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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>東南アジア研究 (1983), 21(3): 267-274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1983-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56140">http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56140</a></td>
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<td>Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Departmental Bulletin Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textversion</td>
<td>publisher</td>
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<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Kyoto University</td>
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Social Life in Burma in the 16th Century

Than Tun*

The main source materials for this paper are the stone inscriptions in Burmese found largely at Ava, Pañya and Cakuiñ (near Mantale, on both sides of the big river Eravati [List]) together with some inscriptions written in the Mon language of lower Burma [U Chit Thein 1965]. Burma in the early 16th century was divided into at least four states, two in central Burma with Ava and Toññū respectively as their centres, another in lower Burma with Hamsāvatī as its centre and the fourth on the western coastal strip of Rakhuiñ with Mrok U as its centre. The kings ruling at Ava were: Rhwenan: kyoau, rhañ (1501–1527), Suihambhwa: (1527–1542), Un:bhōh Khunmuin: (1542–1545), Mui:brai Narapati (1545–1551) and Cakuiñ: Canṣi Kyona Thañ (1551–1555); at Toññū: Mahāśrījayasūra (1485–1530) and Mañ:tarā:rwethi: (1530–1551); and at Hamsāvatī: Bañ:ram (1522–1526), Surhaṅtakārwatpi (1526–1539), Mañ:tarā: rwethi: (1530–1551; he conquered Hamsāvatī and made it his capital in 1539), Hamsāvatī Khānphurhañ (1554–1581) and Nä:chu Dāyakā (1581–1599).

The Burmese did not occupy a large area at this time. According to the Cakuiñ: Ratanāceti inscription of 1485 the Burmese were living in such places as: Arimattana, Mrañcuin:, Pañ:ya, Cakuiñ: and Ava. In these places the kings led luxurious lives in golden palaces full of precious jewels, etc. There are four rivers, the Eravati, Panron, Panloñ and Khyan: twn:. The population along these river valleys is so dense that literally the river banks are bending low with the weight of the people that they have to carry. This certainly is the place of the Burmese [List 1014/14–15].

According to this record, the Burmese were confined to the area around the confluence of four rivers, the Eravati, Khyan: twn:, Mracnay and Mū:. In the Ratanābimhan inscription of 1509 we find that:

The (political centres) were located at Cakuiñ:, Pañ:ya and Ava. Each of these places in turn was the city where the kings resided [List 1043/15–16].

The record continues to define Burma:

The clear cool water of the Eravati runs in the centre with Sunāparanta to the north and Tambadipa to the south. A dynasty of kings ruled over these two divisions where the Religion of Buddha prospered [List 1043/17–18].

This area constitutes only a small fraction
of the present state of The Union of Burma. Nevertheless the ruler was “absolute” in the sense that he was usually described as “the Lord of all Water and Land” [List 1055a/5] and also as “the Victorious Leader of One Hundred Kings” [List 1055a/6]. He was, to his subjects, “the Ruler of all Life in Water and on Land and Much Superior to all Other Kings” [List 1055a/20–21]. His kingdom was small but it was often described as “an extensive land, teeming with towns and villages” [List 1055a/10] and the king as an overlord frequently received as hostages “pretty daughters” [List 1055a/21; 66; 79] from his vassals. The defence of such a country required the ruler to be well versed in the martial arts of combat on horseback or elephant [List 1045/15–16]. In the hard task of administration he would have the assistance of the Crown Prince [List 1845/22; 42], the Chief Queen [List 999/4; 1001/29–30], the “Old Ministers” [List 1005/14] and many wise ministers and officers [List 1055b/1]. The king, to his subjects, was in fact “King of Kings” [List 1055a/3; 9] who maintained an army [List 1014/3; 1045/15] comprised of infantry [List 1050/8; 15] and cavalry [List 1050/65]. Men and officers in his service were as follows:

Cavalry Chief / Mrañ: Mhū: [List 1037a/7]
Chief / Acuí: Akai [List 1045/62]
City Chief / Prañ Sui: [List 978b/18; 1045/63]
Civil Officer Junior / Sampyañ [List 1045/58; 64; 66]
Clerk Junior / Cakhā, Cakhyā [List 978b/18]

