

# Anglo-Burmese Culture

Letters from my mother

Merle Audrey Jacobs



Series in Sociology



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# **Dedication**

This publication is dedicated to the Anglo-Burmese community that resided in Burma throughout the colonial era, World War 2, and the Ne Win regime. Their contributions were pivotal in the establishment of the Anglo-Burmese culture and community. In particular, their storytelling has played a crucial role in preserving this culture for future generations to appreciate and embrace.



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# Foreword

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## **Rooted affiliations: belongingness as distance and engagement**

*Anglo-Burmese Culture: Letters from my mother* provides a long overdue analysis of the relationship between cultural histories and conceptions of identity formations. Informed by traditional and contemporary theoretical concerns, Dr Jacobs directly confronts the problematic of linking history with both normative and interpretive paradigms of biography. As a consequence of her judicious appraisal of advances in qualitative methods, this study develops an insightful and innovative grasp and application of open-source media for data collection and for a critical analysis of the personal experiences and thoughts of Anglo-Burmese.

An evocative politicized definition of cultural imperialism emerges, which is remarkably lucid and extremely well corroborated. This study stands out as an exemplary contribution not only to a diverse array of substantive foci but, more significantly, to a critical demonstration, in an eminently effective manner, of how individuals and communities are both independent and dependent on state processes, ideologies and institutions.

In *Anglo-Burmese Culture: Letters from my Mother*, identity is not simply valorised but clearly explicated within the context of *rootedness*, that is, affiliative processes of being and belongingness. This unique perspective engages actively in implicating the much-needed "critical study of identity: individual and collective as well as, national and transnational." This theorising is about the panoptic breadth of culture, which to date has been obfuscated in mainstream studies. Dr Jacobs presents a compelling argument regarding the use of negotiating strategies as resources for navigating adjustment and settlement. Clearly, this book succeeds in a painstaking and methodologically advanced manner in linking macro- and micro- societal influences. In this context, identity is understood to signify and embody relations between differentially located subjects that constitute and are constituted by the dynamics of historical dislocations. Herein, the emphasis is on how principles and practices create ideologically appropriate subjects. Identity is an integral feature for the survival of family and cultural memories. Dr Jacobs's analysis is committed to a program of reflection in challenging the dominant discourses of identity politics.

Throughout the substantive discussions, there is overwhelming evidence of how memories, emotions and imagination are independent and dependent of the hegemonic cultural ideological processes. Both the exportation and importation of Western values in Burma and in the diaspora impact on consciousness. The premise that the current understanding of one's ancestry suffers considerably in terms of the prevailing binary or oppositional strains is intellectually promising and enables the generation of fertile insights into the competing and converging discourses that implicate history and biography. This study, therefore, will stimulate challenging questions which subsequent researchers would be encouraged to investigate.

The book breaks new ground by focusing on the processual and structural dimensions of the identity -culture nexus by directly confronting the conditions and consequences of identity change. This endeavour serves as an excellent introduction to the current debates in intersectional analyses, human rights, and the social sciences with regard to the role of culture in shaping consciousness and subjectivity, the connections of political economy, geography, history and their attendant contributions.

This book is catalytic in its ability to transform readers into active observers and encourage them to unravel the promises and paradoxes of key elements of identity: being and belonging. This book further succeeds in providing a valuable touchstone for further theorizing and should be read not only by academics but by anyone interested in appreciating the formations and transformations of identities. This work is a solid contribution to knowledge and practice as an extremely readable critique of empowerment. Undoubtedly, this book is most suitable for many audiences, from those more oriented towards multi-disciplinary accounts, human rights critical race theories and practice, gender studies and universally to the more curious general public readers interested in their respective biographies and cultural histories.

## Discussion

### I. Identity as Authenticity

The *subject of identity* is a problematic discourse that defies simplistic interpretations.

Identity is celebrated quite rhetorically as a forum inviting the unequivocal support and participation of a consensually oriented society. Who, for example, benefits from identity practices? What do identity formations produce and reproduce in terms of existing hegemonic imperatives? What elements of the dominant culture define the appropriateness of identity? But confining discussions of identity to a narrow narrative of *ancestry as is* commonplace in the popular culture is a meaningless exercise that forecloses any possibility of social justice

discourses, which presumably must implicate such dynamic features as biography, history, and political economy. The ongoing chatter about identity as politicized mystifies, trivializes, and distracts from a much-needed public consciousness and debate about equity and belongingness. In general, traditional approaches to identity tend to assign primacy to a binary code of “us” and “the other” and artificially bifurcates categories for multi-layered identities or phenomena.

