Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon — **Source link** ⧉

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"Queer" research invariably entails practices of labelling and ascription, often through the adoption of local vernacular categories from the field. In Myanmar, practices of labelling are commonly unarticulated, and local terms are contested. Acts of categorization are thus challenged. The two dominant, non-gender normative subject positions are "open", denoting a feminine image, and "hider", denoting a masculine image. An examination of the elements of external image, internal mind/heart and karma and of the boundaries between Burmese "open" and "hider" subject positions permits a better understanding of these positions. While Burmese "queer" categories mark out a field of gender liminality, their use for individual ascription complicates existing conventions.

Keywords: Myanmar, queer, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, identity.

I'm standing on a crowded bus, travelling down one of Yangon's busy thoroughfares, stuck near the door and holding on to a handle bearing an advertisement for flu medicine. My travel partner is "Maung Maung,"[1] — tall, with shoulder-length hair, sensitive and jovial. S/he's[2] tied hir hair back in a ponytail and has some *thanaka*,[3] ubiquitous Burmese make-up made from bark, daubed on a few spots of acne on hir cheeks. We're on our way back from the northern *DIC*[4] (drop-in centre) for *MSM* (*"men who have sex with men"* or, in Burmese English, "man sex man").[5]

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 programme 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 work to programme targets that quantify how s/he reaches out to *MSM* in hir network and identifies *MSM* who have not yet been to the *DIC*.

I've 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 *make-up* shops 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 p.m., and Maung Maung sits on the floor with other peer educators completing paperwork. For reporting purposes, Maung Maung must separate the peers whom s/he contacts according to taxonomy of *MSM*. Hir organization uses three categories: *open* (အပွင့်၊ *apwint*), *hider* (အပုန်း၊ *apôn*) and *guy* (သူငယ်၊ *thu nge*).[6] An *open* is someone biologically male who acts as and appears feminine. In contrast, *hiders* are biologically male and appear and act masculine. The *hiding* commonly signifies passing as a *man* in public and in certain spheres of life. Typically, when a *hider* walks down the street, s/he is indistinguishable from other "men" in the public eye. *Hiders* often pass as men in family and work settings. *Hiders* and *opens* perceive themselves as having something in common in the sense of an inner, feminine *mind/heart* (စိတ် *seik*), but they diverge in outer appearance. The third category, *guy*, denotes someone who is gender-normative but has a preference for *opens* and *hiders* as well as for women, typically as the penetrative sexual partner. Some Burmese familiar with English queer vocabulary term *guys* "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 opposite sex. *Guys* are the usual partners of *opens* and *hiders*, and it is unusual for *opens* and *hiders* to desire each other erotically, although there is a growing

homo culture in which *homos* (a synonym for *hider*) desire each other, in addition to or instead of *guys.*

Maung Maung must meet weekly and monthly targets. Today s/he reports contact with four *opens*, none new. I ask hir about numbers but s/he gives me a quick frown and quietly tells me not to ask now. S/he 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 transgendered). The term is often used without specificity among the components of the acronym. 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, s/he uses Burmese queer vocabulary: *hider, open, guy, ingahlan*[7] (အင်္ဂလျန်), *dry* (အခြောက်၊ *achaut*) or *aiming to be woman* (မိန်းမလျာ၊ *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 queer networks.

The terms *open* and *hider* delineate an autonomous cultural space occupied by liminal gender/sexual subjects. *Opens* and *hiders* own this vocabulary. The queer signification of these common words and their synonyms are mostly unknown in the general 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 queer vocabulary delineates a dynamic and creative cultural sphere — autonomy within a semi-authoritarian, democratizing state and society; privacy in public. What Maung Maung and I speak remains incomprehensible to the rest of the bus.

I want to find out how Maung Maung views hirself within this queer 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, s/he instinctively knows who is a *hider*, who is a *guy*. S/he does not need to ask hir *peers* how they categorize themselves. Can I also categorize people in the way that Maung Maung and hir *peers* at the *DIC* do, without a conversation? 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? 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 *type* (အမျိုးအစား, *amyoasa*) s/he is. "I am Maung Maung", s/he says laughing. Then s/he puts the question back to me, using Burmese categories. "You tell me. What do you think I am?" This question, originally my question, suddenly makes me anxious. What if I get it wrong? What's at stake here?

