



**Literature, Historiography, Scholarship,
Language, Life, and Buddhism**

HLA PE

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

BURMA

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FOREWORD

Professor Stuart Simmonds

Professor Hla Pe, when he retired from The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1979, could lay claim to being the longest-serving member of The Department of South East Asia and the Islands. Formally associated with the department since 1948 when he took up his duties as Lecturer in Burmese, he had worked closely with Professor J.A. Stewart and others in the preparation of the Burmese-English Dictionary since 1942. The dictionary was the centrepiece of his scholarly work, but he published widely in the fields of Burmese language and literature, and cultural studies.

Every scholar is known and remembered by his publications. This is certainly true of Hla Pe, but his friends may reflect that in them he has expressed only a part of himself. To say so does not in any way reduce the value of the works he has published but rather it is to highlight the good fortune that this volume has brought to notice an aspect of scholarship that often disappears forever as the sound of a speaker's syllables fade upon the air. This is the justification for the publishing of this book of lectures, edited by his friends. The ephemeral has been made permanent. Not that there is anything ephemeral, in another sense, about Hla Pe's lectures. The reader will soon see that they deal with important subjects with great seriousness of purpose and that they were structured with scholarly care. However, he will also discover that the informality of the lecture can provide a deeper insight into the nature of the man who delivered it. In this, Hla Pe has been particularly helpful because he tells us so much, so simply about his personal life, and relates it at every turn to the development of an academic career in a foreign land.

Now that he has returned to Burma in retirement it is important to know how his Buddhist beliefs came into being and matured to sustain him through the problems that everyone must face and brought him safely home again. From the same source is derived his attitudes to learning and to teaching. As he said, he inquired without shame or humiliation from all who could teach him. Then, in turn, he taught without pomposity or a sense of superiority; though that he did not say. He knew that the subject of study is greater and more permanent than the man or woman who professes it. In this knowledge he taught his students, created disciples to carry on his work, and advised the great number of men and women who came to him to seek his wisdom over their scholarly and human problems.

I believe also that Hla Pe had a more particular motive. He grew up in a colonial country, in an age of nationalism when young people desired urgently to make themselves aware of the values of their own society and culture. This was a prerequisite for the sense of national pride which had to be acquired by serious nationalists in order to sustain them in the struggle for independence. Hla Pe's scholarly endeavour was a dedication and its fruits, now that independence has long been achieved, remain of permanent value.

In the fourteenth lecture in this book, Hla Pe writes of a Burmese astrologer who predicted that he would become a great man or a monk. In the Buddhist context that is perhaps not a startlingly original prophesy. More moving to me was his insistence that he was inspired by the knowledge that his family supporters expected that he would become a man of consequence. That he was, and if confirmation is necessary then all his friends confirm it.

NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

John Okell

The problem of representing Burmese words and names in roman script has never had a single widely accepted solution. Different writers use different methods. The papers in this collection were written at different stages in Professor Hla Pe's career, and he used different systems of romanization at different times. For this edition, romanized Burmese words and names have been rewritten so as to conform with a single system, namely that entitled "Standard conventional transcription (with accented tones)" in John Okell's *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (RAS and Luzac, 1971), pp. 66-67. Where the actual form of a word in Burmese script is important it has been romanized to match "standard transliteration" (p. 65 of the same booklet). Well-known names, such as Rangoon, Mandalay, Ava, and so forth, have been left in their traditional form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Robert H. Taylor, Chairman, Centre of South East Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

When Professor Hla Pe retired from the Chair of Burmese in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, several of his colleagues in the Department of South East Asia and the Islands felt that it would be a great loss to students of Southeast Asia, and in particular students of Burma, if the body of his unpublished lectures and talks were to become lost. Therefore, my predecessor as Chairman of the Centre of South East Asian Studies, Mr P.A. Stott, encouraged the collection of the best and most important of the papers to be published in one volume. The initial selection was made by Professor Hla Pe's long-time colleague, Mr J.W.A. Okell, who also standardized the system of transcription of Burmese into roman script. At this stage I requested two former members of the Indian Civil Service who had served in Burma and know Burmese to review the manuscript for us. The advice of Mr F.S.V. Donnison, CBE, and Mr W.I.J. Wallace, CMG, OBE, greatly assisted us in preparing the manuscript for publication. Professor H.L. Shorto also kindly reviewed the manuscript. Finally, we are very pleased, as we know Professor Hla Pe would be, that this volume is being published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

