

An introduction to Burmese language and literature

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Burmese belongs to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan language group and is now the principle language and literary medium of the Union of Burma. Tonal, mainly mono-syllabic and positional, it recognises only three parts of speech: nouns, verbs or verbal-nouns and particles. Changes of tense, mood and gender are indicated by conventional word-positions governed loosely by functional particles. It has both a colloquial and a more elegant literary form as well as special vocabularies pertaining to the Buddhist clergy and the Burmese court. Burmese has borrowed from Pāli, Sanskrit, Mon and in more recent times from English. Many neologisms and scientific and technical terms have been introduced since Burma attained her independence from Britain in 1948 to answer the needs of modern society. The Burmese script, South Indian in origin, reached the Burmese through the Mons of Lower Burma in the 9th. century A.D.

Burmese literature, apart from the lithic inscriptions, originated mainly under the auspices of Burmese Buddhist kings and the Buddhist Church. Monks, men who had received their education in a monastery-school, Court officials and some palace-ladies, drew heavily on stories from the Buddhist scriptures, royal occasions, nature and love themes for their compositions. Poems in refined courtly language displaying clever metrical composition were for recitation rather than reading. Prose writings though not so numerous consisted of translations or adaptations of Buddhist stories into Burmese, works on astrology, Buddhism, history, law and medicine. The 19th. and 20th. centuries have seen the rise and development of Burmese drama, the popular play, the novel, the short story and a wide range of both prose and poetical writings on modern themes.

A.D. 1113–1364 Old Burmese

Burma has epigraphic records in several languages and scripts – Sanskrit, Pyu and Mon – dating from the 6th.–9th. century A.D. The conquest of Thaton in Lower Burma by Anawratha in A.D. 1057 and the subsequent impact of the more mature civilization of the Mons professing Hinayana Buddhism on the Burmese court at Pagan, brought about an era of great religious fervour. Magnificent temples¹ were constructed and thousands of stone inscriptions were set up in or near

1 *Pictorial guide to Pagan* compiled by the Director of Archaeological Survey, Rangoon, 1955, 1963.

Burma, Korea, Tibet von A. B. GRISWOLD, CHEWON KIM, PIETER H. POTT, Baden-Baden, 1963.
Sud-est Asiatique by L. FREDERIC, Paris, 1964.

pagodas recording the meritorious deeds of royal personages and court officials. They also mention important regal events, dedications of slaves and rice-lands to specific pagodas and often contain the prayers and aspirations of the donors followed by fearsome curses likely to afflict anyone so ill-advised as to destroy the work.

At first very crudely, but later painstakingly and beautifully inscribed on pillars, stones, votive tablets and pagoda walls, they first appeared in Mon and Pāli and when a system of representing Burmese sounds had been worked out, in Burmese itself. As most of the themes are dedicatory, their vocabulary is somewhat limited. Loan-words from Mon, Pāli, Sanskrit and Shan are found and frequent inconsistencies in spelling indicate scribes were struggling with the new alphabet.

The earliest dated Burmese inscription so far discovered is the Myinkaba Kubyaukkyi or Myazedi Inscription² of A.D. 1113. Visitors to the National Museum in Rangoon may read on each of its four faces, in Burmese, Mon, Pāli and Pyu, the touching story of how Rājakumār, King Kyansittha's son, made solemn offerings, a golden image of the Buddha and dedicated three villages of slaves as an act of merit so that his dying father might share it in part during his last hours. It is linguistically important for it enabled Dr. C.O. Blagden in 1911 to decipher the hitherto unknown Pyu language.³ The inscriptions also contain many examples of early Burmese verse, the earliest of which is dated A.D. 1310.

Although much of the pioneering work in this sphere has been done by Professor G.H. Luce,⁴ for the decipherment, interpretation and significance of an inscription remains a very specialist study, a huge amount of material, much of it *in situ*, still awaits the systematic and scientific examination of scholars of the languages of Burma keen to unravel more of this important period of Burma's early history and to study the development of the Burmese language.

The inscriptions make frequent reference from A.D. 1271 to palm-leaf writings and to 'libraries' in which to house copies of the Tripitaka so that it is not unreasonable to suppose that what works preceded the earliest Burmese writings must regrettably be lost for all time. The ravages of climate and destructive insects, wars and political strife have taken their toll of this valuable perishable material. It is not until the 15th. century that we have evidence of Burmese palm-leaf literature.