How do I make such an attribution? The only certainty is that Maung Maung is not a *guy* as s/he is oriented towards *guys* and acts with a degree of gender ambiguity. The question is whether Maung Maung is an *open* or *hider*; it is thus the reason that I do not address the construction of the category of *guy* in this article. I look Maung Maung over, thinking about the comments from informants about the importance of *image* (ပုံ, *pôn*) and appearance — that which is externally visible — as a leading factor in our categorization of others. Is it on external appearance that Maung Maung relies when s/he categorises hir *peers*?

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

However, a reading of the internal self must also figure in an attribution. This internal self is perhaps reflected in talk, in disclosure, in intimate knowledge. I've known Maung Maung for six weeks. I know that s/he has a *husband* (လင်, *lin*), 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…" My tongue feels heavy as I try to navigate Burmese vocabulary of sexuality, gender and subjectivity on this sweaty bus. S/he sees me choking on my words and laughs again. "You see", s/he concludes. I smile at hir, pondering what s/he means. "You see?" Is it a rejection of explicit subject positions? Or somehow, a parodying of them? Or a demonstration of the problem of articulation and ascription?

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* (ဆန်၊ *san*), and of the internal *mind/heart*, which may or may not be congruous 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.

The following discussion begins by exploring category use within the broader Southeast Asian "queer" studies literature. It then unpacks Burmese practices of categorization and discusses the problematics of *open* and *hider* categories.[8]

Group identity requires the construction of categories, whether stated or unstated. As categories are constructed and exist in

specific cultural contexts, it is necessary to unpack local processes of categorization with reference to those contexts. A researcher of queer Myanmar cannot avoid categorization, as he or she seeks to understand the local queer context and to represent or analyse it for readers outside the local context. For the outsider in Myanmar, the requisite hermeneutic process presents a particular challenge. Practices of belonging in Myanmar often take the form of non-verbal recognition rather than the articulation of identity terms. The importance of non-verbal recognition allows for great fluidity between categories, too, as individuals can move between *hider* and *open* positions without needing openly 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 categorization of individuals, as well as the organization 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 globalization and/or Westernization of genders and sexualities (Altman 1996, 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.

Gender and sexual categorization 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*, *tomboi*, *tom/dee*) or terms with origins in Southeast Asian languages (such as *bakla, cewak, kathoei, mak nyahs, waria*) (Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005; Garcia 2009; Jackson 1995; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Sinnott 2004; Wieringa, Blackwood and Bhaiyâ 2007; Teh 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, p. 6). Boellstorff also makes use of more specific categories of personhood, such as *waria*, *tomboi* and *cewek*. He explains the use of emic categories, in the case of *waria* for example, as "the term[s] they prefer" (2005, p. 9). Megan Sinnott, in her pioneering study of "lesbian" Thailand, deploys the localized English loan-words *tom* and *dee*, as "culturally and historically specific interpretations of both female homosexuality and transgenderism that exist within a range of possibilities" (2004, p. 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.[9] 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, p. 409). The absence of a common "Western"-style culture of self-labelling in Myanmar makes the simple adoption of Burmese modes of categorization problematic. 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 categorize men who have sex with men without identifying them as gay. From its origins in the United States, the term has been globalized as part of the response to HIV/AIDS. Governmental bodies, including the Ministry of Health in Myanmar, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies and activists throughout Southeast Asia, now use the term (Gosine 2006; Dowsett, McNally and Grierson n.d.; Young and Meyer 2005). "MSM" is both a way to refer to behaviour that may entail health risks and to bracket gender and sexual diversity. 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

[*sic*]" (Khine Soe Lin and van der Putten 2012, p. 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.[10] While the terms "MSM" and "LGBT" are useful in facilitating public-health and human-rights work, in Myanmar they are rarely used outside of social-movement and NGO contexts.

