

The Ramayana Drama in Myanmar*

The story of Rama first reached Myanmar as it did to several Southeast Asian countries with the early Indian traders and merchants, some of whom settled down to form Hindu communities¹. 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. Near this city is Taungdwin - gyi, supposed to have been founded in 837 AD, with the classical name of Ramavati (the city of Rama).² 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.³ 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.⁴ In the Nat-hlaung Kyaung

*Revised version of a paper read at the Siam Society and Chulalongkorn University, July 1998. 1st published in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 90, pts. 1 and 2 (2002) p. 137-148.

1. Sarkar, H.B." The Ramayana in Southeast Asia : a General Survey" . . . 1983. p 207.
2. Ray, Nihar - ranjan. *Brahmanical Gods in Burma* Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001 (reprint). p.8.
3. Suresh Awasthi. "The Ramayana Tradition and the Performing Arts," . . . 1980. p.661.
4. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. " Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts," . . .1976. p. 137..

(Vishnu Temple) of the 11th century in Bagan, there are two brick and stone sculptures of Rama and Parasu Rama.¹

In a lovely tondi of the Abeyadana Temple of King Kyansittha's period (A.D. 1084-1113) a figure of Rama riding Hanuman can be seen.² 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 his previous existence, in two of his Mon inscriptions, one from Mya Kan, Bagan the other from the Kyaik Thalan Pagoda near Thaton³.

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)".⁴ This is probably Parasu Rama (also spelt Parashurama).

-
1. Luce, G. H. *Old Burma — Early Pagan*. Vol. 1 . . . 1969. p. 222. See plates 149e and 149f.
 2. Singer, Noel F. " The Ramayana at the Burmese Court" . . . 1987. p. 91.
 3. Thein Han, U . "Shei-Oo Myanmar Yama a -phwint", *Sabei Phyu* (Apr. to Oct. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol 1. . . . 1993. p. 106.
 4. Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana* . . . 1998 p. 13.

(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.

(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.¹

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 Burma (Myanmar) Historical Commission. He wrote ten articles in Myanmar² and two in English³; 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 Sayadaw

1. Po Sein, U. *Yama thon-myo. Nan-dwin Yama*. Vol. 1. . . 1935. p. nga.

2. Thein Han, U(Zawgyi). *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol. 1. . . 1993. p. 85-180.

3. See Rangoon University. Historical Research Dept. *Silver Jubilee Publication* . . . 1982. p. 148-170.

(Presiding Monk) of Taungdwingyi to the *Kandaw Min Kyaung Myint taza*¹ and (2) *Manikhet*, a play by Minister Padetha Yazar², based on one of the stories of the *Zinme 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 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*.³ 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 *RamaVatthu 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 work⁴.

This earliest Ramayana work written on palm-leaf was discovered by researchers of the Burma (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 Parabaik (Paper) Manuscript

-
1. Kandaw Min Kyaung Sayadaw. *Kandaw Min Kyaung Myittaza* (Myitta-sar written by the Presiding Monk of Kandaw Min Kyaung Royal Monastery). See para.17, p.27-28 of the *Exegesis*. BRS, 1933 ed.
 2. Padetha Yazar, Wun-gyi (c1684-1751). *Mani-khet Pyazat*. See Hanthawaddy Press, 1972 ed., p.6.
 3. Thein Han, U " The Ramayana in Burma", in Rangoon University. *Historical Research Dept.* Silver Jubilee Publication. . . . 1982. p.149.
 4. Thein Han, U. " A-mhar sar (Preface)" to *Yama Wuthtu* . . . 1974. p. 5.

Series, no. 4", while he was serving as the Convenor of the Manuscript Publication Sub-Committee of the Universities Publication Committee.¹

An enlargement of the *Rama Vatthu*, also in prose, is the *Maha Rama (Yama)*, 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 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 1971.² This is the most complete text of the Ramayana published in Myanmar so far.

For many years, the most complete text of the Ramayana written for dramatic performance remained unpublished in paper parabaik and palm-leaf manuscript forms. It was given the title *Thiri Yama (Rama)* by U Thein Han; the author was Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung who probably wrote it in the late 18th or early 19th century. This (verse) drama written in prose and poetry with instructions for the stage and for 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 twenty years ago I obtained a copy of this rare unpublished work on 54 fascicules of paper parabaik manuscript from the Mandalay University Library and had it carefully recopied by hand by a competent Myanmar scholar on modern paper. I have now been able to get it published by the Universities Historical Research Centre under the title *Yama (Rama) Pya - zat-taw-gyi* in three volumes with special funding from the Prime Minister's office.

