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“The Royal Sacred Hairy Family of Burmah”: Human Difference and Biocultural Empire in the Nineteenth Century

Jonathan Saha

Imagine two men conversing on the deck of a steamer headed for England in the early summer of 1886. Perhaps the ship had just navigated the Suez Canal and their conversation takes place under the warm Mediterranean sun. One of the men is an engineer employed on the vessel, the other is a passenger. The engineer is headed back home. He writes letters to his parents in Hartlepool, a small port town in the midst of one of the country's largest industrial coal mining areas. In his correspondence he recounts his conversations with this passenger: a man unlike any other he has met before in his life, a man far from home. In fact, the passenger had traveled very little in his life prior to this journey. Up until December 1885, this man had only known the cloistered courtly life of precolonial Mandalay with its ornate palace complex hidden behind moat and high citadel walls: a stark contrast to the bustling, coal-dusted docks of Hartlepool. The engineer is able to hold a conversation with this foreign man across the language barrier due to the Burmese passenger's rapid acquisition of English during the journey. It is a pleasing image of a brief bridge across cultures. But, nevertheless, this was an innocuous encounter that would have been unworthy of report in the local Hartlepool newspaper had it not been for one singular aspect of the passenger's appearance: his face and body were covered with hair, several inches long.¹ This passenger was known as Maung Po Set and he was traveling with his family,² several members of which also had this same unusual pattern of hair growth. A few months earlier, the last king of the once-powerful Konbaung dynasty—an empire that at its height ruled over what is today Myanmar, as well as parts of Thailand, Bangladesh, and India—King Thibaw had been deposed. In the wake of his fall, Maung Po Set's family

had been persuaded by an Italian would-be impresario to come to England as a spectacle for paying audiences. They were billed as the “Sacred Hairy Family of Burmah.”

Theirs is a story that can be told as one about communications. Or, perhaps, *miscommunications*, and often willful ones at that. It is a story of communications that occurred at different scales and between very different types of historical actors. At a geo-political level, their lives were bound up with the Konbaung dynasty’s clashes with British power on the Indian subcontinent, first in the guise of the East India Company and then later as the Raj. They also came to be at the center of networks of interacting human actors playing out different societal roles. The family were introduced to colonial officials, leading ethnologists, celebrity scientists, opportunistic showmen, and gawking crowds. These meetings became the substance of journal articles, newspaper reports, book chapters, and advertising pamphlets. Drawings and photographs taken at these meetings were circulated across Europe and America. At a smaller scale still, it is also a story about the specialized proteins that signaled to the stem cells of hair follicles across their skins coordinating how they grew. And, deeper still, a story of the genes passed across generations in the family that produce these proteins.³ The challenge their story poses to the historian is that of integrating these scales into a coherent narrative. Geographically expansive empires vie for space in the story with keratin and chromosomes. Between these scales, humans—those porous, multicellular organisms hosting myriad bacterial multitudes—go about their lives as if they were autonomous, discrete, agential, individual actors.⁴ It is toward reconciling these tensions inherent to this story that Samantha Frost’s *Biocultural Creatures* provides something of a guide. Her work shows that cellular activities, even those as apparently banal as hair growth, are contingent upon the environments within which they occur: environments in the broadest sense of the word, encompassing the ecological and the social.⁵

The family attracted such interest because hair and hairiness were a latent but potent sign of human difference for the white, mostly male, imperial actors who met and described the so-called “Hairy Family.” Indeed, the label of “hairy” itself was a pathologizing misnomer as only a few members of the known family had this nontypical pattern of hair growth, known in today’s medical nomenclature as hypertrichosis. The frequently applied prefix of “sacred” was little more than a brazen marketing ploy drawing upon Orientalist stereotypes with no evidential basis. To these men, this hair was a cypher that needed explaining. They believed that it must have a meaning to be derived from it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the meanings that they subsequently ascribed to the hair reveal more about *their*

particular cultural, social, and sexual mores than the bodies of Maung Po Set and his family. Members of the family exhibiting this hair growth were met by a variety of white men with differing levels of proximity to the formal structures of British imperial authority throughout the nineteenth century, but most prominently at moments when the Konbaung dynasty was forced into compromises or defeat through military actions with troops levied in India. This chapter grapples with the coincidence in the timing of British imperial expansion into Southeast Asia with the recurrence of this pattern of hair growth across four generations of this family. I argue that following Frost's lead and taking seriously the ecological contingency of human biology can serve to further undercut and defamiliarize the essentializing, pathologizing discourses of white imperialists as they sought to understand human difference. In doing so I hope to upset the implicit framing of abnormality in the medicalization of hair growth which are legacies of these nineteenth-century discourses, legacies that continue to haunt scientific writings on hypertrichosis.⁶ The wider claim at stake here is that biology does not have an inherent purpose or meaning that is independent of context or culture.⁷ That being so, my broader argument is that while differences between humans have been biologically produced through their embeddedness as organisms of particular environments, the meanings ascribed to those differences historically are the products of particular power relations that are open to critique and challenge.