In Southeast Asia the term "queer" appears above all in academic literature, rather than in local usage. In a review article on Asian "queer" studies, Megan Sinnott warns that the term can be representative of "a kind of oppositional, confrontational, and non-normative status that is unappealing or not consistent with concepts of self and community" in the region (Sinnott 2010, p. 20). However, she views "queer" as a term useful in area studies because of its "umbrella-like inclusion of an unbounded range of individuals" and its potential for border-crossing (ibid. p. 21).[11] Similarly, Peter Jackson explains the use of "queer" in an edited volume on Bangkok to label "sexual and gender practices, identities, cultures, and communities that challenge normative masculine and feminine gender roles and/or transgress the border of heterosexuality" (Jackson 2011, p. 3).

In contrast, Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa oppose use of the term "queer" because of its "homogenizing" effect, specifically in relation to "women's experiences" (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007, p. 2). The charge of homogenization could also obviously apply to "MSM" and, at least in the Burmese context, to "LGBT". But *LGBT* is used to capture Myanmar's diverse non-normative gender and sexual categories, rather than as an acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender" — terms that do not easily translate into the cultural context of queer Myanmar (see Figure 1). The use of "queer" to refer to broader social and cultural conditions in this article is despite its problematic relation to fieldwork with Maung Maung and other informants. It is largely unknown and unspoken in the narratives of their lives that individuals relate.
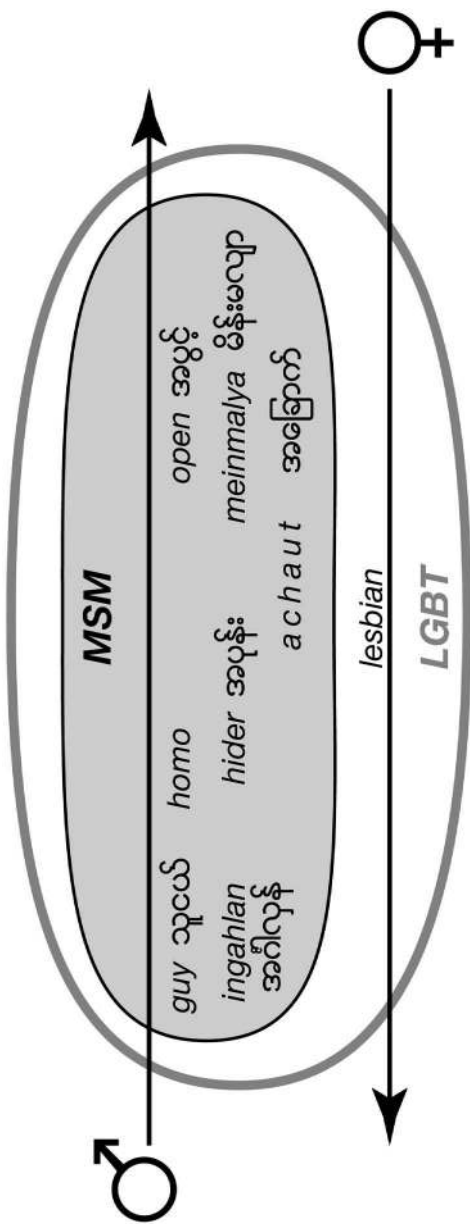
FIGURE 1 The connection between the meta-categories *MSM* and *LGBT* and local terms, on a spectrum from masculine to feminine.

Myanmar's Queer Subject Positions

In order better to understand labelling in queer Myanmar, it is important to unpack local practices of gender and sexual subjectivity, along with the related semantic field. In the Burmese context, the absence of queer ethnographic research in the past makes this task particularly important. *Open* and *hider* subject positions involve three core elements:

1. The external, involving *image* and *resemblance*.
2. The internal, involving *mind/heart*.
3. Past *karma* (ကံ *kan*).

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*, which its authors broadly define as "cross-gender behaviour" (Coleman, Colgan and Gooren 1992, p. 313). While *achaut* 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 identifies three important terms: *meinmalya*, which he translates as "gynæcopath"; *achaut*, which he translates as "nat-possessed one"; and *gyi-pôn* (ဂျီပုန်း), which he translates as "hiding muntjack deer" (1996, p. 93). *Achaut* literally means "something dry", and informants variously interpreted it as referring to the dryness of anal sex or the idea that *achaut* 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, p. 93). This finding is contrary to the findings to which fieldwork has led me. These suggest widespread discrepancy between standard

Burmese terms for non-normative gender and sexual categories and terms principally used and understood within "queer" networks. In an article on gender and sexuality in representations of Myanmar's spirit cults, Tamara C. Ho criticizes 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, p. 298).

