

# Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Performing Arts

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## Introduction

In July 1998 I read a paper at Chulalongkorn University on the Ramayana Drama in Myanmar in which I covered both the literary and dramatic performance. In the present paper I would like to put more emphasis on the Ramayana in Performing Arts as seen in Myanmar because quite a number of papers have already been written on the Ramayana in Myanmar literature especially by my mentor U Thein Han (famous Myanmar writer Zaw Gyi)<sup>2</sup> and in the last decade by Prof. Ohno Toru of Osaka University of Foreign Studies.<sup>3</sup>

## Ramayana in Early Myanmar History

The Indian epic Ramayana came to Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia with the early Indian traders and merchants, some of whom settled down to form Hindu Communities.<sup>4</sup>

The people of Bagan (11<sup>th</sup> AD to 13<sup>th</sup> century) knew the Ramayana story, and there was certainly an oral tradition which they received either directly from India or through the Mon people of Lower Myanmar. There is evidence in the lithic inscriptions, stone sculptures, terra-cotta plaques and pictorial art of the frescoes which enable us to say definitely that the Rama story, both as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu God and also as a Buddhist Jataka story was known at the time.

Many centuries earlier in Beikthano Myo or Vishnu City near Taungdwingyi which was probably founded in late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Pyu people who were Buddhist as well as Brahmanist must have known of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu as they were Vaisnavites. The excavations so far have not revealed any sculptures or other depictions of Rama from the Pyu cities, but there is a belief among some Myanmar scholars that the Ramayana in an oral tradition was known by the Pyu and Mon people before they handed down the story to the Bama (Myanmars) who migrated into the country later from about the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Only in Bagan depictions of Rama are first seen. In the Abeyadana temple built during King Kyansittha's reign (AD 1084-1113) paintings of Hindu and Mahayanist deities can be seen in the

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1. Member, Myanmar Historical Commission. Retired Chief Librarian, Universities Central Library, Yangon, Myanmar.
  2. U Thein Han (1907-1990), Chief Librarian, University of Yangon Library. Please see Bibliography for his papers on the Myanmar Ramayana.
  3. Ohno Toru. Please see Bibliography for references to his papers on the Ramayana.
  4. Sarker, H. B. "*The Ramayana in Southeast Asia a General Survey*. . . . 1983. p. 207.

hundreds of lovely tondoes. There are paintings of both Vishnu, Rama and Hanuman.<sup>1</sup>

The Rama story is known in three forms to the Myanmar people -

(1) Rama as an Avatar, an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. In old Bagan the Vaishnava 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 of Mandalay up to the present day. According to Dr. Tin Maung Kyi of Mandalay there is still a shrine to Rama in Tada-U at Innwa (Ava) which was first put up by Thais brought back from Ayudhya by the Myanmar King in late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

The Myanmar call this "original" Rama, (Vishnu) Rama or "**Pashu Yama (Rama)**"<sup>3</sup>. This is probably Parasu Rama (also spelt Parashurama), or derived from the word Vishnu.

(2) The Rama story as incorporated into the 550 Buddhist Jataka tales, where Rama is depicted as a future Buddha, a Bodhisat. The Myanmar term for this Buddhist Rama is "**Alaung-daw Yama (Rama)**" or the, Bodhisat Rama. This story is Jataka no. 461, the Dat-thaya-hta (Dasaratha) Jataka. There is a belief among Myanmar Buddhists that Rama will become a Buddha after Maitreya.<sup>4</sup>

(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<sup>5</sup>. In this paper I will be writing only about this *Pondaw Rama* or *Nan-dwin Rama*.

## Literary Versions

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 Thahtay-khan Pyo*, based on the Suvannasama Jataka. There are also two references to the Ramayana from the first half of the 18th century in (1) *The Exegesis* by the Min Kyaung Sayadaw of Taungdwingyi to the *Kandaw Min Kyaung Myittaza*<sup>6</sup> and (2) *Manikhet*, a play by Minister Padetha Yazar<sup>7</sup>, based on one of the stories of the *Zinme Pannasa*, or *Pannasa Jataka*, the Fifty Jataka Tales of Chiang Mai.