Frost's work invites us to reconceptualize the human actors in this story in such a way that we can take seriously the role played by hair in imperial history, not merely as a sign, symbol, or cypher, but as a material actant itself. This is not to suggest that hair was a historical agent separable from the people it grew on. Instead, thinking of humans as biocultural creatures enables us to acknowledge that Maung Po Set's visible and unusual pattern of hair growth was a contingent and intrinsic part of the history. For Frost humans are porous and mutable creatures who are shaped and reshaped by environments that they help to shape and reshape. There are two important qualifying elements to this. The first is that this porosity and mutability operates within constraints—parameters that limit the organism's ability to absorb matter or respond to stimuli. These constraints (be they biological or/and cultural) are themselves subject to change over time, but often on different temporalities to the changes in the makeup of an individual human body. The second is that this constrained porosity and mutability occurs in processes across varying levels, from the molecular to the organismic. Cells and bodies do not have clearly demarcated boundaries—no clear inside and outside—but are in a constant process of managing exchange and change.⁸ Hair

makes for an excellent example of the biocultural at work; it changes through someone's life-cycle, is shaped by genetic factors, affected by diet, altered by climatic conditions, and modified by social acts. There is a mercurial quality to hair growth as it is informed by deep, long processes in ecology and speciation, as well as by interventions made according to the vagaries of passing fashions. As Crystal B. Lake has shown, eighteenth-century European understandings of hair form something akin to a pre-history of Frost's biocultural framing. It was viewed as a changeable substance with intangible properties that transcended taxonomic categorizations.⁹ As we shall see, nineteenth-century Imperial understandings sought to give more fixed, essentialized meaning to hair.

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of the Maung Po Set's family's entanglements with British imperialism. This history is one in which the timescale of the cross-generational occurrence of hypertrichosis in the family was concurrent with that of British imperial expansion in Myanmar. This was not entirely coincidental. Retrospective diagnosis suggests that Maung Po Set inherited the propensity for this pattern of hair growth from at least one of his parents, as it is a trait thought to be autosomal dominant—meaning that if a gene located on a non-sex chromosome from one parent is copied in the child, that child is likely to see the same trait develop over the course of their life cycle.¹⁰ As we shall see, during the reign of the Konbaung dynasty in Myanmar, Maung Po Set's family structures were intact, even fostered—something that is apparent even through the exoticizing imperial representations of their courtly lives. With the dissolution of monarchical rule and the incorporation of Myanmar into British India, their lives were profoundly altered and extant evidence suggests that Maung Po Set was, resultantly, the last of the line through which this genetic trait was passed.¹¹ Through this narrative I highlight some of the conceptual shifts in British ideas of human difference over the Victorian period. These ideas placed the family, and their hair growth, in a liminal position within foundation dichotomies to contemporaneous biological and cultural thought: human/animal, divine/profane, natural/unnatural, evolved/atavistic. I then conclude by reflecting on the limits to social constructivist approaches to histories of human difference that struggle to take account of physical diversity and potential benefits to a biocultural approach.

The two earliest and most influential British accounts of Maung Po Set's ancestors—at least those of them with the same hair pattern as him—were written immediately following wars between the Konbaung dynasty and the East India Company. The first was drafted in 1827 by John Crawford, the East India Company's envoy to the then reigning monarch, King Bagyidaw, to

negotiate the terms of the Burmese ruler's defeat in the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–6. The second was written in 1855 by Henry Yule, secretary to the commissioner of the newly acquired East India Company territory of Pegu, a region seceded by the Konbaung Dynasty following their defeat in the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, while on a mission to speak with the recently coronated King Mindon. These wars left the Konbaung state a landlocked rump of its once expansive empire. They also resulted in white British men entering the world of the Burmese courtly capitals, where Maung Po Set's grandfather, Shwe Maung, and mother, Ma Phon, lived. The short paragraphs and sketches that Crawfurd and Yule wrote were widely cited across the empire around the time that they were published¹²; they were quoted by scientists and showmen toward the end of the century,¹³ and they have continued to be referred to by biomedical researchers today.¹⁴

