked about the loss of public underground toilets, which formed a network of popular cruising sites. They thought of the closure as a function of democratisation. Some saw it as the cost of progress and modernisation, as they adapted, creating new cruising networks, such as in downtown teashops and movie theatres.

The distinction between the public and private spheres is important in this study.⁴² For something to be a threat to the state, it needs to be perceived as a threat to ‘public’ order and stability. Gender and sexual politics is typically confined to the private domain. In Myanmar, the relative invisibility of the private sphere in relation to politics has been an asset for trans, enabling the flourishing of a social network counter to but not directly threatening state hegemony. This flourishing is possible precisely because private space is depoliticised. The trans private sphere allows for a transient, multi-sited form of autonomy. In the official language, this can be tolerated because it is presumably not seen to lead to ‘disintegration of the Union’, a primary concern of the state. *Opens* primarily want recognition from their families. The debates around recognition, associated with the work of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, are different to the forms of recognition that my informants were

⁴² Within a Buddhist framework for social and political action, there is an important distinction between actions that target public beneficiaries, those considered most in need, and action that can be more narrowly characterised as ‘identity politics’. The Pali word for charity, *parahita* (ပရဟိတ), literally means ‘public vehicle’ and is part of a framework for moral conduct whereby individuals have a duty to assist those in need. This is also often interpreted as narrowly based on the provision of basic needs, often to the exclusion of political action. Charity is part of the moral dynamics of everyday politics, far more commonplace than antagonistic, statist politics.

seeking (Honneth 1996; Fraser 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Debates around recognition in the West are fundamentally political and the politics has social consequences. The recognition my informants desire is for their identities to be accepted by their families and communities. This fundamentally takes place at a local level in everyday life.

Even though there was a sort of invisible boundary between the demotic sphere and the public sphere, there was still political repression. I finished my main period of fieldwork in mid-2012 and returned for a shorter period in early 2013. I initially avoided asking informants about Burmese politics and when politics entered the conversation, some were visibly scared. Sometimes I was asked to avoid visiting satellite towns when there were protests in the industrial zones. Informants living there were disturbed by the disruptions and feared that if it led to open conflict with authorities, they could also be targeted because of their trans identity.

Occasionally my presence caused fear of scrutiny by law enforcement agencies, particularly outside of Yangon on the spirit festival circuit, where local authorities have greater autonomy. During the Taungbyone Festival in 2012, I was questioned by officials from the 'Special Branch' of the police, who were clearly suspicious as to why I was there. Later, a friend from a local HIV group drove me back to Mandalay. The organisation that ze worked for was being targeted by local authorities who were trying to place restrictions on their activities and the head of the organisation had placed a moratorium on foreign

visitors in order to placate the local government. When ze found out that one of the members was publicly escorting a foreigner, ze was furious at hir and clearly worried that the incident would lead to repercussions, which fortunately never materialised.

In *Karaoke Fascism*, Monique Skidmore (2004) writes about fear as an all-pervasive feature of everyday life, that Burmese can only find momentary reprieve through acts of escape such as dreaming, supernaturalism and entertainment such as karaoke. She describes the fear in the everyday life of her informants, manifesting as ‘alienation and vulnerability’, as well as deep mistrust (Skidmore 2004, 51-2). Her findings were very different to my own. I found a thriving trans society existing within an authoritarian state, which suggests greater possibilities within Burmese civil society than she suggests. While both ethnographic studies took place at different times, Skidmore’s in the midst of military rule and mine at the end of it, trans oral history points to decades of an existing trans society in Yangon. This discrepancy can be explained in part by the insulating effects of trans sociality, exemplified in the kinship dynamics of trans *anadè*. This sphere of everyday life operates as a ‘thick substance, which ‘blocks’ the intrusion of the political’ (Robinson and Tomey, 142). The challenge I faced in the field was therefore to gain access to what might appear to be the somewhat closed space of trans everyday life, in the interstices of the state and heteronormative society.

Intimate ethnography

In order to carry out fieldwork in closed, private spheres of everyday life, I had to gain entry into trans social spaces and conduct myself in accordance with trans social norms. As I have discussed, these norms are a radical recreation of the regulatory dynamics that govern interpersonal relations in the gender normative world. The constrictive dynamics of the gender normative world are most clearly seen in the family, against which trans alternative social forms are created. Of particular relevance are the dynamics of *anadè*, which causes widespread pain and anguish.⁴³ While trans have not done away with *anadè* (if that were indeed possible), they have made it their own, creating a liberatory network of social relations that enables *opens* to be *open*. A key dynamic of trans sociality, regulated by trans *anadè*, is intimacy. As intimacy was a constitutive element of the trans field, it was essential to engage with that in my ethnographic practice. In other words, this is an intimate ethnography.

