

# Myanmar Dramatic Literature, its Rise and Decline

by U Thaw Kaung<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper is a brief survey of Myanmar Dramatic Literature from its origins and rise in the 17th century, to its decline during the British colonial period (1886-1947), with a short account of attempts at revival after Myanmar became independent on 4th January 1948.

In presenting my survey I have concentrated on a few prominent Myanmar plays, and some well-known Myanmar playwrights, to illustrate the development and decline.

There are two main works on Myanmar Drama, one in English by Dr. Htin Aung, former Rector of the University of Rangoon (Yangon) which is still the best study for non-Myanmar readers, though it has become rather dated, as it was written in 1937 about 66 years ago, long before the publication of well-written and important Myanmar dramatic literature of the late 18th and 19th century like *Manikhet* (published 1960) and *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi* (published 2001-2002). I will be discussing later these two important plays which are significant landmarks in the development of Myanmar dramatic literature.

The other important work on the history of Myanmar drama was published only last year, after the death of its author U Maung Maung Tin (M. A.), member of the Myanmar Historical Commission. It is in Myanmar language and based on the author's M. A. thesis submitted to Mandalay University in 1958, entitled *Myanmar dramatic and theatrical art*.<sup>3</sup>

There are also a number of other books and articles mainly in Myanmar language on Myanmar dramatic literature; I am giving a list in the Bibliography at the end of this paper.

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1. Member, Myanmar Historical Commission and retired Chief Librarian, Universities Central Library, Yangon.

2. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese drama*, a study, with translations, of Burmese plays. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1937. Reprinted Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1978. The appendices have four short plays translated in full and extracts from eight other plays translated into English.

3. Maung Maung Tin, U (M. A.). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thamaing* [History of Myanmar dramatic literature]. Yangon: Sit-the-daw Sarpay for Myat-hsu-mon Sarpay, 2002.

## Origins

Myanmar Drama is, I think, more akin to Thai Drama than to drama of the West. The plays have not only straight dialogue, but also music and songs, and often dance items are interspersed. The dialogue is also meant to be declaimed, i.e. spoken out rhetorically. The actors and actresses use poetic prose, or verse (except in some later modern plays of the 20th century) instead of speaking in normal every-day language. The plays, therefore, came to be "written in a style suitable for declamation . . . the basis of the style is the four-syllable metre of the *pyo*, or epic, which had been written in Burma since the end of fifteenth century." <sup>1</sup>

Although plays were written to be performed, later in the 19th and 20th centuries some were written just to be read, as one would read a novel today.

Myanmar scholars have written about the influence of Thai literature, especially the plays from Thailand; Thai artistes and probably the texts of some Thai poetry and drama were brought back to the Myanmar capital after the conquest of Ayudhya in 1767. To quote Dr. Hla Pe, retired Professor of Myanmar Language and Literature at the University of London:

"Drama, like the *Yagan*, seems to have come from the cultural contact with Thailand. The romances and plays which were brought thence to Burma in 1767 increased the interest of the court in secular literature. The earliest plays were "within-the palace" plays, probably named after the Thai *Lakon nai*, which has a similar meaning. These were followed by Court dramas or stage plays, written primarily to be performed before the king or provincial governors. Most of the plays were taken from Jataka stories. The plays were written for the most part in free flowing rhymed prose or "mixed style", which is an ideal medium for "declaiming". <sup>2</sup>

The first plays written down were not full dramatic works. They were probably notes for the actors, with short dialogue pieces which they could memorize. A list of plays from the early Nyaung-yan period especially from the reign of King Anaukpetlun (AD 1599-1605), which were rewritten from *pyo* poems was given by U Maung Maung Tin, but he wrote that we can no longer find the actual texts, and we do not know who the authors were. <sup>3</sup>

1. Hla Pe, Dr. *Konmara pya zat* . . . London: Luzac, 1952. p. 12.

2. Hla Pe, Dr. "Burmese poetry, 1450-1885, its scope and nature", in the author's *Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life and Buddhism* . . . 1985. p. 16.

3. Maung Maung Tin, U. "Myanmar pyazat hnint pyazat sarpay thamaing" . . . 1971. p. 10-11.

## Manikhet

Most scholars now accept *Manikhet* as the earliest fully developed play in Myanmar of which we have a nearly complete text. The play is attributed to Wungyi [Minister] Padetha-yarzar (AD c 1683-1754) who held several high posts under the last three kings of the Nyaung-yan Dynasty (1597-1752).