John Crawfurd was forty-seven when he met Shwe Maung, and he was by this time a veteran official and diplomat for the East India Company, having held posts with them for over twenty years in the Northwest Provinces, Penang, Siam, and Singapore. The mission to the Konbaung court in Ava was his last role for the Company. In retirement he drew upon his extensive experience to develop a considerable reputation as an ethnologist, a career that was and remains controversial, not least for his fervent belief in polygenesis (the ideas that human races did not have common ancestors but emerged from independent stock) and the ambivalent role of race in his thought—of which more below. His interest in Shwe Maung, then, should come as no surprise. He was in the midst of negotiating trade relations with the court when, at his request, King Bagyidaw sent Shwe Maung to visit him. The resulting description was not especially sensationalizing or pathologizing, in spite of how quotes from his text were subsequently used. At the time of their meeting, Shwe Maung was thirty years of age, and married with three children. Shwe Maung, whom Crawfurd found to be more intelligent than most of the Burmese people he had met on his mission, recounted his life story and way that his hair had grown. He had been presented to the King by a local Shan ruler once hair had begun to grow on his body and face at age five. Before this he had lived among Lao speaking peoples who lived by the banks of the Salween River that flowed through Myanmar to the Indian Ocean from China.¹⁵ He was married at the age of twenty-two, the King having "having made him a present of a wife," a woman described by Crawfurd as "rather a pretty Burman woman"; these passing comments on gender and sex would become themes in later texts. Shwe Maung informed him that none of his predecessors had grown hair as he had, nor was it known among his "country men."¹⁶

Slightly built and fine-featured, Shwe Maung did not appear ape-like to Crawford, which was apparently what others had suggested of his appearance. The five-inch long hair on his face and body were described as “lank” and “silky.” Crawford also noted Shwe Maung’s unusual teeth, as apparently he possessed only nine of them, none of them molars. He claimed that he had not lost any teeth through disease or accident. Shwe Maung, however, also reported that he did not feel the lack of them. Crawford also examined his three children. The eldest two showed no signs of taking after their father. The youngest, he noted, a healthy two-year-old girl, had hair on her ears and very few teeth, but he did not extrapolate from these early signs. Although his description was unembellished with speculations about what hair growth might mean for human difference, it is worth briefly situating this text in its historical moment, as it was a time of significant shifts in the meaning of “race.”

At the time Crawford was employed by the Company, within British India, the more fluid notions of human difference and somewhat more permissive attitudes to social and sexual encounters across colonizers and colonized (although never free from violence) of the eighteenth century were beginning to give way to harder categorizations based on bodily difference, location, and religion.¹⁷ White, imperial observers of Myanmar, participated within these debates. The German naturalist, Johann Wilhelm Helfer, writing a decade after Crawford, was representative of some dominant tropes. He sought to locate Burmese human “races” in the “Great Chain of Being” of creatures from the highest to lowest. Writing in derogatory and denigrating tones of Karen peoples, he was trying to counter a belief circulating amongst some missionaries that they were “the lost tribe of Israel,” emphasizing instead what he saw as their rude and primitive nature.¹⁸ For Burmese authorities this was also a period of cultural change. The encounter with the British occurred during a period in which Konbaung rulers were trying to establish greater orthodoxy over religious practice and belief.¹⁹ Conceptions of human difference at this time were fluid, at least to a degree. Proximity to the court and karmic status were the two poles that informed understandings. The negotiations that John Crawford was involved with following the First Anglo Burmese War introduced Euro-American conceptions of race and nation through diplomatic correspondence, particularly regarding refugees and prisoners of war. The attempts by the missionary, natural historian, and translator Adoniram Judson to find corresponding terms in Burmese for the treaties between the Company and the Konbaung Dynasty initiated a process of Burmese actors adopting and adapting these racial

conceptions of human difference.²⁰ In this time of considerable uncertainty and debate around the nature of "race" in both Myanmar and Britain,²¹ Crawford stands out as an especially difficult thinker to place.

