

LEXICAL CATEGORIES OF HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN MODERN BURMESE

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'Do not worry,' Jain assured me. 'They are not gays. They are just looking for gays to make love to.' I registered my surprise. 'Whatever is easier,' he smiled. 'They prefer girls. But they like what is easy.' — *Pico Iyer* (1989: 212)

1. INTRODUCTION

Wierzbicka (1989) provided linguistic evidence to show how the semantics of lexical categories distinguished in English and Russian reflect the way in which English speakers and Russian speakers implicitly view the anatomy of the human psyche or consciousness. Conversely, the ethnopsychology of a people speaking a given language is moulded by concepts represented in its lexicon. Ferdinand de Saussure (1987: 40) expressed the same insight when he said,

les mœurs d'une nation ont un contre-coup sur la langue, et, d'autre part, c'est dans une large mesure la langue qui fait la nation ("a nation's mores have their impact on the language, and, conversely, it is to a large extent the language which makes the nation"),

as did Hagège (1987: 80) when he wrote,

la langue est aussi génératrice de culture, tout autant qu'informée par la culture ("language is just as much a generator of culture as it is shaped by the culture").

That this interaction is insidious and pervasive is a point strongly made by Kortlandt (1985).

The way homosexual behaviour is conceptualized in a given culture finds expression in how the lexicon of its language compartmentalizes or parses up the natural spectrum of behaviour. Boswell (1980: 74–79), for example, argues that the lexical distinctions of first-century Latin reflect that, in the urban Roman cultural environment of that period, the sexual role adopted in intercourse was laden with greater social significance than the sexual orientation. The Latin lexicon distinguishes terms denoting various types of male homosexual depending on the rules assumed in anal and oral intercourse. Terms for passive men included *pathicus* ‘passive homosexual’, *cinaedus* ‘wanton or impudent catamite’ and *(con)stuprātus* ‘violated or debauched man’. Terms for active men include *paedīcātor* ‘bugger’, *paedico* ‘bugger’ and *draucus* ‘sodomite’. Boswell (1980: 79) also lists Latin *glaber* ‘young beardless slave’ as a term for an active homosexual, although he does not indicate what the basis is for this interpretation. In Latin the same semantic distinction applied when referring to male prostitutes: *exolētus* ‘active male whore’ (literally ‘a full-grown one’) vs. *catamītus* ‘passive male whore’. This dichotomy in the Latin lexicon is perhaps best understood in the historical context of Graeco-Roman homosexuality, which had its roots in the ritualized pederasty of primitive initiation rites into manhood (Bremmer 1988). For an opposing view, see Hermans (1990).

Categories of male homosexual behaviour distinguished in the Burmese lexicon indicate the outlook on homosexuality of a very different culture. Burmese society has a Buddhist culture with a prominent polytheistic shamanist substrate. A plethora of indigenous Burmese, pre-Buddhist deities known

as နတ် [naʔ] 'nat' have secured a place within the Buddhist pantheon. The modern Burmese lexicon distinguishes three types of male homosexual: မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] 'gynæcopath', အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] 'nat possessed one' and ရှိပုန်း [dʒibôũ] 'hiding muntjack deer'. The semantics of the lexical distinctions involve the degree of social acceptability or တိက္ခာ [heiʔkha], degree of effeminacy and social function of the referent. The social acceptability or တိက္ခာ [heiʔkha] is determined, in part, by religious factors. Overt homosexual behaviour is not limited to individuals denoted by these three terms.

In Rangoon, an urban homosexual is viewed by himself and by others as belonging to one of these three lexical categories. Homosexuals in Rangoon readily place themselves and other homosexuals in one of these three categories. The author did not encounter instances of discrepancy between the category to which a homosexual saw himself as belonging and the category to which he was assigned by other Burmese. These three lexical categories are defined below and illustrated by brief case studies. The lexical material presented here is based on modern colloquial Burmese as spoken in the Burmese capital Rangoon. Data were gathered by the author during two one-week stays in Burma in 1985 and 1986. Most of the author's data are based on interviews with the six informants described in the case studies at the end of this article. The author also consulted a number of anonymous မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and, of course, other Burmese.

