

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN INTERPRETATION OF GENDER DYSPHORIA: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE REPORT

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In the West gender dysphoria is commonly attributed to a biological abnormality, parental influences favoring assumption of a gender opposite to the subject's anatomical sex, or a combination of these factors. In Southeast Asia (among Hindus and Buddhists), numerous cases of gender dysphoria occur. They generally receive less attention than they do in the West and evoke relatively little concern on the part of the persons affected and the members of their families. The condition is attributed to residues of a previous life as a member of the opposite sex. Some persons with gender identity confusion claim to remember details of previous lives. A case illustrating such claims (without verifiable details) is presented.

The condition in which a person of one anatomical sex believes that he should be a person of the opposite sex is known as gender identity confusion. If the person affected experiences concern and anxiety over his condition he is said to have gender dysphoria. The disorder is often perplexing and sometimes alarming to those affected and their families (1, 5). Western thought and research on the problem have indicated a variety of implicated factors (6), but certainly no clear understanding of etiology. A biological factor, such as Klinefelter's syndrome, has been imputed and evidence for it found in some cases, but not in others (2). Some students of the subject have attributed the child's condition to parental influence that favored the assumption by the child of a role opposite to its anatomical sex; but even the most sanguine believers in parental influence admit to some bafflement about the condition (4). Sometimes a child has rejected its ana-

tomical sex at an early age and yet it seems clear that its parents did not influence it toward feelings or conduct appropriate for the opposite sex (3, 15).

In an earlier article (10) I drew attention to the explanatory value of the idea of reincarnation and suggested that this idea could contribute to our understanding of gender dysphoria. Among Hindus and Buddhists—members of the predominant religions of Southeast Asia—the interpretation of gender dysphoria is simple: the person affected was a member of the opposite sex in his previous life. Numerous persons of Southeast Asia and elsewhere claim to remember previous lives. Many of them give statements about these previous lives that are verifiable and have been verified (7, 8, 12). Among such persons a number—the proportion varies from culture to culture—claim to remember previous lives as persons of the opposite sex. Persons with such memories usually show varying degrees of behavior more appropriate for the sex of the claimed previous life than for the subject's anatomical sex. I have previously reported five such cases in which the subjects remembered verified details of previous lives as members of the opposite sex and showed corresponding behavior (7, 8, 11, 12).

Unlike the subjects of the five cases just mentioned, the subject of the case now reported did not mention any verifiable details about the previous life she said she remembered. The subject, a Burmese girl

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The name of the village where the subject lives has been changed to protect her identity.

called Ma² Tin Aung Myo, claimed that in her previous life she had been a Japanese soldier who was killed in Burma during the Second World War. Although her statements are plausible for the circumstances of her village during that war, no Japanese soldier has been identified as corresponding to her statements. This is a weakness with regard to parapsychological interpretations of the case. On the other hand, the absence of verifiable details nullifies the criticism sometimes made about cases of the reincarnation type, according to which the child subject of the case gains some profit or prestige in his family by attaching himself in fantasy to another family. The subject of this case derived nothing from her assertions about a previous life except an understanding by members of her family of why she wished so earnestly to be a man.

I first learned about this case in the autumn of 1972. With my interpreter and research assistant in Burma, U Win Maung, I made three visits, during the years from 1972 to 1975, to the village of Na-Thul to investigate this and another case. Ma Tin Aung Myo's father had died when she was still a child; but I was able to interview Ma Tin Aung Myo herself, her mother (Daw Aye Tin), two of her older sisters (Ma Shwe and Ma Nyunt), and her younger brother (Maung Sein Maung). In addition, we obtained information about the Japanese occupation of Na-Thul from U Hla Baw, a prominent resident and village elder of Na-Thul who had first informed U Win Maung about the case.

Case Report

MA TIN AUNG MYO'S BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE

Ma Tin Aung Myo was born in Na-Thul village, Upper Burma, on December 26, 1953. Her parents were U Aye Maung and

Daw Aye Tin. They had three other daughters, all older than Ma Tin Aung Myo, and one son, younger than her. U Aye Maung died in about 1963, when Ma Tin Aung Myo was still a child and long before the investigation of this case began. He had been a railway porter by occupation. After his death, his widow and other children worked as hawkers of meals and fruits at the railway station in Na-Thul.