Member of the Myanmar Historical Commission, U Maung Maung Tin's opinion is that this work by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung, the *Thiri Rama*, or the *Yama 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 1789³. The author's rank is shown in the

1. *Rama Vatthu* ... 1974.

2. *Maha Rama Vatthu* ... 1971.

3. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A.). "Yama Pyazat Taw-gyi . . .1957.p.73

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.¹ The title *Nataka* is derived from the Pali "Natako" meaning a dancer or an acrobat.

U Thein Han on the other hand wrote that there was another work, now probably lost, produced by the Royal Commission, and that Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung used this earlier Ramayana Drama and that the new work that he wrote, i.e. *Thiri Rama*, was "definitely a re-presentation".² Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung 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 the

Yama Pya-zat-taw gyi is that it enables us to know what the dramatic performance was like in the Myanmar king's 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 Ayutthaya), Laos, Assam and Manipur and Malaya and Java.³ The following is a list of Ramayana texts in Myanmar

1. *Ibid.*p.77.

2. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "The Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts" . . . 1976. p.163.

3. Thein Han, U. "*The Ramayana in Burma*" . . . 1982. p. 152.

Author	Title	Date	Remarks
<p>Prose (1) Unknown</p>	<p><i>Rama Vatthu</i></p>	<p>17th century</p>	<p>Facsimile offset reprint of original palm-leaf mss. Universities Publication Committee, 1974. Earliest text so far found.</p>
<p>(2) Unknown</p>	<p><i>Maha Rama Vatthu (Wuthtu)</i></p>	<p>Late 18th century or Early 19th century</p>	<p>Published by Burma Research Society, 1971.</p>
<p>(3) Saya Htwe</p>	<p><i>Rama Thonmyo Zat-taw-gyi Vatthu Wuthtu</i> [The three versions of Ramayana]</p>	<p>1904</p>	<p>Published by Tainglon Zabu Press.</p>

Author	Title	Date	Remarks
<p style="text-align: center;">Poetry</p> <p>(4) U Aung Phyo</p>	<i>Rama Thagyin</i>	1775	Being edited for publication. Earliest dated poetic version.
(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, Rakhine State.

Author	Title	Date	Remarks
Drama (7) Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung	<i>Rama Pya-zat-taw-gyi (Thiri Yama)</i>	Late 18th cent. or early 19th cent.	This has the fullest text. Vol. 1 published 2001, vols 2 & 3 published 2002, all three by the Universities Historical Research Centre.
(8) Saya Ku	<i>Pon-daw Rama</i> Pt. 1	1880	Published. Incomplete.
(9)U Maung Gyi (Dabein)	<i>Pontaw Rama and Lakkhana,</i> Pt. 1	1910	Published. Incomplete.

n.b. The above list is based on a list first compiled by U Thein Han in his article "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts", *JBRS*, 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 six 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-five years.

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. This court drama with dialogue, poetic recitations and 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 culture¹. The Thai dancers and musicians were later formed into the Yodaya (Ayutthaya or Thai) Zat-taw-gyi dance and drama troupe and there were 91 artistes at the time of King Thibaw² 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.

Former Rector of the University of Rangoon (Yangon) Dr. Htin Aung in his pioneer study of Burmese (Myanmar) drama wrote that though the Thai

1. Htin Aung, *Dr. A History of Burma....*1937. p. 175.

2. *Shwe Nanthon Worhara Abidan*. Vol. 1, pt. 174. "Yodaya Zat-taw-gyi Ahmudan" ... 1975.

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."¹

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".²

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 also a Jataka story, the hero and heroine are figures of moral uprightness fighting against 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 Thai³.

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) Hanthawadi.

1. Htin Aung, *Dr. Burmese Drama*. . . . 1937. p.41.

2. *Ibid.* p.42.