In this article, the author's (van Driem 1993) system for the transcription of Burmese is used, with transcriptions given between brackets in the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet listed below. The transcription, although a broad phonetic one, assumes an interpretation of Burmese phonology.¹ Nasalization is analysed as a syllable-final segment. All

syllable-initials indicated have phonemic status except /ð/, which is an allophone of /θ/. The phoneme /w/ is restricted to literary pronunciations. The post-initial glide /j/ occurs only after bilabials and laterals. The vowels [ɪ] and [ʌ] are not phonemes, but allophones of /i/ before final glottal stop and /a/ after initial or post-initial /w/ in closed syllables respectively.

SYLLABLE - INITIALS						SYLLABLE - FINALS			
p	t	k	tɕ	s	θ	ʔ	~		
p ^h	t ^h	k ^h	tɕ ^h	s ^h					
b	d	g	dʒ	z	ð	VOWELS			
m	n	ŋ	ɲ			i	ɪ	u	
ṃ	ṇ	ŋ̣	ɲ̣			e	ə	o	
l	w	j	r	h		ɛ	ʌ	ɔ	
ḷ	ẉ	ɟ				a			
POST - INITIAL GLIDES						DIPHTHONGS			
	j	w				ei	ai	au	ou

The vowel [ə] does not occur in closed syllables and lacks distinctive tone. The vowel /a/ has the allophone [ʌ] in closed syllables after initial or post-initial /w/, e.g. ɔoŋ /waʔ/ [wʌʔ] 'to wear', ɔŋŋ̣: /lwâ/ [lʌ] 'too, excessively'. Diphthongs do not occur in open syllables, and the diphthongs [ei] and [ou] can be analysed as allophones of /e/ and /o/ in closed syllables, e.g. ɔŋ̣ /loʔ/ [louʔ] 'work', ʔŋ̣ /ē/ [eĩ] 'house'. The vowels /a/ and /ɛ/ also occur in closed syllables, e.g. ɔŋ̣ /wɛ/ 'enter', ɔŋ̣ /sɛʔ/ 'motor', ɔŋ̣ /kaʔ/ 'crisis', ɔŋ̣ /lã/ 'road'. The vowels /u/ and /ɔ/ do not occur in closed syllables, and the phoneme /u/ does not occur after initial or post-initial /w/. The vowel /i/ occurs in closed syllables only with final /ʔ/, where it is realized as the allophone [ɪ], e.g. ɟŋ̣ [ʃɪʔ] 'eight'. Nasalization is

indicated only above the second letter of a diphthong digraph, leaving room for a tone mark, if any, above the first letter.

The creaky tone is indicated by *accent grave* except in glottal stop final syllables, where creaky tone is automatic. The breathy tone is indicated by an *accent circumflexe*, and the level tone is left unmarked. A phonetic description of Burmese tones in monosyllabic citation forms is provided by U Thein Tun (1982). The creaky tone is short, pronounced with pharyngealized voice and has a sharply falling contour 5-1. The breathy, heavy is long, pronounced with breathy voice and has the contour 4-5-4. The level tone is long and has the contour 3-1.

