

Political Economy of Myanmar: A Few Notes on the Linkage between the Past and the Present

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I. Introduction

The incident in September 2007 in Myanmar involving the Buddhist monks has been differently conceived, interpreted, and predicted by different groups and organizations, but, the final outcome has been contrary to what most have been expected. The military regime seems to perceive and conceive the behavior of demonstrators of both the citizens and the monk as defiance of authority and law and order (pursued by the regime) and that the measures taken to suppress them were within the bound of socio-cultural and traditional systems and laws. Some members of the regime even tend to suggest that thank to harsh measures that the demonstrators have been subdued in time and the country's independence has been saved. This partly reflected in the regime's open and blind defiance and/or rejection of many legitimate demands and persuasions of the internal and international public and organizations including the UN. The world has once again witnessed that most, if not all, internal and international strategies and pressures have failed. Although one against all, the regime still stands firm on its own perception, course and direction. Why is this so? Do they never learn? Why were most predictions of analysts and 'experts' on Myanmar wrong?

II. Assessment and Recommendations of the International Crisis Group

Among others, the ICG's assessments seemed relatively comprehensive and interesting. The ICG assessed that the Myanmar military regimes sustained fears of foreign intervention and blamed foreigners for the country's many problems.

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Driven by an obsession with national sovereignty to seek autonomy from international influences, the military regime became inward-looking and alienated with outside world. As a result of insecurity feeling, they tend to adopt the policies and strategies of self-reliance, doing things its own way, and relying on its own resources. The military regime lacks in understanding of international affairs, motivations, and values of other nations, and, thus, still maintains the ideal absolute sovereignty and perceived need to insulate Myanmar from foreign influence. Consequently, each opening is accompanied by control mechanisms to limit the negative impact of allowing in more foreigners. Myanmar's foreign relations, according to ICG's assessment, are shaped in this tension between traditional values and current needs, which gives to many outsiders an image of the clash-of-civilizations; that is, between the forces of good (i.e. Western democracy) confronting the forces of evil (i.e. Asian authoritarianism). The ICG also assessed that the military leaders fear what will happen to them if the political order is overturned so that they will continue to frame policies influenced by not surrendering power without guarantees for themselves and their families.¹ Are these assessments of ICG correct? Without consideration of the link between the present behaviors and the past traditional Myanmar culture under historical perspective, either the ICG's assessments or the military regime's perception would be difficult to evaluate to be right or wrong. Rightly or wrongly, the perceptions and associated actions of the regime are noted to be linked to a large extent to the past traditional historical culture.

III. Myanmar's Development Attempts: Trials and Failures

The attempt to develop Myanmar through reforms is not a recent phenomenon. It can be traced back as early as to the later phase of the *Konbaung* dynasty, if not earlier, but the efforts of reforms had been failed or aborted, despite the noble objectives of the reforms.² Following Myanmar's independence in 1948, the democratic government led by U Nu had tried to build a prosperous welfare state (*Pyidawtha Nainggan*) but again failed as was interrupted by a change of power to the 'Care-Taker Government' led by General Ne Win in 1956. Then, the Revolutionary Council (RC) led by Gen. Ne Win came into power in

a *coup-de-tat* on March 2, 1962, and tried again to develop the country through 'force and command' until 1973, and later by Socialist means of central planning until 1988. The performance had been so poor that once a prosperous Myanmar deteriorated to the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 1987, finally leading to the downfall of the socialist government in 1998. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) came into power in 1988, later renamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) since November 1997, and adopted market means to develop the country, but performance so far after 20 years of its inception to power was disappointingly poor.

What were the causes or reasons behind such failures in the past? Can a mere change of Government bring development to Myanmar? Can development of Myanmar be ensured by political liberalization, as some suggest? Why is it so difficult to change the mind-set of the government (and of the people as well to a large extent) of Myanmar to be able to keep abreast with the sweeping changes that have been taking place around them? These are a few of a long list of questions for which a number of scholars and researchers inside and outside the country are trying to find answers, but still in vain. This short piece of paper tries to highlight the linkage between the past and present as an important factor related to that answer at least partially, if not fully.

