





U Thaw Kaung

The *Ramayana* Drama in Myanmar

The story of Rama first reached Myanmar as it did several Southeast Asian countries with the early Indian traders and merchants, some of whom settled down to form Hindu communities.¹ The early Pyu people worshipped some Hindu deities; one of their earliest cities was called Beikthano or Vishnu City, which flourished from about the 1st to 8th century AD. Rama is worshipped by the Hindus as an avatar or incarnation of Vishnu, so the story of Rama might have been known to the Pyu people, though there is as yet no concrete proof.

The oral narration of the Rama story, or the *Ramayana*, preceded the visual depictions, which in turn were followed by literary renditions in prose and poetry and later by dramatic performances. In some periods these four aspects of the *Ramayana* tradition co-existed, over-lapping, intermingling and influencing each other.² In modern times we have the *Ramayana* in video and movies.

The first pictorial evidence of the *Ramayana* being known in Myanmar is from the early Bagan Period. In the terra-cotta plaques depicting the 550 (or rather 547) Jatakas of the

two Hpetleik pagodas, the Rama story is shown as incorporated into the Buddhist tales.³ In the Nat-hlaung Kyaung (Vishnu Temple) of the 11th century in Bagan, there are two brick and stone sculptures of Rama and Parasu Rama.⁴

In the lovely tondi of the Abeyadana Temple of King Kyansittha's period (A.D. 1084-1112) a figure of Rama riding Hanuman can be seen.⁵

We can, therefore, safely say that the *Ramayana* was known to the Myanmar people by the 11th century if not earlier. King Kyansittha himself claimed descent from Vishnu and asserted that he was a close relative of Rama in two of his Mon inscriptions, one from Mya Kan, Bagan the other from the Kyaik Thalan Pagoda near Thaton.⁶

The Rama story is known in three forms to the Myanmar:

(1) Rama as an avatar, an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. In old Bagan the Varshnava Brahmans played an important role in court ceremonies, even as they did in later Myanmar kings' times right up to the annexation of the Myanmar Kingdom in 1886. These Brahmans worshipped Rama; one can still see Rama as a

Hindu deity being worshipped by the Hindus in the Ponna-zu quarter of Mandalay up to the present day. The Myanmar call this “original” Rama, (Vishnu) Rama or “*Pashu Yama (Rama)*”.⁷ This is probably Parasu Rama (also spelt Parashurama).

(2) The Rama story as incorporated into the 550 Buddhist Jataka tales, where Rama is depicted as a future Buddha, a bodhisattva. The Myanmar term for this Buddhist Rama is “*Alaung-daw Yama (Rama)*” or the Bodhisat Rama. This story is Jataka no. 461, the *Dattathaya-hta* (Dasaratha) Jataka.

(3) The third Rama story is that of Valmiki and later recensions. The Myanmar probably received this enlarged version of the *Ramayana* not only from India, but also from Thailand and Laos from about the 16th century. The Myanmar call this Rama story “*Pondaw Yama (Rama)*”. This version is also known as “*Nan-dwin Yama (Rama)*” or “*The Palace Rama*,” as this version became the Royal court drama of the Myanmar king’s palace.⁸

Literary versions

The various Myanmar literary versions of the *Ramayana* were meticulously studied in the 1970’s by U Thein Han, former Chief Librarian of the University of Rangoon Library and Chairman of the Myanmar Historical Commission. He wrote ten articles in Myanmar⁹ and two in English¹⁰; these writings form the basic, indispensable literature and became pioneer studies on the Myanmar *Ramayana*.

According to U Thein Han, the earliest literary reference to the *Ramayana* is in a Myanmar pyo (Jataka poem) written by Shin Agga Thamadi in 1527 AD entitled Thuwunna-shan Thahte-khan Pyo, based on the Suvannasama Jataka. There are also two references to the *Ramayana* from the first half of the 18th century in the Exegesis by the Min Kyaung Phondawgyi of Taungdwingyi to the Kandaw Mingyaung Myinttaza¹¹ and (2) Manikhet, a play by Minister Padetha Yazar¹², based on one of the stories of the Zimme Pannasa, the Fifty Jataka Tales of Chiang Mai.

The first Myanmar dated literary work of the *Ramayana* is the *Yama (Rama) Tha-gyin* by U Aung Phyo, written in 1775 at Innwa (Ava), near the end of King Hsinbyushin’s reign (1763-1776). U Aung Phyo was a popular reciter of ballads, and he wrote the *Ramayana* in a poetic form called *tha-gyin* which was used for recitations. He probably roamed the country and recited his ballads including the *Rama Tha-gyin*.¹³ U Thein Han thinks that the story of Rama in Myanmar was gradually enlarged in a period of about 600 years from the simple oral tradition of the Bagan Period to the complex story as it was written down by U Aung Phyo.