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1. Than Tun, Dr. "Brahmanical and Buddhist Iconographs . . ." p.309
  2. Tin Maung Kyi, Dr. *In Search of Thai descendants in the old city of Ava . . .* 2000(unpub.)
  3. Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana . . .* 1988. p.13.
  4. *Anargattawin Vatthu . . .* 1928. p. 23-24
  5. Po Sein, U: *Rama thon-myo. Nan-dwin Rama.* vol. 1. . . 1936. p. (nga)
  6. Kandaw Min Kyaung Sayadaw. *Kandaw Min Kyaung Myittaza* (Myittazar written by the Presiding Monk of Kandaw Min Kyaung Royal monastery). see para. 17, p. 27-28 of the *Exegesis*. BRS 1933 ed.
  7. Padetha Yazar, Wun-gyi (c 1684-1751). *Manikhet Pyazat*. see p. 6 of the Hanthawaddy Press, 1972 ed.

The first Myanmar dated literary work of the Ramayana is the *Yama (Rama) Tha-gyin* by U Aung Phyo, written in 1775 AD 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*<sup>1</sup>. 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. It begins with Ravana's birth and ends when he is killed by Rama. It lacks the Uttara Kanda on Sita's banishment. This version is now being edited from palm-leaf copies to be published as a printed book.

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 therefore, it is 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 work<sup>2</sup>. It is a slim volume of only 54 palm-leaves and the story begins with Ravana's birth to Sita's banishment and reconciliation with Rama (i. e. it has the Uttara Kanda).

This earliest Ramayana work in prose 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<sup>3</sup>. This text is now being edited to be published as a printed book soon.

An enlargement of the *Rama Vatthu*, also in prose, is the *Maha Yama (Rama)Vatthu*, a work probably written in the late 18th century. A manuscript copy from the British Library was copied by U Tet Tut, long-time resident in London, who also edited it together with Prof. 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<sup>4</sup>. This is the most complete text of the Ramayana published in Myanmar so far, and covers from Bala to Uttara Kanda. It has been reprinted many times.

The most complete text of the Ramayana written for dramatic performance is only now being printed from paper parabike and palm-leaf manuscript forms. It is the *Rama Pya-zat taw-gyi*, or

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1. Thein Han, U. "The Ramayana in Burma", in Historical Research Dept. *Silver Jubilee Publication*. . . . 1982. p. 149.
  2. Thein Han, U. "A-mhar sar (Preface)" to *Rama Vatthu*. . . 1974. p. 5.
  3. *Rama Vatthu*. . . Yangon: Sarpay Beikman for Universities Publication Committee, 1974.
  4. *Maha Rama Vatthu*. . . Burma Research Society, 1971.

*Thiri Yama (Rama)* written by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung 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 20 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 (U Ohn Shwe) on modern paper. Now I have been able to publish it as a printed book; vol. (1) has come out and two more vols. will be published in the first quarter of 2002.

Member of the Myanmar Historical Commission, U Maung Maung Tin is of the opinion that this work by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung, the *Rama Pya-zat taw-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 1789<sup>1</sup>. The author's rank is shown in the manuscript as "Tha-nya-thei-asu Sayei" and this rank was given to those who were in charge of the Thai and Myanmar drama troupes at the Myanmar kings' court<sup>2</sup>. 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 Khaung used this earlier work as the basis for the new work that he wrote, i.e. *Rama Pya-zat taw-gyi* which U Thein Han calls the *Thiri Rama*, was "definitely a re-presentation"<sup>3</sup>. 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 *Rama Pya-zat taw-gyi* is that it enables us to know what the dramatic performance was like at the Myanmar Royal Court.

The Ramayana original texts in Myanmar reached their zenith in 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 Ayudhya), Laos, Assam and Manipur and Malaya and Java<sup>4</sup>.

The following is a list of Ramayana texts in Myanmar prose, poetry and drama up to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:<sup>5</sup> -

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1. Maung Maung Tin, U (M. A.). *Rama Pyazat Taw-gyi* . . . 1957. p. 73.
  2. *Ibid.* p. 77.
  3. Thein Han, U. and U Khin Zaw "The Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts" . . . 1976. p. 163.
  4. Thein Han, U. "The Ramayana in Burma" . . . 1982. p. 152.
  5. Based on a list first compiled by U Thein Han . . . 1976.