Two significant events, however, were to have far-reaching effects on the Burmese. The Tartars overthrew the Pagan Dynasty in A.D. 1287 and during the following period of disorder, a series of Shan petty-chiefs held sway in Upper Burma

2 *Epigraphia Birmanica Vol.1. Part 1.* by C. DUROISELLE, Government Press, Rangoon, 1919. *Myazedi Inscription in Four Languages, Ma Nyunt Han, Burma Cultural Series No.1*, National Museum, Rangoon, 1960.

3 *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1911, p.365–388.

4 *Selections from the Inscriptions of Pagan*, by PE MAUNG TIN and G.H. LUCE, Rangoon, 1928. *Inscriptions of Burma*. Edited by PE MAUNG TIN and G.H. LUCE, Oxford, 1933–1957. *Old Burma – Early Pagan* by G.H. LUCE, Vols. 1–3, 1969–70.

until Thadominbya founded a new capital at Ava in A.D. 1364. To escape persecution many Burmese families fled south to Toungoo which was later to become a strong Burmese cultural centre. The Mon kingdom in the south regained its independence during the Mongol attacks and Wareru established his capital at Martaban. On his instructions, Mon monks compiled what has become the earliest extant law-book in Burma, the *Wareru Dhammathat* – a digest of the Laws of Manu. A later ruler, Dhammazedī, A.D. 1412–1492, stimulated a religious revival by sending missions to Ceylon and India, had the *Wareru Dhammathat*⁵ translated into Burmese and left for posterity a collection of his own rulings in the *Dhammazedi Pyaton*.

Burmese poetry

Some of the more common forms of Burmese versification of which there are over 50 varieties are, *pyo*, *yadu*, *egyin* and *mawgun*.

Pyo

A *pyo* is essentially a *jātaka* – one of the former existences of the Buddha, written in lines of four syllables with rhymes that ‘climb’ from the end of one line towards the beginning of successive lines. It is by the power of narration and the author's ability to embellish the story with cleverly contrived rhymes, elegant phrases, *recherche* vocabulary and above all by presenting the audience with sounds to delight the ear, that the literary merit of a poet is judged. *Pyo* are didactic in nature, contain many references to Buddhist doctrine and were mainly the fruit of the labours of monks or ex-monks.

Yadu

Yadu are usually romantic poems composed by young courtiers and palace officials telling of their aspirations and disappointments in affairs of the heart. Seindakyawthu, however, selected this form of verse to extol the greatness of his king and patron, Alaungpaya and wrote poems for significant royal occasions such as the king's visit to the Nanda lake, the arrival of a sacred white elephant and the marriage of his son Thadominhlagyaw 1757.

Egyin

Egyin – cradle-songs or historical ballads were composed ostensibly to lull a child to sleep as it listened to the great achievements of his or her ancestors. They were also written to fan the flames of nationalism during the Toungoo period.

5 *King Wagaru's Manu Dhammasattham, text, translation and notes*, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1963.

Mawgun

Mawgun – a panegyric ode. Originally the word meant the place where the meritorious deeds performed by the king were recorded. It later came to be applied to the verses commemorating the glory and magnificence of the kings of Ava, recording contemporary events and praising the then-reigning monarch. Many were composed about royal elephants.

A. D. 1364–1555 The Ava Period

Two well-known works of great repute but of non-ascertained antiquity are a *linga* written by ANANTATHURIYA, a minister at the time of King Narapatisithu A.D. 1173–1210 on the eve of his execution and a *yadu* on metaphysics by SATUYINGABALA. The first verse of any considerable length extant, however, is the *Yakhaingminthami egyin* A.D. 1455 of ADUNYO, a minister at the Arakanese court. SHIN HTWE NYO'S *Pyeson mawgun* in A.D. 1472 and SHIN THUYE'S *Thakhin Htwe egyin* A.D. 1476 were the prelude to the bulk of Burmese literature which was to reach one of its highest peaks during the reigns of Minkhaung II, A.D. 1481 and Shwenankyawshin A.D. 1502.