‘Intimate ethnography’ is used to describe a range of ethnographic practices where the ethnographer has a particularly close and intimate relationship with their informants.⁴⁴ In exploring intimacy in the field and reflecting on my ethnographic role, I contribute to the field of intimate ethnography, a methodology little used with regard to Asian studies. Intimate

⁴³ Despite *anadè* being a key dynamic in Burmese society, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to this term in academic scholarship. The one exception is Bekker 1964.

⁴⁴ See Lerum 2001, Waterson and Rylko-Bauer 2006, Banerji and Distant 2009, Pérez-y-Pérez and Stanley 2011 and Waterson 2014.

ethnography can substantially overlap with auto-ethnography, as the ethics of the fieldwork encounters necessitate reflection on the positionality of the researcher and the social dynamics between the researcher and informants. It is no coincidence that the approach of 'intimate ethnography' has been used in trans and sexual research, as 'the study of human sexuality requires a deeper, more intimate and trusting rapport between researchers and research subjects than is usually necessary in other areas of social inquiry' (Parker et. al. 1991, 91). Intimacy in fieldwork thereby challenges ethnographic objectivity. Objectivity annuls intimacy and attachment (Lerum 2011, 478), functioning as a 'magical token... bolstering our sense of self in disorienting situations' (Jackson 1989, 3). Intimate ethnography can facilitate openness to more 'bodily' approaches to research. There has thus been a shift in ethnographic practice from the detached observer, grounded in Western norms of rationality, to 'sensual' approaches that involve the body, including the senses, the digestive system and emotions (Stoller 1997).

Intimate ethnography has much in common with radical empiricist approaches in anthropology, with their greater emphasis on participation over observation. For Conquergood, it 'represents a shift from monologue to dialogue, from information to communication' (1991, 182). In Yangon's trans world, entering into dialogue therefore involved positioning myself and being positioned, entering kinship systems and taking sides, although the practice of positioning was always shifting. For some informants, I was a daughter, to others I was a mother and for most I was a friend or sibling. Dialogue involved

eating and drinking together, praying, dancing and embodying spirits. All of these relationships involved obligations that enriched and also complicated the process of ethnography.

Becoming close to trans kinship groups was necessary in order to participate in the trans world. Friendship with one individual would involve links to other trans in their immediate social network. This trans communalism differs from the image of familial communalism claimed by adherents to 'Asian values', which is fundamentally linked to the heteronormative family (Milner 2000). Trans exit from the family shows the fragility and even failure of the gender-normative family as a unit of social control and acculturation.

Communalism is a feature of trans society that provides security, welfare, work, education and moral regulation that stems from and is amenable to trans ways of being. Trans forms of communalism are transient, as individuals shift between varied forms of trans families, some loose and some more structured. Intimate ethnography was therefore a group process. It was not a matter of just gaining the trust of individuals, but involved becoming part of trans webs of relatedness. A mistake or transgression with one individual in the network could therefore create difficulties for me with other individuals, even if they lived on the other side of the city.

Many informants shared their painful experiences, such as childhood memories, issues with lovers, experiences of discrimination at school, at work and in their neighbourhoods and run-ins with the police. My role in these

situations involved the act of bearing witness. As an outsider, I could learn and thereby validate the abuses trans face in Burmese society and also witness the perseverance and creativity trans have in order to endure, grow networks and thrive. Bearing witness refers to a moral act where one witnesses 'human suffering' (Ullman 2006, 182).

Bearing witness to the suffering of my informants entailed expectations for action through 'acts of knowing and acknowledgment', even though what was expected was unclear and left unspoken (Ullman 2006, 188). Informants would sometimes discuss this as 'teaching', talking about me as someone who would teach Australians about the social reality of trans in Myanmar. I think many imagined that my teaching would acknowledge trans pain and suffering, and that it would also recognise instances of the professional, financial and romantic successes of some *opens*. Ethnographic witnessing can be a powerful point to the abstract and de-personalising discourse of human rights (Hastrop 2003).

As others have pointed out, the role of an ethnographer is not to mirror, represent or speak for their participants (Conquergood 1991; Kuper 1994; Smith 2005). Adam Kuper argues that ethnography ought not be a 'political programme' (1994, 551). However, I was entrusted with stories in the field, with the expectation that I reproduce and spread those stories, somehow. Like many others, I was caught in inherent ethnographic tensions, from which intimate ethnography could only provide a partial respite. Fieldwork, and the

social reality it captures, is inherently messy. During much of my fieldwork, I had to constantly shift between a position of empathy with informants, associated with intimate ethnography and, on the other hand, the position of normative viewpoints associated with the outsider.