There is also an undated earlier work in prose called the *Yama Wuthtu (Rama vatthu)* which U Thein Han considers to be from the 17th century, and is therefore probably the earliest *Ramayana* literary work in Myanmar. The story as given in this prose version is very similar to the poetic work of U Aung Phyo, who himself acknowledged that he used an earlier prose work¹⁴.

This earliest *Ramayana* work written on palm-leaf was discovered by researchers of the Myanmar Historical Commission around 1972. The author of this paper was able to publish in 1974 an offset facsimile of this rare palm-leaf manuscript as “Palm-leaf and Parabike (Paper) Manuscript Series, no. 4”, while he was serving as the Convenor of the Manuscript Publication Sub-Committee of the Universities Publication Committee.¹⁵

An enlargement of the *Rama Vatthu*, also in prose, is the *Maha Yama (Rama)*, a work probably written in the late 18th century. A manuscript copy from the British Library was copied by U Tet Tut who also edited it together with U Maung Maung Gyi. As Publisher of the Burma Research Society I was able to print the *Maha Rama* as “New Research Series no. 12” in 1971.¹⁶ This is the most complete prose text of the *Ramayana* published in Myanmar so far.

The most complete text of the *Ramayana* written for dramatic performance has now been published copied from paper parabike and palm-leaf manuscript forms. It is the *Thiri Yama*

(*Rama*) written by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung in the late 18th or early 19th century. This (verse) drama written in prose and poetry with instructions for the various types of music to be played and songs to be sung, is available on over 1320 palm-leaf manuscript pages at the Myanmar National Library. About 15 years ago I obtained a copy of this rare unpublished work on 54 fascicules of paper parabike manuscript from Mandalay University Library and had it carefully recopied by hand by a Myanmar scholar on modern paper. I have now been able to publish it for the first time, in 3 volumes in 2001 and 2002.

Member of the Myanmar Historical Commission, U Maung Maung Tin is of the opinion that this work by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung, the *Thiri Rama*, published in book form under the title *Yama Pya-zattaw-gyi* is the work compiled by the members of the Royal Commission for Translating Thai Stories into Myanmar appointed by the Myanmar Crown Prince in 1789¹⁷. The author's rank is shown in the manuscript as "*Tha-nya-thei-asu Sayei*" and this rank is given to those who are in charge of the Thai and Myanmar drama troupes at the Myanmar kings' court.¹⁸ The title *Nataka* is derived from the Pali "Natako" meaning a dancer or an acrobat.

U Thein Han on the other hand is of the opinion that there was another work, now probably lost, produced by the Royal Commission, and that Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung used this earlier work and that the new work that he wrote, the *Thiri Rama*, was "definitely a representation".¹⁹ The author himself mentioned in the manuscript that he based his work on an earlier work and that he edited and rewrote sentences which were corrupt and inconsistent and made the drama more enjoyable, more delightful to the audience. Anyway, the importance of *Thiri Rama*, or *Yama Pya-zattaw-gyi* is that it enables us to know what the dramatic performance was like.

The *Ramayana* original texts in Myanmar reached their zenith in the early 19th century, developing from the nucleus of Valmiki's text, with influences from Indian vernacular recensions, and as a result of Myanmar's cultural contacts with Thailand (both Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya), Laos, Assam and Manipur and Malaya and Java.²⁰

The following is a list of *Ramayana* texts in Myanmar prose, poetry and drama up to the early years of this century:

Author	Title	Date	Remarks
(1) Unknown	<i>Rama Vatthu</i>	17 th century	Facsimile offset reprint of original palm-leaf mss. Universities Publication Committee, 1974. Earliest text.
(2) Unknown	<i>Maha Rama</i>	Late 18 th cent. Or early 19 th cent.	Published by Burma Research Society, 1971.
(3) Saya Htwe	<i>Rama Thonmyo Zattaw gyi wuthtu</i> [The three versions of <i>Ramayana</i>]	1904	Published by Taing-lon Zabau Press
(4) U Aung Phyo	<i>Rama Thagyin</i>	1775	Unpublished

Author	Title	Date	Remarks
(5) U Toe	<i>Rama Yagan</i>	1784	Published by Burma Research Society, 1933 in 2v.
(6) Saya Htun (of Akyab)	<i>Alaung-daw Rama Thagyin</i>	1905	Published. 3 rd ed. 204 pp. From Sittway. Rakhine State.
(7) Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung	<i>Thiri Rama</i> Published as <i>Yama Pya-zattaw-gyi</i>	Late 18 th cent. Or early 19 th cent.	This has the fullest text. Published by Universities Historical Research Centre, 2001 and 2002 in 3v.
(8) Saya Ku	<i>Pon-daw Rama</i> Pt.1	1880	Published. Incomplete.
(9) U Maung Gyi (Dabein)	<i>Pontaw Rama</i> and <i>Lakkhana</i> , Pt.1	1910	Published. Incomplete.

nos. 1 to 3 are in prose; nos. 4 to 6 are in poetry; nos. 7 to 9 are in dramatic form.

n.b. This list is based on a list first compiled by U Thein Han in his article “*Ramayana* in Burmese Literature and Arts”, *JBR*, vol. 59, pts. I & II (Dec.1976) p.138. All publications listed were printed in Yangon.