2. THE မိန်းမရှာ 'GYNÆCOPATH' AND THE အချောက် 'NAT POSSESSED ONE'

The term မိန်းမရှာ [mēiməʃa] 'gynæcopath' is a usual dictionary translation for English 'homosexual'. Learned neologisms such as လိင်တူချင်းကားမစိတ်ရှိသော [lɛĩtutɕ^hɛ̃kəmàseiʔŋiθá] 'homœoandrolaikaserotophilia', လိင်တူချင်းကားမစိတ်ရှိသောသူ [lɛĩtutɕ^hɛ̃kəmàseiʔŋiθáθu] 'homœoandrolaikaserotophilic', ယင်းကဲ့သို့-သောစိတ်မျိုး [jɛ̃ŋgèθòθáseiʔmjó] 'homophilism', လိင်တူကြိုက်ရာဝစိတ် [lɛĩtutɕaiʔjagàseiʔ] 'homœoandrophileroticism' occur as glosses in bilingual dictionaries but do not form part of the regular lexicon of the spoken language, and of these only the term ယင်းကဲ့သို့သောစိတ်မျိုး 'homophilism' would appear to also be applicable to female homosexuality. The term မိန်းမရှာ [mēiməʃa] 'gynæcopath' is derived from the word မိန်းမ [mēimà] 'woman' through suffixation of the morpheme ရှာ [-ʃa] which also occurs as a free verb in the meaning 'emulate, strive' and as an auxiliary verb to express compassion on the part of the speaker for the subject of the sentence. The morpheme ရှာ [-ʃa] likewise occurs as the ending in the Burmese word for

‘lesbian’, ယောက်ျားရှု [yauʔtəʃa] ‘andropath’ from the root ယောက်ျား [yauʔtəʃa] ‘man’.

The term မိန်းမရှု [mêiməʃa] ‘gynæcopath’ originally denoted palace transvestites who fulfilled a function similar to that of the Indian *hijadā* at the Moghul courts. In present-day usage, too, the meaning of the term မိန်းမရှု [mêiməʃa] ‘gynæcopath’ hinges upon the idea that a homosexual orientation is associated with effeminate or transexual behaviour. Today the term is used (1) as a generalized, deprecatory term for male homosexuals, and (2) in a strict sense to denote effeminate homosexual men who wear their hair long and exhibit transvestism.

Private physicians in Rangoon cater to the cosmetic needs of transsexually inclined homosexuals by outfitting them with artificial female breasts through silicon implants. The မိန်းမရှု [mêiməʃa] in Rangoon are well-informed concerning the availability of sex change operations in the West. Some Rangoonese မိန်းမရှု [mêiməʃa] told the author that they would be eager to undergo the surgical treatment transsexuals receive in Europe if it were available in Burma, whereas others considered such surgery undesirable. The term မိန်းမရှု [mêiməʃa] designates the most outspokenly cross-gender of male homosexual behavioural categories differentiated in the Burmese lexicon.

The term အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] ‘nat possessed one’ is a deverbative derived from the verb ချောက်, also spelt ခြောက်, [tʰauʔ] ‘frighten, scare, haunt’ through affixation of the nominalizing prefix အ- <ə->. Stewart and Dunn (1950: 55) define the term အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] as ‘terrorization, molestation, visitation by spirits’. The အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] is traditionally a male homosexual who functions as a spiritual medium in the worship of nats. In modern usage, အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] denotes any male

homosexual whose sexual orientation is either intentionally or inadvertently conspicuous or any male homosexual who is generally candid about his sexual orientation. The term အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] encompasses a broader and more varied range of behaviour than that covered by the term မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa]. Rangoonese အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] generally wear their hair short, as ဂျီပုန်း [dʒibôũ] 'hiding muntjack deer' do (see below), but some အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] have long hair like မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa]. The အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] category denotes individuals ranging from effeminate long-haired men, provided they are not transvestites, to short-haired homosexual men who exhibit no pronounced cross-gender behaviour. အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] are not necessarily prostitutes, but any ပြည်တန်ဆာ [pjèdətʃa] 'male prostitute', whether manly or effeminate, is, due to the disrepute of his profession, classified as an အချောက် [ətʰauʔ], unless he is a transvestite. Transvestite prostitutes are categorized as မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa].

Both မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] play a major role in the နတ်ပွဲ [naʔpwê] 'nat festival', the most important of which takes place in the fifth month of the Burmese calendar ဝေခါင်လ [wagaũlà], corresponding to the latter part of August and beginning of September. Nats are indigenous shamanist ancestor deities who have become absorbed into the Burmese Buddhist pantheon. The nats worshipped in modern Burma include the disincarnate spirits of previous monarchs. The nat festivals are characterized by dance, oratory, instrumental and vocal music. Detailed descriptions of nat possession and nat worship are provided by Spiro (1967). The traditional site of a major nat festival in the month of ဝေခါင်လ [wagaũlà] is at တောင်ပိုး [taũbjôũ], north of Mandalay. It is at the end of this festival that the most nat weddings occur.