Daw Aye Tin said that when she was several months pregnant with Ma Tin Aung Myo she dreamed repeatedly that a stocky Japanese soldier wearing short pants and no shirt followed her and said he would come and stay with them. Daw Aye Tin was afraid of the man in the dream and told him not to follow her. The same dream occurred three times at intervals of 5 to 10 days.³

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF NA-THUL

The Japanese Army occupied Na-Thul in 1942 soon after they invaded Burma. Allied fliers contested their presence, mainly because of the important railway station at Puang which is nearby. Allied fighter bombers came over, for a time twice daily, and bombed the area. They would also make runs as needed to machine gun any person they saw on the ground. To avoid these attacks the Burmese regularly left the village in the morning and only returned at night.

The bombing and strafing of Na-Thul and Puang continued until the Japanese were finally driven away by the advancing British and American armies in 1945.

Daw Aye Tin had not learned of the death of any Japanese soldier under circumstances corresponding to those mentioned by Ma Tin Aung Myo, which I shall describe below, but we should feel no surprise at this. The Burmese villagers continued to trade with the Japanese soldiers without, however, becoming much ac-

² The Burmese use honorifics liberally when speaking with each other and in writing. "Ma" is an honorific given to young, generally unmarried girls. An older woman, whether single or married, is addressed as "Daw." The corresponding terms for younger and older men are "Maung" and "U."

³ Dreams in which a deceased person appears to the dreamer and announces his intention to be reborn as a child of the dreamer's family occur often in cases of the reincarnation type, especially in the cases of Burma and Thailand and among the Tlingits of Alaska (9).

quainted with them except in special circumstances.

When I talked with Daw Aye Tin in 1975, she could not remember that she had had any special relationship with the Japanese soldiers who occupied Na-Thul. She treated them like any other customers and carried on her modest business with as little interruption as the unusual circumstances permitted.

MA TIN AUNG MYO'S STATEMENTS ABOUT THE PREVIOUS LIFE SHE CLAIMED TO REMEMBER

One of Ma Tin Aung Myo's older sisters said she began to speak when she was 2 years old, but another said she did not speak before she was 3. My informants differed also about just when Ma Tin Aung Myo first referred to a previous life.

According to her oldest sister, Ma Shwe, Ma Tin Aung Myo made her first reference to a previous life when she was about 4. She was walking with her father one day when an airplane flew over. She began to cry and seemed frightened. When her father asked her what the matter was, she replied: "I want to go home. I want to go home." Thereafter she cried every time an airplane flew over. Her father asked her why she was afraid of them and she said that they would shoot her. Her father answered that this had formerly happened, but would not then. This reassurance had no effect; Ma Tin Aung Myo continued to show an extreme fear of airplanes for many years.

At about this time, or perhaps a little later, Ma Tin Aung Myo was noted to be depressed and weeping. Asked to tell what was troubling her, she said: "I am pining for Japan." She then gradually began to tell what she remembered of how, as a Japanese soldier stationed in her family's village, she had been strafed and killed by an (Allied) airplane.

Ma Tin Aung Myo narrated the following further details about the life she claimed to remember. She said that she came from the northern part of Japan. She had been married and had children. (There were discrepancies in the different

statements about the number of children she claimed to have had in Japan.)

She remembered being near a pile of firewood and about to cook a meal when an airplane came over. She recalled that, at that moment, the Japanese soldier she claimed to have been wearing short pants and a big belt, but had taken off his shirt. The firewood pile was near an acacia tree and about 75 meters from the house in Na-Thul where Ma Tin Aung Myo's family lived. The pilot of the airplane spotted the Japanese soldier and dived at him, spraying machine gun bullets. The Japanese soldier ran around the pile of firewood in an effort to escape, but a bullet struck him in the groin. He died immediately.

Ma Tin Aung Myo included no names in her statements—of the Japanese soldier and his family, or of the community in Japan where he had lived.

In 1974, Ma Tin Aung Myo told U Win Maung and me that in the previous life she had five children, of whom the eldest was a boy. She thought that she had had a small shop in Japan before joining the army. She also said that she had been a cook in the Japanese army and had died during the period when the Japanese were evacuating Burma. The airplane that shot the soldier whose life she claimed to be remembering had two tails, but she could not say whether it was a British or an American airplane.

MA TIN AUNG MYO'S BEHAVIOR RELATED TO HER CLAIMED MEMORIES OF A PREVIOUS LIFE

Circumstances and manner of Ma Tin Aung Myo's speaking about the previous life. Ma Tin Aung Myo had a severe phobia of airplanes and would cower and cry when one flew over. When reproached about this she said: "What do you know? I was shot and killed." Once when Ma Tin Aung Myo was about 9 years old, that is in about 1962, a helicopter landed in a field at Na-Thul. Most of the villagers wanted to see the helicopter, but Ma Tin Aung Myo fled into the house crying, and said she was frightened.