Between 1968 and 1972 the All Burma Hindu National Central Council published a direct translation from Sanskrit into Myanmar, in 6 volumes, of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. The translation was made by the Myanmar monk Shin Kaitima, the Migadawun Sayadaw of Benares.

Also there are a number of retold *Ramayana* stories in condensed form published in the last fifty years.

Dramatic Performance

Although music, song and dancing has been a part of Myanmar culture from the Pyu period, namely from the early years of the Christian era, court drama developed quite late, only in the late 18th century during the Konbaung Period. This court drama with dialogue, poetic recitations and of course music, song and dancing, started with

the introduction of the *Ramayana* dramatic performance by Thai artistes who were brought back after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. A large number of captives were brought back including dancers and musicians who gave an impetus for a renaissance of Myanmar culture²¹. The Thai dancers and musicians were later formed into the Yodaya (Ayutthaya or Thai) Zattaw-gyi troupe and there were 91 artistes at the time of King Thibaw²² just before Mandalay fell to the invading British forces in November 1885.

It is said that the dancers and musicians at first performed to entertain their own Thai people living in Myanmar. Songs were sung in Thai by the people who longed for their homeland. The Myanmar courtiers who heard the music and songs asked their help to incorporate these into Myanmar classical music repertoire.

The former Rector of the University of Yangon, Dr. Htin Aung in his pioneer study of Myanmar drama wrote that though the Thai *Ramayana* had many characteristics of a proper play, it was more akin to the Elizabethan English masque where the actors and actresses

wore gorgeous dresses. He stated that “though the majority of the performers were professionals, many lords and ladies probably took part often, for at the Burmese court exiled members of the Siamese nobility took part in the earlier presentations of the play, but it may be that they had to do so as teachers of the new art of court dramatic performance. Music and song were essentially connected with the play, and all the characters danced.”²³

The Thais taught the Myanmar to perform the *Ramayana* as a great dramatic art. Dr. Htin Aung wrote that “exiled members of the court were ready and willing to help not only because they were anxious to teach the new art to their conquerors, but also because they missed an entertainment to which they had been accustomed for generations”.²⁴

The Thai *Ramayana* or as the Myanmar called it Yodaya (Ayutthaya) Yama (Rama) became immensely popular at the court of the Myanmar kings because the Thais and the Myanmar shared many common cultural characteristics. The Myanmar Court language, customs and manners were similar to those of the Ayutthaya Royal Court and the court scenes of the *Ramayana* were easily adapted from Thai into Myanmar. Both in Myanmar and Thailand, the *Ramayana* is like a Jataka story, the hero and heroine are figures of like moral uprightness fighting against the cruel demons, the maleficence of the world and eventually triumphing. The mythology was common to both nations, so the play could easily be reproduced inserting Myanmar dialogue and songs in place of Thai²⁵.

The Myanmar were already familiar with the *Ramayana* in prose and poetry, and therefore the dramatic performance introduced by the Thai actors and actresses became very popular not only at the Royal Court, but also in courts of the provincial governors like the one in Bago (Pegu) Hanthawaddy. We have an eye-witness account by the British envoy Michael Symes of such a performance at the residence of the Hanthawaddy Myowun or Governor of the Hanthawaddy Mon provincial region which at one time covered Yangon. It was on 10th April

1795 which happened to be the first day of Thingyan (Songkran), around 8 p.m. Symes gave a vivid description:

*At a little before eight o' clock, the hour when the play was to commence, we proceeded to the house of the Maywoon, accompanied by Baba-Sheen, who, on all occasions, acted as master of the ceremonies. The theatre was the open court, splendidly illuminated by lamps and torches; the Maywoon and his lady sat in a projecting balcony of his house; we occupied seats below him, raised about two feet from the ground and covered with carpets; a crowd of spectators were seated in a circle round the stage. The performance began immediately on our arrival, and far excelled any Indian drama I had ever seen. The dialogue was spirited, without rant, and the action animated, without being extravagant: the dresses of the principal performers were showy and becoming. I was told that the best actors were natives of Siam, a nation which, though unable to contend with the Birman and Peguers in war, have cultivated with more success the refined arts of peace. By way of an interlude between the acts, a clownish buffoon entertained the audience with a recital of different passages, and by grimace, and frequent alterations of tone and countenance, extorted loud peals of laughter from the spectators. The Birman seem to delight in mimicry, and are very expert in the practice, possessing uncommon versatility of countenance.*²⁶