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PART A
ON LITERATURE

1 BURMESE POETRY, 1450–1885

***Its Scope and Nature*¹**

*Lecture delivered to the Ostasiatisches Seminar,
University of Frankfurt, July 1965*

It was with both pride and humility that I accepted the kind invitation extended to me by the Director of the Ostasiatisches Seminar, University of Frankfurt, to come and deliver a lecture on any aspect of Burmese literature. I was especially proud when I learnt that this was to inaugurate a course in Burmese language and literature at the University: this, I believe, is the only course of its kind outside Burma. At the same time I was filled with humility at the thought of having to do justice to this momentous occasion. With such mixed feelings, I shall now read the paper "Burmese Poetry, AD 1450–1885: Its Scope and Nature".

The Burmese have a vast store of literature on stone, on palm leaf, and in printed book form from the twelfth century to modern times. Today, however, I will address myself to only a few representative kinds of Burmese imaginative literature, all drawn from the poetry which dominated the scene from AD 1450 to 1885, before the West had made its impact on Burmese culture: in other words, the poetry that made its debut in what is usually referred to as the Golden Age of Burmese literature, and ended with the downfall of the Burmese monarchy. This poetry was written on palm leaf with a stylus, as printing was not widely used in Burma before the end of the nineteenth century.

The two major contributory factors in the birth and development of this imaginative literature are Buddhism and the Burmese kings. The establishment of Theravāda, or conservative, Buddhism long before the eleventh century in Burma, and its dissemination of education not only in the religious language, Pali, but also in the language of the country, gave the Burmese a script of their own, produced numerous poets, and provided themes for the poetry. The patronage given by the kings, supporters of

the Faith as well as sponsors of culture, was an incentive to the growth of this poetry. It flourished in its many ramifications from the fifteenth century until the downfall of the Burmese monarchy in 1885. The authors were Buddhist monks in secluded monasteries, courtiers who had spent long years of study in the monastery, and also some talented court ladies, all of whom deliberately strove after courtly refinement of language. The themes were religion, royalty, nature and love, though poems on the life and amusements of the ordinary people became fairly popular from the eighteenth century onwards.

One of the terms for poetry in Burmese is *kabya lin-ga*, derived from the two Sanskrit words *kāvya*, a name for a certain kind of poetry, and *alaṃkāra*, an ornament of the sound or of the sense. Burmese poetry tried to live up to the meaning of *alaṃkāra*, and I would like to say a few words about these two kinds of ornamentation or embellishment.

In early Burmese verse, the primary device used to achieve melody, the embellishment of the sound, in which the basic number of words or syllables in the line is four, is rhyme. Vowel length and stress play virtually no part in its structure. Burmese is a tonal language; syllables are differentiated from one another not only by the consonantal and vocalic elements of which they are composed, but also by pitch and voice quality; and the language is largely monosyllabic -- that is, broadly speaking, each syllable has a "meaning" and can be used as a "word".

These two features -- the rhyme and the number of syllables in a group -- are disposed in many different arrangements, but the basic scheme is to have a rhyme in the fourth syllable of one line, the third syllable of the next, and the second of the next, while the fourth syllable of the last line will be the rhyme for the following two lines, and so on. To give an example of this "climbing" rhyme:

za-tí pon-nyá/gon-ma-ná-hpyín/than-pá-hòn-sòn/
hpet-mé kyon-thà/à-thòn-htaung-htà/²

To have this 4/3/2 scheme throughout the stanza would be monotonous, and to break this monotony Burmese poets introduced some other schemes which may be expressed as 4/3/1, 4/3, 4/2, 4/1, and 3/2. The last line of a stanza usually has 5, 7, 9, or 11 syllables.³

This system of "four-syllable lines" with its rhyme schemes was characteristic of compositions until new genres and songs appeared on the scene in the eighteenth century. In the latter, the number of syllables in a line varies, and, though the "climbing" principle persists, the rhyme schemes are less rigid

and sometimes more elaborate -- especially in drama, which made its début later than the other new genres, in the "mixed style" of prose and poetry. In performance, all forms of verse are usually chanted, though occasionally they are recited in a normal speaking voice; songs are sung, and dramas declaimed.

Embellishments of the sense are chiefly literary devices such as similes, metaphors, tropes, allusions, and synonyms. These will be illustrated in the translations later on, but here I will just say a word about synonyms which cannot be illustrated without quoting a long poem. It is a feature of one poem, which lists a long succession of kings, that different words are used for the accession and death of each king.