Scholarship on queer Myanmar has suffered from a lack of cultural contextualization 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 as 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 gives 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] 2001, pp. 278–79)**.** 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, woman is performed, dressed up, made up, 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 dimensions: shape and manner. Shaping relates to body. A piece of wood is carefully carved into the image of a spirit. In order for it to be recognizable, the artisan must follow artistic norms of body shape, dress, colour, hair and facial features that in combination signify which spirit he is representing. This shaping is gendered and the gender of the spirit is a 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*.[12]

Another informant described the way in which s/he gradually developed a feminine aesthetic and, intuitively, skills in beautification: "When I turned 16 and 17 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] every day."[13] 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, on the other hand, involves practices of enactment. So an *open* enacts femininity and a *hider* masculinity through speech and movement, each component of which can be read within a

system of Burmese performative classifiers: *manner of speaking* (ပြောပုံဆိုပုံ၊ *pyawbôn sobôn*), *manner of going* (သွားပုံလာပုံ၊ *thwabôn labôn*), *manner of eating* (စားပုံ၊ *sabôn*), *manner of sleeping* (အိပ်ပုံ၊ *eikbôn*) and *manner of being* (နေပုံ၊ *nebôn*). These terms are most often used by spectators who interpret the actions of actors in a film or of people in everyday life. The process of acting also involves the deployment, conscious or unconscious, of these concepts in relation to what one wants to project to the viewer or spectator. For *opens* and *hiders*, manner involves either the enactment or suppression of *nwè* (နွဲ့). A dictionary definition of *nwè* includes "to sway, move sinuously … dainty, enchanting, languid, weak, deficient" (မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2001, p. 240). 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, p. 166). All of my *open* informants discussed becoming *nwè*, often from a young age, as part of the *opening* process. *Hiders* 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 male 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 *hiders*.

The Homo Dictionary, a project of a Burmese online social networking site, is a participatory glossary of Burmese and English "queer" slang with Burmese definitions.[14] The dictionary's existence displays the contested and unstable nature of Burmese queer vocabulary. It is simultaneously a project in meaning-making, an attempt to formalize 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 ("ဟိုမိုတို့၏ စကားလုံးအဘိဓာန်" [Homo Dictionary] no date). At the time of writing, *The Homo Dictionary* contained 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 ("ဟိုမိုတို့၏ စကားလုံးအဘိဓာန်" [Homo Dictionary] n.d.).

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] 2001, p. 144). 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 s/he is biologically male. S/he is dressed in masculine clothes, in a plain t-shirt, baggy pants and plastic thongs. However, hir *manner* is often feminine. S/he 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, p. 9; also Reason and Bradbury 2006, pp. 87–88). In Burmese, *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 desire: sexual desire, desire for a particular sexual position and the gendering of attraction. 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 agree that we like to be fucked, openly live like women and openly suck cock.'"[15]

Opens and *hiders* often described *mind/heart* in a similar way. They said that some time 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 *kan*). This verb literally translates as any of "to catch, receive, endure, tolerate, withstand and enjoy" (မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ ဦးစီးဌာန [Myanmasa Apwe Usitana] 2001, p. 58). It is etymologically unrelated to the verb "to fuck" (လိုး *lo*). *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."[16] A "woman's *mind/heart*" is therefore a crucial determinant for Burmese "queer" personhood.

One way of talking about becoming an *open* or *hider* centres 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."[17] Some informants describe women's *mind/heart* as something that can be caused by environmental factors. One

informant in hir sixties understood hir *opening* thus: "Since I was very young, I lived with my aunties and they put *thanaka* on my face and put lipstick on me. I obtained a lot of female *mind/heart* from living among my aunties."[18] Another informant attributed the origins of her *openness* in part to wearing *thanaka* under her parents' influence, which led to an interest in make-up:

> [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 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.[19]

"The Nobleman Who Can Wear a Sarong of 19 Lengths" (ဆယ့်ကိုးတောင်ဝတ် မင်းယောက်ျား၊ *Sèko Taung Wut Min Yaukkya*), 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 s/he dresses and acts as a girl. S/he has no choice but to comply. Dressing and behaving as a woman gradually affects hir *mind/heart*, and s/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, s/he has a woman's *mind/heart*. S/he wants to comb hir hair, put cream on hirself, wear nice clothes and have a husband. This all starts from that *mind/heart*."[20] Here, wanting men and femininity leads to a clear causal relationship between *mind/heart* and *image*.