Apart from airplanes, the chief stimulus

of Ma Tin Aung Myo's talk about the previous life was cloudy weather.⁴ She was then likely to hide herself behind a door or in a pile of clothes and say that she wanted to go to Japan where she had children.

Ma Tin Aung Myo's attitude toward Burma and Burmese customs. Ma Tin Aung Myo did not like the hot climate of Burma, nor did she enjoy its spicy food; on the contrary, she preferred sweet foods. She wanted the curries to be cooked with juggery, a preparation high in sugar content obtained from certain types of coconut palms.

When she was a young child she liked to eat fish, especially half-raw fish. (She did not care for completely raw fish as do some Japanese people.) One day a fish bone stuck in her throat and after this unpleasant experience she acquired something of a phobia of fish.

Ma Tin Aung Myo did not clamor for, or even request, other strange foods of which her family had never heard; nor did she summarily reject the food offered her; she only complained about its spiciness. Her mother made concessions and gave her blander food such as eggs. In view of her claim to have been a cook in the previous life that she said she remembered, one might have expected that she would have participated actively in the cooking at her home. She told me, however, that in view of her aversion to spices and chilies she omitted them when she cooked, and other members of the family therefore forbade her to cook for them. She had, and stated, an equally low opinion of the competence at cooking of others in the family.

She frequently expressed a longing to return to Japan and said she would go there when she grew up. Sometimes she lay on her stomach and cried from homesickness. In addition to Japan as a whole,

⁴ Informants for Burmese cases often state that the subject particularly remembers or talks about the previous life on cloudy days. (This is similarly reported for subjects in other countries, but much less often than for those in Burma.) On cloudy days, which are often also rainy days, the Burmese people are likely to remain in their houses and be relatively inactive. The dark and depressive weather may facilitate an "inwardness" that in turn allows memories of previous lives to come into consciousness.

she seemed to miss the children of the previous life; or perhaps her memories of them made her wish to return to Japan.

When Ma Tin Aung Myo was quite young, her family noticed that she talked to herself and other children with words they could not understand. Unfortunately, they made no attempt to understand this language or even to learn whether it was a definite language, such as Japanese, and not mere childish chatter. It is certain, however, that Ma Tin Aung Myo did not resist learning Burmese, which she picked up quite readily.

Ma Tin Aung Myo's sexual orientation. From an early age Ma Tin Aung Myo insisted on wearing boys' clothes and refused to wear girls' clothes. In 1974, she told me, almost boastfully, that she did not own a single item of Burmese women's clothes. Both men and women in Burma wear, from the waist down, a long ankle-length garment called a *longyi*. The women wear longyis having (nearly always) either floral designs or solid colors; and the men wear them (also nearly always) having check patterns. The women tuck the upper edge of the longyi into itself at the left side without a knot; in contrast, the men pull the longyi tight with a rather conspicuous knot that protrudes at front in the middle. For upper garments the women usually wear rather delicate blouses, while the men wear shirts somewhat like those worn by Western men. Burmese women usually wear their hair long and often drawn into a bun or queue at the back. Burmese men usually wear their hair rather short. In all of these aspects of dress and appearance Ma Tin Aung Myo adopted the male style. She wore her hair quite short; she used a man's shirt and a longyi of check patterns that she wrapped with a prominent knot in front.

Ma Tin Aung Myo would actually have preferred a style of dress closer to that of the Japanese. She said at one time that she wanted a big belt which was necessary to protect the stomach against the cold.

When she was a young child Ma Tin Aung Myo played with boys and particularly liked to play at being a soldier. She asked her parents to buy her toy guns and

said that she wanted to be a soldier. She continued playing at being a soldier until the age of about 10. No other child of the family, including her younger brother, ever played at being a soldier or asked to have toy guns; yet every time her father went to Mandalay, Ma Tin Aung Myo asked him to buy her a toy gun, which he did. Ma Tin Aung Myo also played football and cane ball like a boy.

Ma Tin Aung Myo's menarche occurred when she was 15. Her menstrual periods have been usually regular, but accompanied by pain for 2 or 3 days and by some other "illness" that was not further described; it was, however, severe enough to require medical attention, at least sometimes.

In her late teens Ma Tin Aung Myo began to associate more with girls, and she was accepted well by them. They tended, however, to address her as "Ko" (another male honorific) because of her masculine traits.