Dr. Francis Buchanan who accompanied Symes' 1795 mission to Myanmar has given us some further particulars on this subject:

Although these entertainments, like the Italian opera, consists of music, dancing, action, with a dialogue in recitative; yet we understood, that no part but the songs was previously composed. The subject [of the play] is generally taken from some of the legends of their heroes, especially of

Rama; and the several parts, songs and actions, being assigned to different performers, the recitative part or dialogue is left to each actor's ingenuity. If, from the effects on the audience, we might judge of the merit of the performance, it must be very considerable, as some of the performers had the art of keeping the multitude in a roar. I often, however, suspected, that the audience were not difficult to please; for I frequently observed the Myoowun of Haynthawade [Hamsavati or Hanthawaddy] (the man of high rank whom we most frequently saw), thrown into immoderate laughter by the most childish contrivances.

The Ramahzat (Ramahyana), and other ancient fabulous histories, form the groundwork of nearly all the favourite plays, the outline of the story being merely preserved, while the language of the play depends as much upon the fancy of the performer as the taste of the audience.²⁷

Commission for Translating Thai Stories into Myanmar

Although there is still some controversy as to which Myanmar literary version is the earliest and how we obtained the *Ramayana* literature, there is no doubt that as far as the dramatic performance is concerned Myanmar scholars all agree that the *Ramayana* dance drama was obtained from Thailand. As concrete proof scholars cite the "Order of the Crown Prince" (Prince Shwedaung), the eldest son of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819). On 3rd December 1789, the Crown Prince who was not only a very able and courageous General of the Army, but also a lover of music, poetry and drama issued an Order for Myanmar translations to be made of stories and plays brought back from Siam (i.e. Ayutthaya) and Chiang Mai within the previous two decades. A Commission of eight high-ranking royalty, officials, scholars, writers and musicians was appointed to work in consultation with Thai interpreters from Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai.²⁸

The Crown Prince's Order states:

This is a list of persons responsible for selecting from the completed works such plots and scenes as would be suitable for the Palace and Royal Apartments and responsible for writing in full the poems and songs for the plots and scenes so that they could be sung, presented and acted.

Writers of Music and Songs

(1) *Pabhavati, the Lady Thakin Minmi (1758-1798) ex-queen of King Singu (1776-1782). At the time she had remarried the Prince, Lord of Kama town. He was the son of King Bodawpaya who had succeeded King Singu. This Lord of Kama was the 8th member of this Committee.*

(2) *Lord of Pyinsi town, the Prince Commander of the Royal Cavalry.*

(3) *U Kyi Soe, Maha Nanda Yodha, Lord of Maletha village and Ngetoe. He was a Privy Councillor.*

(4) *U Sa (1766-1853), at the time Zeya Thinkhaya, Herald to the Privy Council. He later became Lord of Myawaddy, a famous soldier, diplomat, musician and poet.*

Writers of Dialogues and Poems

(5) *Prince Minye Nanda Meit, Lord of Malun town, later Lord of Mekkhara town.*

(6) *Nemyo Kyaw Swa, Assistant Minister, Lord of Moda town.*

(7) *U Toe, author of Rama Yagan; his title was Nemyo Razathu, Herald to the Crown Prince and Treasurer.*

(8) *Prince Thado Dhama Raza, Lord of Toungoo town. While he was Lord of Kama town he married Lady Thakin Minmi.*

The plays completed with plots and scenes were I-naung, Rama, Sankhapatta, Kesasiri - 4 plays.²⁹

We, therefore, know that four eminent composers of music and songs headed by the talented Lady Thakin Minmi wrote, or rather



adapted the Thai tunes and wrote Myanmar words for the songs to be sung in the *Ramayana* performance. Also four writers including two Myanmar princes took part in writing the dialogue and poems for the Myanmar *Ramayana* Court Drama. There was of course a lot of help from Thai nobility and artistes who would have explained orally the plot, songs and dialogue as used in the Ayutthaya *Ramayana* court drama.

In a record of 1863 deposited in the Royal Treasury which also served as a Royal Record Office, there is a note saying that the husband and wife team wrote one play each: the Lord of Toungoo wrote *Sankhapatta* and his wife Lady Thakin Minmi, the *Kesasiri*, both stories being from the *Chiang Mai Paññāsa Jataka*. Although there is no record for the *Ramayana* it is probable that the commission members made a joint effort in translating from Thai to Myanmar. We know for sure that Prince Pyinsi and the young U Sa, only 23 at the time, wrote some of the songs set to adapted Thai music, as these songs called *Yodaya* (or Ayutthaya = Thai) have come down to us in the *Maha Gita*, collections of Myanmar classical songs and music where their names are appended under the songs they wrote.³⁰ In this collection there are also some *Ramayana* songs whose authors are unknown.