Besides these two kinds of embellishments, there are several types of poets' "manipulations" of the form of verse. I will mention only the few well-known devices: the "wheel-composition" in which every line begins with the same syllable (like spokes radiating from the hub), or the "pearl-threading composition" in which every line begins with the same letter. Other displays of ingenuity involve the use of metathesis and spoonerism.

These embellishments and ingenious devices have made Burmese poetry what it is. The strict requirements of the "four syllable line", and the extreme flexibility of the Burmese language with its immense vocabulary of monosyllables, often entail distorting words, phrases, and syntax. To accommodate a rhyme, the poet had often to alter a tone, or truncate polysyllabic words from Pali and Sanskrit; to cut down grammatical suffixes to an inadequate minimum, or add extra ones which in prose would be superfluous; or to place words in an unconventional order. All of these contrivances, together with figures of speech, erudite allusions and verbal gymnastics are part of the esoteric character of the verse, much of which is completely intelligible only to the small number of the initiated.

More than fifty forms of verse can be distinguished; but, as I have said, I will deal only with a few representative kinds, under two periods, namely 1450-1750, and 1751-1885.

Burmese Poetry, 1450-1750

It has been mentioned earlier that the chief motifs of early Burmese poetry were religion, royalty, nature, and love. It may be said that each of the five major genres in this period took one of these motifs as its predominant though not necessarily

exclusive theme. These genres were *pyó*, *maw-gùn*, *eì-gyìn*, *tàw-là* and *yadú*.

PYÓ. *Pyó* are verse renderings of Buddhist stories and teachings which transferred the Pali originals to a Burmese setting and made them more vivid by adding small imaginative details and homilies. In the case of those *pyó* which are based on Buddha's Birth Stories, the narrative parts, though not devoid of embellishments, are usually in fairly simple verse. The real literary merits, however, lie in the poet's treatment of the *gāthā* (Pali verse) in Burmese and of certain conventional topics such as the Buddha, the king, the city, and addresses to persons. Here is a translation of a literary composition on the Buddha taken from a *pyó* based on Birth Story or *Jātaka* 509.

He who has the might to topple and crush, like a violent storm, that vaunting banner, the inflated arrogance of the four castes; the banner they have set up on the three boasted qualities of birth, virtue and honour, which are extolled with noise and bombast as without equal;

He whose renown re-echoes far and wide, as descended from a line of virtuous kings going back for one hundred and sixty thousand generations;

Humbly revered by all creatures, denizens of earth and sky;

He whose virtues are incomparable, towering like Mount Meru; supreme head of all holy monks; lord of the beings of the Three Worlds;

While dwelling in dignity at Jetavana -- the noble monastery [witness of numerous scenes of release] not far from the wealthy and populous city of Sāvatthi -- here he set forth the beginning of the stanza *cīrassamvata passāmā*, and told this story about the excellent Renunciation, which made him sternly reject, without qualms, the tranquil and happy life with his father Suddhodana, his dear wife Bimbā, his beloved son Rāhula, and all his companions and followers, a life of perfect bliss, as if in the palace of Sakka, with all the felicity of kings.⁴

(translated by J. Okell)

Again, this illustration "on the city of Benares":

Take for example a forest glade, remote and lovely, where fragrant flowers abound; where sweet and tasty fruits, unbidden and unsought, ripe and firm, lie within reach, so plentiful they cannot all be plucked, overburdening the boughs in great abundance; where leaf and sturdy branch, latticed and intertwined, jutting out make pleasant shade; and where every delight is found. To men from distant parts, who have never been there, it beckons and calls; and once they come, they feel fast bound and cannot leave. Just so is the great city of Benares, with its marks of honour; with pleasant sights in plenty on land and water; calm and peaceful in the eight directions, without robbery, crime or war; blossoming brightly all around; and acclaimed by men from far and near who shelter in the expansive hollow of its precincts.⁵

(translated by J. Okell)

One of the most admired passages in the same *pyó* is that in which the miseries of continually repeated birth are described as like a reel spinning round as the thread is wound off it.

Kogan *Pyó*

tathan-dei-dei/tabei-lyìn-lyìn/tahnyìn-hsò-zò/tahnyò-lyá-lyá/tadá-lwàn-lwàn/tathàn-he-he/tadwe-ta-da/taha-hlaik-hlaik/tashaik-ngin-ngin/tabin-pàn-bàn/tawàn-lyà-lyà/yahat-chà-thó/

Birth after birth, over and again, with dirt and besmirching, oppression and evil, fading and withering, longing and craving, crying and groaning, clutching and clinging, panting and gasping, sobbing and weeping, toil and weariness, all pervading, round and round like a spinning reel.⁶

(translated by J. Okell)

The other *pyó*, which may be called didactic *pyó*, consist entirely of homilies and sage advice. Here is a short extract from one of the best known, called "The Essence of the World".