SHIN UTTAMAKYAW A.D. 1453–1542 is best remembered for a *tawla* – forest journey – describing the return of the Buddha to Kapilavastu in the nine stanzas of which he paints in burning colours a series of portraits showing how the whole universe paid him due homage. It is especially noted for its very close observation and spiritualization of nature.

SHIN MAHATHILAWUNTHA, a *pyo* writer of great fame, usually chose profound subject matter and sought to explain points of the Buddhist doctrine as in his *Paramidawgan pyo* A.D. 1451 and *Sutaungan pyo* c. A.D. 1495, whilst his *Taungdwinla pyo* describes in riddles a journey he made from Taungdwingyi to Ava. To him are also accredited the two earliest prose works in Burmese, the *Parayanawatthu* A.D. 1511, a collection of stories based on the Dhammapada and Anguttara commentaries and the *Yazawingyaw* A.D. 1520, a synopsis of the early history of kings in India and Burma up to the 15th. century.

SHIN MAHARATHATHARA, born in Ava in A.D. 1469, a child prodigy and rival of Shin Mahathilawuntha, composed many fine poetical works amongst the most famous being the *Buridatlingagi* A.D. 1484, the *Buridatzaubaung pyo* A.D. 1494, the *Thanwara pyo* A.D. 1529 and the *Gambhithara pyo*. It was, however, at the request of Minkhaung II that he wrote his masterpiece known under three titles: *Kogan pyo*, *Satudhammathara pyo* or *Hatthipala pyo*. In nine long sections it unfolds in a wealth of elegant turns of phrase, learned allusions and exquisitely well-chosen figures of speech, the story of the Hatthipāla *jātaka*. His *Shwesetdawthwa tawla* describing a journey to the famous shrine of the Buddha's footprint at Prome is noted for its meticulous attention to the flora and fauna he encountered.

Rebellions and disorder were again rife until the Shan ruler of Mohnyin and Thadominsaw of Prome captured and sacked Ava in A.D. 1527. The new ruler, Thohanbwa, bent on a policy of destruction and persecution, killed monks, pillaged pagodas and burnt valuable manuscripts from monastic libraries. Many Burmese families again fled to Toungoo, many no doubt joining relatives already established in the south. Shan chieftains ruled until A.D. 1555 when Bayinnaung, who had been crowned king in Toungoo, moved north to re-establish Burmese supremacy in Upper Burma.

Popular tradition credits the *Lokathara pyo*, a poem of 55 short verses exhorting laymen, kings and Brahmans to observe and practise Buddhist teachings, to a learned monk the KANDAWMINGYAUNG SAYADAW. SHIN TEJOTHARA, living in the safety of Prome, is remembered for two *pyo*, the *Byadiha pyo* and the *Thuwannahintha pyo*, both written as inuendos to the Shans. SHIN AGGATHAMADI was the author of the *Thuwannathama pyo* and the trilogy on parts of the *Nemi jātaka*, the *Nemimaggasogan pyo* A.D. 1535, the *Nemingayegan pyo* A.D. 1538 and the *Nemibongan pyo* A.D. 1542. His descriptions of the beauties of heaven and the miseries of hell are so graphic as to arouse wonder and amazement, fright and trepidation. Two poetesses, MI NYO from Arakan and MI PHYU from Ava vied with each other at Court each writing a *yadu* eulogising herself.

A.D. 1515–1752 The Toungoo Period

In contrast to the literature of the Ava period in which Burmese writers mainly members of the Buddhist Order naturally enough looked to the Buddhist scriptures for inspiration, *yadu*, *egyin*, *mawgun* and prose works now came into their own. Young courtiers, romantic and adventurous in outlook, produced large numbers of works praising the exploits of Burmese kings, recording contemporary events and displaying their own finer feelings in hundreds of romantic verses.

HLAWGATHONDAUNGHMU wrote two famous *egyin* in honour of king Tabinshwehti – the *Mintayashwehti egyin* A.D. 1515 and the *Mintayashwehtinadawthwin egyin* A.D. 1530, NAWADEGYI, a soldier-poet composed many *yadu* describing his travels to Prome, Salin, Sagaing and Ava, and NATSHINNAUNG, a Lord of Toungoo, wrote what are generally considered to be some of the best love poems in Burmese literature. He had fallen in love with the extremely beautiful widow of Nandabayin's son, the Crown Prince, killed in single-combat during an elephant fight with the Thai king Naresuan in A.D. 1593. Their happiness was short-lived for he was put to death in 1612 for his complicity with Philip de Brito, a Portuguese adventurer, in defying Anaukpetlun at Syriam.