IV. Approach to Myanmar Political Economy

Most foreign observers and scholars have confused, and oftentimes confounded, Myanmar society, its culture, language, and character of its people for many generations dating back to the times of Myanmar kings. Some misinterpreted, some oversimplified, and there were still some who lacked the necessary knowledge of the Myanmar's cultural traditions and beliefs and values in their quest for 'truths' of the Myanmar state of affairs. Consequently, most of their 'findings' were either incomprehensive or biased. In this regard, a locally well known leftist politician-cum-writer, Maung Suu Zann once wrote:³

The rightist capitalist economists, Furnivall⁴ and Andrus,⁵ had written extensively about Myanmar political economy⁶ based on facts and figures as 'raw materials'. The [Myanmar] leftists like *Thakhin* Soe and Ko Ba Hein,

among others, had also written extensively about Myanmar political economy, but the writings of both sides were not comprehensive. The major weakness of the 'capitalist economists' was that their approach and analysis, although based on facts and figures, was rather 'mechanical' and failed to outline the concrete laws of development on which Myanmar society has been based. On the other hand, the leftists have outlined the social laws of development of Myanmar to some extent, but their analysis and expositions lacked factual validity and reliability.

Maung Suu Zann assessed that a new interpretation and analysis of Myanmar political economy based on the 'new materials accumulated by the rightist economists' and 'the tools and laws exposed by the leftists' would be required.

For any such study to be fruitful and comprehensive would need the fundamental knowledge of Myanmar economic history, traditional polity, culture, and the systems of beliefs and values. Various Myanmar researchers asserted that the personality, policy and value-orientation of the tradition-bound nationalist political leadership have constrained Myanmar society to transform the traditional social system, and the strong persistence of traditional socio-political culture was the root cause of persistence of authoritarianism and lack of development in Myanmar.⁷ Some 'elements of old tradition' were thus seen by them as the major barriers to the process of modernization and development in Myanmar. Accordingly, the political saga of Myanmar especially under the military rule cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the persistent traditional symbols, customs, and myths of State that the central power holders have seemed to want to emulate.

As Geertz (1983, pp.73-5) has pointed out, political authority requires a cultural frame in which to define itself and advance its claim, and so does opposition to it. The cultural frame in which the Myanmar leadership (military as well as civilian) have defined and claimed legitimacy has indeed been the traditional culture with its centuries-old symbolic images of the 'sacred center', *nagaya*, and kings, *yazahs*, whose authority over the 'periphery', *daitha*, or the subject is defined in the polity of absolute despotism, *padaithayit* (Mya Maung 1991). Surprisingly or not, the governments in Myanmar tended to preserve these

perceptions and conceptions in ‘modern’ Myanmar. However, Myanmar’s downgrading to the LDC status in 1987 during the ‘Burma Socialist Regime’ led by U Ne Win has traumatized the feelings and heightened the sense of shame of the once proud Myanmar people who have never ever imagined that such a thing would happen to their country. Transformation of Myanmar from the position of ‘Rice Bowl’ to that of ‘Rice Hole’ of Asia within a quarter century was an indicative of the enormous wastage of Myanmar’s natural wealth at a rapid pace. The human factors of mismanagement by the military managers and inefficient strategies and policies of development were commonly pointed out by the analysts as the responsible factors to turn Myanmar into such a miserable state.

V. Components of Old Traditions Considered

The eight components of old traditions are selected for our purpose here. They are:

1. Contradictions;
2. Tradition-bound political leadership and persistence of conservative attitudes of the people towards government;
3. The role of superstition in politics;
4. Failure to appreciate the importance of the rule of law and private property right;
5. Status and rank conscious society;
6. Authoritarian attitudes and allied habits of mind;
7. Believing in myths and supernatural things; and
8. Racial complex.

5.1 *The Land of Contradictions*

Myanmar had historically earned various reputations and one of them is calling it as the “land of contradictions”.⁸ One of the contradictory portrayals of Myanmar society relates to the relaxed, pacific, and happy-go-lucky characters versus the tense, violent, and stressed to the point of being paranoid nature of the Myanmar people. This seeming split personality of the Myanmar people has led many observers to draw two opposing inferences with respect to the

propensity of Myanmar society to develop into a modern nation. At the one end of the spectrum of assessments is the view of immense potential for development, and at the other end is the view of total societal impotence for modernization.