Padetha-yarzar was a gifted writer who composed a number of *pyo* lyrical poems which were based on Buddhist birth stories, including one entitled *Manikhet Pyo*. Some scholars think that he rewrote this *pyo* poem again as a play, but as the actual text of the play does not bear his name and because the two palm-leaf copies preserved in the Myanmar National Library from which the printed version was made lack the last leaf or two, up to now there is still no conclusive proof of authorship.

The story of *Manikhet*, the magical flying horse with emerald eyes, comes from the *Sattadhanu Jataka* (no. 20) of the *Paññāsa Jataka* which is known in Myanmar as the *Zimme Paññāsa*, the fifty Jataka stories from Zimme, the Myanmar name for Chiang Mai. So there is a strong Thai connection.

U Maung Maung Tin (M. A.) raised some questions as to whether Padetha-yarzar actually wrote this play because he thought that it might have been one of the plays written by the Eight Member Commission appointed by the Crown Prince, Thiri Maha Dhammarbi-daza Thihathu, (the Prince of Shwe Daung), during the reign of King Bodawpaya, on 3rd December 1789, to translate into Myanmar the texts of plays and song lyrics brought from Thailand, especially from Chiang Mai, Haribhūñjaya and Khmer, after the Myanmar conquest of these regions.<sup>2</sup>

Before this first documented play which some scholars date as being written as early as 1733, there were probably other short plays with only the dialogue written out for the players and the music and songs improvised. Some scholars think that *Manikhet*, might have been adapted from a Thai script.<sup>3</sup>

*Manikhet* is a play complete with dialogue, lyrics for songs, directions for what music to play and other stage directions. The editor of the first printed edition U Hla Tin (Hla Thamein) wrote that the play was written to be performed,<sup>4</sup> though U Pe Maung Tin, the eminent scholar of Myanmar Literature, thought that it was written only to be read.<sup>5</sup> I favour U Hla Tin's view because in examining the text carefully, I find many *zat-chin*, or lyric poems to be used in performing the *zat* or drama, together with the stage directions.

1. *Paññāsa-Jataka, or Zimme Paññāsa*, in the Burmese recension; vol. 1. edited by

Padmanabh S. Jaini. . . London : Pali Text Society, 1981. p. 228-255.

2. Maung Maung Tin, U. (M. A.). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thamaing* . . . 2002. p. 75, 83.

3. Diamond, Catherine. "The relationship of the *pwe* performance, to its popular base in the age of Hollywood's Titanic," in *Myanmar Two Millenma* . . . 2000. p. 104.

4. Hla Tin, U. (Hla Thamain). *Manikhet pyazat* . . . 1960. Introduction p. ka (၀).

5. Pe Maung Tin, U. *Myanmar sarpay thamaing* (History of Burmese Literature) . . . 1958 reprint). p. 151.

## Ramayana

The story in dramatic form of Rama and Sita is called by Myanmar *Yama zat*. Scenes, or episodes from the Ramayana were probably performed first by Hindu settlers during the Pyu period (1st to 9th Century AD). Later the Myanmar version of the Ramayana was written down first in poetry and prose.

After the fall of Ayudhya in AD 1767 the Thai court theatrical troupe and dancers were brought back to the Myanmar capital of Innwa (Ava) where they performed the *Ramayana* and *Eenaung* at the Myanmar Court. At first the performers were all Thai, the dialogues were also in Thai but Myanmar performers learnt quickly from the Thai players and later took over.<sup>1</sup>

J.A. Stewart, an eminent British administrator and scholar wrote that the Ramayana "continued to be performed in the Siamese language for some years [after the fall of Ayudhya], but that before the end of the eighteenth century, Burmese adaptations of it were made."<sup>2</sup>

In the *Konbaungzet Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi*, the Myanmar chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty, it is stated that plays, or grand dramatic performances (*zat-gyi*) were staged to celebrate the founding of a new capital at Amarapura in AD 1783.<sup>3</sup>

Ramayana was one of the main plays which the Eight Member Commission appointed by the Crown Prince, the Prince of Shwe Daung, was assigned to translate and adapt into Myanmar from Thai and Khmer.<sup>4</sup> This was in AD 1789 so from that time scholars think that there was a Myanmar version of the Ramayana written down in dramatic form. The text of this earliest Ramayana drama has not been found up to now, and so it is probably lost forever. What has survived on palm-leaf and paper parabaik manuscripts is a full fledged dramatic version revised and rewritten by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung (a title conferred by the King) who was in charge of dramatic presentations at the Royal Court. Nataka means theatre. This text has only recently been printed in book form (3 volumes, total number of printed pages 1006) by the Universities Historical Research Department.<sup>5</sup> It used to be a rare manuscript text before it was transferred to print.