A nat wedding is the union of a female or male medium,

known in Burmese as a နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədo] ‘nat wife’, and the nat by whom he or she becomes possessed. The term နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədo] has been translated in the literature both as ‘shaman’ and as ‘medium’. Spiro (1967: 219) reports that ‘in most, but not all, cases, the nat is believed to love the shaman sexually.’ Alternatively, the နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədo] may effectively become the nat and, as such, acquire the sexual orientation of the nat. Concerning the male နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədo], Spiro (1967: 220) observes: ‘With few exceptions male shamans seem to be homosexual (manifest or latent), transvestite, or effeminate (and sometimes all three). Their nat, of course, is always female. If the male shaman, either in possession or in a dream, perceives himself as a female or identifies with a female nat, his sexual satisfaction acquires explicit homosexual overtones.’

The bodies of the မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] functioning as နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədo] ‘nat wives’ are said to become possessed (နတ်ပူတယ်၊ [naʔ pude]) by a nat. Since it is held that the nat himself or herself is speaking through the medium, the possessed မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] or အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] is in a position to make provocative statements with impunity and to demand money from those partaking in the ceremony. A participant addressed by a မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] or အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] held to be possessed by a nat is obliged to proffer what the nat requests. Possessed မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] are alleged to be clairvoyant, telepathically gifted and capable of making prophecies. By virtue of their paranormal powers မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] play a central role in Burma’s major religious festivals.

Outside of the religious context, the status of မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] or အချောက် [ətʰəuʔ] has different social implications. As Spiro (1967: 225) points out, ‘although homosexuality and

transvestism are both found in Burma outside of shamanism, they are viewed, in these contexts, with disdain. Practiced as part of the shamanistic role, however, they are accepted, if not approved. Similarly, although there are no formal sanctions which discriminate against bachelors in Burma, it is taken for granted, and indeed expected, that a 'normal' male will marry.' Even in the religious context, however, Spiro (1972: 272) stresses that nat possession is considered 'a major crisis', to which one responds with a battery of rituals. Far from being respectable, Spiro (1967: 209–218) reports that a large portion of Burmese do not believe in the divine inspiration of နတ်ကတော် [naʔkədɔ] and impugn their integrity. Eli Coleman of the University of Minnesota reports that 'to have a son become an *acault* [i.e. အချောက် [ətʰauʔ], GvD] is evidence of having a disreputable life in a parent's previous incarnation. Therefore, families may be embarrassed by their son, and try to prevent his being invaded by Manguendeun [i.e. မင်္ဂုဒေါင်း [màŋwədəū], GvD]' (personal communication, 22 January 1988). The deity မင်္ဂုဒေါင်း [màŋwədəū] is a lesser female nat, the wife of မင်းကျော်စွာ [mɛ̃tʰəswa], who is one of the နတ်-သုံးဆယ်ခွဲနှစ်ပါ [naʔθòũsʰɛkʰə̃nʔpa] 'Thirty-Seven Nats'. Spiro (1967: 219–229) reports that parents attempt to prevent their son or daughter from becoming a medium because of the disgrace it brings. The important religious function of မိန်းမရှာ [mɛ̃mʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] does not provide them with တိက္ခာ [heiʔkha] 'social respectability'.

3. THE ရှိပုန်း 'HIDING MUNTJACK DEER' AND တိက္ခာ 'SOCIAL RESPECTABILITY'

The term ရှိပုန်း [dʒibôũ] consists of the morphemes ရှိ [dʒi], also written ချေ [dʒi], 'muntjack deer' and the verb ပုန်း [pôũ] 'hide oneself, conceal oneself'. The muntjack or barking deer

is a small species of deer of the subfamily Muntiacinae. The term ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] 'hiding muntjack deer' is therefore a metaphor for the crypto-homosexual, a phenomenon in Burmese society which bears only superficial similarity to the 'closeted gay' of Western society. A ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] does not become an အချောက် [ətʰau?] simply by 'coming out of the closet'. The role of the ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] in Burmese society is less well defined than that of the မိန်းမရူာ် [mêiməfa] and အချောက် [ətʰau?].

A ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] is a male homosexual who does not advertise and in some respects actively conceals his sexual orientation. The behaviour of ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] is not considered effeminate by Burmese standards. Some ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] are candid about their sexual orientation and appear to be able to discuss their homosexual orientation freely with friends of both sexes. Some ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] are bachelors, whereas others are married and have children. Generally, spouses of married ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] are aware of the ambivalent sexual orientation of their husbands. However, even the urban ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] stolidly maintain the appearance of being heterosexual in public places, including their place of work. Since a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] conceals his homosexuality as a matter of course, the ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] by and large conforms to the accepted social patterns of behaviour and freely participates in every domain of community activity, something which the stigmatized မိန်းမရူာ် [mêiməfa] and အချောက် [ətʰau?] are barred from doing.

An important concept in the social awareness of the ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] is တိက္ခာ [hei?kha] 'social respectability'. မိန်းမရူာ် [mêiməfa] and အချောက် [ətʰau?], although tolerated in urban Rangoon, are unequivocally viewed as lacking တိက္ခာ [hei?kha]. By contrast, a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] is viewed as respectable, and in order to maintain this respectability a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] will refrain from associating openly or fraternizing with either

မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməfa] or အချောက် [ətʰau?], at work or in public, even though he might be on good terms with them after working hours in informal and intimate settings.

Unlike the first-century Latin terms adduced above, the term ရှိပုန်း [dzibôũ] gives no indication as to whether the person thus designated assumes either a passive or an active role in sexual intercourse. The criterion of တိက္ခာ [hei?kha] ‘social respectability’ is in part contingent upon not exhibiting conspicuous cross-gender behaviour in public. As stated above, a male prostitute, however manly he may behave, is an အချောက် [ətʰau?] by default because his profession categorically lacks တိက္ခာ [hei?kha].

The spectrum of cross-gender behaviour is to some extent reflected in the use of the native Burmese facial cosmetic သနင်ခါး [θənəkʰâ], a yellowish powder made from the finely pulverized bark of the tree *Limonia acidissima*, of the Rutaceae family. The powder is mixed with water, applied to the skin and allowed to dry. မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməfa] use သနင်ခါး [θənəkʰâ] powder regularly, and this behaviour is associated with femininity in Burma. Many but not all အချောက် [ətʰau?] use သနင်ခါး [θənəkʰâ] powder. The use of သနင်ခါး [θənəkʰâ] powder amongst ရှိပုန်း [dzibôũ] is no more common than it is amongst heterosexual men, some of whom use the powder in a domestic setting.

Homosexual behaviour in Burma is not limited to individuals included in the three lexical categories under discussion. An individual who engages in homosexual acts is not necessarily viewed as a ရှိပုန်း [dzibôũ] ‘hiding muntjack deer’, မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməfa] ‘gynæcopath’ or အချောက် [ətʰau?] ‘not possessed one’. For example, a male who maintains a sexual liaison with a ရှိပုန်း [dzibôũ] or is the client of a ပြည်တန်ဆာ [pjèdətʰa] ‘male prostitute’ may not consider himself, nor be

considered, as belonging to any of these three homosexual categories. His homosexual activity is viewed as a transient diversion or as a more convenient form of sex, allegedly because women are 'so hard to get'.

Since male prostitutes lack *ဟိက္ခာ* [hei?kha], men making use of their services observe discretion. Such clients generally view themselves as ordinary men and do not classify themselves as *ဂျီဝန်း*: [dzibôñ], nor are they viewed as such by those who do classify themselves as *ဂျီဝန်း*: [dzibôñ]. By contrast, a young unmarried man who maintains a sexual liaison with a *ဂျီဝန်း*: [dzibôñ] is not in peril of losing *ဟိက္ခာ* [hei?kha] 'social respectability', even when the sexual nature of their relationship is explicit. The involvement of the young bachelor is construed as being a convenient pre-marital outlet for his sexual urges. Such overt affairs are therefore necessarily transient and terminate when the bachelor marries.