ZEYYANANDAMEIT A.D. 1572 and SHIN THANKHO A.D. 1598 were also *yadu* writers of great fame. The *Minredeipa egyin*, a cradle-song in honour of Anaukpetlun's son, is ranked as one of the best *egyin* in Burmese literature. The 55 hairstyles used by the maids-of-honour during the Pagan dynasty was the topic chosen for a verse-form known as *angyin* by a young poetess, YAWESHINHTWE.

The middle of the 16th. century saw the appearance of prose works in ever increasing numbers. A historical romance, the *Yazadarit Ayedawbon* was translated from Mon into good Burmese, an Arakanese scholar, MAHAPYINNYAKYAW

wrote a compilation of legal precedents under the title of the *Mahapyinnyakyaw pyaton* thus placing the interpretation of the Manu Dhammathat on a Buddhist basis, and in A.D. 1629 there appeared the *Manikundala watthu*, the story of the Sutasoma *jātaka*, so skillfully written that references to almost all the other *jātaka* were cunningly introduced. The most important prose work of the period was the earliest standard history of Burma, the *Mahayazawingyi*, compiled from many manuscripts at his disposal by U KALORUIT A.D. 1714–1735.

PADETHAYAZA, who served under the last three kings of the dynasty, would today be termed a radical. He chose up-to-date themes for his many *pyo* – the Arrival of the Siamese Envoys – for example and wrote *tyabwe* – bucolic songs – featuring the everyday-life activities of Burmese villagers. He laid the foundation for popular dramas known as *pyazats* that were to become so prolific in the second-half of the 19th. century by composing the earliest extant court drama in Burmese literature, the *Manikhet pyazat*.

Attacked by the Manipuris in the north, the Gwe Shans near Mandalay and by the Mons in the south, the Toungoo dynasty fell to the Mons in 1752 with the capture of Ava. The Burmese king, his family and many members of the court were deported to Pegu. Scholars and writers retired to the safety of remoter areas and the Burmese bided their time noticing especially how the Mons were failing to consolidate their gains. Alaungpaya, A.D. 1752–1760, the man born to lead the Burmese to final victory over the Mons, established himself at the head of a national movement in Shwebo to found the new Konbaung dynasty.

A.D. 1752–1875 The Konbaung period

Burmese literature reached its zenith during this period. This is owed to the patronage of the Court, where skilled men of letters extolled the virtues and prowess of the then-reigning monarch and helped to fan the flames of nationalism with their compositions, to the arrival in Burma of talented Thai artists with new forms of entertainment as the result of Burma's frequent inroads into Thailand and to a growing change of both subject matter and method of presentation. Prose works began to proliferate, model-letters – *myittasa* – in mixed style were exchanged between ordinary people and songs of many types came to the fore. Towards the close of the period the earliest seeds of Burmese drama were sown.

A brilliant young author of love poems on the model of Nawade and Natshinnaung, U AW, tutor to Alaungpaya's son, helped in some measure to revive the withered and fallen spirits of the Burmese by his patriotic verses. In addition to *pyo*, *egyin* and *luda*, he also wrote a standard work on Burmese orthography in 1793 short stanzas called the *Kawilakkhanathatpon*.

LETWETHONDARA delighted the Court under a succession of kings with his *pyo* and *mawgun* but is chiefly remembered for a *yadu* he wrote during his exile to Meza. His reminiscences of Shwebo, touching references to his family and mellifluous expressions so moved the king, Naungdawgyi, that he had him recalled to assume a post of high legal office. Many of his works bear the stamp of his profession. One of his contemporaries, KYONWUNBONMAZEYYA, compiled

the *Manukye Dhammathat*⁶ in Burmese, one of the five law-manuals used in both the Burmese and British Courts.