U Thein Han after careful study of the songs and music in the Myanmar *Ramayana*, and discussions with some Thai musicians was of the opinion that these songs although termed “Yodaya” by the Myanmar, are really adapted Thai tunes which he said had been “Burmanized” and not taken directly from Thai.³¹

U Myint Kyi, Myanmar scholar and researcher of Myanmar music, wrote that though Thai songs and music of the *Ramayana* were at first directly translated into Myanmar, “later new lyrics were composed in our own language with melodic adaptations of the original Thai style in the same manner as western pop music has been adapted to our own lyrics now”.³² In his paper “Three Yodaya Songs Representing Thai Element in Myanmar Classical Music” read at the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies, held in Chiang Mai in 1996, of the three

Thai songs studied, two are from the *Ramayana*.

Sir James George Scott (1851-1935) who was in Lower Myanmar after its annexation by the British described Myanmar life, customs and beliefs as he observed it in the late 1870’s, in his classic work *The Burman, his Life and Notions*, using the pseudonym Shwe Yoe. In the chapter on “Plays”, he mentions that the Ramazat, i.e. the *Ramayana*, is a constant, abiding favourite dramatic performance with the Myanmar people. He goes on to describe the *Ramayana* as it was performed in Yangon by a Royal Palace Theatrical Troupe sent by King Mindon on the occasion of the Proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876.

*Everything was of the best possible kind; the royal drum and cymbal harmonicons, the trumpets, the flutes, even the bamboo clappers, were of an excellence never before known in Rangoon. The players were famous wherever Burmese was spoken, and the play lasted five nights. The general opinion was that it called forth more admiration of King Mindon than loyalty for the Empress [Victoria] among the delta people.*³³

The Stage

The “stage” for the *Ramayana* dramatic performance was at first only an open court, lighted with lamps and torches as seen by Michael Symes in 1795. Sometimes there was a branch of a tree stuck in the middle of the circular space where the players performed. But it gradually grew more elaborate, probably under the influence of the foreign theatrical troupes which visited Lower Myanmar after Bago (Pegu) and all the coastal areas were annexed by the British in 1853. From the time when *Ramayana* was first performed, within a period of about 75 years theatres were being built as part of the palace complex. For example when Mandalay Palace was constructed in 1857, there was a temporary Royal Theatre building near the Hman Nan Saung (the Central Palace) where the king spent most of his days. This Theatre

Drawing Room or Pwe Viewing Hall was at first a temporary theatre for the royal family, built of bamboo with a cone-shaped roof. Later in the reign of King Thibaw (1878-1885) it was replaced by a permanent structure, a Yun, Thai style building with a three-tiered roof.³⁴

Also the simple, nearly bare stage setting with only two door-ways down stage for exit or entry of the actors³⁵ was replaced by an elaborate stage which could portray Ravana abducting Sita and conveying her on an aerial journey by use of ropes and pulleys. The theatre was constructed so that actors could disappear underneath the stage floor or re-appear. A pond with water lilies could be created in the middle of the stage. Even vehicles carrying humans drawn by small elephants and horses could be brought on stage. The setting of this elaborate stage for the Palace Theatre was recorded fully in the Royal Chronicle when two special theatres were built for the Ear-boring Ceremony of King Thibaw's royal daughter in January 1885.³⁶

Dramatic Presentation

In both the live stage and the marionette stage, the *Ramayana* from early times to the present is presented using four techniques:

- (1) Dramatic words and gestures.
- (2) Dramatic words interspersed with relevant songs.
- (3) Dramatic recitation with a musical background.
- (4) Dance and miming to relevant music designated as appropriate to particular dramatic situations.³⁷

Myanmar *Ramayana* stage presentation is different from the Thai in that the players lift up their masks to speak, to articulate the dialogue, whereas in Thailand the masks are never lifted and the players never utter any words. In the above four techniques used in Myanmar, for the first three techniques the mask is lifted whenever the players voice the dialogue.³⁸

Only in the fourth technique is the Myanmar *Ramayana* exactly the same as the Thai because

there is only miming with gestures and dancing to appropriate music. To give an example Hanuman dances and hops about stealthily, while he is searching for Sita in Ravana's stronghold in Sri Lanka; the music played is the Yodaya/Thai *chut*³⁹, the conventional music for stealth.