Beyond emic *open* and *hider* discourse, Burmese popular writers use *mind/heart* as a way to understand gender difference and to pathologize 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, ဝိမိုးနင်း၊ [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 of a common essence and interconnected. For example, Pi Mo Nin, a respected writer active during Burma's socialist era (1962–88), 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, p. 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, p. 81). Atta Kyaw, a contemporary writer prominent in *hider* and *open* networks as a defender of *LGBT* rights, went further. In a guide for teenagers, he counselled that, "To be a strong, bright and healthy normal person, I think that that person should have an equal balance of man and woman's *mind/ body*" (2004, p. 185).

In Burmese discourse, the notion of the gendered *mind/heart* has been used in a way to argue for acceptance (in the case of Atta Kyaw) and to stigmatize (in the case of Than Pay Myint). Than Pay Myint compares men who act out rather than suppress their *women's mind/heart* to humans with the *mind/heart* of animals (1997, p. 58). In these texts, gender liminality is often discussed as a significant presence of the *mind/heart* of the opposite gender (မအဲ၊ [Ma Ei] 2009, pp. 278–80; သန်းဖေမြင့်၊ [Than Pay Myint] 1997; ဝိမိုးနင်း၊ [Pi Mo Nin] 1969, pp. 81–84). Figure 2 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.

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.
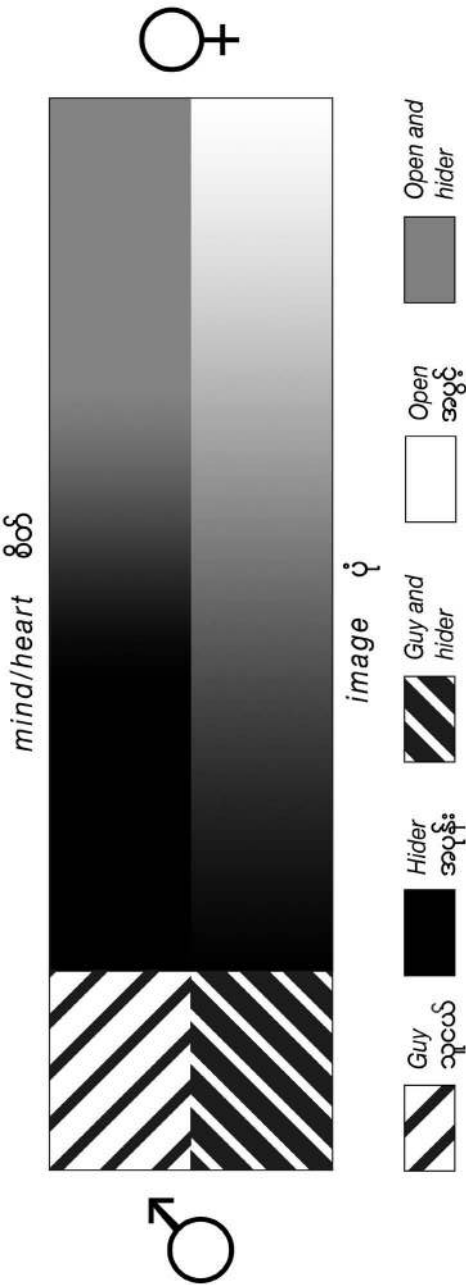
FIGURE 2 Mind/heart and image on a spectrum from masculinity to femininity.

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. S/he is disdainful towards *opens* who "behave in such an exaggerated manner" but identifies with them on a deep, inner level.[21] They have a common experience of desire. Other informants also recognized that *opens* and *hiders* shared a common, gendered *mind/heart* but that the two groups differed sharply 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 2).