The latter view is to be found in the writings of a group of Western observers, especially a group of Portuguese and American missionaries, who came into contact with old Burma before the British colonial annexation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their 'predilections and religious biases tended to describe the Burmese social character as depraved, cunning, cruel, barbarous, and vile' (Mya Maung 1991, p.xviii). Judson has gone to the extreme by writing that the Myanmar people were sunk in "gross idolatry... and susceptible to the wicked inclinations of their depraved hearts" and "cannot live without telling lies (*mutha*)".⁹ These allegations were, however, rejected by several analysts who recognized many good qualities of Myanmar people. For example, according to Father Sangermano (1833), "indeed there are some persons whose affability, courtesy, benevolence, gratitude, and other virtues contrast strongly with the vices of their countrymen". Similarly, the reply of Captain Forbes (1878, p.55) to Syme's observation of Burmans as "destitute both for delicacy and humanity, considering women as little superior to brute stock of their farms" showed that "in Burma women enjoy a freer and higher position than elsewhere in the East; indeed, in some matters they have attained rights that their sisters in England are still seeking to obtain, or have lately gained".

The positive aspects of the traditional Burmese society that are commonly noticed include egalitarianism, absence of rigid class barriers, elastic social system, freedom of women, individualism, and affability of its people. As Professor Hagen (1956: 7-12) noted: "Egalitarianism extended to virtually all social and political relationship in the society, strong social sanction prevented even the king from encroaching on the rights and privileges granted by custom to the individualism". Some criticized Hagen that he was referring to the positive aspect of Burmese society under the reign of benevolent Burmese kings, not the terrible tyrants who certainly outnumbered the former by thousands.¹⁰ Despite that, there were indeed no castes or hereditary landed aristocracy and even the royal succession to the throne had no strict rule of primogeniture—a fact with tragic

consequences of disorder.¹¹

The latest contradiction between what is ideal and what is real or the gap between the normative behaviour sanctioned by religion and the deviant behaviour that shocks various observers was the violent massacre of demonstrators by their own army during the mass demonstrations in August 1988 and September 2007. For those who were brought up in the ethos of traditional Burmese culture, these outburst of violence and killings can be explained by the ancient Burmese traditions of absolute authoritarianism and despotic social order, which were noted by many analysts as deliberately revived by the military anarchy.

Taylor and Michael Aung Thwin interpreted the Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS) as a modern version of Karl Polyanyi's model of economic redistribution. Mya Maung rejected them by asserting that equating or even comparing 'the military command economy with the economy of the type put forth by Karl Polyanyi in his *'Great Transformation'* is a myth. Mya Maung viewed the WBS as an indigenous or Burmese and *ipso facto* a duplicate of the Sino-Soviet model. By any standard norm or measure, the BWS was not a model but a mixture of Marxism, Maoism, Buddhism, and some other personal ideals, mixed 'properly' to suit more to the personal ambition and to be instrumental to the implementation of the main uncommitted objective of 'Burmanization'. It might perhaps be seen as an attempt to subtly revive or reestablish the institutions, norms and values that flourished under the absolute despotism of old Burma.

5.2 Tradition-bound Political Leadership and Conservative Attitudes towards Government

The conservative attitudes of old Myanmar people towards the *bayin* or *min* (king or government) seem to essentially persist still. Perceiving *min* as an evil and as one of the five enemies of mankind, relying on the government for everything to be done on their behalf and yet to stay aloof from the government for fear of involvement with government business, viewing the government as omnipotent, omnipresent, and omni-competent, persisting the *min* complex, the highly personalized outlook in human relationships within the administrative

infrastructure, and the desire to please the superior, and relationship based on subjective evaluations rather than on objective calculations are a few of many such conservative attitudes.¹² In this regard, the statements of a Minister of the AFPFL Cabinet in an interview with a newspaper correspondent in 1955 would seem to be relevant and sufficient proof. The Minister then stated:

“You know the popular Burmese prejudice against ‘government’. We were all taught that government was an enemy, an evil to be avoided as much as possible. We were told by our elders that there are five enemies to be wary of: **government**, water in the form of floods that destroy or treacherous waters in which men drown; fire, thieves, and those who do not love us. As you see, government tops the list, and it’s the first enemy of the people. So we were taught, so we believed.”¹³

5.3 *The Role of Superstition in Politics*

Various superstitious rituals¹⁴ are performed by the Myanmar people to counter unforeseeable misfortunes of dangers, or to bring in good fortunes. There is no ‘*Myanmar Yazawin*’ (History of Myanmar Kings) that does not mention the notorious advisor of the kings, *ponnars* (the Hindu Brahman astrologers).¹⁵ The Myanmar kings employed on a regular basis not only the *ponnars* but also a host of other palmists, shamans, and astrologers. The Government Gazetteer in 1880 described the superstition of the Burmans as follows: “The Burmans are exceedingly superstitious and hardly anything can be undertaken without the advice of an astrologer, or *ponnar*, or a *bedin-hsaya* (fortune-teller), who is called in to select the fortunate day and hour for all the important ceremonies of life”.