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<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
(1) Unknown	<i>Rama Vatthu</i>	17th	Facsimile offset reprint of original palm-leaf mss. Universities Publication Committee, 1974. Earliest Myanmar text . This text is about to be published as a printed book. <sup>1</sup>
(2) Unknown	<i>Maha Rama Vatthu</i>	Late 18th cent. or early 19th cent.	Published by Burma Research Society, 1971.
(3) Saya Htwe	<i>Rama Thon-myo Zattaw gyi vatthu</i> [The three versions of Ramayana]	1904	Published by Taing-lon Zabu Press.
<b>Poetry</b>			
(4) U Aung Phyo	<i>Rama Thagyin</i>	1775	Earliest dated version. Being edited to publish as a printed book.
(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. 3rd ed. 204 p. From Sittway, Rakkhine State.

1. See also English translation of the full text by Prof. Ohno Toru . . . 2000.

## Drama

(7) Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung	<i>Rama Pya-zat taw-gyi, or Thiri Rama</i>	Late 18th cent. or early 19th cent.	This has the fullest text. Available on parabike & palm-leaf mss. Vol.1 published in Oct. 2001. Vol.2 will be published in Jan. 2002 and Vol. 3 in March 2002.
(8) Saya Ku	<i>Pon-daw Rama Pt. 1</i>	1880	Published. Incomplete.
(9) U Maung Gyi (Dabein)	<i>Pon-daw Rama and Lakkhana, Pt. 1</i>	1910	Published. There are 3v.

(Note : all printed versions were printed in Yangon. Manuscript versions are available in the Universities Central Library and the National Library 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. A translation into Myanmar from a modernized Hindi version has been made by Myanmar writer Paragu which is being serialized in a local magazine.<sup>1</sup>

Also there are a number of retold Ramayana stories in condensed form published in the last century. For example the versions by U Po Sein<sup>2</sup>, U Tin Hla<sup>3</sup> and the one by Dagon U Tun Myint<sup>4</sup>.

At present a standard Myanmar text of the Yama Zat (the Ramayana in Myanmar Language) is being written by U Kyaw Zwa (writer Chit Oo Nyo). He is basing his text on the *Maha Rama Vatthu* published by the Burma Research Society in 1971. The project to produce a standard text is being sponsored by the Myanmar Ministry of Culture.

## Dramatic Performance

Although music, song and dancing has been a part of Myanmar culture from the Pyu period, i.e. from the early years of the Christian era, Court Drama developed quite late, only in the late 18th century during the Konbaung Period.

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1. Paragu (pen-name of U Hla Kyaing). *In Naing-gan Gon-yi Magazin*, (2000).

2. Po Sein, U. *Rama thon-myo. Nan-dwin Rama*. vol. 1. . . 1936.

3. Tin Hla, U. *Rama Vatthu (story of Rama)* . . . 1935.

4. Tun Myint, U, *Dagon. Maha Rama* . . . 1973.

Before the Court Drama a few scenes from the Ramayana might have been performed by the Hindu communities in Myanmar especially during their festivals like the Depavali (at the end of the monsoon) which the Hindu Brahmans think is the day when Sita and Rama returned to Ayodhya after Sita was rescued from Ravana. Before the Court Drama developed Yama U Ohn Maung thinks that there were recitations of Ramayana in Myanmar in *Quet-seik* style<sup>1</sup> and some scenes performed as a *nibat-khin*.

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 Ayudhya in 1767. In the large number of captives brought back were Thai dancers and musicians who gave an impetus for a renaissance of Myanmar culture<sup>2</sup>. The Thai dancers and musicians were later formed into the *Yodaya* (Ayudhya or Thai) *Zat-taw-gyi* troupe and there were 91 artistes at the time of King Thibaw<sup>3</sup> just before Mandalay fell to the invading British forces in Nov. 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<sup>4</sup>.

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.”

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”<sup>5</sup>.

The Thai Ramayana or as the Myanmar called it *Yodaya* (Ayudhya) *Yama* (Rama) became immensely popular at the court of the Myanmar kings because the Thais and the Myanmar shared

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1. Ohn Maung, U, Rama. *Myanmar and Rama*. (Unpub. mss.)