Crawford's advocacy of polygenetic explanations for the origins of human races was already apparent by the time he visited the court at Ava. His 1820 landmark publication *History of the Indian Archipelago* received critical appraisals for the implications of its departure from scriptural monogenesis belief. But while polygenesis has been associated with advocacy of human enslavement in the North America, Crawford was a radical political thinker strongly opposed to slavery. Nevertheless, he saw different races as having obtained differing levels of civilization, and recognized the possibility of different racial groups to develop and move up the rungs of what he imagined as a civilizational hierarchy, which predictably had Anglo-Saxon European societies occupying the apex. This infused with his passionate advocacy of free trade. For India, he envisioned white settler colonialism as a catalyst for a thriving commercial society on the subcontinent in a post-slavery world. The mutability and fixity of racial difference in his work were ambiguous. The implications of his thinking in terms of his advocacy of equality were ambivalent.²² With so much about human difference still unsettled and disputed, Shwe Maung's hair was a floating signifier that did not yet signify anything concrete.²³ This is perhaps why this first text was so spartan in terms of its wider implications. When ideas about human difference became more rigid, hypertrichosis began to take on more meaning.

Henry Yule's meeting with Shwe Maung's youngest daughter, Ma Phon, thirty years later took place in a geo-political context reminiscent of Crawford's embassy. The Konbaung dynasty had again been defeated in a war with the Company that resulted in a loss of significant territory. Yule was part of a mission to negotiate ongoing relations with the newly crowned King Mindon, a modernizing monarch who sought to reform the state in what remained of his realm. At the time that Yule's *Narrative* was published, scientific and public understandings of human difference, through the concept of race, had been informed by three significant concurrent events: the Great Exhibition and the showing of colonized people at the Crystal Palace in south London; the emergence of theories of evolution based on natural selection, particularly in the talks and writings of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace; and the Indian Revolt of 1857.²⁴ As the diversity of these events suggest, and as Sadiya Qureshi has rightly argued, approaches to studying and conceptualizing human difference remained heterogeneous in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁵ This heterogeneity notwithstanding, from the 1850s

race became increasingly a bodily, physiological concept—a set of physical, measurable categories.²⁶ This hardening of racial divisions and the formation of new ethnographic understandings were the context for Yule's description of meeting Ma Phon, even while his text does not itself delve into theorizing the meaning of her hair growth. His awareness of this context was apparent in the tongue-in-cheek natural history taxonomic term he used to describe her now deceased father, Shwe Maung, "*Homo Hirsutus*"²⁷—a turn of phrase that was then used for as a title by the *Leicester Chronicle* for its article quoting Yule's descriptions verbatim.²⁸ But, as brief and descriptive though his writing on her was, it was pivotal in bringing the attention of the scientific world to her and, perhaps more importantly, the hereditary nature of her atypical hair growth.

The specter of animality informed Yule's account, just as it did Crawfurd's in his disavowal of any ape-like characteristics to Shwe Maung. Yule, however, drew comparisons with dogs, writing that "one started and exclaimed involuntarily as there entered what at first sight seemed an absolute realization in the flesh of the dog-headed Anubis." Attempting to capture the qualities of the hair on her face, he went on to write, "The nose, densely covered with hair as no animal's is that I know of, and with long fine locks curving out and pendent like the wisps of fine Skye terrier's coat, had a most strange appearance." The animality of the hair was offset by her comportment for Yule. Ma Phon's "modest" manners and "feminine" voice enabled him to overcome his "instinctive repulsion." Rather than anything "brutal," to him she resembled a "pleasant-looking woman masquerading."²⁹ Animals, through comparisons to their bodies, were central to wider studies to understand human difference throughout the nineteenth century. These studies often linked certain humans as closer to animals, representing physical traits as atavistic throwbacks to "lower" forms of being.³⁰ More banally, Crawfurd and Yule looked to nonhuman creatures for reference points for their readers, supplementing their texts with detailed drawings. With exception of their teeth, Yule and Crawfurd saw no other visible anatomical differences between Shwe Maung and Ma Phon, and the general Burmese populace. Both remarked on the uncanny fineness of their hair when making animal comparisons. Perhaps their expectations were that the hair itself would resemble that of an animal, rather than being human hair growing in a nontypical pattern. As it is, biologically hair is often distinct to particular species and distinguishable microscopically and genetically. Although more abundant, Ma Poon's hair was no less human than Henry Yule's.³¹