Most Bamar-Buddhists¹⁶ and other animists rely heavily upon the allegedly supernatural power to help and guide the ventures of their lives, so that these ‘professionals’ are overly popular in all over Myanmar even today. The influences of these supernatural (or superstitious) beliefs and practices are not only confined to individual and private domains and functions but also openly to the national and state functions. Two of many of such practices are illustrated below as case examples.

Case example (1): A loyal henchman of the *Adipati* (the Head of State) Dr. Ba Maw, who was a religious Minister in the latter's cabinet during the Japanese regime described in his book how he presaged the impending downfall of Dr. Ba Maw through omens. The coming of a tortoise into his house was taken by him as an omen, which he read as the return of the English to Burma (because the tortoise represents the English - a tortoise is called 'lake' in Burmese, and the word 'lake' is an abbreviated nickname for the English). When the allied forces invaded Burma in 1945 with full strength Dr. Ba Maw and his cabinet propitiated all the nats (spirits) in the country and sought their help to drive out the invading enemies.¹⁷

Case example (2): January 4, 1948, 04:20 AM was chosen as the 'auspicious' and 'graceful' hour and day by the learned astrologers for the declaration of independence for Burma, and the Cabinet accepted their choice and performed the independence ceremony on the same day and hour (of the coldest month of winter in Myanmar). Regarding the extreme superstitious nature of the leaders, an American writer wrote in 1948: "Last summer, during the interim government an entire cabinet resigned a few hours after having been sworn in by the governor. Astrologers had announced that the oat taking coincided with a pathetic state of anarchy among the stars. Mass resignation was the only way out. A few hours later, all the same men reappeared and went through exactly the same ceremony, at a moment favored by the spheres".¹⁸ It was no secret that the then Premier U Nu was superstitious, and he regarded himself as "*Phayar-Laung*" (the 'Embryo Buddha' or Bodhisattva).

Relying on superstitious practices became more numerous under the military regimes since 1962 up to date. Consulting with the fortune tellers, palm-readers (or palmists) and the like, and holding festivals of *nats* (spirits) and other super-natural legendary things by offering various foods and other things to ask for some favours and privileges or to escape from or overcome some problems or troubles, spending a very considerable amount of money, are very common among the general public.¹⁹

5.4 *Failure to Appreciate the Rule of Law and Private Property Right*

The rule of law is an impersonal law blind to status, color, age, sex, position, or power, and springs out of the law of contract society. By this definition and standard measurement, the members of the ruling elite in Myanmar (both civilian and military) do not appear to have a clear idea of the basic principles of the rule of law concept. Most members of successive governments and high ranking officials generally violate the main tenets of the rule of law, and ignore the basic principles and took the law into their own hands.²⁰ There are plenty of evidences for this, but the case of an AFPFL Minister's objection to the application of the rule of law at the village level in the Democratic Administration Bill alone would seem suffice for our purpose here. The issue was about allowing the traditional village leaders such as the *phongyi* (monk), the *thugyi* (headmen) and the village elders a role in the application of law in the village administration. They were to oversee and decide whether the law should be strictly applied or not. Such an attempt to intervene in the rule of implementation was viewed by the said Minister as social sanction. Said the Minister:

The aim should be to settle most of the cases in the village itself by compromise and mutual consent so that no personal enmity should be bred of these cases...It has been found that the introduction of the rule of law which is alien to the Burmese tradition has led to the disintegration of Burmese social life. An unalloyed continuance of the rule of law will further disintegrate Burmese social life will have to depend more on social sanction than on the rule of law. I do not recommend that the rule of law should be dispensed with. But the rule of law should be adjusted in such a way that it should leave the largest possible scope to the play of social sanction.²¹

If the law is to be subjected to the dictates of the men in authority then there is no rule of law.²² Unfortunately, appreciation of the concept and value of the rule of law is still lacking in Myanmar as public opinion is not yet strong to counter rough justice and the authorities concerned are not yet matured enough to appreciate the concept.²³ This conception and behavior was noted to be rooted in the absolute monarchy system of old Myanmar where only the rule of order

or personal prevailed with the result of ruthlessness, favoritism, and corruption. For example, the Ministers (*Wuns*) down to Village Headmen (*Ywathugyis*) collected taxes and revenues for the Emperor at much higher rates than was prescribed by the customary law (which generally was fixed at 10%) in order to have their shares for their maintenance and for giving 'presents' to the successive higher authorities for favors.²⁴ The 'presents' were always necessary when any favor was asked for, nothing was obtained without them. As the Emperor considered the property of his subjects as in reality belonging to him, he could exact from them anything he pleased.²⁵