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1. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese drama* . . . 1937. p. 41-42. Also J.A.Stewart. "Burmese stage, *Chinthe* vol.1, no. 1(Apr. 1951) p.17.

2. Stewart, J.A. "Burmese stage", *The Chinthe*, vol.1, no.1 (Apr. 1951) p. 17.

3. Maung Maung Tin, U (K.S.M). *Konbaungzet Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi* . . . 3 rd. ed. . . 1968. vol. 1. p. 555. Also J.A.Stewart. "Burmese stage" . . . 1951. p. 17.

4. Pe Maung Tin, U. "Cultural Activities in Konbaung Period. Pt. One. The story of how the Ramayana came to Burma", *The Working People's Daily*, Sunday Supplement (14 Mar. 1965) no page numbers.

5. Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung. *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi*; vol. 1, 2001; vols. 2 and 3, 2002.

The author's name appears only as a note at the beginning of chapter (7) "The Marriage of Princess Kawthila" on a palm-leaf manuscript in the Myanmar National Library; some scholars, therefore, think that Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung, rewrote or revised an old text only from this chapter. This old text could have been the original drama prepared by the Eight Member Commission.

If we compare the text of this Ramayana drama with the earlier prose and verse versions like the *Maha Yama Wuthtu* (in prose) and *Yama Yagan* (in verse) we find that although the main story is the same there are quite a number of differences which are in the form of additions, omissions and alterations to the plot and characters. This has been ably pointed out by Professor Ohno Toru of Osaka University of Foreign Studies.<sup>1</sup> Earlier, Myanmar writer and Ramayana specialist, the well-known author U Thein Han (who usually wrote under his pen-name Zaw Gyi), had also mentioned (55) points of differences. He called this dramatic version *Thiri Yama (Rama)* because he found this name in the Bala Kanda and Uttara Kanda and wanted to use this name to differentiate it from other versions of the Myanmar Ramayana.<sup>2</sup> But this name is now not used because when the play was first printed in 2001 and 2002, the book was entitled *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi* [The great drama of Rama].

Zaw Gyi thinks that this play was written by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung a little earlier than AD 1849, the date when the stone bas-reliefs of scenes from the Ramayana were made and donated at the Maha Lawka Mara-zein Hpaya-gyi by the Thathanabaing (Head of the Buddhist Sasana), U Ney-ya Dhamma, the Second Maung Htaung Sayadaw. This Buddhist Abbot left an inscription which is dated 1849, so we know the date of the Pagoda. And because the Ramayana plaques depicting scenes in dance posture are in accord with the text of the *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi*, with a few additional scenes, Zaw Gyi thinks that the date of the text is a little earlier than the stone plaques.<sup>3</sup>

There is reason to believe that this fully developed dramatic version of the Myanmar Ramayana, the only one in dramatic form found so far from the Myanmar kings' time, has connections not only with Valmiki, but also with the Thai *Ramakien*. It was written after the Commission of Eight translated from Thai in 1789 and most probably before 1849.

To give just two instances of the connection with Valmiki, Rama is portrayed as an incarnation of Narayana, i.e. Vishnu, in this dramatic work. Earlier Myanmar Ramayana works

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1. Ohno Toru. "Salient features of Yama Pyazat- taw-gyi", *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 11 (June 2003) p. 109-118.

2. Zaw Gyi. *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*; vol. 1 . . . 1993. p. 131. (1st pub. in *Sar-bei phyu* magazine, (Apr. to Oct. 1986) with the title "Shei-u Myanmar Yama a-phwint".

3. *Ibid.* p. 132.

like *Yama Wuthtu* and *Yama Thagyin* had made Rama a Bodhisattva.

Also is *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi* the period of Rama's banishment to the forest is given as (14) years, same as in Valmiki's Ramayana and Thai *Ramakien*, whereas other Myanmar Ramayana works in poetry and prose give the number of years Rama was banished as (12) years.

There are at least two other similarities with the Thai *Ramakien* :

(1) *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi* has a scene where a quarrel takes place between Hanuman and Nala on the construction of a causeway across the Ocean to Lanka. This is not found in Valmiki, but a similar episode is to be seen in the Thai *Ramakien* where a quarrel between Hanuman and Nilaphat, Maha Chomphu's adopted son is mentioned while the causeway was being built.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Ravana is shown in *Ramakien* as having been a demi-god called Nontok (Nan-daka), in a previous life, carrying out the duty of washing the feet of gods who came to pay reverence to Phra Isuan (Isvara). *Yama Pyazat-taw-gyi* mentions that Dattagiri (Ravana) was in his former life, a gate-keeper who served the Supreme Lord Paramesvara.