In the old days the *Ramayana* took 65 days to present at the Myanmar Royal Court, but later it was shortened to 45 days and to about a month. Unlike some of the Myanmar *Pwes*, theatrical dance and drama presentations, the *Ramayana* was presented for only three to four hours per night, with only occasional presentations lasting about six hours at a time.⁴⁰

Although we can no longer see the full dramatic presentation in modern times we know how it was performed from the manuscript version of *Thiri Rama*; (now in book form as *Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi*) we can read the dialogue, still hear the songs being sung and the music played. We can even visualize how the dramatic presentation looked like, what dresses and masks were worn and so on because there is a well-known continuous series of 347 stone reliefs of *Ramayana* sculptures at the Maha Loka Marazein Pagoda at Thakhut Ta-nyei about 13 miles north of Budalin and 34 miles east of Monywa in Upper Burma.

The Pagoda was built by the Head of the Buddhist Sasana in Myanmar, the Second Maunghtaung Thathanabaing Sayadaw U Neyya in 1849. From the king to princes, princesses, ministers, soldiers, musicians and so on, the dresses depicted on the sculptures are all from the early Konbaung Period when the *Ramayana* dramatic performances were first presented.⁴¹

Colonial Period to the Present

When the last Myanmar king, King Thibaw was sent into exile, the Myanmar Royal Court also ceased to exist. The *Ramayana* Court Dramatic Troupe which had been set up by the king and the Court was disbanded, some of the dancers and musicians coming down to places like Yangon, Pyapon, Bogale, Hinthada and

other cities and towns where they kept alive the Ramayana tradition right up to the present.⁴²

One *Ramayana* troupe went to visit and perform before King Thibaw at Ratnagiri in India where the king lived in exile for 31 years.

The British and Myanmar officials continued to patronize the Ramayana Dramatic Troupe asking them to perform for special occasions. For example when the Thai Prince, H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab visited Myanmar in 1936, he was entertained with a Ramayana performance in Prome by the great Myanmar dancer U Po Sein and his troupe. The prince wrote:

*In the third act Maung Po Sein took the role of Lord Rama in an excerpt from the Ramayana. He carried a bow and was followed by male attendants. Only Maung Po Sein danced, extending his arms with a graceful bearing as he walked, swaying to the rhythm of the orchestra. I perceived that the theatrical style was Thai, because it was slower than and not so sprightly as the Burmese style. The curtain was then drawn forward, ending the portion performed for our benefit.*⁴³

After Myanmar regained her independence in 1948 the Ramayana dramatic performances were actively encouraged by the Ministry of Culture and the State Fine Arts and Drama Schools and from the last nine years the new University of Culture kept alive the *Ramayana*.

The State Culture Dance Troupes also performed the *Ramayana* as a Dance Drama without any dialogue or songs but only with music and dancing.

During 1998, there was much renewed interest in the *Ramayana* in Myanmar as it was announced in 1997 that for the first time the *Ramayana* dance troupes will be allowed to compete for a special prize at the Annual Music, Song, Dance and Composing Competitions held by the Ministry of Culture. The Secretary of the State Peace and Development Council, in his speech on 18th October 1997, pointed out that the *Ramayana* Dance Performance is an important part of Myanmar culture, and that although we received the Rama story,

music, drama and dance elements over many centuries from several neighbouring countries, it has been successfully adapted to conform with our own music, dance and drama traditions to become an integral part of our cultural heritage.⁴⁴

Ramayana Dance troupes from all over Myanmar also competed in 1999 and in 2002.

In Yangon there are at present four Ramayana Dance Troupes, apart from the State Cultural Dance Troupe. They have formed Ramayana clubs or societies. Their names are:

(1) Obo Nan-dwin Yama Athin headed by U Ohn Maung a well-known Rama dancer who is also a publisher and bookseller of repute.

(2) Thahaya-dana Yodaya Yama Athin, the Thai Rama Club, headed by U Bo Ni who made a name in the role of the Golden Deer.

(3) Myanmar Kyet-thayai Saung Nan-dwin Yama Athin, the Court Ramayana headed by U Hla Moe who had trained in the Soviet Union at one time.

(4) Thiri Yama Aphwai (Annawa) headed by U Than Aung of the Annawa Dhammayone in Bahan quarter.⁴⁵

The Thai Connection Re-examined

Myanmar scholars, musicians and even performers of the Ramayana in Myanmar all say that the dramatic presentation is derived from the Thai Ramayana Court Drama of the late Ayutthaya period. Scholars like U Thein Han, music experts like U Myint Kyi have examined how close the Myanmar Ramayana is to the Thai Ramayana in plot, characters, dialogue, music, songs and so on. Of course the main story is generally the same as both versions are derived from the same source, the great Indian epic. But in details there are many dissimilarities and variations.