5.5 *Status-Conscious Society*

Myanmar people are highly conscious of status, but they do not realize that in such a law-of-status society an individual does not exist as an independent entity but as a component of a unit, either in family or in society, and enjoys a status according to his age, sex, generation, and occupation. Because of this, there is an absence of equal treatment concept within the society. In Myanmar society or community, a person is always viewed in term of his occupation or rank or status, but never viewed as a neutral member of a society possessing rights and privileges as a human being.²⁶ The status in the society depends on one's occupation and personal wealth, and respect and attention is regulated according to the social scale. The egalitarianism of the law-of-contract society of the West thus seems to the Myanmar people as impertinence and incivility.²⁷ The terms address to the individuals illustrates vividly the vigor of status awareness. A Myanmar is never called plainly by his or her name which will be construed as an insult. Proper prefixes have to be used as indicative of age, sex, and status. There is no neutral honorable term such as Mr. or Miss as in English usage. The scale of value is even applied to different parts of a person's physique. The head, for example, is regarded as sacred, the feet as dirty, and the private organ as filthy.

Thus the Myanmar people resent their head being rubbed or touched. To touch the head of a father would be a gross affront and irreverence unless it is done with permission. Raising one's feet toward another or aloft indicates an act

of defiance or disrespect. Although barefoot is not regarded as rude, throwing one's feet in the direction of another, whether they are covered or not is rude. During the time of the Myanmar kings, no one might turn his feet in the direction of the king. At night all beds were so laid that the heads might be directed to the King's apartment and the feet radiated outwards.²⁸ Moreover, to compare a person with an animal is regarded as extremely rude.²⁹

5.6 *Authoritarian Attitudes and Allied Habits of Mind*

The authoritarian element is still very strong in Myanmar's communal psychology and/or political culture. It has been pointed out that an atavist trend toward the old thought mold resurged during the Japanese period as reflected in the draft plan for independent Burma drawn by Gen. Aung San in Tokyo in 1942. He then wrote:

In the conception of Burmese people everything goes well if the head leads correctly but everything goes wrong if the head misleads or is unable to lead...It is against the Burmese temperament which demand always a strong capable leadership and does not want merely a figure head...There shall be only one nation, one state, one party, one leader. There shall be no parliamentary opposition, no nonsense of individualism. Everyone must submit to the State which is supreme over the individual.³⁰

It was not clearly known whether or not Gen. Aung San sincerely believed in this authoritarian 'Blue Print for Free Burma' or he has to write it as it was under the prevailing political environment and conditions, but Maung Maung (1969: 298), the well known biographer of General Ne Win, claimed the document to be in accordance "with the tone and temper of the Burmese Way to Socialism". No better eloquent testimony on the prevailing mood of the present ruling elite could be had than from one of the learned followers of Gen. Ne Win.

It seemed that the concept of an authoritarian rule pattern has caught admiration of some Myanmar leaders, and that even the Fascist/Nazi dictatorships of the West had influenced them. These dictatorships were noted to revivify the authoritarian trend of the Myanmar politicians, as, for instance, Dr. Ba Maw declared himself *ah-nar-shin* (dictator) of Myanmar in 1939. When Burma was

granted independence by the Japanese, Dr. Ba Maw was installed as dictator in a grand ceremony which was documented by a journalist-cum-cabinet minister, U Tun Pe, as follows:

...(An) impressive ceremony in which Dr. Ba Maw was installed as *Adipati* (the Head of the State) then took place. Everything in the setting was calculated to recall the old royal tradition. The music played was the customary accompaniment to the entry of the King in *pwes* (i.e., dramas or theatrical performances), the announcer was a dwarf, and *Thakhin* Kodaw Hmine, in administering the oath, addressed Dr. Ba Maw as ministers of old addressed the King. There stood Dr. Ba Maw in the full light of glory he had created for himself.³¹