SHWEDAUNGTHIHATHURA wrote what has become the first *zatwatthu* on record, the *Yadanakyemon zatwatthu*, SHWEDAUNGNANDATHU relates the story of a Mon princess in his *Mwenun yagan*, the oldest surviving *yagan* in Burmese literature and ATWINWUN WANNADHAMMAKYAWHTIN produced word-for-word translations of several law-manuals.

One of the masterpieces of Burmese literature, the *Paleiksa egin*, was composed by U HPYAW at the behest of Prince Singu, the son of King Hsinbyushin A.D. 1763. In 70 verses containing much legend and quasi-historical tradition, it traces the genealogy of Burmese kings giving dates. It reaches the height of poetry with its elegant variation, literary refinement and wealth of homonyms. Singu's Chief Queen, SHIN MIN achieved fame by writing short poems *le-gyo*, *dwe-gyo* and songs, *tedat*.

The most prolific and versatile writer of the period was a man honoured by successive kings with many titles, the TWINTHIN TAIKWUN. As well as nine famous *pyo*, many *luda*, *mawgun* and *yadu*, he made a significant contribution to Burmese history by writing his „New History“ or *Yazawinthat*. It contains additional material not found in the „Glass Palace Chronicle“ for as one of the officials appointed by Bowdawpaya to examine hundreds of inscriptions he had collected near Mandalay, he was able to compare the contents of former chronicles with them and make use of many other old manuscripts. Burmese scholars owe him a great debt for his treatise on obsolescent Burmese words from the 15th. and 16th. centuries, the *Poranakatha*. He drew on them freely in his own writings and may well be responsible for changes of meaning of many words by giving connotations he thought they should have!

U TO, A.D. 1751, an ex-monk, a skillful rhymester, inventor of new words and fascinating phrases, composer of countless epistles – *saungba* – during Singu's reign, began one of the best known works in Burmese literature, the *Yama yagan*, a discursive epic on the theme of the *Rāmāyana*. It is one of the many traces of Thai culture introduced into Burma as the result of the warlike excursions of Burmese kings into Thailand from the time of Bayinnaung's attacks on Ayuthaya in A.D. 1564 to its destruction by Hsinbyushin's forces in A.D. 1767. U YWE completed the work and U LAN wrote a notable skit on it.

KYIGAN KO YIN GYI A.D. 1757, author of a poetical work on Burmese spelling, the *Swesonkyawhtin thatpon*, established a name for himself in the literary world through his model-letters – *myittasa* – poetical letters originally for royal ears or in connection with royal affairs which he now composed for laymen. Other writers who achieved distinction in a specific style were U YA for his – *e* – a kind of song – ME KWE for her *ngogyin* – dirges – NAWADE II for his *mawgun*, U AUNG HPYO for his *thagyin*, and U AWBATHA for his adaptations into flowing

6 *The Dhammathat, or Laws of Menoo*, translated from the Burmese by D. RICHARDSON, Maulmein and Rangoon, American Baptist Mission Press, 1847, 1896, and Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1963.

Burmese of eight of the great *jātaka* stories. The minor stories were translated into Burmese by another outstanding monk, the NYAUNGAN SAYADAW. The MONYWE SAYADAW and U SHWE KHYI were the last representatives of the old-school of classical *pyo* writers.

Thailand temporarily conquered by Burma culturally conquered Burma for entertainers of all kinds, especially those capable of performing drama, actors and musicians, singers and dancers now exerted a considerable influence on the Burmese Court. By turns a novice, a goldsmith, an army officer, a court official and a writer, MYAWATI MINGYI U SA, A. D. 1765–1853, translated a Siamese play into Burmese under the title of the *Inaung zat*. He also composed vast numbers of *yodaya thachin* – songs in the Siamese style – which have become firm Burmese classics.

U SHUN, A. D. 1782, a notable poet of Bagyidaw's reign, well-versed in astrology and medicine wrote widely. The *Mahasutasoma pyo* and the *Ummadanti pyo* are regarded as his best.

Different types of song, *tedat*, *lecho* (a 4 section song), *dwecho* (a 2 section song), *bawle* (plaintive songs), *thancho* (sweet songs) began to find an appreciative public. Two rival bards, LU U MIN and POTHUDAW U MIN, MA MYA KALE and her daughter HLAINGHTEIK-KHAUNGTIN have all left memorable compositions. Two dramas in courtly language the *Indawuntha nandwin zat* and the *Wizayakayi nandwin zat* were the forerunners of popular plays – *pyazats* – which were to become so much the rage under the influence of U KYIN U and U PONNYA.