Clerk Senior / Cāre: [List 1014/40; 1043/29]
Governess / Athintōanu [List 1040a/4; 1055a/6]
Guard / Kuiwram [List 1014/27]
Holder of Town in Fief / Mrui, Cā: [List 1055a/9]
Horse Messenger / Mrañ: Lhyañ [List 1050/65]
Inner Group Chief / Atwañ: sañ: mhū: [List 1037a/5]
Inner Three Thousand Chief / Atwañ: sum: thonmhu: [List 1057a/7]
Land Officer / Mretuin [List 995/7; 1045/63]
Mercenary / Kre: cā: [List 999/3]
Officer and Minister / Amhu: Amat [List 1050/8; 65; 79; 1055b/1]
Paddy Store Chief / Capā: Cuiw Sukrī: [List 981a/7]
Privileged Man or Noble / Sukon: [List 981a/7]
Reservoir Chief / Kan Puiñ [List 1043/7]
Steward / Bhanṭā Cuiw [List 978b/18; 1045/63]
Supreme Leader of Monks / Saṅgharāja [List 1005/8]
Three Thousand Boats Chief / Lhoaukā: Sum: thoñ Mhū: [List 1037a/6]
Town Chief / Mruiw, Sukrī: [List 1002/23]
Village Chief / Rwā Sukrī: [List 1001/33; 1014/25]
Village Controller / Rwā Kai [List 1045/63]
Village Ruler / Rwā Mañ: [List 978b/18]
Worker / Amhu Lup [List 1014/27]

The relationship between the ruler and the ruled might well have been of a strained nature since the ordinary common people avoided any dealings with government servants if possible. One record of 1481 says:

The Land Officer could not be trusted. He might reckon a piece of land measuring one unit as only half a unit and a half unit as only a quarter unit [List 995/7].

This statement suggests that the officers were usually corrupt or oppressive. There is also another statement in a similar strain. It says:

Try to avoid meeting a king’s servant when one comes into the village. Let not even a dog bark at him (Just ignore him.) [List 995/15].

But we know that it was impossible to ignore king’s servants who went round the villages to collect taxes. They exacted the Wet Tax / Acwat Khwan [List 1045/68] on the products of rivers and lakes and the Dry Tax / Akhrok Khwan [List 1045/68] on the products of cultivation. In detail the taxes were:

Taxes on the use of bullock carts, wheelbarrows, ports, ferries, scales, baskets, looms, licenses to collect toddy juice, to produce oil, to receive court fees or fines, to run a brokerage, to start cultivation on plots of land subjected to yearly inundation, to raise cattle such as buffaloes and oxen, to make pots, to grow sesame, to collect cotton, bamboo, pelts and to enjoy certain commission fees [List 995/11-14].

The majority of the people who were thus taxed were Burmese and most of them were cultivators. Here is a list of people living in the Kingdom of Burma at that time:

Cakraw [List 802/46; 1046/10]
Kantū [List 802/55]
Karañ Mratle: chu inscription/9
Kasañ [List 936a/23]
Kharañ [List 949a/25]
Khyañ [List 958a/5; 963a/21; b/11]
Krwañ [List 963b/52; 54; 55; 1014b/40]
Kulā: [List 934b/24]
Lankhrow [List 963a/38]
Lawa [List 934a/23; 943b/15]
Mranmā Kan Ü inscription b/17
Mrun [List 963a/21; b/11]
Nāga Rañ On Mrañ inscription/8
Panse: [List 963a/21; b/11]
Pasañ [List 963a/25]
Pa Uiw [List 963a/38]
Phrum Nakya Kan Ü inscription b/17
Pohnloñ [List 947a/36]
Prow Rañ On Mrañ inscription/18 and 34
Putw Cetilha inscription b/34
Pyū [List 963b/53; 55; 1050/7]
Rakhuñ Kan Ü inscription b/17
Rokchwai Kan Ü inscription b/17
Sak [List 943a/5; 963a/21; b/11]
Syam Thûpårūñ inscription 15a/2
Tanluñ Thûpårūñ inscription 15a/1
Tanu Thûpårūñ inscription 15a/8
Taruk [List 947a/5]
Toñsū Re Mrak inscription/11

We notice that the name of Pyū does not appear in any inscriptions after 1500.

The livelihood of the people as found in the inscriptions was as follows:

Architect / Pissukā [List 1050/22; 25; 26; 72]
Astrologer / Hūrā [List 1050/23; 25; 72]
Big Drum Player / Paṭ Ma Ṭī: Krāṅkān inscription a/28
Blacksmith / Paṇbhai [List 1014b/26; 38]
Breaker of Stones / Kyok Khwāi [List 1045/37]
Carpenter / Laksāmā: [List 981a/23; 1014b/26]
Carrier of the Sick and Wounded / Sānā Tham: [List 1045b/6]
Cowherd / Nwā: Thin: [List 1045/59]
Dancer / Kakhre Saṅ Ma [List 1045/20; 1050/67]
Harpist / Coṅ: Ṭī: [List 963b/34]
Mason / Purān [List 981a/22; 1014b/26; 39; 1045/30; 31]
Massage Expert / Laksā Krāṅkān inscription a/7
Nautch / Panṭyā [List 963b/52; 1014b/40]
Painter / Pankhi [List 981a/22; 1014b/40; 1045/39]
Palanquin Bearer / Tham Caṅ Tham: [List 1045/72]
Player of Brass Drums / Kre: Paṅ Saṅ Kre: Pat Ṭī: [List 1014b/40] Krāṅkān inscription a/28
Player of Cymbals / Laṅkhwaṅ: Saṅ [List 1014b/40]
Player of a Ring of Leather Drums / Sare Pat Saṅ [List 1014b/40] Krāṅkān inscription a/28
Player of a Set of Brass Gongs / Paṭ Naraṅcarā Saṅ [List 981a/12; 15]
Sawyer / Lhwa Saṅ [List 1045/39]
Sculptor / Tamo, [List 981a/22; 1014b/26; 39; 1045/38]
Singer / Sikhrān: Saṅ [List 1045/19]
Umbrella Bearer / Thī: Chwāi [List 1045/72]