Yule's description hints at the gendered dimension to how Ma Poon was perceived, particularly the implicit heteronormative understandings of sexual

desire at work. As Crawford did with Shwe Maung, Yule paid attention to the Ma Poon's unnamed spouse and her two children. It was claimed by the Burmese official accompanying Ma Poon that her husband had been obtained by the then king through the promise of a reward, although "it was long before any one was found bold enough or avaricious enough to venture." This disparaging and rather ungenerous remark sits at odds with his earlier statements on her attractions. As Nadja Durbach has discussed with reference to Krao, a Laotian girl who had similar hair growth as Maung Po Set and who was also exhibited in London and Europe during the 1880s, there was an association between hairiness, beastliness, and licentiousness in the Victorian imagination revealed by attitudes toward hairy women. Witnessing what Durbach terms Krao's "primitive sexuality" served to locate white, British bodies at an evolutionary removes from savage traits while providing titillation to audiences.³² Yule, in a variation on this theme identified by Durbach, displayed incredulity that Ma Phon could be desirable because of her hair. It was a professed assumption that figured in the work of Darwin, who was familiar with Ma Phon's family from Crawford and Yule's descriptions by the 1860s.³³ Inaccurately referring to them as from Siam, Darwin described them as "ludicrously hideous" in a chapter on sexual selection. What he deemed "excessive" body hair was to him a "primordial condition" and that sexual selection had led to women becoming gradually "divested of hair."³⁴ This underlying assumption that women's body hair was unattractive to the point of being a factor in the development of gender differences in the species, and of differences between races, remained a feature of writings about the family throughout the nineteenth century.

A footnote to Yule's paragraphs on meeting Ma Phon mentions that he was also visited by some albino people who lived at the court. These, he pointed out, were not a distinct race.³⁵ This brief reference indicates the wider concerns around human difference at play at the time Yule was writing. Sadiah Qureshi's research has shown that while the display of colonized human exhibits in Victorian Britain should not be thought of simply as part of "freak shows," the two practices were connected in the role they played in evidencing human diversity and facilitating the emergence of racial thought.³⁶ Attempts to bring Ma Phon into these circuits of spectacle and display had already been made when Yule was on his mission. He described how an Italian impresario had offered to marry her in order to bring her to Europe, but that the king had forbidden it. He speculated that the famous showman, P. T. Barnum, would succeed where this man had failed—a prescient statement, although it would take another thirty years for this to pass.³⁷ Before this, photographs of Ma Phon taken by British officials and soldiers

in Myanmar had started to circulate across Britain and Europe, providing the basis for scholarly publications.³⁸ In the ensuing discussions the ambivalence of their hair growth within wider conceptions of racial difference were marked. It was pointed out in British and North American medical journals in the 1870s that it was unlikely that the Shwe Maung and Ma Phon represented a “missing link.” A Russian father and son also with hypertrichosis frequently discussed in conjunction with the Burmese family made the notion that they were all the descendants of a surviving strand of early human development implausible (although this did not stop such speculation in Barnum’s eventual publications on them). Nevertheless, it was suggested that “a new race” could be bred from them using selective breeding.³⁹ There was both a locative logic to race that constrained medical and ethnographic understandings of hypertrichosis, and a belief in the evolutionary mutability of race that suggested that the hereditary nature of the condition could produce racial difference.

When Yule met Ma Phon in 1855, she had two sons one of which was Maung Po Set when he was still a young boy. Although it is not entirely clear which of the two children he was, it seems mostly likely that he was the younger of the two, whom Yule described as having long tufts of hair around his ears similar to the hair growth noted by Crawford on the then infant Ma Phon. In some careful analysis of photographs taken between the 1860s and 1890s for an article on the family in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* written in 1996, Jan Bondeson and A. E. W. Miles deduced that Maung Po Set also had a daughter with the same pattern of hair growth called Ma Meh. Their deductions, however, were based on an element of inference and a selective reliance on inconsistent accompanying texts—as well, it would seem, on an unstated assumption, that she was not Ma Phon’s daughter, born after a gap of a decade after her brothers when she would have been in her early forties. Regardless of how Ma Meh was related to Maung Po Set, she died when she was roughly eighteen.⁴⁰ This personal tragedy coincided with the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885–6. Accounts of how the final war, which ended with the complete annexation of Myanmar into the Indian Empire, affected the family are inherently unreliable. The words of Ma Phon and Maung Po Set from 1885 onward were mediated by the promoters touring them, seeking to drum up interest in the family and play up intrigue and adventure. Most accounts recount them fleeing the palace complex following the British invasion, occupation, and sacking of Mandalay, often with references made to the despotic rule of “obstinate” King Thibaw.⁴¹ By the 1880s, stories that Ma Phon and Shwe Maung’s spouses had only been acquired at the threat of execution were used to embellish the narratives of