The Myanmar leaders and people by and large are authoritarian in their outlook to this day which is part of the old thought pattern inherited from the past but unacknowledged. There are some Myanmar scholars who tend to think that it is not the authoritarian element in their thought mold that impels them towards the misuse or abuse of their power; on the contrary, it was power that has corrupted people.³² In terms of the fact that “democracy is not a privilege to be conferred but a habit of mind to be acquired”,³³ the level of knowledge, experiences and exposures of the Myanmar people are still very limited and yet immature. As portrayed by Maung Maung Gyi, the common trait of a Myanmar individual is the one who is “over bearing, haughty, and consumed with over-weeding confidence when in office with enough power and authority, but is a different, modest, and normal self when out of office and power”. As Nisbet wrote in 1901: “Either a man is powerful and therefore to be feared, or else he is weak and consequently may be despised. As might therefore be expected, there are timid and obsequious in the presence of those having authority over them”.³⁴

The authoritarian character of the Myanmar society can be found almost everywhere but is most noticeable in the areas of law and order and public security. Despite existence of well prescribed laws, rules and regulations, most officials or man in authority usually take them into their hands, and abuse power bestowed upon him. The traditional Myanmar thought pattern has prescribed six attributes, *nar-yaka-gon-chauk-pa*, that should be possessed by a true

leader as vigilance, assiduity, sympathy, patience, sagacity, and helpful admonition and, act accordingly, but since they are just customary and traditional rules without legal binding, there was no mechanism or law to check and balance or punish in case of failure to observe them.

To be fair, the Myanmar society and people at the same time possess some very positive and enlightened democratic attributes such as the absence of rigid caste system, freedom of women and women's rights, and easy social mobility. The problem, however, is that they lie outside the field of law and order. In the non-political aspects of social relations the Myanmar people may be said to have been ahead of other Asian societies as well as of many Western societies in a comparable time period, but in the political aspects of social relations such as enforcement of law and order, the Myanmar people under most of their kings had been primitive and might, perhaps, be at lowest stage.

The tendency to lie or to water down the truth is still widely prevalent in Myanmar in the authority-subordinate relationships, perhaps an offshoot of the authoritarian character of the old Myanmar governmental system. A Myanmar individual is invariably afraid of the person in authority especially a close or direct superior. Traditions have taught him that men in position and power are always those who tend to abuse power so that the main emphasis of his relationship with the man in authority would be to try to please his superior rather than face the facts and tell the truth. For example, it is on record that the Ministers at the Royal Palace flattered the king by telling lies when the British army came up the river in 1824-26 (i.e., the First Anglo-Burmese War) and annexed the Arakan and Tenasserim coastal regions.³⁵

Father Sangermano, an Italian priest who was a long resident at the capital of the Ava Kingdom, reported:

Among the principal precepts inculcated to the Burmese there is one that forbids lying; but perhaps there is no law less observed than this. It would seem that it is impossible for this people to tell the truth; nay, a person who ventures to do it is called a fool, a good kind of men but not fitted for managing his affairs. Dissimulation is the natural companion of the last mentioned habit, and the Burmese practice it to perfection. They may

have conceived an implacable enmity to another, they may wish him every kind of evil and be endeavouring by words and actions to ruin him but not the slightest sign of their dislike will be observed in their exterior deportment towards him; they will transact business with him and talk with him as if they were dearest friend. On the contrary, have they fixed their affections on anything and determined to make it theirs then they will feign an absolute dislike to it.³⁶

The description in the above report is generally still valid and true in Myanmar today. According to a Myanmarese saying, even a verse does not rhyme smoothly without an element of lie (*muthar-ma-par linga-ma-chaw*). Lying, underreporting of unpleasant facts, or overstatement of agreeable matters does not seem to bother a Myanmarese conscience nor is it regarded as violating the code of public morality. The intention of verbal manipulation is to save one's position or situation, or to promote one's status within the hierarchy. As a matter of historical fact, suspicion and distrust, byproducts and relics of the personalized hierarchical system of the days of Burmese monarchy, have indeed found their way up to our time of 21st Century.