There are two areas associated with this double role that were a challenge. One had to do with language and the other with pain. The sphere where I have had to take sides is in relation to the semantics of identity, a key area of 'queer' and trans studies to which I contribute. Myanmar has a rich vocabulary of terms related to non-normative genders and sexuality. Some are self-ascriptive, some are derogatory and some are used in state governance, as part of policy-speak. As is common in 'queer' ethnography, I went into the field eager to learn Burmese trans cant and use those self-ascriptive terms in writing. The use of 'local' terms seemed to me vital as a way of avoiding the fraught politics of ascribing English terms that are grounded in a different culture of gender and sexuality. The latter approach is emblematic of the colonialist tradition in anthropology. However, as I gradually learnt, the reification of local signifiers carries its own problems. The key categories, *open* and *hider*, are part of trans cant; however, they constitute a field of tension within trans networks. One issue is the foregrounding of gender identity over sexuality. The terms *open* and *hider* refer to those who are assigned male at birth but have a feminine *mind/heart*. *Opens* act on that by being outwardly feminine, whereas *hidere*s conceal it, passing as normative men. Both *opens* and *hidere*s are attracted to men. Gender identity and sexuality is therefore compounded,

leaving little space for those who do not fit this binary. The term *hider* is particularly problematic as it can refer to any man who is attracted to other men and enjoys the insertive role in anal sex.

The *open/hider* binary casts all who do not fit a gender and heteronormative mould as inherently feminine, regardless of their *mind/heart*. It furthermore positions feminine trans as desiring gender normative men. There is also an inherent tragedy in this for most, since *guys* invariably let their trans partners down by marrying gender normative women. To avoid the term *hider* in favour of terms that describe sexual orientation is also problematic, since I met many *hiders* in the field who clearly identify with the feminine to a certain degree. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that these categories of identity are transient and largely used by others rather than self-ascriptively, as I found when talking to Maung Maung on the bus. I therefore opted to use the terms *open* and *hider*, in English translation, and the term 'trans' to refer to both categories. I do that with ambivalence as all options are fraught.

Reconstituting kinship

Anadè is of profound importance to the everyday lives of trans. *Anadè* is a cause of pain and an impetus for separation and exit from the family. However trans life histories are not just narratives of lack or negativity but are of trans becoming. Becoming involves attempting to create positive spaces and

relationships, and forming new ways of dealing with non-acceptance within heteronormative society. Trans *anadè* is a supreme example of this, as I have demonstrated. It is *anadè* in its trans form that enables the fusing of new forms of family and sociality. *Anadè* was not identified by informants as a concern, in part because there is no outside to *anadè* in everyday life. *Anadè* is an implicit and explicit framework for behaviour from which there is no easy escape. Similarly, as a defining feature of intimate ethnography is closeness, I was not able to critically examine the dynamics of *anadè* until I was outside the field. While particular social contexts, such as the temple festival, allow for the loosening of social conventions, *anadè* in some form is ever present in interpersonal conduct. As Myanmar democratises, it is possible that the culture of *anadè* will be transformed. Neo-liberal globalisation could have a displacing effect through its radically different ethics of individualism. While I am critical of *anadè* as a cause of injustice, it can be adapted and reformed as trans have shown. The moral economy of *anadè* is counter to the individualism of capitalism that is gradually taking hold of Burmese society. My research is the first detailed study of *anadè* in everyday life and contributes to a critical understanding of 'face' in East and Southeast Asia.

In Myanmar, a common move for someone who is trans and *opening* is to exit from the natal family. This is a response to experiences of violence and the limited power *opens* have to create a space of belonging within their birth families. It is remarkable that so many *opens* choose to disobey their parents and exit, given the centrality of the family and the gender and hetero-normative

rules of *anadè* within Burmese society. *Anadè* is a crucial ordering principle that creates a profound barrier for individuals who wish to move into an *open* identity. In the context of family, the obligation to one's parents overrides the possibility of being true to oneself. This reflects the diminished place of authenticity within Burmese folk psychology and the privileging of familial equilibrium over psychical interiority and individuation. By exiting, *opens* are transgressing fundamental social norms, not just in relation to gender and sexuality but in relation to *anadè*.