The Burmese word *လူဝို* [lubjo] 'bachelor' is pregnant with significance. To draw attention to the fact that an individual is a bachelor in Burmese is a direct allusion to the relative sexual freedom the person is presumed to enjoy. Not surprisingly, the word *လူဝို* [lubjo] takes on a special significance in the speech of *ဂျီဝန်း*: [dzibôñ], who not uncommonly draw attention to the fact that a young man is a bachelor in the wishful thought that he may be amenable to a liaison. A parallel development may have taken place in English. The collocation 'gay bachelor', like *လူဝို* [lubjo] originally an explicit reference to the sexual freedom of the referent, is, according to one view on the subject, the ultimate source of the modern term 'gay', which became widespread in the 1960s in the meaning 'homosexual'.

4. RANGOON: CASE STUDIES

One of the many places of congregation for the *မိန်းမရှာ* [mêi-

məʃa], အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] and less inhibited ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôū] of Rangoon is the centrally situated မဟာဗန္ဓုလဝန်းခြံ [məhabandùlā pādžā] ‘Mahabandula Park’ and the nearby ဆူးလေစေတီ [sʰûlezedi] ‘Hsule Pagoda’. Here male homosexuals come individually or in groups and meet each other on an informal basis. The homosexuals which congregate here are occasionally subject to harassment by the police. Around the entrance to the park, there are a number of mobile vendors with vending carts full of wares such as cigarettes and small condiments. One of these is a middle-aged woman who warns the မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa], အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] and ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôū] when the police are coming, instructing them in advance to disperse and maintain a low profile.

Many မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] sleep in temples where they are relatively safe from police harassment, although even there the police have been known to harass, threaten and extort money from them. All the မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] whom the author consulted and who regularly slept in temples had personally experienced police extortion. Although many reports were made of physical abuse by the police, none of the မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] or အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] consulted would himself admit to having been subject to such abuse.

Most Rangoonese ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôū] reportedly do not frequent Mahabandula Park or other places which would make their sexual orientation conspicuous. The social stigma resting on မိန်းမရှာ [mêiməʃa] and အချောက် [ətʰauʔ] constitutes strong social pressure on homosexuals to conform to a lifestyle considered respectable in Burmese society. As elsewhere, stigmatization of a homosexual orientation can lead to problems of self acceptance. A homosexual suicide is mentioned in Case Study 6 below.

The following case studies are brief descriptions of six of the Rangoonese အချောက် [ət^hau?] and ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] whom the author consulted. The names of the consulted informants are withheld to protect their privacy and substituted by the abbreviations **M1**, **M2**, **M3**, etc.

Case 1

M1 is a well-built, attractive ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ], forty-one years of age but with a far younger appearance. **M1** is known for his promiscuity and flirtatious behaviour. He is married to a devoted wife and is the proud father of a young son. **M1** is a government employee with a desk job at an office in Rangoon. **M1** enjoys a sexual relationship with a young bachelor who works in one of the canteens on the slope of Rangoon's famous ရွှေတိဂုံဘုရား [ʃwedəgoũ p^həjâ] 'Shwedagon Pagoda'. **M1**'s visits to his lover at the pagoda do not embarrass the lover, because the fact that the lover is not a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] is well established in the minds of the lover's many co-workers. In fact, when **M1** visits the lover at the pagoda, his lover's co-workers make jocular and ribald references to the length and thickness of their colleague's penis, which they say is what lures **M1** to the pagoda. **M1** made a point of assuring the author of the veracity of the co-workers' descriptions.²

However, if the canteen worker were to visit **M1** at the latter's place of employment, this would constitute a grave indiscretion, as it would expose **M1**'s status as a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ]. Even though some of **M1**'s friends at work are both aware of and indifferent toward his orientation, it would betray a lack of ဟိက္ခာ [hei?kha] to be visited by one's homosexual liaison at work.