The Myanmar dance troupe at the Royal Court used adaptations from the Thai *Ramakien* when the Court Drama flourished in late 18th century and 19th century. They had earlier also obtained the Ramayana story from India and adapted it into Myanmar.

The Myanmar court was influenced by Thai literature and court rituals and became more formalized and ceremonial. Although the court plays were at first performed by the Thai and Myanmar courtiers themselves, a professional class of musicians, dancers, actors and actresses were later engaged by the King<sup>2</sup> under the supervision of a high ranking official to produce and stage the plays. The King also encouraged writers to produce dramatic literature.

### **Eenaung and other Court Dramas**

Another well-known play translated from Thai by a member of the Eight Member Commission appointed in 1789 was *Eenaung* (or *Eena*). The translation made was not from the text of the Thai play *Aindarwuntha*, but from a court romance with the same title.<sup>3</sup> The method of translation was also, scholars think, not a textual translation from Thai to Myanmar, but a verbal one, where Thai Princes and Princesses related the story to members of the

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1. Ohno Toru. "Salient features of Yama pyazat-taw-gyi", . . . 2003.

2. Htin Aung, Dr. *A History of Burma*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1967. p. 230-231.

3. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese Drama* . . . 1937. p. 47.

Translation Commission, and U Sa, (1766-1853) (who later became the famous Lord of Myawadi, a town on the Thai border), a Member of the Commission, wrote a Myanmar Court Drama named *Eenaung* with dialogue, songs and instructions for what music to play and other stage directions.<sup>1</sup>

It is noted on one of the manuscript texts of *Eenaung* that U Sa first wrote the play in 1798 and that it was first performed at the Myanmar court the following year in 1799. Some scholars think U Sa wrote the songs first in 1789.<sup>2</sup> He and the Prince of Pyinsi are credited for having written (37) Yodaya (Thai) style Myanmar songs.<sup>3</sup>

The text of this play was divided into (26) chapters by the Hanthawaddy Press when they first printed vol. 1 with (15) chapters in 1965 and a second edition of the same vol. in 1971. Although this reputable Press advertised that vol. 2 would soon be printed, it has never materialized, because it stopped all its publication activities in the 1980s.. Out of these (26) chapters, U Sa is said to have written at first in 1798 only up to chapter (18) the scene of the cockfight between Pan-yei (Panji) and Uhna-kan (the story from Thai ended with this scene) and only about (30) years later, after he became the Lord of Myawadi (Myawadi Wungyi) in 1829, he completed the text by writing chapters (19) to (26). At present we can only read up to chapter (15) in print, i.e. vol.1. Some of the manuscript texts seen are full of inaccuracies and seems to have been rewritten and recopied by several persons whose names we do not know. Some have rewritten the play as a prose story for the Myanmar royalty and courtiers to read,<sup>4</sup> because it became a popular work of imaginative literature which was much read and appreciated by the highest echelons of society at the capital.

Unlike the *Ramayana* with its stereotyped characters divided into good and evil persons, *Eenaung* was more closer to the court life, with its romantic intrigues, for U Sa did not use all the material he got from the Thai model; he discarded the heroic adventures of Eenaung and related only the amorous episodes all taking place within the palace.<sup>5</sup>

Also different from the *Ramayana*, *Eenaung* was not a masque, but a love story and the Princes, the Princesses and the numerous ladies and young men of the Court could identify themselves with the characters. But it shared with the *Ramayana* adaptations from Thai music, songs and dance movements and gestures.

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1. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thamaing* . . . 2002. p. 110. Also Introduction on a palm-leaf manuscript text (not in printed edition), quoted in full by U Maung Maung Tin.
  2. *Ibid.* p. 79.
  3. Nu, U. Thabin-wun. *Myanmar thabin lawka* . . . 1967. p. 35-36.
  4. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A.). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thamaing* . . . 2002. p. 93.
  5. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese Drama* . . . 1937. p. 47.

There is reason to believe that U Sa's *Eenaung* was seldom performed in its entirety ; it is such a long play and probably only some episodes were put on stage. In 1885 King Thibaw had ordered preparations for a performance of *Wizaya-kari*, a play derived from the *Eenaung* tradition, but he was deposed and taken away to exile in India before it was actually staged. So *Eenaung* and other derivative plays were more often read than performed at the Court.