2. Htin Aung, Dr., *A History of Burma* . . . 1967. p. 175.

3. *Shwe Nanthon Worhara Abidan*, vol. 1, section 174. “Yodaya Zat Taw Gyi Ahmudan”.

4. Nu, U. (Thabin-wun). *Myanmar thabin lawka*. . . 1967. p. 23-24.

5. Htin Aung, Dr. *Burmese Drama* . . . 1937. p. 42.

many common cultural characteristics. The Myanmar Court language, customs and manners were similar to those of the Ayudhya Royal Court and the court scenes of the Ramayana were easily adapted from Thai into Myanmar. Both in Myanmar and Thailand, the Ramayana is a Jataka story, the hero and heroine are figures of 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 Thai<sup>1</sup>.

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. There is 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 8p.m. at night. Symes gave a vivid description:-

“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 Birmans and Peguers<sup>2</sup> in war, have cultivated with more success the refined arts of peace”<sup>3</sup>.

Dr. Francis Buchanan who accompanied Symes’ 1795 mission to Myanmar has given us some farther particulars on the Myanmar Ramayana.

“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 actors’ ingenuity.

“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<sup>4</sup>.

1. Htin Aung, *Dr. Burmese Drama . . .* 1937. p. 42.

2. By Peguers the author means the Mon people.

3. Symes, Michael *An Account of the Embassy to the Court of Ava . . .* 1800. p. 177-178.

4. *Journal of Asiatic Soc. of Bengal, Reprinted in* vol. 8, p. 535. . . . Mackenzie, Kenneth R. H. *Burmah and the Burmese . . .* 1853. p.93-94.

## Commission for Translating Thai Plays into Myanmar

Twenty-two years after the fall of Ayudhya, during the reign of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819), the Crown Prince (Prince of Shwedaung) (1762-1808) issued a Royal Order in 1789 appointing a Commission of eight high-ranking royalty, officials, scholars, writers and musicians to make Myanmar translations of the stories and plays brought back from Ayudhya and Chiang Mai. This Commission included Lady Thakin Min-mi (1758-1798) Ex-Queen of King Singu, the Lord of Pyinsi, U Sa (1766-1853) who later became the famous Lord of Myawaddy, soldier, diplomat, musician and poet, U Toe (1751-1795) author of *Rama Yagan* and other members.

The four plays translated by this Commission complete with songs, plots, dialogues and scenes were *I-naung*, *Ramayana*, *Sankhapatta* and *Kesasiri*.<sup>1</sup>

The Myanmar Commission worked with Thai nobility and artistes and there were translators proficient in Thai language. Myanmar scholars think that some Commission members travelled to Thailand Cambodia, Java and Laos in 1785 to collect material for the their translations as well as to study music, songs and dances<sup>2</sup>.

Many *Yodaya* Ayudhya or Thai songs and music were also adapted to Myanmar words and music. There are now over (35) *Yodaya* songs in the official collection of Myanmar classical songs.<sup>3</sup> Out of these (35) songs at least four and a number of musical items are for the Ramayana.

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 and music although termed “Yodaya” by the Myanmar, are really adapted Thai tunes which he said had been “Burmanized” and not taken directly from Thai<sup>4</sup>.

U Myint Kyi, 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”<sup>5</sup>. 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.

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1. 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).p.2-6.
  2. Singer, Noel F. *Burmese Dance and Theatre* . . . 1995. p. 13.
  3. *Maha Gita* Various editions. See Culture Ministry ed. 3 vols. in one, 1997. Section on Yodaya Songs, p. 75-94.
  4. Thein Han, U “Rama Zatkhin Bon hnint Tay Gita,” *Sabei Phyu* (1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. vol. 1. . . 1993. p. 171.
  5. Myint Kyi, U. “Three Yodaya Songs Representing the Thai Element in Myanmar Classical Music” . . . *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 5 (June 2000) p. 27-36.

Sir James George Scott (1851-1935) who was in Lower Myanmar after its annexation by the British described the 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 Shway 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<sup>1</sup>."