I asked some of my informants to point to *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 themselves as occupying a common position. Others felt there was some divergence but saw it as far less significant than it is in relation to *image*. 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 *hiders* have different types of *mind/heart?*

> "San": They are the same. From being a *hider*, *opens* come. 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 *hiders*, 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 *hider* and *open* appearance are different, but *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 [*hiders*] 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 realizing. I am very direct, open and everybody knows, the whole country knows.[22]

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/heart*, particularly in the case of hiders. At the same time, some informants also criticized *opens* for *opening* opportunistically, in order to capitalize on the beauty industry rather than to have an *image* authentic to themselves. When with me in public, Maung Maung has not attempted to hide hir desire, talking openly about sex and hir husband. Hir manner has also often been *nwè*. S/he is comfortable moving within both *open* and *hider* networks. Is hir *image* congruent with hir *mind/heart*?

Karma

A final important dimension of *open* and *hider* subjectivity is the notion of past 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. Past 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, 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's being a *kathoei* (Jackson 1998, p. 89; Winter n.d.; Nemoto et al. 2011). 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 of the novel *Smile as They Bow*, by Nu Nu Yi (Innwa). Daisy is a spirit medium, an *open* and a character based on a prominent Burmese spirit medium who has since died. S/he reflects on her life when s/he suspects that her lover is cheating on her.

> 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 *meinmasha* mark is on us from the moment we're born (2008, p. 42).

The element of past karma therefore adds a sense of fate to Buddhist *open* and *hider* subject positions. One informant, in his seventies, spoke of this matter with a strong sense of despair: "I don't want to be an *achaut* again in my next life. It's too hard. It comes with too much suffering."[23] While the dynamism of subjectivity lies in the realm of *image* and *mind/heart*, 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 "queer" personhood. If *open* and *hider* subject positions are a consequence of karma, they are fixed, a natural (albeit punitive) element of the life cycle.

"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*, biological sex and any divergence between

the two. Individuals often refer to *mind/heart* when discussing the desire to construct a feminine *image, opens'* preference for feminine interests and *hiders'* sexual 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 s/he falls within the liminal space that *opens* and *hiders* occupy. Falling in this space is largely a question of desire. Maung Maung talks to me about love, from which I can deduce that s/he desires men and uses her body to act on that desire, by engaging in sex. In the first three months that I knew Maung Maung, s/he would often lament hir long distance relationship. Hir husband was at that time working as a migrant labourer in Malaysia. Despite the distance, s/he would display material signs of their relationship, most notably an Android phone with 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 every day", s/he 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. S/he is attracted to *men*. This attraction is a reflection of her *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 a liminal space between *man* and *woman*. Maung Maung's image involves *nwè*. When s/he speaks, s/he often softens hir voice and enunciates in a style that is *nwè*. However, s/he maintains a masculine body, mostly wears male clothes and has a male voice. If s/he needs to, s/he can *hide*, as s/he does to some degree in the presence of hir mother. When I asked hir if hir mother knew that s/he was *MSM*, Maung Maung replied that s/he probably did. But s/he never talked about it with hir mother, and hir mother never asked. 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.*"[24] Does this request mean that Maung Maung is a *hider*? For Maung Maung, and others, the binary nature of *open/hider* categories makes alignment with a single position problematic.

Open/Hider Boundary

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

open	hider
authentic	fake
strong	weak
brave	afraid
unified self	fragmented self
image of woman	image of man
receptive partner	receptive partner

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 *hiders* of being "fakes". In this way *opens* take a superior moral position against *hiders*. They are "real" and "true" to themselves and those around them. They have sacrificed. This sacrifice includes financial loss, as limited possibilities for livelihood are available to *opens*. One *open* informant explained: "Some *hiders* 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."[25] Another informant made a similar comment. "Today *opens* are *hiders* and only become *opens* in their old age [when they have less to lose]."[26] However, some *opens* are also accused of inauthenticity. As one informant explained, "There used to only be a few *opens*, but after people see the success of famous

make-up artists people just become *opens* for money."[27] *Hiders* and *opens* can both misrepresent themselves to others by not showing their *mind/heart*. However, it is *hiders* 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. *Hiders*, 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 give anything up in their social world in the way that *opens* do. *Hiders* can walk through the streets of Yangon, their gendered subject position invisible, taken for granted, like all men. 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 this dichotomy — and the divisiveness that it causes within queer networks — as a cause of disunity and a barrier to pushing forward claims for queer 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 organizational settings, the *open*/*hider* dichotomy persists on the street, in the bus, in everyday life.