Identity is also subject matter that moves beyond the dubious celebration of multiculturalism. Rather, the study of being confronts directly the basis of social order, the nature of society and the interpretations of challenges. Likewise, identity, as Dr Jacobs identifies, is a multiple subject, enjoying a plurality of meanings that are displaced and re-constructed in concert with other hegemonic reproductions of conformity or discipline. Readers are urged to suspend, if not escape, from prevalent common-sense assumptions until they have, first, journeyed fully through this study and, second, participated actively in interrogating complex problematic relationships. In other words, readers are asked to locate themselves in the debates and struggles which characterize the study of identity, to ground their perceptions, to empower themselves conceptually and to engage in open dialogue. This book challenges the closure of canons within conventional theorizing. Traditional texts obscure more than they reveal; the concept of identity remains mysteriously hidden behind the magic of facile reductionism. This book is oppositional, challenging the unitary, polarizing, and totalizing view of traditional models which refuse to defy the defining gaze of legitimate authoritative definitions. This essentially is an apolitical project that invites readers to position themselves ideologically and historically. Admittedly, this book is not a text typically inscribed in Anglo-centric traditions of privilege to demonstrate the origins of current Canadian values and practices. This book provides a variety of compelling theoretical formulations that need to be fully appreciated and assessed in order to develop an understanding of identity retention and transformations.

The concept of identity exists as a discursive practice that is socially or relationally situated. The idea of “Canadian-ness” filters interpretations and marginalizes differences according to convoluted experiences and “inoculated reflexivities” (Giddens, 1992: 3). This manipulated corpus of essentializing customs and self-serving institutional proscriptions solely respond to “official” meanings of challenge, defined as distance and difference. Moreover, this slippage or elasticity of “deterritorialized” meanings in the diaspora “subverts the subject” (C, 1981; Lacan, 1977) by a chain of signifiers -- definitions, written and symbolic.

Caught up in the cultural labyrinth of images and rituals as a priori conditioning, the *ancestral home* and the *receiving society* symbolise differential identities and

experiences (individual and communal) that reflect, enable, and constrain cultural meanings and realities inherent in diverse and dynamic encounters. Meanings and symbols penetrate permeable systems of language and individual consciousness, thereby running the risk of transforming the agent-subject into a self- subordinating object.

The thought-provoking and stimulating chapters, provide a solid contribution to critical thought and research by addressing pervasive mediations of identity, unravelled within significant interactions, social organizations, and social structures. To address and enlighten these issues the author has constructed an engagement with the much coherent themes of *intersectionality* that elucidate as well as resolve thorny issues which to date have obfuscated theoretical integration. This innovative approach confronts identity as a contested terrain. The sensitivity to details of interpretations is a refined one, and it enables readers to yield some very significant insights and to open a key of contemporary theorization in a potentially far -reaching way. Readers will welcome this analysis as a novel attempt to demonstrate the character of a neglected subject by illuminating the enduring and complex influences of hybridity. I congratulate Dr Jacobs for defying the debilitating ethnocentrism that ignores intersectionalities of inequalities. Lastly, consciousness-raising is emancipatory, allowing for the flexibility of thinking and listening to ourselves rather than conveniently engaging in the mindless but convenient "stir and mix "of opinions.

Freedom figures prominently in historical and biographical claims. Notions of freedom are constructed out of a constellation of meanings that they interpret in the context of past estranged experiences and current predicaments. The focus of this book is not based on the veracity of these assertions. Rather, it is directed towards the degree to which this idea of the "quest for freedom and independence" becomes incorporated into central meaning patterns of diasporic Anglo-Burmese.

## **II. Belonging and being: rooted empowerment**

Citing bell hooks (2009), Dr Jacobs notes that "belonging" is a universal experience that people from any background can relate to on their life journey. As the author articulates, belonging is a fundamental human need that is crucial in shaping one's personal identity. Being Anglo-Burman incorporates a multi-layered set of identities while belonging is constantly evolving one's identification as Anglo-Burmese sustains and enhances the establishment of a sense of belonging. The British constructed Burma, which in turn resulted in the creation of Anglo-Burmese communities.