5.7 Believing in Myth

The ancient Myanmar state was characterized by dual myths of the king personified as a sacred and a mighty ruler, which in turn were rooted in the sources of myths: the pre-Gautama rulers of mythical kingdoms of India and the myth and legend of the life of Gautama Buddha. They symbolized the two basic priestly and soldierly qualities of an ideal ruler or king. The personalities of Burmese kings and political leadership throughout the entire history of Burma could be described in terms of the symbol of power, based upon the two myths of godly-man and hero.³⁷ The Myanmar king conceived himself as the 'Ruler of the Universe', a concept born out of the pre-Gautama Buddha mythical kingship and dynasties in India and later magnified in the hands of the legendary and actual Buddhist kings of Myanmar.³⁸ According to Myanmar traditional legend, the first king of the world, *Maha Thamada Min*, a direct descendent of the 'Sun' kings, (*nay-myo-nwe*), ruled the universe by observing the sacred moral laws and

avoiding the four sins. Tracing the lineage of the Myanmar kings to the Sun Dynasty and the metaphoric glorification of their power and rule as the illuminating sunlight dispelling the darkness are the representation of the mythical symbol of the godly man.

This myth is closely associated with the hero myth. Most of the earlier ancient Myanmar kings had been symbolized by a dual myth of god-man and hero. The Bagan kings, for example. The most legendary Burmese king of the Bagan Dynasty, symbolizing the image of the Great Buddhist King of India, Asoka, was King Anawrahta (or Aniruda) (AD 1044-1077). He introduced Buddhism throughout the land by importing it from the Mon Kingdom which he conquered, eradicated the animistic religion and stripped off the influence and power of the *ayeegyis* (Hindu hermits) in his kingdom, and constructed numerous and still famous pagodas, temples and shrines as deeds of merit — a legacy left for all successive Myanmar kings and the mighty warriors as a role model of his successors.

The third monarch of Bagan Dynasty, Kyansitthar or Htee-Hlaing Min (AD 1084-1113), was also a great legendary figure. The conception of Kyansitthar was attended by earth quakes, thunder, and other signs which were read by the king's astrologers as a signal of the emergence of a *min-laung* (an embryo of a would-be king) which terrified the insecure reigning king, Anawrahta. Not knowing that it was his son who was conceived by the exile princess, the king, on the advice of the astrologers, ordered to kill thousands of pregnant women, nursing babies, and the young cow-herds. The young Kyansitthar miraculously escaped each of these killings under the protection of the dragon king, *nagar min*, indicating the persistence of animistic worship of *nagars* in his kingdom. When Kyansitthar entered the Buddhist clerical order, the astrologers once again conveyed their knowledge of it to the king. Not daring to violate the cultural sanction against killing the sacred monks, the king invited them to eat at his palace. There, the king detected and discovered the identity of the *min-laung*, whose mouth radiated brilliant lights when eating. Upon this discovery, the king asked his astrologers whether or not this monk would take over his throne immediately. The ironical answer given was that the *min-laung* would succeed the king only after his

death. The king, remorseful and guilt-ridden over all his useless killings, began to perform many deeds of merit including the construction of pagodas for the atonement of his sins. He also made Kyansitthar one of his commanders, whose exploit as a courageous and loyal soldier became the classic legend in the history of Bagan. Kyansitthar's legendary tales were much longer, but it seems suffice to say here that he symbolized a mighty warrior king with exceptional sacred qualities known by the Myanmar people as *kan* (luck) and *hpone* (unusual power and ability).

To be fair, not all Myanmar kings were tyrants and or legendary ones. While there were fierce and cruel kings, there were also godly kings in Myanmar history. For example, Alaung Hpayar, the first king of Konbaung dynasty, earned a reputation of fierce and cruel due to his ruthless treatment of the rebellions (Mons in 1755), King Bodaw Hpayar (or Badone Min) and King Mindon of the same Konbaung Dynasty were symbolized as godly-kings.

5.8 *Ethnic and Racial Complex*

The question of racial origin and cultural identity of Myanmar people is still a controversial issue of heated debates and violent quarrels. Even the skin color and physical features of typical Myanmar people are noted to be not definitely established. The Bamar's sensitivity with respect to skin color as an aspect of racism can be discerned in the usage of the term *kalar* for the Indians as a derogatory sense that the Indians are black, although most Burmese have no knowledge of the meaning of the term they use.³⁹ In fact, the skin color of true Bamar is neither white nor yellow but 'brown and bluish' as described by a Burmese saying.⁴⁰ If measured with this yardstick, about 80% of the Bamars (including almost all ruling members) today may not be true Burmese as their skin are either yellow or fairly-dark and dark or reddish brown, and other mixed colors.