Learn to read the scriptures and master them. Be not frivolous. Follow good examples, esteem good works, strive to be good, and let good results be established in you.⁷

(translated by Hla Pe)

Before we go on to the next genre there are one or two more things I would like to say about the *pyó*. It is composed in stanzas of varying lengths, and there are usually about 200-300 such stanzas in the entire poem. The subject matter is religious; non-religious *pyó*, which appeared later, are exceptional. The authors in the first one hundred years were all monks, often writing at the request of the king. It is very tempting to assume that the Burmese borrowed the idea from the Sinhalese *Jātaka kāvya*.⁸ Contact between the Buddhists of Burma and Ceylon was very close during the fifteenth century and the monk who seems to have been the first to write a *Jātaka* story in Burmese verse in 1484 had a teacher who had been to Ceylon.⁹

MAW-GŪN. *Maw-gūn* are records of notable events in the public life of the king. They are written on such subjects as the completion of a canal, the building of pagodas and monasteries, the successful outcome of a military campaign, the coronation of the king, the arrival of foreign ambassadors, or the acquisition by the king of a white elephant.¹⁰

Like *pyó*, the *maw-gūn* have all the embellishments. Those written in this period range from 10 to 25 pages long, while longer ones were written later on. But unlike *pyó*, which were written at this time only by monks, and *ei-gyin*, which were written only by lay courtiers, *maw-gūn* were written by monks and laymen alike. The monks, however, generally confined the subject of their *maw-gūn* to the building of religious edifices and other events of religious significance, while the laymen wrote on secular subjects. The poets often used the notable event as the warp and the power and glory of the king as the weft, and wove them into grandiose patterns. Thus, in the poem about a holy lake called *Shi-shà*, which the king comes to repair, the following words were put into the mouth of the king and the fisherman whom he met there.

The entire forest is reverberating with the sound of drums.

An innumerable endless host, controlled, marshalled
and led by proud and glorious command,
With spearmen to right and to left,
With horsemen encompassing round about,
A mighty invading host, on some strange new
enterprise --

Thus I see before me.

Whither will my lord go?

With a redoubtable host that are too numerous to
calculate, millions that you see,
Together with hundreds of ministers, I, the exalted
monarch, have come in person

To invest and besiege the city of Shí-shà Thīn-gyì
I propose to widen my empires.¹¹

(translated by Hla Pe)

EÌ-GYÌN. Eì-gyìn were written only by courtiers. Their chief distinguishing characteristic is that they are cast in the form of an address to a royal child, informing him of the great achievements of his or her royal ancestors, tracing the line as far back as the semi-divine beings who were accepted as the progenitors of the family. As in the case of the maw-gùn, the subject offers many opportunities for panegyrics on the king and for displaying the poet's skill in the use of "embellishments". An eì-gyìn may be as long as 20 to 40 pages. The following passage is an example of the way the subject was treated:

In times long gone by, and in a distant country, Duttabaung, the great-grandfather of your grandfather, by the power of Sakka from the heavens above and of Naga and Garuda [mythical beasts], enslaved all who dwell on earth, in water and in the sky. Men of this generation, who see it not, cherish the memory and repeat the story. But O how your father surpasses this! For him the Lord of the Raksa, the celestial ogre, came gliding down with rushing and roaring, and said, 'If you need help to fight, I am your Lordship's slave, bold and defiant'. Both spirits and men have seen this, and his renown reverberates with wondrous clamour far and wide over the entire face of the earth. And you little (Princess) Htwei, great and noble blessing -- sleep, softly, sleep.¹²

(translated by J. Okell)

TÀW-LÀ. The tàw-là, which literally means "forest journey", is a comparatively short poem, in which the poet describes the thoughts stimulated by scenes in the forest. One of the most famous tàw-là was written by a monk in about 1491. His description of the forest as he travelled on a pilgrimage to the two sacred footprints of Buddha in Upper Burma -- of the trees, the colours, and the light and shade, of the different birds and their calls, and of the sound of the wind -- is moving in itself; but the beauty of the poem lies in its evocation of the mood of wistful sadness to which these sights and sounds gave rise, and of the doubts that came into the poet's mind whether he should stay within the strict rules of the Order or return to the natural