Case 2

M2 is a friendly but not handsome ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ]. He is forty years of age and is a bachelor. He sells imported Indonesian

batiks and kains in one of the large covered markets in Rangoon where he has a permanent stall. **M2** is theatrical in the company of intimate friends, but he is sobriety itself when he is engaged in commercial activities with his clientèle in the marketplace. **M2** is a successful merchant and makes small donations to needy အချောက် [ətʰau?] on a regular basis. His generosity is tempered by envy, however: he is seldom the object of anyone's sincere sexual attentions and refuses handouts to attractive အချောက် [ətʰau?].

M2 was greatly embarrassed by an အချောက် [ətʰau?] who approached him in the marketplace during business hours with a request for financial assistance. The အချောက် [ətʰau?] had hoped that **M2** would give him the money quickly in order to rid himself of the embarrassment of being visited by an အချောက် [ətʰau?] at his place of work. It was the deliberate intention of the အချောက် [ətʰau?] in question to embarrass **M2** because **M2** selectively begrudges him, although he is particularly needy, and suggests that sexual favours be rendered in return for any money. The အချောက် [ətʰau?] in question is physically repulsed by **M2** and feels ill-treated because **M2** shells out handouts to others who are not the made subject of his advances. Moreover, **M2** is as blunt about the အချောက် [ətʰau?]'s lack of ဟိက္ခာ [hei?kha] as he is relentless in expressing his sexual attraction toward him.

For fear of stigmatization, **M2**, like most Rangoonese ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ], does not frequent Mahabandula Park or other places where homosexuals are known to congregate.

Case 3

M3 is a ဂျီပုန်း [dzibôũ] of partial Chinese extraction and in his mid-twenties. **M3** is a taxi driver by profession. He is 180 cm in height, which is rather tall by Burmese standards. **M3** is very concerned about his ဟိက္ခာ [hei?kha]. He consorts with

အချောက် [ətʰau?] in the evenings, especially in the neighbourhood of Hsule Pagoda. He is always said to be on the look-out when he is in Mahabandula Park, for fear of being spotted. His parents are unaware that their son is a ဂျိဝန် [dzibōū], and **M3** has no intention of informing them because he anticipates that the idea would not be well received.

Case 4

M4 is a friendly, effeminate အချောက် [ətʰau?] in his early twenties. He wears his hair long and uses ဝန်ခါး [θənəkʰâ] powder and eye liner. **M4** generally sleeps in pagodas or out on the streets. He is not accepted by his family, not because he is an အချောက် [ətʰau?] but because he is a whore. Only his sister, who lives on the outskirts of Rangoon, will have anything to do with him. One of the places he earns his living is at a men's toilet situated underground. He also finds clientèle at a transport depot for long-distance lorry drivers. **M4** has often been a victim of police extortion.

Case 5

M5 is twenty-seven years old and is a manly အချောက် [ətʰau?] who wears his hair short and shuns feminine attributes. **M5** is of low-caste Nepalese extraction. His father came to Burma as a Gorkha soldier during the Second World War. His mother, also Nepalese, died when he was a child. **M5** was born and raised in Rangoon, and, although he understands some Nepalese, he has virtually no active command of the language. **M5** speaks Burmese and goes by his Burmese name. His Nepalese name is known only to his father and the author. **M5** is an attractive and successful whore. His success as a prostitute is only paralleled by his misfortune in contracting venereal diseases from his clientèle. He carries a personal registration card from a private venereal disease clinic where he regularly undergoes treatment.

M5 has been married twice. His first wife died shortly after their marriage. He re-married, fathered a daughter and then became a whore. He has been evicted from his house by his second wife who refuses to live with a male whore. **M5** has been disowned by his father who works for the Burmese government as a lorry driver. For his father, who is Nepalese, the fact that **M5** is an အချောက် [ətʰauʔ], let alone a whore, constitutes sufficient ground for disowning his son. **M5** has occasionally attempted to regain his father's acceptance, but whenever he visited his father in the lorry drivers' canteen, he was totally ignored, and whenever he returned to his parental home in an attempt to reconcile with his father, he ended up being severely beaten.