## 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<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>.

Also the simple, nearly bare stage setting with only two door-ways down stage for exit or entry of the actors<sup>4</sup> 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

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1. Shway Yoe (pen-name of Sir George Scott). *The Burman his Life and Notions*. 3rd ed. . . 1910. p. 295.
  2. Thein Han, U. "Rama Zat-khin bon hnint Gita", *Sabei Phyu* (Dec. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol. 1 . . . 1993. p. 170.
  3. *Mya Nan San Kyaw, the Royal Palace*. [Myanmar, Dept. of Archaeology] . . . [1995?]p. 36.
  4. Thein Han, U. . . *Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts* . . . 1976. p. 146.

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 settings 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<sup>1</sup>.

## Dramatic Presentation

In both the live stage and the marionette stage, the Ramayana from early times to the present is being 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<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>.

Only in the fourth technique the Myanmar Ramayana is 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*<sup>4</sup>, 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 still later 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<sup>5</sup>.

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1. *Konbaung-set Maha Yazawin daw-gyi*; compiled by U Maung Maung Tin (KSM) --- vol. 3. 3rd ed. 1968. p. 683-684.

2. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "*Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts*," ...1978. p. 146-147.

3. *Ibid.* p. 147. See also Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana* . . . 1998. p. 99-100.

4. *Chut* is accepted by the Myanmar as a Thai term, but the present-day Thais do not recognise the term or the music.

5. Thein Han, U. "Myanmar Rama Anu-pyinnya hnint Zat Pwe," *Sabei Phy* (Nov. 1986).

Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol. 1. . . 1993. p. 160-161.

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*; we can read the dialogue, still hear the songs being sung and the music played and also read the stage directions. 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 Myanmar.

The Pagoda was built by the Head of the Buddhist Sasana in Myanmar at the time, the Second Maung-htaung Thathanabaing Sayadaw U Nyeya in 1849. From the King to Princes, Princesses, Ministers, soldiers, musicians and others, the dresses depicted on the sculptures are all from the mid- Konbaung Period when the Ramayana dramatic performances were being presented<sup>1</sup>.

## Costumes and Masks

One of the reasons why the Myanmar audience has for many years loved the *Rama Zat*, the dance drama is because of the gorgeous, colourful costumes and the striking masks, differentiating the two groups of good and bad characters.

For the main characters, richly embroidered costumes with gold and silver thread were made from silk, satin and velvet imported from China through Yunnan<sup>2</sup> and used for the Royal Dance Troupes. By the 18th century weavers brought back by the Myanmar king from Manipur and Assam to Amarapura were already producing special silks cloths for the Court.

The designs for dance costumes and for the masks for the main character as well as for minor ones were probably recreated at Innwa (Ava) and Amarapura by the Thai artistes brought from Ayudhya. In designing new costumes for the Royal Dance Troupes at the Myanmar Court, Myanmar artistes would have worked closely with the Thai artisans and in doing so adapted some of the Thai attire into a form and design more conducive to Myanmar taste, and similar to the court dresses at the Myanmar Court.<sup>3</sup>

Sita is the only character who does not wear special costume adapted from Thai dress as she uses typical attire of a Myanmar court lady, usually dressed like a Princess with a silk *htamein* (nether garment), a *htain mathein ein-gyi* (hip-length jacket with curved edges), she also does not need to cover her face with a mask, but only wears a ceremonial, decorated head-dress. Sometimes, she just

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1. Than Tun, Dr. "Thahut Ta-nei Rama", *Hanthawaddy Newspaper supplement* (3 Sept. 1972). See also U Thein Han . "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts" . . . 1976. p. 165.

2. Singer, Noel. "*Ramayana at the Burmese Court*" . . . 1987. p. 102.

3. Hla Thamain. *Myanmar Ramayana*. . . 1998. p. 104-115.

wears flowers in her hair, and of course a lot of costume jewellery, especially pearl necklaces, earrings, beads and gold bracelets. Sita also uses with much effect a transparent shawl, a *pa-war*, usually of an emerald green, blue or pink in colour.

Rama is always dressed in green and Lakshmana in gold, with both the masks and costumes with these two respective colours predominating. Rama also has tied across his breast a large *pa-war*, a green shawl.

The masks are of two types (1) *an-kite* with mouth closed and (2) *an-ha* with mouth open. The principal actors mostly use the *an-kite* type of mask and so they have to tilt their masks to articulate the dialogue for better delivery. Rama is the only character who has two masks, one as a student and the other as a prince.<sup>1</sup> The minor characters, the monkeys and demons usually wear the *an-ha* type of masks.