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

We have an eye-witness account by the British Envoy Michael Symes of such a performance at the residence of the Hanthawadi Myowun, or Governor of the Hanthawadi 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:-

"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 specators 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 in war, have cultivated with more success the refined arts of peace. By way of an interlude between the acts, a clownish buffon 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 Birmans seem to delight in mimickry, and are very expert in the practice, possessing uncommon versatility of countenance."¹

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

"Althought 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;

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

and the several parts, songs and actions, being assigned to different performers, the recitative part or dialogue is left to each actors'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 Hanthawadi] (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 "¹

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 AD). On 3rd of 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,

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

writers and musicians was appointed to work in consultation with Thai interpreters from Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai.¹

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 a 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 Myawady, 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 Raza-thu, Herald to the Crown Prince and Treasurer.

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). no page no.

- (8) Prince Thado Dhama Raza, Lord of Taungoo 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 plays¹.

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. They were helped by 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: i.e the Lord of Taungoo wrote *Sankhapatta* and his wife Lady Thakin Minmi, the *Kesasiri*, both stories being from the *Zimme*(*Chiang Mai*) *Pannasa 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 certain 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 wrote². In this collection there are also some Ramayana songs whose authors are unknown.

-
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). no page number..
 2. *Maha Gita*. Various editions. See Myanmar. Culture Ministry ed. 3vols. in one, 1997. Section on Yodaya Songs, p. 75-94.

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 Thai¹.

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"². 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 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 Ramayana, 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

1. Thein Han, U. "Yama Zatkhin Bon hnint Tay Gita," *Sabei Phyu* (Dec. 1986).
Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol 1. . . 1993. p.171.

2. Myint Kyi, U. "Three Yodaya Songs Representing the Thai Element in Myanmar Classical Music", *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies*. Theme VII. 1996. p.161. Reprinted in *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 5 (June 2000) p. 27-36.

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."¹

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 1853.² 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 (Lanna) Thai style building with a three-tiered roof.³

Also the simple, nearly bare stage setting with only two door-ways down stage for exit or entry of the actors⁴ 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

-
1. George Scott, Sir. *The Burman, His Life and Notions* , by Shway Yoe . . . 3rd ed. 1910. p.295.
 2. Thein Han, U. " Yama Zatkhin Bon hint Gita," *Sabei Phyu*, (Dec. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi. Vol. I.* . . . 1993. p. 170.
 3. *Mya Nan San Kyaw, the Royal Palace* [Myanmar. Dept. of Archaeology.] . . . [1995?] p. 36.
 4. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. "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 1885.¹

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 situations².

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 dialogue³.

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;

-
1. *Konbaung-zet Maha Yazawindawgyi*; 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.

the music played is the Yodaya/ Thai *chut*¹, which has become the Myanmar 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 time².

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 printed and published under the title *Yama 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 Maung-htaung Thathanabaing Sayadaw U Neyya in 1849³. From the King to Princes, Princesses, ministers, soldiers, musicians and others, the dresses depicted on the sculptures are all from the early

-
1. *Chut* is accepted by the Myanmar as a Thai term, but the present day Thai do not recognise the term or the music.
 2. Thein Han, U. " Myanmar Yama Anu-pyinnya hnint Zat Pwe," *Sabei Phyu* (Nov. 1986). Reprinted in *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi* . . . 1993. Vol. 1. p. 160-161.
 3. Mya Mya Win. *The Maha Loka Marajin Pagoda in Historical Perspective*. Mandalay: University of Mandalay, M.A. thesis in History, 1999. (Unpublished). According to the writer of this thesis the Ramayana stone plaques were donated by King Mindon around 1852-53.

Konbaung Period when the Ramayana dramatic performances were first presented.¹ The dancers are frozen on stone in attractive dance postures.

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, Hpapon (Pyapon) Bogale, Hinthada (Henzada) and other cities and towns where they kept alive the Ramayana tradition right up to the present².

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 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"³.

-
1. Than Tun, Dr. "Thakhut Ta-nei Yama," *Hanthawaddy newspaper supplement* (3 Sept. 1972). See also U Thein Han and U Khin Zaw. "Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts" . . . 1976. p.165.
 2. Thein Han, U and U Khin Zaw. " Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts" . . . 1972. p. 166-167. See also U Thein Han. " Yamazat Khin Pon hnei Tay Gita" . . . 1993. p. 171-173.
 3. Damrong Rajanubhab, Prince. *Journey Through Burma in 1936.* . . Bangkok: River Books, 1991. p. 206.