Unfortunately, there is no Thai literary version from the Ayutthaya Period which we can use for comparison with the early Myanmar versions of the Ramayana. The Ramakien, a work written by King Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty in 1798 was probably based on an older work of the Ayutthaya Period "but lost perhaps

in the holocaust of 1767".⁴⁶ King Rama I liked the Rama story so much that he not only took the name of the hero of the *Ramayana*, as a title of greatness, but also wrote what is now the earliest standard Thai *Ramayana* literary version.

U Thein Han compared the *Thiri Rama* (now printed as *Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi*) with the *Ramakien* and found that there are many differences in plot, characterization and in details of the Rama story.⁴⁷

Professor Ohno Toru of Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan, has now done detailed comparisons between the *Rama Wuthtu*, which is supposed to be written in Myanmar at a time contemporary with the late Ayutthaya Period, to the *Ramakien* which is probably based on a *Ramayana* version of the same period. Professor Ohno has noted down in some detail the divergent episodes in the plot, and characterisation.⁴⁸

Conclusion

By studying the *Ramayana* in Myanmar we can conclude that the Rama story received from very early times through oral narration was written down in poetry and prose from the 17th century, and that the dramatic performance of the *Ramayana* first started in the late 18th century had a strong influence from the Thai in costumes and masks, plot and characterisation, but that the Myanmar people adapted it to fit in with their own tradition and culture as they had already received the *Ramayana* from India, Assam, Manipur and Laos from earlier times.

Further research is needed. At present none of the Myanmar versions are available in translations. In conclusion I would like to propose that some of the Myanmar *Ramayana* texts should be translated into English and Thai as this will facilitate further research by international scholars.

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Notes

¹ Sarkar, H.B. *The Ramayana in Southeast Asia: a General Survey*, p.207.

² Suresh Awasthi. “The Ramayana Tradition and the Performing Arts,” p.661.

³ Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. *The Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts*, p.137.

⁴ Luce, G.H. *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, Vol.1, p.222. See plates 149e and 149f.

⁵ Singer, Noel F. “The Ramayana at the Burmese Court,” p.91.

⁶ Thein Han, U. “Shei-Oo Myanmar Yama-phwint,” *Sabei Phyu* (Apr. to Oct. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol.1, 1993, p.106.

⁷ Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana*. 1998, p.13.

⁸ Po Sein, U. *Yama Thon-myo. Nan-dwin Yama*, Vol.1, p.cp. (nga).

⁹ Thein Han, U (Zawgyi). *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*, Vol.1, pp.85-180.

¹⁰ See Historical Research Dept. Silver Jubilee Publication, pp.148-170.

¹¹ Kandaw Mingyaung Sayadaw. *Kandaw Mingyaung Myittaza* (Myittasar written by the Presiding Monk of Kandaw Min Kyaung Royal monastery). See para.17, pp.27-28 of the Exegesis. BRS 1933ed.

¹² Padetha Yazar, *Wun-gyi* (c1684-1751). *Manikhet Pyazat*. See p.6 of the Hanthawaddy Press, 1972ed.

¹³ Thein Han, U. “The Ramayana in Burma,” in Historical Research Dept. *Silver Jubilee Publication*, p.149.

¹⁴ Thein Han, U. “*A-mhar sar* (Preface)” to *Yama Wuthu*, p.5.

¹⁵ *Yama Wuthu*. Yangon: Sarpay Beikman for Universities Publication Committee, 1974.