Dr Jacobs reminds readers of the distance still to be travelled, especially as a society pulls together to expand its collective consciousness about belongingness and the transcendence of the spirit of hope. Amidst the material rubble, beneath the chaos of recovery, behind the bombastic jingoism to the intrepid analyst,



there is a hitherto unrecognized authentic empowerment. Empowerment, not the banality of idle chatter about the glories of the past, will serve to focus attention on the often - ignored structures and processes which result from an authentic commitment to challenge one's being, beliefs and behaviour – one's self. This enterprise is a forthright interrogation of how one interprets both the familiar and the foreign; that is, how one transforms the familiar into the foreign and the foreign into the familiar.

Belongingness requires a collective effort in which the interests and involvements of current. Past and symbolic others are central. The strength of this study resides in the examination of the long overdue analysis of generic processes of belongingness that extend the grounded theorizing by focusing on biographies, narratives and interactions inherent in living in the host society and grounded in the ancestral society.

### **III. Distance and engagement**

The phenomenon of distance and engagement is about exclusion, resistance and accommodations contextualized within the intersections of culture, political economy and history. Both the acted subject and the subjected actor, constitute and are constituted within the politics of difference and the defiance of deference. The Anglo Burman is an active agent situated within wider constituting contexts; this cultural subject exists within discourses of power and is engaged in micro-political (local) struggles shaped by more macro-cultural influences (global). By unravelling the circumstances leading to their "separation" from conventional society, the ways in which these become part of the host society are highlighted. Moreover, the relevance of this substantive focus regarding more generic and generative dimensions is discussed.

#### ***"Pushes" and "Pulls"***

The accounts of experiences in the book are framed within the dual forces of dislocation and exposure. In reconstructing and coordinating their biographical maps, Dr Jacobs relies on factors that "push" and "pull" her subjects towards the seemingly more attractive alternatives of survival. The logic of their accounts "hang together" and is contingent upon the available stock of information and the relevant socialization. With meticulous precision, this book explores the negotiation of identity as extremely problematic in situations where cultures clash.

Given the above, the term marginality accurately reflects the general conviction that the diasporic communities are somehow set apart from society and yet not fully part of the dominant group. But instead, their marginality is re-constituted that is attentive to socially, economically and politically and yet notions of being peripheral to the larger Canadian context are contested ideationally. Marginality, the failure to be fully implicated in the wider conventional society,

becomes their key to identify transformation as they become more staunchly rooted in the history of hybridity: in and of British and in and of Burmese.

#### **IV. Methods as Emancipating**

Informed by interdisciplinarity, Dr Jacobs approach demonstrates the vibrancy of *open-source media* as a site of cultural excavations. These sources are utilized to highlight the significance of selfhood and identity in historical contexts. Critical inquiry consists of what is said (the message) together with how it is being said (the method). It is precisely a concern for the latter that sets this experiential project apart from other investigations. The strengths of this book rest not on any one person but in the collective representation of different voices and the different forms of (re)presentations. Collectively, the voices herein demonstrate courage to be vulnerable, open and challenging—to move beyond and outside of the self. The strengths of their contributions are in the connections with the subject from so many vantage points— especially race, gender, class and rank/status. The strengths derive equally from the authentic style of presentation—spontaneous, exciting, and passionate. In this way, the voices offer a very rare, refreshing, and empowering set of analytic tools with which to approach history and biography. Dr Jacobs succeeds well in stating implicitly that the message, as well as the methods of this study, is deliberately oppositional. The author, in her own way and her own style, challenges disciplinary canons and the totalizing view of traditional “common sense”. The uniqueness of this project conceptually and methodologically exists in the different voices (tone and tenor) of the subjects, including that of the author. This study’s commitment to critical pedagogy, the criteria used to evaluate the merits of this project and its constituent contributions are broad, “outside the mainstream box,” and intrinsically sensitive to those voices that have traditionally been excluded.

On the one hand, the methods succeed in liberating the imagination, memory, and emotions in order to realize the maturation of dreams. Methodologically, the concept of Anglo-Burmese is contextualized historically, mediated politically and articulated culturally.