Only three of U KYIN U's many plays survive, the *Mahosatha*, *Dewagonban* and *Papahein pyazats*. U PONNYA A. D. 1812–1867, author of much courtly and religious verse, astrological works and several famous dramas, the *Paduma*, *Yethe* and *Wizaya pyazats*, but for an untimely end, the ultimate penalty for his involvement in a rebellion in 1865–66, would doubtless have held audiences and readers spellbound with many more of his accomplished writings. His plays primarily written for performance at the Burmese Court or before provincial governors contain vivid descriptions, show touches of wit and are models of clarity.

Dr. ADONIRAM JUDSON, the great American missionary who arrived in Burma in 1813, laboured under considerable difficulties, personal tragedies and in unsettled conditions for many years to produce what is still the standard Burmese-English dictionary. A dictionary bearing his name and compiled from his manuscripts was published in 1826 by the Serampore Mission Press, Calcutta during Judson's imprisonment at Ava during the First Burmese War. On his release he occupied himself with the translation of the Bible, the first copy of which in Burmese was printed in A. D. 1840. Dissatisfied with his earlier lexicographical efforts, he began a double work only to succumb to an attack of fever in 1850. The 1st. Edition was published under the care of the Reverend E. A. Stevens in 1852. It was revised and enlarged in 1893 and 1918 and a Centenary Edition was printed in 1953 in Rangoon by the Baptist Board of Publications. He also wrote a grammar of the Burmese language. Two other Baptist missionaries, Carey and Hough

began their labours about this time and with them came the first printing machines to Burma.

Alaungpaya's third son, Bowdawpaya, 1782–1819, a proud and ambitious monarch, embarked on a policy of Burmese expansion that ultimately brought about the downfall of his country. He seized Arakan, raided in Assam and unsuccessfully attacked Siam. The Burmese frontier now bordered India. Fugitives from Arakan and Assam, Burmese incursions into British territory, the annexation of Manipur in 1819, a variety of border incidents, the self-confidence of the Burmese commanders and their armies and a general ignorance of the might of the British in India at that time were some of the contributory factors that led to strained relations between the British and Burmese authorities. After the First Burmese war 1824–1826 the ceded provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim became the Province of British Burma. Lower Burma was added after the Second Burmese War 1852 and the whole of Burma was united as a province of British India after the Third Burmese war 1885.

Literary activity was greatly affected by these momentous political changes. Burmese literature had been rather conservative in its forms and themes and the country somewhat isolated from the outside world. With the introduction of secular literature from Thailand, the establishment of printing presses in British Burma and greater contact with the west, new styles of creative and independent writing slowly evolved. Burmese authors began to write short dramas in authentic stage idiom, complete with songs and comic interludes. Drama was no longer the prerogative of the Court. By the middle of the 19th. century there were touring theatrical companies and itinerant puppeteers were very popular. Works which had hitherto been laboriously copied and not infrequently mis-copied by scribes on palm-leaves and on to concertina-like black paper-manuscripts called *para-baik*, could now be swiftly produced in their thousands by the printing-press. Owners saw considerable profits were to be had by encouraging authors to write for a reading public whose numbers were steadily increasing.

Before the advent of these new styles, compositions on more traditional lines continued. King Bagyidaw appointed a committee of scholars in 1829 to compile a history of the Burmese kings. The committee sat in a part of the royal palace at Ava called the *Hman-nan*⁷ or Glass Palace from which the work takes its name. Its members not only made use of earlier extant records but inserted lengthy observations on debatable points. The „Second Chronicle“ deals with the period 1821–1854 and the *Konbaungset*, by U TIN, compiled from diaries, records of the Court and private memoirs ends at 1886.