There were two famous imitators of U Sa's *Eenaung*, Court Dramas written by a beautiful poetess and Queen, Ma Mya Lay (1809-1845), and her daughter, an equally gifted poetess also famed for her beauty and fine writing, the Princess of Hlaing (Hlaing Htaik Khaung Tin)(1833-1875). Ma Mya Lay called her play *Aindarwuda* and the Princess of Hlaing used the original Thai name *Aindarwuntha*. She also wrote another play in the same tradition and called it *Wizaya-kari*. Of these three Court Dramas, the Princess of Hlaing's works are much longer, with finer characterization (often satirizing members of royalty and courtiers and portraying incidents in the palace of the authoress' own time). There were also many lyrical songs. Unfortunately, *Wizaya-kari* has only been printed partially and even on palm-leaf and paper parabaik manuscripts the entire work cannot be found up to now.

Dr. Hla Pe, eminent (retired) Professor of Myanmar Language and Literature at the University of London wrote :

"It was about this time - - the last decade of the eighteenth century - - that Myawaddy Wungyi U Sa wrote his *Nandwin Zattawgyi*, the *I Naung*, a translation or adaptation from the Siamese. It is important as fixing the form of the *Nandwin Zattawgyi* or the 'palace play', which was followed a generation or more later by the *Nandwin Zat* of the Princess of Hlaing. It was cast in the form of narrative, much of it is unrhymed, but the more elevated passages are in verse which generally follows the rhyme scheme of the *pyo*, but does not adhere strictly to the four-syllable line. The probability is that these 'palace plays' were read rather than acted.<sup>1</sup>

The Princess of Hlaing is supposed to have written these two Court Dramas to satirize her husband, the Crown Prince Kanaung (King Mindon's younger brother), for having taken many minor queens and concubines.<sup>2</sup>

The Myanmar royalty patronized the writing and performances of the Court Dramas; they had the leisure and the wealth to encourage and enjoy such writings and theatrical shows.

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1. Hla Pe, Dr. "Introduction", to *Konmara Pya Zat . . .* by U Pok Ni. vol. 1. 1952. p. 13.

2. Pe Maung Tin, U. *Myanmar sarpay thamaing (History of Burmese literature) . . .* 5th ed. 1958. p. 318.



As shown above queens and princesses took part in writing these Court Dramas. Although *Eenaung* and other Court Dramas had their origins outside Myanmar, in the able hands of such an elegant poetess as the Princess of Hlaing, the scenes and episodes reflected and satirized the royalty, courtiers and events from within the Myanmar Royal Court itself.<sup>1</sup>

Being written by and mainly for the Myanmar royalty and courtiers, these Court Dramas; display the special elevated style of language used in the Court. They extol the power and glory of the King, exhort the many Princes and Princesses to listen to the admonitions of the King and Queen, instruct the royal children to live in harmony and affection with each other, and advocate an unwavering loyalty to the King.<sup>2</sup>

*Eenaung* was performed, usually in mid-April soon after the Myanmar New Year, during the time of a special ceremony called "*U-kin-daw phwint mingala*" at the Royal Court. The queens and concubines, and the ladies of the Court were all invited to see the performance, because *Eenaung* conveyed a message for the queens and the court ladies to cultivate good and honest hearts, and to live in harmony with each other.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Htin Aung pointed out the seminal role that *Eenaung* by U Sa played in the development of Myanmar dramatic writing.

"... *Eenaung* taught the Court to break away from the Siamese tradition and to develop a native drama with borrowings from and imitations of the Siamese Court drama. Because many of the incidents in the play were invented by the author and not borrowed from the original Siamese court romance, it pointed out the possibilities of an invented story as the subject of a play. In short, Myawaddi paved the way for the coming of U Kyin U and U Pon Nya."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Wa, Maung (Theippan). ( U Sein Tin). "Myanmar pyazat mya. [no.] 3. Nandwin zat-taw mya," *Thuriya thadinsa* (Sun) Daily Newspaper, (14 Oct. 1940). Reprinted in *Thusa dwe pyaw de Theippan Maung Wa* . . .2nd. ed. 1970. p. 291-292.
  2. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thamaing* . . .2002. p. 202.
  3. Thein, Saya (Hmawbi). "Thabin pyin-nya-the do a-khan-a-na a-kyauung," *Kawi-myet-hman Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 4 (July 1929). Reprinted in *Hmawbi Saya Thein sar-baung-chok* (Collected works of Hmaw Pee Sayar Thein). Yangon : Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association, 2000. p. 101.
  4. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese Drama* . . . 1937. p. 48.

### Plays based on Thai stories

Apart from *Ramayana* and *Eenaung* there are three other Myanmar plays which were translated from Thai and Yun (Lanna Thai) by three well-known members of the Eight Member Commission set up in 1789. They are

- (1) *Thamoddayaw Pyazat*, by U Sa.
- (2) *Kaytha Thiri Nandwin Zat-taw-gyi*, by Thakin Min Mi and
- (3) *Thinkhapatta Nandwin Zat-taw-gyi*, by the Prince of Taungoo, Thu-thiri Maha Dhamma Raja.<sup>1</sup> Of these three plays only the text of *Kaytha Thiri* by Thakin Min Mi has survived and have been printed in book form.<sup>2</sup> Of the other two only fragments have survived on palm-leaf and parabaik manuscripts.