- ¹⁶ *Maha Yama Wuthtu*. Yangon: Burma Research Society, 1971.
- ¹⁷ Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A.). "Yama Pyazat *Taw-gyi*," 1957, p.73.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.77.
- ¹⁹ Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. *The Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts*, p.163.
- ²⁰ Thein Han, U. "The *Ramayana* in Burma," p.152.
- ²¹ Htin Aung, Dr., *A History of Burma*, p.175.
- ²² Htin Aung, Dr., *Burmese Drama*, p.175. See also *Shwe Nanthon Worhara Abidan*, vol.1, part 174. *Yodaya Zat Taw Gyi Ahmudan*.
- ²³ Htin Aung, Dr., *Burmese Drama*, p.41.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.42.
- ²⁵ Htin Aung, Dr., *Burmese Drama*, p.42.
- ²⁶ Symes, Michael. *An Account of the Embassy to the Court of Ava*. London: W. Bulmer, 1800, pp.177-178.
- ²⁷ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol.8, p.535sq. Reprinted in Mackenzie, Kenneth R.H. *Burma and the Burmese*. London: George Routledge, 1853, pp.93-93.
- ²⁸ Pe Maung Tin, U. "Cultural Activities in Konbaung Period, Part one: The Story of How the *Ramayana* Came to Burma," *The Working People's Daily, Sunday Supplement* (14 March, 1965).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
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- ³¹ Thein Han, U. "Yama Zatkhin Bon Hnint *Tay Gita*," *Sabei Phyu* (1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*, Vol.1, p.171.
- ³² Myint Kyi, U. "Three Yodaya Songs Representing Thai Element in Myanmar Classical Music," *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies*. Theme VII. 1996, p.161.
- ³³ Shway Yoe. *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, 3rd ed. 1910, p.295.
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- ³⁷ Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts," *JBRBS*, vol.59, pts.I&II (Dec.1978), pp.146-147.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* p.147. See also Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana*, pp.99-100.
- ³⁹ *Chut* is accepted by the Myanmar as a Thai term, but the present day Thai do not recognise the term or the music.
- ⁴⁰ Thein Han, U. "Myanmar Yama Anu-pyinnya Hnint *Zat Pwe*," *Sabei Phyu* (Nov. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*, Vol.1, pp.160-161.
- ⁴¹ Than Tun, Dr. "Thakhut *Ta-nyei Yama*," *Hanthawaddy newspaper supplement* (3 Sept. 1972). See also U Thein Han and U Khin Zaw. "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts," p.165.
- ⁴² Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts," pp.166-167. See also U Thein Han. "Yamazat *Khin Pon Hnei Tay Gita*," pp.171-173.
- ⁴³ Damrong Rajanubhab, *Prince. Journey Through Burma in 1936*. Bangkok: River Books, 1991, p.206.
- ⁴⁴ Khin Nyunt, *Lt.Gen.* Speech at National Theatre on 18 October, 1997. See *New Light of Myanmar* (19 October, 1997). Also reported in Hla Thamein, *Myanmar Ramayana*, pp.8-10.
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- ⁴⁶ Dhaninivat, *Prince*. "The *Ramakien*, the Siamese Version of the Story of Rama," Burma Research Society. *Fifth Anniversary Publication*, no.1, 1961, p.35.
- ⁴⁷ Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts," pp.163-164. See also U Thein Han. "Shei-oo Myanmar Yama a *hpwint*," pp.138-139.
- ⁴⁸ Ohno Toru. "Was Myanmar *Ramayana* Translated from Thai *Ramayana*?" *Essays given to [Dr.] Than Tun on his 15th Birthday. Studies in Myanmar History*. vol.1 Yangon: Innwa Publishing House, 1999. p.121-142.

Dramatic performances of the Ramayana emerged in the Konbaung Period (1752-1885), when royal minister Myawaddy Mingyi U Sa converted the Ramayana Jataka into a typical Burmese classical drama; he also composed theme music and songs for its performance. Ever since then, Ramayana performances have been very popular in Burmese culture, and Yama zat pwe (Rama dramatic performances) and marionette stage shows are often held. Scenes from the Ramayana can also be found as motifs or design elements in Burmese lacquerware and wood carvings. Date Created. Around 1870. Ramayan: With Gagan Malik, Neha Sargam, Sachin Tyagi, Neil Bhatt. One of the greatest epics, Ramayan, written by Valmiki, unravels the journey of Lord Rama, right from his marriage to Sita to the slaying of Ravana. Rama, the eldest son of King Dashratha, is the heir apparent to the throne of Ayodhya, but Dashratha is compelled by Kaikeyi to make her son Bharat the king. Kaikeyi further asks Dashratha to send Rama on exile for 14 years, so Rama willingly agrees. He leaves, accompanied by Sita and his younger brother Laxmana. However, when Bharat learns of his mother's viciousness, he goes to the jungle to persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya. But he comes back only with Rama's sandals that he places on the throne. Years later, Sita is abducted by Ravana, the King of Lanka. The story of Ramayana, particularly, travelled beyond our shores, and became highly indigenous with various elements of the tale changing suitably to match the local cultural ethos. A year-long exhibition in Singapore on the mythological text, "Ramayana Revisited: A tale of love & adventure", at the Peranakan Museum, ignited the exploration of the role the story plays as a cultural unifier for the Asian region. In Laos too, the epic is prevalent as Myongsing Ramayana, Phra Lak Phra Lam and Guay Duorahbi. In Myanmar, the two variants, Rama Thagyin and Maha Rama, composed in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, are very popular. The Filipinos know Ramayana as Maharadia Lawana and Vietnam's famous dance-drama lakhon bassac depicts their variant of the epic. The Ramayana was selected for the third time as the dramatic text for the national competition at the Myanmar National Theatre, an event that also included contests of solo performers in dance, singing, song composition, instrumental music, and marionette troupes. Six troupes, each comprised of about thirty-five actors and musicians came from the various Burmese states to perform. All were required to present the same new version of the text that had been edited and consolidated under the auspices of the Drama Association, the organization that oversees all stage performance in Myanmar. Only one troupe, from the town of Pyapon, maintains a continuous tradition of performing the epic in its entirety.