The most spectacular mask is of course for Ravanna, a fierce demon face with an expression of ferocity with two huge protruding white incisors, jutting out sabre-like from bright red lips. On the two sides of the head-dress and at the back are three smaller demon heads, each facing a different direction. On the towering top of the mask-head there is a middle tier with nine small demon heads, but right on top of the head-dress is a single golden head of Brahma facing outward.

The masks were made with either a base of thin bamboo work or cloth. It was then covered with *tha-yo* lacquer (i.e. sawdust, ash and lacquer) which was also used to mould the facial features. Some were made of papier mache and lacquer and some from light wood. For some of the more elaborate masks and head-dress like for Ravana and Rama, some parts were painted green, red, gold etc. as appropriate and also some glass mosaics and gilding were added.

The masks were considered sacred and when not in use kept in two groups: (1) of those for the good characters and (2) for those of bad characters (demons) on an altar-like stand. Hanuman and his monkey troops, of course, belong to the good side. Offerings of *tha-zin* orchids are made in the month of *Nat-taw* (Nov. - Dec.). The mask for *Bodaw* (Visvamitra/ Phgarot Muni) is especially venerated. The performers usually give an offering of flowers, fruits, candles and incense sticks before putting on the masks for each performance.

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1. Singer, Noel. "Ramayana at the Burmese Court" . . . 1987. p. 101. Also Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana*. . . . 1998. p. 104-115.

## Decline and Revival of Ramayana Dramatic Performance

Thabin Wun U Nu who held a responsible post at the Court with regard to theatrical performances to earn the epithet “Thabin wun” (Minister or Officer in charge of the dramatic performances at the Myanmar Court) divides the popularity of the Rama Zat, the Ramayana dramatic performance into three periods:

1. *The Rise of the Court Drama*, especially the Ramayana from the reign of King Hsinbyushin (1763-1776) to the reign of King Bagyidaw (1819-1837) when the Ramayana was well established as a Myanmar dance drama at the Court. From the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 to 1837 this first period covers about 70 years.
2. *Full-fledged Dramatic Performances* of the Ramayana from the reign of King Tharrawaddy (1837-1846) to the reign of King Thibaw (1878-1885). The second period covers 48 years.
3. *Decline of the Dance Drama* with the end of the Myanmar monarchy and the beginning of British colonial rule (1886 to 1948<sup>1</sup>), a period of 62 years.  
To this I would like to add another period.
4. *Revival of the Dance Drama* after Independence, 1948 to present, i. e. year 2002, a period of 54 years.

We have seen how the Myanmar people adapted the Ramayana dance drama brought from Ayudhya to merge with the Ramayana oral and literary traditions that they had received earlier. It became so popular at the Myanmar Court that during the time of King Singu (1776-1782) the King would quietly slip down from the *thin zali* (ornamented royal chair) at the palace theatre and don a mask of a demon or a monkey to join in the dance, causing some embarrassment to the queens and ministers<sup>2</sup>. Ramayana was one of the most popular dramatic performances at the Myanmar Court and we know from one of Henry Burney’s records (letters sent to the Governor General in India) that on the night of 7<sup>th</sup> August 1830 he was entertained by King Bagyidaw to a performance of the Ramayana but the British envoy did not really enjoy the dance drama as he suffered from having to sit on carpets with folded legs to see Rama, Hanuman and other characters dance for four hours<sup>3</sup>.

From the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878) when the whole of Lower Myanmar, the coastal,

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1. Nu, U. “Thabinwun Hmattan”, *Thuriya* (Sun) monthly magazine vol. 25. (Oct./Nov. 1941). See also U Maung Maung Tin (M. A.). “Nyaung-yan khit Myanmar Nandwin Pya-zat”, *Myet-khin thit Magazin*, no. 121 (May 2000). p. 108.