The cultivators’ main crop was rice. Due to the frequent inroads of the Shans of the north, many farms did not get proper care and as a result yields were poor. In one case we find that:

One pay1 only produced one basket of paddy [List 1045/61].

Usually it would be twenty baskets or more. Unfortunately the inscriptions do not give much information on economic conditions, but from the names that we find in them we have the following list of trees and plants:

Acanthus illicifolius / Karā: [List 1014/88; 1045/35]
Areca catechu / Kwām: Si: [List 1014a/48]
Artocarpus integrifolia, Jackfruit Tree / Pinnai [List 1014b/18]
Arum / Pin: [List 1014b/18]
Banana / Nhakpyoau [List 1050/22]
Calophyllum / Punāk [List 1014b/18]
Citrus / Rhok [List 1014b/18]
Coconut / Un: [List 1014b/18]
Cringe Tree / Coṅ: rāṅ: [List 1014b/18]
Custard Apple / Oyā [List 1014b/18]
Egg Plant / Kharam: [List 1014b/18]
Eugenia / Sapre [List 1050/70]
Foetid Sterculia / Lakkhup [List 1050/67]
Gourd Creeper / Bhū: [List 1055a/22; 1055b/5]
Grass / Nejā, Mrejā [List 1050/70]
Gum / Sacce: [List 1050/70]

1) 1.75 acres/0.70875 hectare.
This list gives us some idea of what herbs, plants and trees the people used for construction materials, food, medicine, etc.

The second quarter of the 16th century was, as we all know, a very troubled period and the reconstruction of various important buildings destroyed during this time was carried out from about the middle of the century. One record says: “Damaged parts of some pagodas were repaired” and another record mentions that “a finial on one pagoda top was fixed in AD 1482”. In the Pagan period pagodas did not have the crown which is now called Thi: (Umbrella) and this record of 1482 suggests that the practice of fixing a finial to pagoda-tops had started by the 15th century. Repairs at some religious establishments were carried out very often and one record of 1484 says:

The religious edifice was completely whitewashed. The bulbous part was (made new) and five tiers of finials were fixed on it. Golden bells were hung around these finials so that they chimed most pleasantly (at every waft of breeze). Bright colours were also painted (all over the building).

Perhaps it was through such repairs that many old and original works of art were lost in Burma, as even today in Burma antiques are usually ruined by repairs. Apart from the ravages of the wars, there were natural calamities like earthquakes and floods that also caused much damage to the ancient monuments. One record of 1426 says: “Because of a great earthquake the earth trembled intensively and many walls fell”.

2) Using Irwin’s Tables all Burmese dates are given AD equivalents.
In another record the cause of the destruction of old buildings was clearly stated: At *Ava* the Capital and at *Pagan*, *Pañ:ya* and *Cakuiṅ*; which were nearby, various religious monuments, together with many libraries where copies of the *Piṭaka* were kept, were destroyed by non-believers (who came to loot and plunder) [List 1073b/8]. These non-believers were the Shans of the north, whom we know were converted to Buddhism by the middle of the 16th century. Towards the end of the 16th century large-scale looting of pagoda relic chambers occurred again in lower Burma. This time it was the Portuguese who did the looting [Mahannan 1829(III): 169].

At the end of an important social activity or a business transaction, a kind of feast was usually given to celebrate the occasion. During the whole of the Pagan period and for some time after the fall of Pagan, plenty of meat and fermented drinks called “*siy*” were consumed at such feasts. *Arak*, the distilled alcoholic liquor, was introduced into Burma by the second quarter of the 16th century and the downfall of King *Mαtαra*:rhwethzi: was attributed to the fact that he became an alcoholic [Mahannan 1829(II): 252–253]. It seems that Buddhism was able effectively to suppress this important social custom of drinking liquor in public. Eating the pickled tea called *Labhak*, which was probably a Shan custom, took the place of alcohol. At law courts, when both parties were happy about the judgement, they took tea together.