King Mindon 1852–1812 having transferred his capital from Amarapura to Mandalay, strove to make it a centre displaying the best traditional arts and skills of the Burmese people. Ever mindful of the role Buddhism played in the lives of the people and himself a fervent adherent, he achieved the dearest wish of his life

7 *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. Translated by PE MAUNG TIN and G.H. LUCE, Oxford University Press, 1923 and Rangoon University Press, 1960.

in 1871 by convening the Fifth Buddhist Council. The sacred books of the law – the *Pitaka thonbon* – were recited and discussed over a period of months. A final version was later beautifully inscribed on marble tablets and arranged within the walls of the Kuthodaw Pagoda Mandalay.

In 1872 Mindon despatched his chief minister, THE KINWUN MINGYI, at the head of a Burmese mission to England. On the way it negotiated treaties with Italy and France. The minister has left us interesting accounts of his travels in England and France in two diaries.

A.D. 1875–1948

With the publication of the *Mahajanaka pyazat* by U KHO in 1875, U POK NI's *Konmaya pyazat*, and U KU's *Luwun maung hnama pyazat*, playwrights poured out a volume of popular dramas in ever increasing numbers but of often inferior quality. U CHAN MYA and SAYA LUN wrote many of these rhymed-plays creating the most poignant situations.

Burmese writers now under more European influence than ever before turned their attentions towards novel writing. The advent of modern Burmese fiction was heralded with the publication in 1900 of an adaptation of „The Count of Monte Christo“ under the title *Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma* by JAMES HLA GYAW. The amorous adventures of a happy-go-lucky vegetable-seller feature in U KYI's *Maung Hmaing* published in 1905 and two rustic rogues have comic adventures in his *Sagadaungza watthu*. U LAT in two outstanding novels *Shwepyiso* in 1913 and *Sabebin* 1914 shows the contrast between the old and the new code of manners that was slowly becoming part of Burmese society.

In 1910 the Burma Research Society was founded „for the investigation and encouragement of Arts, Science and Literature in relation to Burma and neighbouring countries“. Scholarly and extremely informative articles in both Burmese and English appeared in its Journal until the Japanese invasion in 1942. The activities of the Society and the publication of its Journal were re-started after the war.

During the 1st. World War, Britain made promise to Burma of political advancement with responsible self-government as the ultimate aim. Burmese sentiments were aroused and SAYA LUN, alias Mr. Maing Hmaing, wrote two imaginary biographical memoirs – *Boycot tika* and *Myauk tika* – freely interspersed with excursions into history and skillfully contrived verses with political overtones.

It has often been asserted that Burmese language and literature tended to be neglected during the British period in favour of acquiring an English-style education so necessary to obtain a post in a Government Department, a coveted status-symbol in many a Burmese family of the time. While this may in part be true, the advent of cheap printing materials, the printing press and the rapid development of Burmese newspapers, magazines and periodicals gave increased opportunities for budding authors to show and practise their skills. Political consciousness in Burma came as an aftermath of the war and with the people's patriotic

motives and a growing interest in western art and science, there occurred a revival in Burmese literature.

The founding of Rangoon University in 1920 in extensive grounds a few miles outside the city also did a great deal to encourage young student writers to publish original articles, essays, poems and short stories in University magazines and in „Gandalawka“, the organ of the Burma Education Extension Society, formed in 1928 to inculcate reading habits, publish books on contemporary thought and to serve as a forum for new writers.

A group of literati known as the ‚Khitsan‘ or modern writers, pioneered a new literary movement in the early 1930's. Under the pen-name of ‚Theipan Maung Wa‘, U SEIN TIN, I.C.S. wrote delightful vignettes of Burmese life as seen through the eyes of a junior Government official. ‚Zawgyi‘, U THEIN HAN, who for many years has been Librarian of the University of Rangoon adapted Moliere's „Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme“ in 1935 and U WUN – ‚Minthuwun‘ – poet, scholar, translator and lexicographer and one of the foremost authorities on the Burmese language, are very well-known for their numerous collections of short stories and poems. *Thonpwinsaing*,⁸ a volume published in 1955 contains some 30 of the best stories of these three writers. The presses meanwhile were busily engaged reproducing Burmese classics, pagoda histories, learned treatises on Buddhism, manuals of administration, popular plays, medical texts and large numbers of works on astrology, history and law. Members of the Education Department and teachers throughout Burma occupied themselves editing and preparing texts for use in schools and learned scholars of the Buddhist Church continued the work of their predecessors revising and commenting on the Buddhist scriptures.