Yule and Crawford, emphasizing the wider Orientalist view of the Konbaung dynasty as tyrannical.⁴² What appears to be consistent across these stories is the connection with Captain Piperno, an Italian soldier apparently part of Thibaw's court; although we should perhaps be skeptical of his self-aggrandizing claims to have personally rescued them from hiding in the jungle in a state of near starvation.⁴³

Piperno was able to bring them over to London in the summer of 1886 where they were shown at the Egyptian Hall, with the aid of the impresario Guillermo Antonio Farini—a Canadian whose real name was William Leonard Hunter. Farini had several years earlier arranged for Krao to be exhibited to much fanfare.⁴⁴ Her tour contributed to a resurgence of speculation about Ma Phon and her son.⁴⁵ Farini was also known for promoting Georgious Constantine, or "the Tattooed Man from Burmah." He had appeared in Vienna in the 1870s covered head-to-toe with elaborate tattoos, much to the interest of Europe's anthropologists. As with Ma Phon and Maung Po Set, the story that accompanied Constantine was questionable and played on Orientalist stereotypes. He claimed to be Albanian and to have been a pirate and mercenary in Asia before being captured by the Burmese government and punished for his crimes with a sentence of torture by tattooing. The Burmese origin of the tattoos was confirmed by none other than famed German Orientalist scholar Max Muller, but his story was doubted at the time. The highly embellished, stylized, and extensive tattooing on his body was not used as a punishment by the Burmese state. Instead it appeared that Constantine commissioned the artwork to be done. And, on returning to Europe, he made a career from touring with traveling shows displaying the impressive body art.⁴⁶ The family's time at the Egyptian Hall was met with acclaim in the press. Just as it did in the exhibitions of Constantine, entertainment and science overlapped. The family was met by two prominent scientific collaborators of Charles Darwin: the biologist and anthropologist Thomas Huxley,⁴⁷ and naturalist John Jenner Weir.⁴⁸ The latter's description of the encounter was published in *Nature* and provided the basis for subsequent newspaper reports.

The accounts of their time at the Egyptian Hall, and the tours that followed, vary only slightly in their portrayals of Maung Po Set and his family. For the most part, he was described as intelligent and possessing some artistic skill. He would apparently sit and draw pictures of animals while being on show. His tattooed legs were frequently commented upon. His mother, Ma Phon, was as remarked upon as much for her betel chewing habit as for her hair. Maung Po Set's wife was also occasionally commented upon, in spite of her lack of

hirsute, usually for her cigar smoking, but sometimes more suggestively, as she was in the *Liverpool Mercury* in which she was described as “hardly less interesting a little body than her husband.”⁴⁹ The notion of them constituting the remnants of an ancient race was recurrently mooted. What they made of their experience is beyond the record. It was not a consideration of the commentators who wrote about them. However they may have felt, their lives were to become even more itinerant. It may have even been chaotic. Piperno evidently had high hopes for this venture. He copyrighted a photograph Maung Po Set soon after they arrived in England at the start of the summer of 1886, a sign of his proprietorial claim to them, as well as his speculative hope for success.⁵⁰ But his plans of setting up a circus in Leamington with them in the Autumn fell apart with an acrimonious court case with his partners over the money to be put up to establish the project. The mention of his contribution to the circus of the “hairy family” in court was met with mirth. Following the laughter in the court, the Master of Rolls jokingly inquired whether they “were the children of the plaintiff?” to renewed laughter.⁵¹ Indeed, bad puns on “hair” and jokes about animal-like behavior were also recurrent in the coverage of the family in the press.⁵² Piperno lost his case, and by the following year, Yule’s prediction of thirty years earlier came to pass, and P. T. Barnum was now promoting them on a yearlong tour of North America from late 1887.