M5 is a close friend of **M4** and, like him, earns his living at a men's toilet situated underground and at a transport depot for long-distance lorry drivers. He sleeps on the streets and, if possible, in pagodas.

Case 6

M6 is a middle-aged, unmarried ဂိုဏ်း [dzibôũ] who used to be a biology professor at a university in Burma until he was pressured into giving up his job for political reasons. His family were affluent jewelers before independence. During the years at the university, **M6** was popular with the students, and some of his former students are now his personal friends. Unlike any of the individuals of the other case studies, **M6** also speaks languages other than Burmese, viz. English and French. He has a large circle of ဂိုဏ်း [dzibôũ] friends, and each year he and his friends go on holiday at the famous Burmese beach resort of ငှက်ပျံ [ŋàpàli] on the Bay of Bengal.

M6 lives in a large family home in the suburbs of New Rangoon, which he shares with father, mother, brothers and sisters and their spouses and offspring, in the traditional Bur-

mese fashion. All his relatives are aware of his and his friends' sexual orientation. **M6**'s friends are received with generous hospitality whenever they visit the family home, and they have all been introduced to the family. His young to middle-aged ရှိပုန်း: [dzibôũ] friends likewise live with their respective families, are accepted by their families as ရှိပုန်း: [dzibôũ] and are at liberty to take their friends home with them. None of the individuals mentioned in the other case studies know **M6** or belong to his circle of friends.

One of **M6**'s friends, a colleague at the university, committed suicide, according to **M6**, because of problems of self-acceptance in connexion with his homosexual identity. **M6** claims to be indifferent to others' attitudes towards his sexual orientation. Although his self-acceptance is undoubtedly a factor contributing to his overall well-being, he believes that his nonchalance in this regard may have been a factor in bringing about his expulsion from the university where he worked.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The semantics and usage of the lexical categories မိန်းမချာ [mêĩməʃa] 'gynæcopath', အချောက် [ətʰau?] 'nat possessed one' and ရှိပုန်း: 'hiding muntjack deer' are indicative of the way 'homosexuality' is conceptualized by speakers of Burmese. There is no lexical category in spoken Burmese which is semantically equivalent to English 'homosexual'. Linguistic evidence supports the view that sexuality is perceived differently in different cultures. An understanding of the semantics of lexically differentiated concepts in a given language can be profitably studied in this regard.

NOTES

1. I thank David Bradley of La Trobe University in Bundoora,

Australia, for his helpful comments on Burmese phonology, although my phonological analysis differs from Bradley's.

2. The Burmese word for 'penis' is လီး [lî]. Terms denoting homosexual acts include လီးစုပ် [lîsouʔ] 'fellatio', formed with the verb စုပ် [souʔ] 'suck', and လိုး [lô], the vulgar Burmese verb 'fuck' which denotes both vaginal and anal intercourse. The verb ကိုတ် [kəiʔ], 'be erect' collocates with လီး [lî] 'penis', e.g. လီးကိုတ်တယ်။ [lîkəiʔde] 'have an erection'. In poetic diction, the expression ဝန်းထောင်း [pâ^hâũ] 'passion flower' denotes a male erection. The qualifier ထောင်း [t^hâũ] literally means 'pulverized, fine as powder' but also occurs in expression in which it denotes strong passion. The genitalia of a boy are referred to poetically as ရွှေဝန်း [ʃwepâ] 'golden flower'. The flower image in connexion with male genitalia seems not uncommon in Tibeto-Burman languages. In David Bradley's experience, in fact, in Burmese "some people associate ဝန်း [pâ] alone with penis and avoid the word in the meaning 'flower' and in compounds" (letter of 27 April 1992). The verb လှ [lâ] 'to be beautiful' can be used with respect to a male referent, although this is unusual even in the speech of homosexuals; the more usual verb is ရေ့၇ [tə^hɔ̃] 'handsome.'

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