#### **V. Conclusions**

For Dr Jacobs, critical cultural approaches provide an alternative framework for appreciating the form and content of identity. Implicitly, this approach captures the historical development of identity, the role of popular culture, and the communications of foreign values that are imbricated within the Burmese culture.

Awareness is culturally mediated and linguistically conditioned. She asks poignantly, how can we critically elaborate on the differential impact of the British colonial influence on the Burmese and Anglo Burmese? Accordingly,

this book transcends the given and develops the complexity of “being”, which involves knowing and making sense of Canada’s Anglo-Burmese history. This book is the result of a scrutiny and painful appraisal of many studies which were felt to capture more fully the contexts, conditions and consequences of becoming and being on numerous levels of analytic inquiry. This book reflects a commitment to providing more challenging directions, and to understanding the experiences of Anglo -Burmese. This inquiry begins with a consideration of experiences and contingencies influencing identity, collective and individual. To provide insights into these early experiences of nationhood identity, this inquiry provides a most meaningful convergence of history and biography. Dr Jacobs approaches the experiences of Anglo Burmans from an appreciative stance, sensitive to different life chances and experiences. The book illustrates that there was little evidence of a gradual attenuation of cultural bonds. Quite the contrary, bonds were strengthened.

Lastly, *Anglo-Burmese Culture: Letters from my mother* demonstrates effectively the intellectual and applied benefits derived from blending insights within an intersectional framework. By focusing on these intersections and interactions, we see that becoming a Canadian of Anglo-Burmese heritage is a collective accomplishment emerging out of the various social relations, real and symbolic, that newcomers retain from the past and various social relations developed in Canada. Lessons from the history, biography and migration experience are captured in a most innovative and thoughtful manner that incorporates contemporary debates and insightful argumentation. This book triumphs in revealing that which has been concealed by authorities. Likewise, for Chomsky (1989), a scrutiny of the subtext reveals that illusions are necessary in order to maximise certain interests. Regrettably, consciousness of identity is constricted, advocacy muted, and inequalities legitimised within these cultural codes, familiar or foreign.

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# Introduction

The book comprehensively explores Anglo-Burmese culture, offering more than a simple portrayal of a mixed-parentage community in Burma. It delves into the intricacies of behaviours and cultural nuances within this community, shedding light on its unique cultural identity shaped by the historical context of British colonisation in Burma. However, there is a lack of firsthand accounts from an insider's perspective on this community's distinct way of life. Identity theories (Stets & Burke, 2003) suggest that the complex nature of the researcher's and the subjects' identities poses a significant challenge in achieving complete insider status. Although this approach has advantages, it is essential to recognise that realising these benefits and overcoming potential difficulties requires thoughtful consideration, mindfulness, and ongoing introspection. In discussing Anglo-Burmese culture, I analyse the underlying structures contributing to its development, resulting in behaviours that reflect the culture explored in this book (Jacobs, 2000).

The study of behaviour patterns at an individual and a group level is critical in comprehending the connection between the self and your community group. Long-term observation of an individual's behavioural patterns can lead to a deeper understanding of that person. Similarly, analysing similar behavioural patterns across multiple individuals can provide insights into specific categories of people. At a higher level, observing behaviour patterns across individuals in a community helps identify how these patterns align with others to form broader community trends. These extensive inter-individual patterns form the foundation of social structure, which is vital for understanding the dynamics of society (Ridgeway, C. L, 2006). A sociological approach to understanding the self and identity starts with the belief that an individual and their group have a relationship of mutual influence.

Using autoethnography to understand self and identity is a form of writing that links personal experiences with cultural contexts. Autoethnography is a research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography. It involves reflecting on personal experiences within a cultural context and analysing them to gain insight into larger social and cultural issues. Autoethnography also allows for the exploration of power dynamics within colonial relationships. This approach shows different levels of awareness when we intertwine personal narratives with cultural perspectives. The term was coined by Denzin (1997) and popularised by Ellis (1997), as well as Denzin and Lincoln (2000). The autoethnographer does not attempt to find an absolute "truth." Instead of presenting an outsider's view, the researcher will share their

perspective as an insider in the study. Through their journey, they strive to gain new insights and better understand their world, even if it means challenging their preconceived notions. Ultimately, they hope to share what they have learned with others. As an Anglo-Burman, both I and others in my community recognised my membership within this group. Although my academic expertise and studies shaped my perspective, I was deeply committed to exploring the fundamental nature of Anglo-Burmese culture.