Now I would like to mention two important religious movements that enormously changed the society. One was a reformation in the Order of Buddhist Monks that was carried out during the last quarter of the 15th century and the other was the extension of Buddhism to the people of north and northeastern Burma during the middle of the 16th century. The reformation was carried out by King *Ramadhipati* (1472–1492), known popularly as *Dhammadæti* [Pe Maung Tin 1958a], who was a Buddhist monk in his early life. He could recite by rote the Three *Piṭaka* and *Weda*. He was well versed in the texts of *Vitak*, *Byakaruin*, *Chana:, Alaṅkā* and *Che:bindo*. He was also skilled in the arts of masonry and carpentry.

He had a high opinion of the religion of Śrīlāṅkā and sent several senior monks from his capital to be reordered there.

From its very beginning, the Buddhist Sect of *Mahāvihāra* (in Śrīlāṅkā) had had a line of venerable monks. Some monks from Rāmaṅna went there (and joined that sect). With reverend senior monks of that sect as *upaJjhaya*, they were ordained at the Uḍakukkhapa Sima on the bank of the Kalyāṇi river where the Buddha himself had bathed (when he visited Śrīlāṅkā). In this way these monks brought back the pure lineage of monks of the (*Mahāvihāra* Sect of Śrīlāṅkā) to Rāmaṅna. They in their own turn became *upaJjhaya* and ordained new monks.

Now on 21 January 1476 the king invited the Most Reverend *Moggalana* to his palace and consulted him on how best he should carry out a reformation with Singhalese
help. As a result 10 senior monks went to Śrīlāṅkā. On 16 July 1476 they were reordained as Buddhist monks in Śrīlāṅkā. They came back and reached Hamsāvatī on 12 October 1476. A site for a new ordination hall was selected on 22 November 1476 and when the hall was built, it was named the Kalyāṇī Sima. Various other Sima were constructed and consecrated throughout the kingdom and there were 15,666 new monks ordained altogether. The king made two special requests to all the senior monks who would lead the community of the new order of monks. Firstly that no one who had been punished by the king for being guilty of a crime or who was reputed to be a thief or who had a serious physical deformity should be accepted as a candidate for monkhood. Secondly he requested that the leaders expel the following from the community of monks.

1. Those who practised medicine.
2. Those who practised astrology and alchemy.
3. Those who painted or dyed clothes.
4. Those who carved wood.
5. Those who were engaged in one form or another of those occupations that an ordinary man would do for his livelihood.
6. Those who sang songs as part of a discourse on the Religion.
7. Those who begged agricultural products that could be stored up for later consumption instead of begging food daily for immediate consumption.
8. Those who sought the company of lay people.
9. Those who were already rich through trade, etc., though still kept up the pretence of being monks.

This second request of his was in accord with the prescriptions of the Vinaya but his first request had no real Buddhist sense in it. Obviously he disliked having anti-feudal elements in the Order of Monks.

The movement to extend Buddhism to the Shans of north and northeastern Burma was instigated by another king. Hamsāvatī Chaṅphurhaṅ was in fact a usurper who began his attempt to become king early in 1551. On 11 January 1551 he seized Tonū, on 30 August 1551 Praṅ, on 12 March 1552 Hamsāvatī and on 22 January 1555 Ava. He then started a campaign in the north and northeast on 9 November 1556. When Mongmit, the Ruby Land, was taken on 10 January 1557, the king had a pagoda constructed and the chief and his subjects were converted to Buddhism. From there he marched north again. He and his army crossed the Eravati using a boat-bridge at Thiṅkhyauṅ on 20 February 1557 and he took Muiṅkhaṅ on 6 March 1557. Muiṅkhaṅ, another Shan centre, was taken on 26 March 1557. The Shans were animists and at the death of a chief, his favourite wives, servants and pet animals were killed and buried with him. The king passed an order on 2 April 1557 to the effect that this custom was intolerable in his territories and should be stopped at once. Whilst Shans who had been living among the Burmans before and after the fall of Pugam might have been Buddhists from about the 10th century, during the reign of a Shan chief from
Mui: ṇhaṅ: who ruled Ava temporarily from 1526, treasures from many pagoda relic chambers were looted. And, considering monastic establishments centres of potential enemies, Suihambhwār, the then conqueror of Ava carried out a massacre of monks in 1539 [Mhannan 1829(II): 142]. Now the king’s order prohibiting this horrible custom was to have a profound influence over the people living in the northern, northeastern and central parts of Burma. From about the middle of the 16th century all the people of Burma were politically unified under the rule of a strong king and as a result of Hamsāvatī Chān-phrūruṅhaṅ’s conversions all of them embraced the same faith, Buddhism, so that living together would now be much easier.

In conclusion, we find Burma in the 16th century was passing through a difficult phase of its development, when several different races of people were politically unified and Buddhism was introduced to all these races. This conversion to a single faith proved to be quite advantageous as it helped the people to live peacefully together and this certainly paved the way for a much better situation in the 17th century.

References