Newspaper reports had it that Barnum had been attempting to acquire the family prior to the Third Anglo Burmese War. Some claimed that he sought contact with them while searching for a white elephant, but had been refused by King Thibaw.⁵³ In 1884 he had succeeded in bringing a white elephant called Taung Taloung to the London Zoological Gardens en route to New York. He arrived with great expectation and was met with disappointment. The elephant’s blotchy, pinkish skin was underwhelming to audiences. Accusations that this was a normal-colored elephant that had been painted abounded. As Sarah Amato has demonstrated in her excellent article on the episode, Barnum was adept at cannily deploying ambiguities about the truth of his exhibits to cultivate curiosity and interest—mixing fact and fiction in his advertising materials. He also played with racial discourses to intrigue and interest his imperial metropolitan audiences.⁵⁴ These strategies were again used to promote Ma Phon and Maung Po Set. His booklets and handbills advertising them played up Thibaw’s despotism and bloody courtly politics, made rash claims that they represented the last of an ancient race, and quoted extensively from authoritative accounts—Crawford and Yule, for the most part, but also scientific writings on them, such as those in the *British Medical Journal* and John Jenner Weir’s article in *Nature*. Some of

the information on the materials produced was demonstrably inaccurate, such as the epithet "Hindoo" frequently applied to them.⁵⁵ But it was the hereditary nature of the hair growth that Barnum emphasized. In an illustrated history of the family published by Barnum, alongside a sketch of doctors examining Maung Po Set and Ma Poon—depicted with more body hair than that which they actually possessed—the narrative concluded with a paragraph reinforcing the import of their intergenerational trait.

It should ever be borne in mind that this unearthly and unparalleled contribution of living mysteries from mysterious Asia—birth-place of the human race—while the cap-stones of all physical prodigies, are not monstrosities, or the ephemeral result of unnatural intermixture, but indubitably crowned with the full nobility of primal origin, and the most difficult problems with which ingenious, speculative, ethnological science has had to contend. They are at one a natural revelation; an animate riddle to the wisest; most extraordinarily conspicuous as types of a distinct race, endowed with average human intelligence and a gentle disposition; not to be confounded with those singly exceptional vagaries, or distortions of nature, known as "freaks" which neither inherit nor transmit their accidental and generally repulsive exaggerations and defects.⁵⁶

Science, spectacle, and salacious inferences are crammed into these two run-on sentences. In the flow of this illustrated history, Barnum and the British empire are part of the same historical force that have worked to bring these "wonders" out from the "gross and fanatic superstition of the Orient" into the glare of imperial publics.⁵⁷ In Barnum's promotional materials the grotesque is shifted from the family to the Konbaung dynasty. The family is framed as having been "wrested" from "savage King Theebaw," elsewhere referred to as the "monster monarch." Claims that they were "living talismans" weighted down by expensive and lavish jewels heightened the sense of Oriental grandeur.⁵⁸ Audiences were invited to indulge their voyeuristic impulses while being encouraged to feel superior to Burmese monarchs who could only view the family through their superstition and savagery, thus unable to truly appreciate the value the family held. But divested from Barnum's colonial rhetoric, it is clear that there was a parallel between the life of this family and the fate of the Konbaung dynasty. From Crawford's early description in the 1820s, through Yule and the circulation of images in the middle of the century, to their touring of Britain and North America, as the Burmese empire was eroded by British imperialism the family became more visible to western audiences. This conversion into an imperial spectacle cannot be separated from their rendering as scientific specimens. They became a touchstone for ideas about

human difference. The self-evident heritability of their pattern of hair growth contributed to perennial questions over the origin of the species and the mutability of racial categories over time.

The history of Maung Po Set and his family, or at least the history of how they were seen by others, has been retold above very much in the vein of critical postcolonial studies and cultural historical approaches. I have submitted colonial texts to a close reading to bring out the essentializing and pejorative tropes at work in them, and to identify the wider imperial discourses they operated within. It is an approach that works to denaturalize the colonizer's understandings of the world, attempting to deny their historical role in authoring powerful truth regimes. It is an approach inherently wary of scientific knowledge, tentative in its engagement with questions of ontology.⁵⁹ But it would be hard, if not sophistic, to claim that the visible differences between the family and the overwhelming majority of the human population did not play an important part of this story. How then might the biological "reality" of hypertrichosis add to the story? How can it be engaged without pathologizing Shwe Maung, Ma Poon, Maung Po Set, and Ma Meh? One way, I would tentatively suggest, might be to follow Samantha Frost in thinking of biology and culture as inseparable, but in precise ways. It is not so much that biological knowledge is always culturally embedded, although this is an important and persuasive analytical framing.⁶⁰ Nor is it to underscore the entanglement of nature and culture in the materiality of human societies—an approach that usefully locates agency in networks connecting a variety of animate actors.⁶¹ Instead, Frost's work emphasizes the point that biological processes *are always* cultural processes, and vice versa. Recognizing the specific biocultural peculiarities of humans through this approach entails paying close attention to what cells, proteins, genes, and organisms do and how they do it without recourse to ascribing intentions or telos to them.