As discussed throughout this thesis, the more immediate causes of violence, shame and anguish takes place within the natal family. It is within the family, and as children, that non-masculine informants typically start their trans journeys, and experience the often violent reaction from male members of the household. And it is through moving out of the family home and negotiating new, trans modes of relatedness, often involving reconstructions of kinship, that many informants are able to experience a sense of belonging in the city. As Evelyn Blackwood found in her study of lesbians in Indonesia, 'the Western idealized concept of self as an autonomous, cohesive, and integrated entity, distinguishable from all others, differs from notions of personhood in Indonesia, where the self is defined by and through one's kin and community of origin... Position and behaviour are relative to the person with whom one is interacting' (2010, 441-2). There is a clear logic here. If individuals are rejected by or reject their natal family, they seek out and create new configurations of family. As I have demonstrated, trans kin includes families of friends, an area neglected

within queer Asian studies (Erni 2003). These include mother-daughter relations which structure trans blending of work and home and facilitate the exchange of knowledge with regard to trans everyday life.

My research has focussed on a group neglected within Myanmar studies. It has explored trans social organisation during the beginning of political transition to democracy and as such, has captured both the hope and ambivalence in relation to what democracy may bring. Counter-intuitively, I have found that the trans community, with the exception of sex workers, has been able to thrive under dictatorship, while democratisation has brought new threats in the form of populist, moral politics. While I initially aimed to focus on the state, my research evolved into an examination of the everyday, social dynamics of kinship, intimacy and *anadè* that were of primary concern to my informants. This contrasts with the considerable attention on the all-encompassive power of the state within political and anthropological literature on Myanmar. More broadly, this work adds to a growing literature on gender and sexual minorities in Asia, within which Myanmar has been largely absent.

Afterword

In the play, the narrative of Chit Chit progresses towards a positive conclusion, illustrative of the trans reconstitution of kinship.

Chit Chit is in physical and emotional pain after being attacked, first by random men and then by the police. A new scene begins in a doctor's surgery.

We see a gender normative, heterosexual couple visiting the doctor, who is courteous and caring. Next, Chit Chit comes in with his anxious trans mother, who starts telling the doctor that Chit Chit's head is bleeding. The doctor is abrupt and asks them what sort of people they are. Chit Chit's mother replies assertively: 'We are *meinmalya*.'

She replies curtly, 'Oh you are *a dry*. Trouble. Wait a minute, I just need to check something' as she gives Chit Chit a blood test roughly and without consent. After a short time, the doctor tells both patients they have HIV/AIDS and will be charged extra. Chit Chit's mother pleads that they are in trouble and their money has been

stolen. The doctor tells them to come back another time and quickly closes her clinic.

Back on the street again, Chit Chit despairs: 'I'm so disgusted with my life'

Chit Chit's mother comforts hir. 'Don't say that. This is nature. It's part of our life.'

Chit Chit's trans mother says ze will take them somewhere that can help. The two of them then go to an trans drop-in centre where ze begs for help and explains Chit Chit's predicament to a friendly health worker.

Chit Chit sobs: 'My life is horrible. My parents discriminate against me. They kicked me out of home. At school, my friends don't like me anymore and discriminate against me because I'm *a dry*. They don't give me a place to be, they don't recognise me or encourage me. When I'm on the street, people assault me again, just for being out trying to build up my own life. Then the police come, pretending to help but instead take all my savings and even fuck me.'

The health worker provides some words of assurance: 'Don't worry. There are a lot of places and people that can accept you and organisations that can offer help to people like you.'

Chit Chit's mother gives a rousing speech: 'Well daughter, if we keep living our lives being oppressed, we'll have oppressed lives. We have to work hard to fight against homophobes. It is not a sin to be in love with the same sex. It is love that comes from our hearts. Just love. People who hate us and see us as wrong are the ones who are sick. Not us. We have to unite and work hand in hand to get rid of that sickness.'

Chit Chit rises slowly, still in pain, and hugs hir trans mother. 'Yes mummy, that's right. We'll try.' Ze has found home.