In 1937 the Nagani – Red Dragon Book Club – formed by Thakin Nu, later to become Prime Minister of Burma, began publishing works dealing with revolutionary trends in world politics. Two years later a State Translation Bureau was set up to make known the works of western arts and science available to Burmese readers. The Japanese invasion and military occupation of Burma until 1945, however, brought to a halt this period of literary activity.

Burma was to become a battle-ground twice over resulting in many of her towns being all but destroyed in the holocaust of war. Offices, schools and libraries were looted, presses smashed and thousands of books and manuscripts perished. As of yore, members of the literary intelligentsia sought safety in rural areas to await more settled times. The task of rebuilding a shattered country began in 1946. Despite the shortage of printing materials, presses began to recover and cheaply produced novelettes many with wartime themes, magazines, newspapers and with the current political agitation for independence from Britain, political pamphlets of all kinds, appeared.

8 *Thonpwinsaing Khitsan Sarpay, Shumawa, Rangoon, 1955.*

The modern period

At a colourful ceremony in Rangoon on January 4th. 1948, the new Republic of the Union of Burma was born. Burmese is now the sole official language of the country and nationalism demands its use in all spheres of Burmese life. The Burma Translation Society, now known as the Sarpay Beikman Institute, has since its inception in 1947 produced editions in Burmese of many hundreds of selected literary and technical works from foreign literatures. It also encourages books to be written on a wide variety of Burmese cultural and literary topics and committees sit to discuss lists of modern words for adoption into the Burmese language. Nine volumes of its *magnum opus* – The Burmese Encyclopedia – *Myanmarasweson kyan* have already been completed. America presented the Society with Monotype printing machines made in Britain, the first adaptations of this process to the Burmese script and by 1954 over five million copies of its publications had been distributed. The Revolutionary Government took over the affairs of the Institute in 1962 and set up the Union of Burma Literary and Translation Commission whose energies were to be devoted to the compilation of a standard dictionary, an official manual of Burmese composition and a technological dictionary.

U Nu, himself an accomplished Burmese scholar who became Prime Minister in 1947, has written two well-known plays, *Yet set ba kwe*, a story set in pre-war Burma showing aspects of the national struggle against landlords, money-lenders and the British regime, and *Ludu aung than*⁹ – portraying a young man's conversion to Communism, his subsequent disillusionment and vindication of democracy. The late Mr. J. S. Furnivall edited and translated another of his works under the title *Burma under the Japanese* in 1954.

Buddhist studies received a further fillip in 1954 with the great attempt on the part of the Burmese Government to promote the extension of Theravada Buddhism not only within the frontiers of the Union of Burma but throughout the world by convening the Sixth Great Buddhist Council. Its main task was the compilation of an authoritative version of the Buddhist Canon for publication and during its two-year session attended by thousands of monks from all over Burma, delegates from Buddhist and non-Buddhist countries and many renowned scholars of Buddhism, the re-edited Tipitaka was ceremonially recited. The proceedings closed on the full-moon day of the month of May, 1956, the end of the 2500th. year of the Buddhist religion and thus would herald, it was hoped according to a well-known Burmese prophecy, the advent of a revival in Buddhism, a period of increased prosperity and auspiciousness and universal harmony.

A military government headed by General Ne Win deposed U Nu on the 2nd. March, 1962. A Revolutionary Council was set up and the 1947 Constitution abrogated. Army officers have since been administering the country endeavouring to implement ambitious economic and social programmes following the decision to introduce 'Lanzin' – the Burmese way to Socialism. As an incentive, the Sarpay

⁹ *The people win through*, by E. HUNTER, New York, 1957.

Beikman Institute continues to award annual prizes in nine categories of literature and Burmese authors are exhorted to see that the works they produce reflect and record the achievements of the peasants and the workers thus contributing to the success of the Burmese Way to Socialism Programme.

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In Burma the Library of the University of Rangoon and the National Library amongst others have valuable holdings of books and manuscripts in Burmese and other indigenous languages of the country in addition to large quantities of periodicals, reports and magazines on an extensive range of topics. Good collections of Burmese books and books on Burma may be consulted at the British Museum, the India Office Library, and in the Library of the School of Oriental Studies, London.