2. Singer, Noel. “The Ramayana at the Burmese Court” . . . 1989. p. 92.

3. Burney, Henry. As quoted by U Thein Han. “Myanmar Rama Anu-pyinnya hnint zat pwe” ... in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol. 1. . . 1993. p. 159.

prosperous region was already under British rule, some of the Ramayana dancers left Mandalay to start Ramayana dance troupes in Lower Myanmar, especially at the Ayeyawady deltaic region in Nyaungdon, Phyapon, Bogale and in Yangon. One of the reasons for the dancers going south towards the rich delta area was because King Mindon being a very pious Buddhist did not much favour dramatic performances. The Ramayana was supposed to have been performed only once a year during his reign<sup>1</sup>. Marionette shows without actors and actresses were more popular at the Court during King Mindon's time. Although no records have been found, some Myanmar writers say that the whole cast of Ramayana characters were made in the form of puppets for the Royal Court Puppet Troupe<sup>2</sup>.

When the Royal Court ceased to exist in November 1885, the Yodaya (Ayudhya) Zat (Theatrical) Troupe at the Court was disbanded. The capital shifted to Yangon and the Ramayana dancers either came down to Yangon and surrounding towns of the Ayeyawady Delta or went to some of the Shan States, especially Hsipaw to serve under the Sawbwa chieftans.

One Ramayana troupe went to visit and perform before King Thibaw for the ear-boring ceremony of the Princesses in 1912 at Ratnagiri in India where the king lived in exile for 31 years. It was led by some Myanmar Ramayana dancers from the Shan State of Hsipaw<sup>3</sup>.

The British and Myanmar officials continued to patronize the Ramayana Dramatic Troupes asking them to perform for special occasions. For example when the Thai Prince, H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab of Thailand visited Myanmar in 1936 he was entertained with a Ramayana performance in Pyay (Prome) by the great Myanmar dancer U Po Sein and his troupe. The Prince wrote that "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<sup>4</sup>.

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 six years the new University of Culture kept alive the Ramayana.

The State Culture Dance Troupes introduced in 1971 Ramayana as a Dance Drama without any dialogue or songs but only with music and dancing, with brief narration between each acts<sup>1</sup>.

1. Ohn Maung, U, Rama. *Myanmar hnint Rama* (unpub. mss).

2. Singer, Noel. *Burmese Puppets*. Singapore : Oxford University Press, 1992. p. 21.

3. Maung Maung Tin, U (M. A). "Nyaung-yan khit Myanmar Nandwin Pya-zat," *Myet-khin thit Magazin*, no. 122 (June 2000). p. 85-86.

4. Damrong Rajanubhab, Prince. *Journey Through Burma in 1936*. Bangkok : River Books, 1991. p. 206.

From 1998 there was much renewed interest in the Ramayana in Myanmar because for the first time Ramayana troupes from all over the country were allowed to compete with music, song, dance and dialogue for a special prize at the National Annual Myanmar Music, Song, Dance and Composing Competitions held by the Ministry of Culture. Secretary (1) of the State Peace and Development Council in his speech on 18th Oct. 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.<sup>2</sup> The competition was again held in 1999. After a break of two years the competition will be revived in 2002.

In Yangon there are at present (4) Ramayana Dance Troupes, apart from the State Cultural Dance Troupe. They have formed Ramayana Clubs or Societies. Their names are:

- (1) *Obo Nan - dwin Rama Athin* headed by U Ohn Maung a well-known Rama dancer who is also a publisher and bookseller of repute.
- (2) *Thahaya-dana Yodaya Rama 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 Rama Athin*, the *Court Ramayana* headed by U Hla Moe who had trained as a dancer in the Soviet Union at one time.
- (4) *Thiri Rama Aphwai* (Annawa) headed by U Than Aung of the Annawa Dhammayone in Bahan quarter of Yangon.<sup>3</sup>

There are no regular performances. Ramayana Dance Troupes are finding it very hard to compete with popular movies, videos and TV. Although the Ministry of Culture is encouraging the revival of the Ramayana in Myanmar it is very difficult for the Dance Troupes to survive without public interest and patronage.<sup>4</sup>

This is true not only of the Ramayana but Myanmar drama as a whole. The rise of the modern novel at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the decline of the writing, reading and performing

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1. Khin Maung Nyunt, Dr. "Ramayana in Myanmar's Heart", *Myanmar Perspectives*, Vol. V, 1 (2000). p. 31.
  2. Khin Nyunt, Lt. Gen. Speech at National Theatre on 18-10-97. See *New Light of Myanmar* (19-10-97) Also reported in Hla Thamein . . . *Myanmar Ramayana* . . . 1998. p. 8-10.
  3. Hla Moe, U. (Yama Zat Thabin Pyinnya Shin). "Myanma Yoe-yayin - kyei-hmu htain thein ye", [To Keep Alive the Myanmar Cultural Heritage], *Kyei Mon daily newspaper* (18th Apr. 1998). p.5.
  4. Communication with Rama U Ohn Maung in Yangon, (Oct. 2000)

of plays which were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

After the second Ramayana contest in Yangon held in late 1999, it was found that the Dance Troupes were performing different variations of the Rama stories with a number of modern interpolations and interpretations.