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 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. 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.¹

In Yangon there are at present (4) Ramayana Dance Troupes, apart from the State Cultural Dance Troup. 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 Soviet Union at

1.. 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.(now Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt) Ramayana dance and drama troupes from all over Myanmar competed also in 1999 and 2002.

one time. (4) *Thiri Yama Aphwai* (Annawa) headed by U Than Aung of the Annawa Dhammayone in Bahan quarter.¹

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. 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".² 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 *Thiri Rama* (published 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.³

-
1. Hla Moe, U. (Yama Zat Thabin Pyinnya Shin). "Myanma Yoe-ya Yin Kyeihmu Htain Thein Ye" [To keep alive the Myanmar Cultural Heritage], *Kyei Mon* daily newspaper (18th Apr. 1998) p.5.
 2. Dhaninivat, Prince " The Ramakien, the Siamese Version of the Story of Rama," Burma Research Society. *Fiftieth Anniversary Publication no. 1*. . .1961. p. 35. See also *Thai Ramayana* retold by King Rama I of Siam ... 1998.
 3. 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 Yama a hpwint" . . . 1993. p. 138-139.

Prof. Ohno Toru of Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan, has now carried out 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. Prof. Ono has noted down in some detail the divergent episodes in the plot, characterization and so on.¹

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 Thai in costumes and masks, plot and characterization, dance gestures and music, 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 concluding my paper I would like to propose that the *Rama Wuthtu*² from the 17th century should be translated into English and Thai as this will facilitate further research by international scholars.

-
1. Ohno Toru. "Was Myanma Ramayana Translated from Thai Ramayana?" in *Studies in Myanma History* . . . 1999. p. 121-142. See also Ohno Toru's "Salient Features of Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi", *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no.11 (June 2003) p.109-118.
 2. Now translated into English by Prof. Ohno Toru in *A Study of the Burmese Rama Story*, with an English Translation . . . 1999.

Bibliography

In English

1. *Asian Variations in Ramayana* ; ed.with introd. by K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar.
New Delhi : Sakitya Akademi, 1983(1994 reprint).
2. Damrong Rajanubhab, Prince. *Journey Through Burma in 1936*.
Bangkok : River Books, 1991.
3. Dhaninivat "The Ramakien, a Siamese Version of the Story of Rama,"
Burma Research Society. *Fiftieth Anniversary Publication, no.1*.
Yangon: BRS, 1961.p. 33-45.
4. Htin Aung,Dr. *Burmese Drama . . .* Calcutta : Oxford University Press,
1937.
5. - - -. *A History of Burma*. New York : Columbia University Press,1967.
6. 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. p.8-10.
7. Luce,G.H. *Old Burma - Early Pagan*. Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin
for Artibus Asiae, 1969-70. 3vols. illus.
8. Mackenzie,Kenneth R.H. *Burmah and the Burmese*. London : George
Routledge, 1853.
9. Mya Mya Win. *The Maha Loka Marajin Pagoda in Historical Perspective*.
Mandalay: University of Mandalay, M.A. thesis in History, 1999.
(Unpublished)

10. *Mya Nan San Kyaw, the Royal Palace*. [Yangon : Dept. of Archaeology, 1995?].
11. Myint Kyi,U. "Three Yodaya Songs Representing the Thai Element in Myanmar Classical Music", in *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies*. Theme VII. Toward a New Frontier of Thai Studies. Chiang Mai: The Conference, 1996. p.159-167. Reprinted in *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no.5 (June 2000) p.27-36.
12. Ohno Toru. *A Study of the Burmese Rama Story*, with an English translation . . . Osaka: Osaka University of Foreign Studies, 1999. The *Rama Wuthtu* completely translated into English by is Prof.Ohno included in this monograph.
13. - - - "Was Myanmar Ramayana Translated from Thai Ramayana?" in *Studies in Myanma History*. Essays given to Dr. Than Tun on his 75th birthday. Vol. 1. . . Yangon: Innwa Publishing House.1999. p. 121-142.
14. - - - " Solient Features of *Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi*," Myanmar Historical Research Journal, no.11 (June 2003) p. 109-118.
15. 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 nos.
16. *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia* . . . ; ed. by V. Raghavan. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi,1980 (1989 reprint).