Hair growth provides a good example of biocultural processes at work. It is not a predetermined process written indelibly into an organism's genes, but the result of the intrinsic interactivity of an organism in its environment. Human hair is influenced by numerous factors, including climate, nutrition, life stage, hormones, pollution, and stress.⁶² That is before we begin to address the variety of practices humans themselves do to their hair that effects and influences its cycles of growth. The pattern of hair growth termed hypertrichosis can itself be stimulated by a variety of factors, not only the autosomal dominant mode of genetic inheritance believed to have contributed Shwe Maung, Ma Phon, Maung Po Set, and Ma Meh's hair growth.⁶³ Acknowledging the complexity and diversity of the processes of hair growth can allow us to resist framing the

family's hypertrichosis as an abnormality and view it instead as one outcome in an array of possible patterns of human hair growth. The colonial-era explanations of why the family exhibited this hair growth rested on underlying notions of inherent racial divisions, clear gender binaries, and heteronormative sexual desires structured by both. But, when this ideology is stripped away and discarded, we are left with a family that lived and loved in a space provided by a collapsing empire— intimate ties that enabled the gene that copied the proteins that informed the hair stem cells to grow across their bodies to be passed down from grandparent to great-grandchild.

But there are bigger stakes in acknowledging the biocultural aspects to imperial history beyond the specifics of Maung Po Set's case. These need to be approached with caution and care. Among some of the more profound questions immediately prompted by this particular narrative include how should imperial historians address the physical differences between humans in the past, particularly where these have demonstrably shaped or been shaped by empire? And can these differences be addressed without reinscribing either contemporaneous differentiations made between humans or retrospectively applying current understandings through what are often at best imperfect (most commonly actively hostile and pejorative) historic portrayals of colonized bodies? Regardless of the fraught methodological challenges, Frost's work urges us not to avoid these questions, writing that this would be to "sidestep the ways that the representation and perception of group differences, and the organization of social and political life in accordance with those representations and perceptions, create commonalities in the social and material habitats in which humans are cultured."⁶⁴ Yet, while I am sympathetic with the discernible frustration among some historians keen to bring in ecological factors at the lack of engagement with biological processes,⁶⁵ I instinctively find myself at some unease at claims that, for example, genes are important agents in shaping imperial desires,⁶⁶ or that biometric data can show bodily changes in demographic groups that resulted from colonialism.⁶⁷ However, a recognition of the biocultural nature of human difference, at least as I understand its implications, would not lend itself to biologically reductive modes of historical explanation. It is inherently a non-deterministic, multifactored way of analyzing change over time. It provides grounds for skepticism about monocausal explanations for biocultural change.

The inherent complexity of biocultural change provides an intellectual case for taking seriously the effects of the "social and material habitats" produced or undone by imperialism without reifying the category of race. As Frost argues explicitly in her conclusion, dominant, even hegemonic, powers are

unable to exercise the mastery over lived environments in such a ways as to make human difference conform to racial divisions. And, moreover, those subject to these forces as “human biocultural creatures [are able to] contest ideas, resist expectations, and refuse obligation and accommodation in ways that create imaginative, social, and material frictions and striations.”⁶⁸ To return to Maung Po Set to illustrate these points, rather than as Barnum’s “animate riddle”—a phrase that aptly captures how the family were perceived by white imperial audiences—thinking of hair growth as biocultural reveals the colonial assumptions in the questions prompted by the intergenerational trait. Prominent among them was that belief hair growth was one sign of whether a person was fully civilized, fully evolved, fully human. In contrast, engaging with the human as biocultural, as a responsive organism formed through cells managing the traffic of energy between the body and the environment with constraints on its inherent mutability that shifted slowly across generations, and their hair was not a sign of abyssal difference, it was instead a contingent expression of human variety that emerged from processes common to us all.

Notes

- 1 “A West Hartlepool Steamer’s Passengers,” *Hartlepool Mail*, May 21, 1886, 3.
- 2 His name has been transliterated in different ways in the contemporary sources. I have elected to use the most common transliteration for these name elements during this period.
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- 14 Bondeson and Miles, "The Hairy Family of Burma."
- 15 Subsequent texts, including recent works, have inaccurately glossed Shwe Maung's reported autobiography as locating him as being from what is today Laos. But since the Salween River does not flow through Laos, and Lao peoples are dispersed across the upland regions of this section of Zomia, this is an inaccurate assumption.
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