Some who read this book may assume that my research has a Eurocentric bias because of my education in Canada. I kept this bias in mind when I employed an interdisciplinary methodology that drew from a diverse range of scholarly sources, including studies on colonialism, mixed-race communities, cultural identity, and reference groups. This approach allowed for a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the subject matter to consider the question, "What defines Anglo-Burmese culture?"

I was motivated to delve even deeper into their history and culture, revealing a story of a people whose lives were shaped by the imperial gaze of the British. During this exploration period, I came across many individuals with Anglo-Burman heritage who possess a strong desire to explore and share their unique cultural background on open-source web pages. On these platforms, I discovered individuals who chronicle their experiences of growing up as Anglo-Indians prior to settling in Burma. There were also stories of Anglo-Burmans who spoke about relatives and their families. The use of the terms Anglo-Burmans and Anglo-Burmese are used interchangeably in articles (Burnett, 2003). Therefore, I assert that the Anglo-Burmese people also referred to as the Anglo-Burmans, are terms that the Anglo-Burmese community uses without much debate, as both terms are considered synonymous.

This publication examines the Anglo-Burmese people from their lived experience. While colonial documents offer some insight into the community, it is through open-source channels that we gain a more nuanced understanding of how individuals identify as Anglo-Burmese and what factors have influenced their cultural identity. The book's narrative structure is intentionally comprehensive, offering a thorough investigation rather than a simple linear progression. The term 'Anglo' is typically associated with England or the English people, as in the term 'Anglo-Saxon'. However, the term 'Anglo-Burman' carries nuanced and complex connotations requiring deeper exploration, which will be further examined in the following pages. Preceding 1935, Burma was viewed as a British Indian province, leading to a notable increase in Anglo-Indian migrants participating in sectors such as railways, state services, and logging. In Burma, ethnic Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Burmans mixed and had equal legal and constitutional rights under the Anglo-Indian category. Nevertheless, the 1935 Government of Burma Act, influenced by the growth of Burmese nationalism,

resulted in the combined group of ethnic Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Burmans being formally designated as Anglo-Burmans living in Burma.

This book will construct Anglo-Burmese culture from within the community. With a rich blend of Asian and European heritage infused with the values of British colonialism, the Anglo-Burmese culture has evolved into a truly unique and intriguing cultural phenomenon. The book offers an extensive study of this culture, shedding light on its customs, traditions, and way of life from their lived experience. The Anglo-Burmese community inhabited a distinctive liminal zone between the coloniser and the colonised. These details offer a wealth of insights into Burma's complex tapestry and the intricacies of race and colonial hegemony.

Analysing Anglo-Burmese experiences can provide us with a more profound comprehension of colonialism's complexities and its extensive influence on individuals and communities. The research explores the unique blend of ethnic diversity, adaptation, religious traditions, and social and political history that characterises this culture. Examining the impacts of colonisation, WWII, and migration, the author sheds light on the complex forces that helped shape the Anglo-Burmese culture. Despite their loyalty to Britain, these individuals were not acknowledged as part of their descendants.

As I embarked on this journey to research Anglo-Burmese Culture, I experienced a powerful emotional transformation. I gained valuable insights from my interactions with family, friends, and the Anglo-Burmese diaspora. Through exploring the distinction between academic texts and personal narratives of Anglo-Burmans who lived in Burma, I was able to contextualise memories through storytelling, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the culture's historical development. In the late 1980s, sociological research shed light on the importance of storytelling (Polletta et al., 2011) for individual and collective identity. Narratives serve as the foundation of authoritative discourse and can be a powerful and emancipatory form of communication. Sociologists analysed individual narratives to uncover the underlying motivations driving their behaviours, which may not be easily discernible, even to the individuals themselves. Rather than providing an external perspective, the researcher adopts an insider's viewpoint in the study. Throughout my research, I encountered various documents that brought forth both joy and sadness as I confronted subconscious memories of my experiences in Rangoon. Though I have come to terms with my identity and the significance of living in Burma, my research also illuminated the impact that colonialism had on our lives.

The experience of being raised in the Anglo-Burmese community was a source of great pleasure. Interacting with other Anglo-Burmese children was a frequent and enjoyable activity, replete with opportunities for families to engage and forge connections. After the war, my family and I resided in a small

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