17. Ray, Nihar-ranjan. *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*; a chapter of Indian Art and Iconography. Bangkok : Orchid Press, 2001.(reprint). (Bibliotheca Orientalis : Burma, vol. 8) 1st pub. in Calcutta, 1932.
18. Sarkar, H. B. " The Ramayana in South-east Asia : a General Survey," in *Asian Variations in Ramayana . . .* 1983. p.206-220.
19. Scott, Sir James George. *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, by Shway Yoe. London: Macmillan, 1882. 2 vols. Various editions and reprints.
20. Singer, Noel F. " The Ramayana at the Burmese Court", *Arts of Asia*, vol.19, no.6 (Nov.- Dec. 1989) p.90-103, illus.
21. Suresh Awasthi. " The Ramayana Tradition and the Performing Arts," in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia . . .* 1980. p.660 - 669.
22. Symes, Michael. *An Account of the Embassy to the Court of Ava*. London: W. Bulmer,1800.
23. Thaw Kaung, Dr. "Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Performing Arts," *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 9 (June 2002) p. 73-99.
24. Thein Han, U (Zaw Gyi) "The Ramayana in Burma," in Burma. Historical Research Dept. *Silver Jubilee Publication*. Yangon : The Dept.,1982. p. 148-158.
25. Thein Han,U. and U Khin Zaw. " Ramayana in Burmese Literature and Arts,"*Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol.59, pts.I & II (Dec. 1976)p137-154.

In Myanmar

26. Hla Moe, U. (Yama Zat Thabin Pyinnya Shin). "Myanma Yoe-ya Yin-kyei-hmu Htain Thein Ye" [To keep alive the Myanmar Cultural Heritage], *Kyei Mon* daily newspaper (18th Apr. 1998) p. 5.
27. Hla Thamein. *Myanmar Ramayana* . Yangon : Padamya Nga Mauk Sarpay, 1998.
28. *Konbaung-zet Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi*, by U Maung Maung Tin (KSM). - - vol.3. 3rd ed. Yangon : Ledi Mandaing Press,1968.
29. *Maha Gita*. Yangon : Culture Ministry, 1997. 3 vols. in one.
30. *Maha Rama Wuthtu* ; ed. by U Tet Tut and U Maung Maung Gyi. Yangon: Burma Research Society, 1971.
31. Maung Maung Tin,U(KSM) *Shwe Nanthon Worhara Abidan*. [Vol.1] Yangon : Dept. of Religious Affairs,1975 (reprint).
32. Maung Maung Tin, U (M.A.). "Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi," *Yinkyeyi-hmu Sar-saung*, vol.2, no.7 (Mar. 1957)p.73-77.
33. - - - . *Myanmar Pya-zat Thamaing*. Yangon: Sit-the-daw Sarpay; Myat Hsu Mon Sar pay, 2002.
34. Min Kyaung Phondawgyi (of Taungdwingyi). *Kandaw Min Kyaung Myittaza A-phyai*. Yangon : Burma Research Society, 1933.
35. *Mon Kyauk-sa Baung-chok* [Collection of Mon Lithic Inscriptions] ; compiled and translated into Myanmar by U Chit Thein . Yangon: Archaeology Dept , 1965.

36. Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung. *Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi*. Yangon : Universities Historical Research Centre, Vol. 1, 2001. Vols. 2 & 3, 2002. In 3 vols. Introductions by U Thaw Kaung, U Aung Thwin and U Nyunt Maung.
37. Padetha Yazar, Wun-gyi . *Mani-khet Pyazat*. 2nd ed. Yangon : Hanthawaddy, 1972.
38. Po Sein,U. *Yama thon-myo. Nan-dwin Yama*.Vol.1. Yangon : Toe Sarponhneit Taik, 1935.
39. *Yama Wuthtu*. Yangon : Sarpay Beikman for Universities Publication Committee,1974. Introduction by U Thein Han.
40. *Thai Ramayana*, masterpiece of Thai literature, retold from the original version written by King Rama I of Siam. [Trs. into English]. Bangkok : Chalermnit Bookshop, 1998.
41. Than Tun, Dr. "Thakhut Ta-nei Yama," *Hanthawaddy newspaper supplement* (3 Sept.1972).
42. Thein Han,U.(Zaw Gyi). *Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. Vol.I. Yangon : Union of Myanmar Literary and Journalist Organization, 1993. p.85-180.

Ref: Journal of the Siam Society. vol. 90 (pts.1 & 2) 2002. p. 137-148.