All these three plays are based on stories from what the Myanmar call the *Zinme Paññāsa*, the *Paññāsa Jataka* which we think came from Chiang Mai.

*Thamoddayaw Pyazat* is based on the *Samuddahosa Jataka* (no. 6) and *Thinkhapatta Nandwin Zat-taw-gyi* on *Sankhapatta-rajā Jataka* (no. 10) of the *Paññāsa Jatakā*, the Fifty Jataka stories from Zinme, the Myanmar name for Chiang Mai.

*Kaytha Thiri* seems to be a composite of stories taken from several Jatakas of the *Paññāsa Jataka* collection and further research needs to be done to identify the sources.

Myanmar sources on palm-leaf and parabaik paper call this play a "Yodaya Zat-taw-gyi", or "Thai Royal Great Jataka", which identifies its Thai connection. The translator, compiler, is identified as Thakin Min Mi (1758-1819?), the ex-Queen of King Singu (1776-1781). She later re-married the Prince of Taungoo, Thu-thiri Maha Dhamma-rajā, another member of the Royal Commission established to translate Thai and Khmer plays. She was also the granddaughter of King Hsinbyushin (1763-1776) who brought back Thai dancers from Ayudhaya.

During the Myanmar kings' time, *Kaytha Thiri* court drama took seven nights to perform. In the pre-Second World War period the well-known Shwe Man U Tin Maung dance troupe of Mandalay, used to perform this drama, in a condensed version, in two nights. For many years now it has not been staged.

*Thinkhapatta Nandwin Zat-taw-gyi* is attributed to the Prince of Taungoo, though some scholars are of the opinion that Thakin Min Mi, his wife, also wrote some portions of the play. As only some fragments have been found, there is still a need to search for a more

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1. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A). *Myanmar pyazat sarpay thaming* . . . 2002. Chap.(3), p. 77-164.

2. Thakin Min Mi. *Kaytha Thiri pyazat*; ed. by U Hla Tin ( Hla Thamain). Yangon: Govt. Central Press, 1965.

complete text, though it may never be found now. *Thinkhapatta* is also classified from the Myanmar kings' time as a Thai Royal Great Jataka. It is a love story about King Yasa and his Queen Yasa-kitti-devi. As in the Ramayana the performers wore masks, especially the leading actors. They had to lift the lower front part covering the mouth, to recite the dialogue. Some attempts were made by the Ministry of Culture to revive this play, as a dance drama, during the early 1980s, but there have not been any performances for many years. Some of the local dance troupes perform condensed versions with improvised dialogue.

Minister of Myawadi U Sa's *Eenaung* was the drama which started to break away from the Thai tradition. U Sa borrowed elements of the story from Thai and imitated Thai court drama; at the same time he developed a purely Myanmar native drama, putting in the characterization and elements of human psychology which is essential to good dramatic literature.<sup>1</sup>

U Sa led the movement by inventing incidents which were not in the Thai court drama; he also developed the characterization. This development of Myanmar dramatic literature by U Sa led to the plays of U Kyin U and U Pon Nya, which finally broke the rigidity of following Thai versions.<sup>2</sup>

### **U Kyin U and U Pon Nya**

U Kyin U (c1773 - c1838) and U Pon Nya (1812-1867) were the two playwrights who wrote much shorter plays which could be performed in a night. Discarding the Thai plays for inspiration they took their plots from Buddhist stories, especially the Jatakas, and from old legends. During this period, from mid-18th to mid-19th century, Myanmar drama reached its zenith. The use of printing presses in Lower British Myanmar also played an important role in making these dramatic writings become popular with a wider reading public. U Pon Nya's *Wizaya* was one of the first plays to be printed in 1872, followed by U Kyin U's *Dewa-gonban* in May 1873 (Burma Herald Steam Press, Yangon). U Pon Nya's *Ginga Malar* was printed August 1873 and his *Ye-The* in October 1874.<sup>3</sup>

U Kyin U knew the stage well and his plays were not only for the Court, but also for the people and his plays were read widely as well as staged. He is a romantic playwright. You can see in his plays *Dewa-gonban* and *Parpahein* (translated into English by Dr. Htin Aung) his use of fantasy and romance.<sup>4</sup> Up to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century his plays were being studied in schools

1. Htin Aung, *Dr. Burmese drama . . .* 1937. p. 48.

2. *Ibid.* p. 48.