Ma Tin Aung Myo's mother did not passively accept her wish to wear boys' clothes. She told me that she used to scold Ma Tin Aung Myo about her male style of dress and frequently told her to wear girls' clothes. In resisting these admonishments Ma Tin Aung Myo claimed that when she wore girls' clothes she got a headache and was otherwise unwell. She said such clothes irritated her skin. (This was almost certainly a rationalization, although the Burmese women do wear their clothes somewhat more tightly fitting than the men wear theirs.)

Daw Aye Tin said that her husband was more indulgent than she was in the matter of Ma Tin Aung Myo's dress. He allowed her to wear boys' clothes and even to crop her hair like that of a boy.

The matter of Ma Tin Aung Myo's dress reached a crisis when she was in the sixth class at school. The school authorities began to insist that she come to school dressed as a girl; she refused, they remained adamant, and so she dropped out of school. (I think she was about 11 or 12 when this happened.) Eventually her family capitulated in the matter of clothes and its members made no further objections to

Ma Tin Aung Myo's masculine style of dress.

When I met Ma Tin Aung Myo first in 1972, she was overtly masculine in her sexual orientation. She said that if conventions would permit she would associate with boys. She had no wish to marry a husband and expressed instead a desire to have a girl as a wife.

I asked her to perform an extended Draw-a-Person Test (14). For her two free choices she drew masculine figures in accordance with the other indices of her male sexual orientation.

Ma Tin Aung Myo's case does not lend itself facily to the categories of Western psychiatry for disorders of sexual identity (13). Since she has not asked for transforming surgery we should not call her a transsexual; but I am quite sure she has never heard of such surgical operations, and she has, as I shall mention later, asked for sexual alteration in her next incarnation. Nor can we call her a transvestite, if we restrict this term to persons who obtain sexual pleasure from cross-dressing. So far as I know, Ma Tin Aung Myo dresses as a male because she thinks she is a male and she dresses thus habitually.

THE ATTITUDE OF MA TIN AUNG MYO'S FAMILY TOWARD HER MEMORIES AND BEHAVIOR

When Daw Aye Tin became pregnant with Ma Tin Aung Myo she had already given birth to three girls. She said that she and her husband both then wished that their next child would be a boy. So they had some disappointment when Ma Tin Aung Myo was born a girl. As I have already mentioned, however, Daw Aye Tin expressly denied that she in any way encouraged Ma Tin Aung Myo to dress as a boy. She did this entirely on her own and against her mother's protests and rebukes.

U Win Maung is an educated Burmese who has lived many years in the West and also has a profound knowledge of the customs and attitudes of his own people. He told me that although Ma Tin Aung Myo's family, at the time she was born, would have preferred to have had a son, they

would never have dressed her in boys' clothes or imposed a male role on her just to suit themselves. The Burmese people like to have the first child a son, but they do not object to girls, and mothers generally prefer them because they are easier to manage; moreover, they remain at home and help their mothers.

MA TIN AUNG MYO'S EXPLANATIONS FOR HER "SEX CHANGE"

The Burmese people, nearly all of whom are Buddhists, have a ready explanation for cases like Ma Tin Aung Myo's. From their point of view, Ma Tin Aung Myo simply remembers the life of a Japanese soldier who happened to be killed near their house and got himself reborn among them. Further and more specific interpretations, of the type I am constantly seeking, seem to them a somewhat odd Western craving. Afflicted as I am with this, however, I put various questions to the informants that I thought might satisfy my curiosity on the matter; but readers should remember, in weighing the answers I received, that they came in response to questions, and not spontaneously. To questions about why, as she saw herself, she had changed sex from one life to another, Ma Tin Aung Myo gave different answers on different occasions.

In 1972, Ma Shwe said that Ma Tin Aung Myo explained her condition by saying that the fatal shot from the airplane had hit the Japanese soldier whose life she remembered in the genitalia and thereby induced "sex change" in the next life. Ma Shwe said, however, that Ma Tin Aung Myo had normal female genitalia.

Ma Tin Aung Myo herself conjectured (in 1974) that perhaps the Japanese soldier had wished to change sex and that this had been the cause of her condition. In 1975, she advanced a third explanation. She suggested that the Japanese soldier had molested girls and been punished for that by becoming a girl himself in his next life.⁵

⁵ The last two explanations put forward by Ma Tin Aung Myo form part of the repertoire of interpretations employed by the Burmese for cases of this type. Among Buddhists of Burma, and to a considerable extent among Buddhists elsewhere, women have a

MA TIN AUNG MYO'S LATER DEVELOPMENT

The fading of Ma Tin Aung Myo's memories of the previous life. In 1974, Ma Tin Aung Myo told me that she had forgotten most of what she had formerly remembered about the previous life; and yet she seemed to remember much of what members of her family said that she had stated when a young child. I infer from this that perhaps she had earlier remembered more about the previous life than she had expressed to her family; or possibly they and she remembered, of all she had earlier said, the more emotion-laden events of the previous life such as the fatal shooting of the Japanese soldier by an Allied airplane. [I have elsewhere (12) discussed the difficulties in evaluating statements made by subjects of these cases concerning the fading of memories of the previous lives they claim to remember.]