The Ministry of Culture therefore, formed a main committee with Ramayana experts, academics, writers and officials for producing a standard, classical Myanmar version of the Ramayana based on old texts and also to produce a three hour dramatic performance version with dialogue, costumes, masks and scenes based on the Court Drama of the late Konbaung Dynasty. Five Sub-Committees were formed to carry out research into the literary texts, not only of Myanmar but also of some of the other countries which have a Ramayana tradition; also to study stage performances, costumes, masks, music, songs and so on.

This Committee started meeting to discuss the Ramayana revival and producing a standardized version from January 2000. The author of this paper is a member of the committee, and my friend and colleague U Kyaw Zwa (writer Chit Oo Nyo) was given the task of writing a standard, “uncorrupted” Myanmar text based on the old texts. He has now finished the first draft.

At the same time we are also trying to publish in book form some of the old texts. *Yama (Rama) Tha-gyin* is being edited for publication. I am also bringing out a printed version of the *Yama(Rama)Vatthu*. These two works are the earliest Myanmar versions in poetry and prose respectively. I have also been able to transfer from palm-leaf and paper parabike manuscripts to print vol. (1) of the main dramatic version in Myanmar; this work has now been published as *Rama Pya-zat taw-gyi*.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

I have presented in my paper how the Myanmar people got the Rama story from India, probably through the Pyu and the Mon peoples; how it was written down in poetry and prose in the Nyaungyan and early Konbaung period which would correspond to the late Ayudhya period in Thailand, i.e. 17th century and early 18th century; and of how the dramatic performance received from Thailand became a Court Drama at the Myanmar Royal Court in late 18th and 19th century.

Though the costumes, masks, dance movements and music of the Ramayana dance performance is similar to Thai, the story itself in its details and even the names of some of the characters are not the same.

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1. Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung. *Rama pya-zat taw-gyi*. Vol. 1. Yangon : Universities Historical Research Centre, 2001. Introduction (10p.) by U Thaw Kaung and U Aung Thwin.

Unfortunately, there is no Thai literary version from the Ayudhya 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 Ayudhya Period “but lost perhaps in the holocaust of 1767”<sup>1</sup>. King Rama I liked the Rama story so much that he not only took the name of the hero of Ramayana, as a title of greatness, but also wrote what is now the earliest standard Thai Ramayana literary version.

U Thein Han compared the *Rama pya-zat taw-gyi*, or *Thiri Rama* with the *Ramakien* and found that there are many differences in plot, characterization and in details of the Rama story.<sup>2</sup>

Prof. Ohno Toru of Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan, has now done detailed comparisons between the *Rama Vatthu*, which is supposed to be written in Myanmar at a time contemporary with the late Ayudhya Period, to the *Ramakien* which is probably based on a Ramayana version of the same period. Prof. Ono has noted down in some detail the divergent episodes in the plot, characterization and so on.<sup>3</sup>

The Ramayana has been a popular tale in Myanmar for a thousand years or more, with literary versions for reading for about three hundred years, and dramatic performance popular with the public for about two hundred years or so. The old Ramayana texts in Myanmar are being printed in book form, at least one translated into English, and the dramatic performances are being revived. We hope that Ramayana experts from Thailand and other countries will join us in our efforts.

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  2. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. “Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts” . . . 1976. p. 163-64. See also U Thein Han. ” Shei-oo Myanmar Rama a-hpwint” . . . p. 138-139.
  3. Ohno Toru. “Was Myanma Ramayana Translated from Thai Ramayana?” in *Studies in Myanma History, vol. 1. Essays given to [Dr.] Than Tun on his 75th birthday* . . . 1999. p. 121-142.

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