3. Maung Maung Gyi. "Myanmar pyazat ye -si gyaung". . . 1969. p. 244.

4. Htin Aung, *Dr. Burmese Dram . . .* 1937. p. 100. I have given copies of these two plays in English translation to Chulalongkorn University.

and universities in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> I will not go into details about his plays, as Dr. Htin Aung has already written a good appreciation entitled "The characteristics and achievement of U Kyin U" in his book on *Burmese Drama*.<sup>2</sup>

U Pon Nya was a gifted writer who could write a play like *Ye Thai (the Water-seller)*, *Paduma*, *Wizaya*, or *Kawthala* in two or three days.<sup>3</sup> He is regarded as the greatest playwright in Myanmar Literature.

U Pon Nya was not only the best Myanmar playwright, he was also up to now unsurpassed in the depiction of a logical unfolding of the plot and characterization, in the field of Myanmar drama. He was a realist who portrayed ordinary people like a water-seller as well as royalty and courtiers. In his plays we can see a fine study of character development as in *Ye The (the Water-seller)* and the dominance of destiny and a sense of duty on his main characters as in *Wizaya*. He was also a genius in his depiction of humour, and maintained full artistry, so that his plays do not degrade into cheap farce. His humour is comedy, not farce; they appeal to the intellect and often help towards character development.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Decline of Myanmar Drama**

During U Pon Nya's period the Myanmar kingdom was coming towards her final end, the British colonists taking over in the three Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-26, 1852 and 1885. From the time U Pon Nya lost his life soon after an unsuccessful rebellion by some of King Mindon's sons in 1866, Myanmar dramatic literature declined to what Dr. Htin Aung terms as "the Decadent Period (1866 to 1877)" and right up to the end of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when plays nearly ceased to be written or performed with the rise of the modern novel. Myanmar dramatic writing declined from about 1866, and although over 500 short plays were written and printed (many only about 80 pages), they were of a cheap, fantastic, or farcical kind, not meant to be performed but just to be read as entertainment and

1. I remember studying *Dewa-gonban* for the Matriculation class in 1953-54.
2. Htin Aung, *Dr. Burmese Drama*. . .1937. p. 68-75.
3. Ah Mar, *Daw, Ludu. Lwan thu sar*. Yangon : Lawka Sarpay, 2003. Chap. 1. "Sar-so Salay U Pon Nya, nhit 150 mway ne" [150 years birth-date of Salay U Pon Nya], p.2. There are a number of books in Myanmar on U Pon Nya and his works.

For printed plays of this period see also Mya Kay Tu. "Pyazat sar-oke mya hnint sarye saya mya . . . 1994. p. 348-354.

Also Hmawbi Saya Thein. *Myanmar Zat-pwe thabin hnint pyazat sar-oke mya* . . .1965.

4. Dr. Htin Aung's "The Characteristics and achievements of U Pon Nya," in his *Burmese Drama* . . . 1937. p. 99-108.

relaxation. Among the numerous playwrights of this period, only a few stand out like U Pok Ni (1849-c1893), Sataing-hmut U Ku (1827-1895), U Hsu Tha of Pegu (Bago), and Saya Thin of Sinbyu-kyun (c 1858-c 1934). U Hsu Tha's *Saw Pe Saw Me pyazat* was so popular that 7,400 copies were printed between 1880 and 1882.<sup>1</sup> Most of the dramatists of the period 1870 to 1900, though famous in their day are now almost forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Only some of the plays are studied as good examples of Myanmar dramatic literature.

Dr. Hla Pe, for many years Professor of Myanmar Language and Literature at the University of London, School of Oriental Studies in the Introduction (p. 1-43) to his translation of *Konmara pyazat* by U Pok Ni has made a critical study of the plays written and printed during this period.<sup>3</sup>

The demise of the Myanmar Royal Court ended the King's patronage of the Court Drama. At the same time the replacement of Myanmar high officials by British officers in the capital (moved from Mandalay to Yangon) and in the district headquarters also meant the loss of patronage in many cities and towns. The only place for Myanmar drama remained with the roving troupes of performers who went from one pagoda festival to another, to stage the popular all night *Pwes* which included music, songs and dancing with the drama staged only for a few hours from about 2 a. m. to the early hours of dawn.

Even after the end of the Myanmar Royal Court, the special court language continued to be used in the dramatic literature and performances. "All the characters spoke in the stilted manner of the court; colloquial language was rarely used."<sup>4</sup> Nowadays classical drama is no longer performed. The *pwes* usually stage a (2½) to (3) hour dance drama wrongly called by the Myanmar *orpara* (from opera) with the lead actor performing a melodrama with some songs, music and dancing.<sup>5</sup>

The writing of drama also declined rapidly, its place being taken, by the modern Myanmar novel which came into vogue from about 1906.