Modifications of Ma Tin Aung Myo's behavior. Ma Tin Aung Myo was already 19 years old when U Win Maung and I first began to study her case. I have tried to describe her behavior, as I learned about it from our informants, during the peak of its deviance from what might be expected of normal Burmese girls. As she grew older, Ma Tin Aung Myo modified her behavior in certain respects, although not with regard to her sexual identity.

She lost her phobia of airplanes when she was in her late teens. As late as 1972, however, U Win Maung learned that she was still "rather nervous" every time an airplane flew over her village; but she no longer became immobilized with fear as she had been earlier.

She also gradually adapted to the spicy Burmese food. She told me in 1975 that she was then eating Burmese food "normally."

In general also she was happy in Burma and she had lost the desire to go to Japan. The intense summer heat of Upper Burma's plain still bothered her, but she

status inferior to that of men. Therefore, the mere fact of being born a woman implies some misconduct in a previous life that has earned such a demotion. The causative misbehavior can be of any kind serious enough for such an effect; it does not need to be maltreatment of women, although it may be.

obtained some relief by visiting one of her sisters who lived in the upland town of Taunggyi.

In her sexual orientation, however, Ma Tin Aung Myo remained intransigent. She continued to dress in the male style and completely rejected a female position in society. U Win Maung had once written her and in addressing his letter to her he had used the female honorific, "Ma." She wrote back saying that this had made her sad and that she wished to be called either *Maung* Tin Aung Myo or, if her friends would not make this concession, just plain Tin Aung Myo. In 1975, she again mentioned the honorific at the time she signed our release for the use of her real name and photograph in a report of her case.

In January 1977, U Win Maung visited Na-Thul again for the purpose of clarifying certain details and obtaining more information about the case. Daw Aye Tin (Ma Tin Aung Myo's mother) then told him that Ma Tin Aung Myo had got into the habit of "going steady" with girlfriends. At the time of U Win Maung's visit, Ma Tin Aung Myo had gone out of her village on a "courting trip" to another village.

Ma Tin Aung Myo said that she would never marry. She had little education and was partly dependent on her mother, although she helped the latter in her small trade as a hawker at the railway station. I raised the question of what would happen to Ma Tin Aung Myo after her mother's death. They had already thought of that. Ma Tin Aung Myo had told her mother not to worry about her fate after she died and Daw Aye Tin had accepted her decision to remain single.

Perhaps I communicated some incredulity concerning the flint-like hardness of Ma Tin Aung Myo's position concerning the sex she wished to be. She evidently felt the need for a stronger statement to overcome my skepticism. So she told U Win Maung and me (in 1975) that we could kill her by any method that we cared to choose under only one condition: that we guarantee she would be reborn a boy. We had no wish to carry out the first of her stipulations, and no power to implement the second.

Discussion

In cultures that include a belief in reincarnation, claims to remember previous lives occur rather often. The culture certainly facilitates the expression by a child of memories of a previous life that he thinks he has. (In the West children who make such statements are generally suppressed.) Some critics of these cases believe that cultural influences suffice to account for all of their aspects. I do not agree and have described in reports of cases published elsewhere evidence that at least some of the subjects of these cases possessed a mass of information about the deceased persons they were talking about, which, in my opinion, they had not acquired by normal means of communication (7, 8, 11, 12). The present case does not belong to this group, but it presents another question not easily resolved by attribution to cultural pressures. If Ma Tin Aung Myo wished, for needs of her own that we cannot perceive, to identify herself with a deceased person, why did she select a Japanese soldier? The Burmese, for the most part, did not come to hate the Japanese as did many Americans during the Second World War; but the Japanese were nevertheless unpopular or detested in Burma, and the personation by a Burmese girl of a Japanese soldier certainly gained her no credit in her family or village.

The simplest explanation sometimes is the best one and I believe that Western psychiatrists and psychologists should seriously consider and investigate further the basis for the Southeast Asian interpretation of cases of gender dysphoria.

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