Glossary

<i>Anadè</i> ; A regulatory framework that governs interpersonal interactions	အားနာတယ်
<i>Anal sex age (pinkan thet)</i> ; years since first experience of sex.	ဖင်ခံသက်
<i>Asin</i> ; trans term for handsome, good looking <i>guy</i> .	အစင်
<i>At</i> ; trans term for small-sized penis.	အပ်
<i>Awli</i> ; trans term for <i>rude, bad-looking, badly behaved guy</i> .	အောလီ
<i>Awza</i> ; influence, authority	ဩဇာ
Beautician (<i>make-up saya</i>)	မိတ်ကပ်ဆရာ
<i>Cake (keik)</i> ; trans term for large-sized penis.	ကိတ်
<i>Chit</i> ; to love.	ချစ်တယ်
<i>Dry</i> ; derogatory term for <i>opens</i> and <i>hiders</i> . Also used self-ascriptively.	အခြောက်
<i>Eat (sa)</i> ; Trans term for the verb, 'to fuck'.	စားတယ်
<i>Gandu</i> ; derogatory term for transgender that derives from a Hindi slang term for anus.	ဂန်ဒူး
<i>Green death (asein thay)</i> ; violent or unexpected death.	အစိမ်းသေ
<i>Guy (thu nge)</i> ; trans term for gender normative man, main category of personhood that <i>opens</i> and <i>hider</i> are attracted to.	သူငယ်
<i>Gyi-pôn</i> ; derogatory term for <i>hiders</i> .	ဂျီပုန်း
<i>Hider (apôn)</i> ; trans term for a person assigned male at birth who identifies internally as feminine and has a masculine external appearance. Used as a noun or verb.	အပုန်း၊ ပုန်းတယ်
<i>Homo</i> ; trans term for 'gay' male, often attracted to other <i>homos</i> .	ဟိုမို
<i>Husband (yaukkya)</i> .	ယောက်ျား

<i>Ingahlan</i> ; trans term for <i>guy</i> who is both the insertive and receptive partner in anal sex.	အင်္ဂလန်
Lemon medicine seller (<i>shaukthisaybya</i>); a trans roaming street performer, who receives payment for the performance but also provides a small packet of lemon medicine as a token.	ရှောက်သီးဆေးပြား
<i>Line (laing)</i> ; used to describe professional categories, work <i>lines</i> , such as the spirit <i>line</i> , the make-up <i>line</i> etc.	လိုင်း
<i>Make-up</i> ; cosmetics. Also used to describe the profession of beauticians and hairdressers.	မိတ်ကပ်
<i>Marriage, married (yaukkyashidè)</i>	ယောက်ျားရှိတယ်
<i>Medium</i> ; trans term for medium-sized penis.	အလယ်အလတ်
<i>Meinmalya</i> ; those who act like women, standard Burmese term for transwoman.	မိန်းမလျာ
<i>Meinmapôn</i> ; feminine appearance.	မိန်းမပုံ
<i>Meinmasan</i> ; feminine style, resemblance.	မိန်းမဆန်
<i>Mind/heart (seik)</i> ; conciousness.	စိတ်
<i>Nat kana pwè</i> ; temporary, irregular festival in honour of the 37 <i>nat</i> spirits.	နတ်ကနားပွဲ
<i>Nwè</i> ; to act in a feminine manner.	နွဲ
<i>Offer</i> ; trans term for male non-gender or non-heteronormative sex worker.	အော်ဖာ
<i>Open (apwint)</i> ; trans term for a person assigned male at birth who identifies internally as feminine and has a feminine external appearance. Used as a noun or verb. Used in verb and noun form.	အပွင့်၊ ပွင့်တယ်
<i>Pôn</i> ; psychsocial power.	ဘုန်း
<i>Sin</i> ; trans term for good-looking <i>guy</i> .	စင်၊ အစင်
Spirit (<i>nat</i>).	နတ်
Spirit medium (<i>nat kadaw</i>).	နတ်ကတော်

<i>Tawtha</i> ; person from a rural area.	တောသား
Temple festival (<i>paya pwe</i>); also referred to as pagoda festival.	ဘုရားပွဲ
<i>Thanaka</i> ; Extract from the bark of the <i>thanka</i> tree, used as a cosmetic.	သနပ်ခါး
<i>Those who love the same gender (leintuchitthu)</i> ; non-derogatory term for LGBT.	လိင်တူချစ်သူ
<i>Village (ywa)</i> ; trans term for an underground toilet, used for cruising.	ရွာ
<i>Yaukkyalya</i> ; transman, lesbian.	ယောက်ျားလျာ

Acronyms

DIC	Drop In Centre
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. While this acronym is extended to LGBTIQ to include intersex and queer or questioning, I have limited it to 'LGBT' as that was the form most commonly used during fieldwork.
MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

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 လိုလိုက်ပို့ပေးပြီး သူဆင်းသွားမှအခြောက်မှန်းသိပေမယ့်ကားထဲကကျပ်သိန်း ၇၀

ပျောက်သွားလို့ရဲသွားတိုင် ရတဲ့အဖြစ်၊ အတွဲ ၁၇၊ အမှတ် ၂၂၊ ဧပြီလ၊ ၂၀၁၃ [Crime News Journal, 'A Case that had to be Reported to the Police for the Loss of Seven Million Kyat.' *Crime News Journal*. 17 April, 2013].

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