Conclusion: Betwixt and Between

My difficulty with Maung Maung's question is a problem of articulation, attribution and vocabulary. Maung Maung knows who s/he is, who s/he is attracted to, what *image* s/he 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 contextualized studies of queer Southeast Asia (and elsewhere), which Garcia terms "nativist" and "localist" (2009, pp. xix–xxv), 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 categories in the literature and in fieldwork encounters is insufficient as an approach to the study of 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 the 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, s/he was demonstrating the flaw in these subject terms. There is no need for hir to name hir subject position. S/he 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 she 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 s/he felt being put into the *open* group. "I can be an *open* or a *hider*, gay or transgender", s/he replies.[28] Maung Maung is not compelled to fix himself in one category. S/he can remain in-between and move between fluid terms, occupying multiple positions simultaneously or depending on how s/he is labelled by others in the institutional processes in which s/he 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.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. To protect the confidentiality of informants, the names and personal details of people mentioned in this article have been changed.
2. I use "s/he" and "hir" to refer to individuals who do not identify with local categories of "man" or "woman". The third-person pronoun is gender-ambiguous in Burmese — as the root pronoun *thu* သူ may refer to both masculine and feminine subjects, although it also has a specifically feminine form. This gives some flexibility to gender-liminal subjects — one can use the pronoun *thu* while leaving some ambiguity whether the signifier is a "he" or a "she". When Burmese speak English, it is common for them to use "he" and "she" interchangeably — a habit considered a grammatical mistake.
3. Burmese terms here are Romanized using the the standards of the United States Board of Geographical Names and of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use.
4. Informants use a range of important Burmese terms and English loan-words

in relation to gender and sexuality. For the convenience of readers, I here use English translations of such Burmese words, which I will mark with italics. In the first instance of a translated term, I also provide the term in Burmese script and its Romanization in parentheses. When informants have used an English loan-word, I also flag this use through italics.

5. Field notes, 31 May 2011.

6. Other organizations 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 emphasizes youth, it is used colloquially to refer to men of a range of ages.

7. *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 *hiders* in a derogatory manner, and I have not yet come across a *guy* who uses the term self-ascriptively.

8. This article draws on twelve months of fieldwork in Yangon, starting in May 2011. Ethnographic work included participation in a broad range of daily activities, including socializing, work and home life; NGO and activist activities; and community events. It also included qualitative interviews with sixty-five informants. The broad focus of the study was ways in which "gay" and "transgendered" Burmese construct practices of relatedness in the city.

9. For example, Garcia (2009, pp. xx–xxi and 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; also see Morris (1994).

10. Examples include Cambodian Center for Human Rights, *Coming Out in the Kingdom: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2010); Human Rights Watch, "Malaysia: Respect Rights of LGBT People" <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/05/malaysia-respect-rights-lgbt-people> (accessed 23 January 2013); and international organizations 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 the "Western" *LGBT* categories as political strategy, albeit in a different context, see Currier (2012).

11. For other examples of the use of "queer" in Southeast Asian studies, see Martin et al. 2008; Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow 2012; and the Queer Asia book series of Hong Kong University Press that the latter title is part of.

12. Interview, 9 October 2011.

13. Interview, 4 October 2011.

14. The dictionary was available on the Myanmar Gay Education (MGEDU) website (http://www.mymgedu.com) until late 2012 when that site was taken offline. The site continues on Facebook.

15. Interview, 17 July 2011.

16. Interview, 17 November 2011.

17. Interview, 11 June 2011.

18. Interview, 21 June 2011.

19. Interview, 9 October 2011.

20. Interview, 31 May 2011.

21. Field notes, 16 January 2012.

22. Interview, 19 February 2012.

23. Field notes, 23 August 2011.

24. Field notes, 3 November 2011.

25. Interview, 26 November 2011.

26. Interview, 11 June 2011.

27. Field notes, 22 March 2012.

28. Field notes, 27 March 2013.

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