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1. Than Htut, U. "Introduction", to U Hsu Tha. *Saw Pe Saw Me pyazat* . . . 1977.

2. Stewart, J.A. "Burmese stage", *The Chinthe*, vol.1, no. 1 (Apr. 1957) p. 17.

3. Hla Pe, Dr. "Introduction" to *Konmara pyazat* . . . by U Po Ni. . . 1952. p. 1-43.

4. Singer, Noel F. *Burmese dance and theatre* . . . 1955. p.47.

5. Dinmond, Catherine. "The relationship of the *pwe* performance to its popular base in the age of Hollywood's *Titanic*" . . . 2000p. 106-109.

### Attempts at Revival after Independence

When Myanmar regained her Independence on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1948, the newly created Ministry of Culture made numerous attempts to revive Myanmar dramatic performances. I remember seeing a performance of *Wizaya* by U Pon Nya around 1954-1955 staged by the Ministry of Culture drama troupe. But later only dance dramas were performed without any dialogue, e.g. *Hpo Yazar*, *Hantha-kumar*, *Yan Aung Myin*<sup>1</sup> and the *Ramayana*.

The Ministry of Information and Sarpay Beikman (Palace of Literature) also encouraged the writing of plays, setting up a National Literary Award for the best play of the year. This prize was awarded only occasionally due to the lack of deserving new plays. During the 12 years from 1988 to 2000, the Best Play Literary Prize was awarded only twice, once in 1990 and the other in year 2000.<sup>2</sup>

Short dramatic performances and plays were quite popular in the immediate post-Independence years, especially from around 1950 to about 1954; they were staged at Karhtay (from Cathay ?) and Win Win theatres in Yangon.<sup>3</sup> But they were soon forced to close down due to economic reasons. Few of these plays were ever printed for the reading public.

In 1998, 1999 and again in year 2002, to encourage the performance of the Myanmar Ramayana, dance and drama troupes from all over the country were invited to Yangon to compete in the Annual National Myanmar Music, Song, Dance and Composing Competitions, held by the Ministry of Culture<sup>4</sup>

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1. Thein Pe Myint, "Pyithu kyaik pon thadan a myo myo saung thaw pya-zat mya hnint pya-zat sarpay," *in* *Pya-zat hnint pya-zat sarpay*. . . 1971. p. 121.

2. *2000 pyi nhit a-twet a-myo-tha sarpay hsu* . . . [Literary prizes for year 2000]. [Yangon : Sarpay Beikman, 2001] p. 141-148.

3. Thein Naing, *U. Myanmar zat thabin thamaing*. Yangon : Sarpay Beikman, 1968. p. 196.

4. For attempts at reviving the Myanmar Ramayana *see* the author's "Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Performing Arts," *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 9 (June 2002) p. 92-94.

## Conclusion

The immense popularity of radio and TV plays, movies and videos on the one hand, and of fiction, both the novel and short story, and various magazines, have contributed greatly to the decline of dramatic performances and the writing of dramatic literature.

After the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 cultural influences from Thai came afresh to Myanmar. Dr. Ba Han, the learned lexicographer, wrote in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*:

"The wind of change in regard to both the matter and manner of dramatic performance came from Siam, now Thailand. In the irony of things Siam whose relations with Burma were punctuated by recurring wars exercised a paramount influence on the growth of the Burmese Drama. Burma attacked Ayuthia, the then Siamese capital no less than six times. Yet the aftermath of each war was a cultural gain to Burma to a greater or less degree"<sup>1</sup>

The wind of change from the east had greatly benefitted not only Myanmar dramatic performances, but vastly enriched Myanmar dramatic literature. From mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the winds of change came to Myanmar from the west and this was greatly detrimental to Myanmar dramatic literature and performances. Perhaps we in Myanmar should look east again to Thailand, Vietnam, China and Japan to see how the traditional drama is being preserved, and at the same time modern indigenous dramas are being written and developed, both in the field of literature and performances.

Although we have had a modern National Theatre building in Yangon for over a decade now, plays are seldom staged. Assiduous efforts should be made to encourage the writing of more plays and the staging of more dramatic performances.

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This is a comprehensive survey of Myanmar dramatic writings. Researched and compiled by well-known Myanmar novelist Nyein Kyaw.

**Ref:** (Paper read at the Siam Society, Bangkok in 22 July 2006.

*Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 18 (Dec. 2006) p. 81-104.