This mystery of the racial identity of Bamars is pointed out by analysts as a factor of producing deep psychological wound infested with ethno-linguistic group conflicts and fragmentation, and its traumatic effect tends to be most pronounced in the psyche of individuals with mixed blood, particularly the one

with alien blood such as the Anglo-Sino and Indo-Burmese. The intermingling of various ethnic groups taking place for many centuries created this traumatic identity crisis. This may be taken as one of the basic reasons for the intense Bamar chauvinism and xenophobia of the people of Myanmar in general. The history of races of Myanmar with all their conflicts and conquests over each other from the very beginning of their migrations laid the foundations for a tension-and-war-ridden society with tense ethnic differentiation and fragmentation.⁴¹

VI. The Sources of Myanmar Traditions

Myanmar traditions are documented to be basically rooted first in the Indian and later in Chinese cultural configuration of ancient Burma, with later proliferations and modifications during the reign of various Burmese kings and the British colonial rule. Some claim that “the Burmese language itself is a by-product of the Indo-Chinese languages. The script and alphabet in Burmese writing are directly linked to the South Indian culture, while the tonal nature of spoken Burmese is primarily Chinese”.⁴²

Particularly, two major elements of ancient culture of India and China, namely, (1) the Pre-Buddhist animistic myths and spirits, and (2) astrology and numerology have also become a very influential on Myanmar cultural pattern and mode of behavior. For example, the animism and worship of spirits, *nats*, dated back to many centuries before the arrival of Buddhism in the 11th Century during Bagan Dynasty. The reliance on the role of the medicine men or shamans, astrologers, wonder-makers (*fakirs*) with supernatural power all reflect traditional Myanmar peoples' incapacity to cope with the harsh and demanding physical world around him. A host of mythical animals and spirits, dragon, Vishnu warrior bird, ogre, tiger, ghost, the demons and evil spirits, to mention a few, pervaded the entire belief system. The persistence of animistic mythology is also reflected in the customary Burmese practice of naming their children according to the day the child was born. Each day of the week is symbolized by a mythical animal and each of these days and birds are marked by certain alphabet.

VII. Conclusions and Suggestions

It is observed that the currently prevailing thinking, attitudes, behavior, and practices in Myanmar are directly related to and strongly influenced by the old traditional and conservatives beliefs and values, and attitudes and practices. However, many, if not all, of these traditional beliefs and values and practices are noted to be no longer suitable to the changed conditions of our time. They seem to constrain, if not retard, change and development, which call for revision or discarding the ones that are no longer relevant with the changed circumstances. For instance, the Bamar governments historically have put much emphasis on the 'ethnic purity' or 'racial purity' in their endeavor to achieve development, but the reality of the country's composition of nationalities and ethnic groups suggest otherwise. Experiences of a number of countries have also shown that policies based on ethnic purity have failed. Even the preaching of Buddha or the practice of '*tha-ma-hta*' emphasizes on the 'purity of mind' (*seik*) rather than on race or the ethnicity or the color of skin (Houtman 1990).

Another notable point was that the authoritarianism even in the ancient times was counter-balanced by the customary laws and regulations as reflected in the traditional concept of *Mahasamata* (the Great President). The power of the *Mahasamata* was bestowed upon him neither by benevolence nor by some supernatural powers like *nats* (spirits) but by the people.⁴³ Moreover, the ratification of *Mahasamata* is completed only after completion of the *beik-theik* (coronation) ceremonies in which the *Mahasamata* had to take oath and make several promises and commitments to the horrible maledictions (or curses) that the *Mahasamadaha* has to encounter if he failed to honor the commitments. The king was bound or obliged to observe the ten royal codes or principles of conduct (*min-kyi-ta-yar sebar*) and various other ethical and moral precepts to be observed in ruling the country. As time, circumstances and environments have changed, many facets of old traditional beliefs and values, and practices became unsuitable and thus must be changed to keep the society stable and developed.

Notes:

1 Based on these assessments, several recommendations have been made by the ICG to donor Governments, Inter-Governmental and International NGOs, which include, among others, providing

- education and training opportunities for government workers, expanding media activities and education broadcasts by the BBC&VOA to improve the flow of information into the country, encouraging more ties in sciences, arts and technology, expanding existing humanitarian programs run by the UN and international NGOs, encouraging a debate with all political groups on how the country might improve its economy without exposing itself to the feared side-effects of globalization, expanding funds for diaspora graduate students to study history, politics and society to ensure a range of intellectual views on the country, and improving understanding of international systems with an emphasis on training local workers to run health and education programs (See ICG, Asia Report No 28, 12-7-2001, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index>, 16/12/07).
- 2 The reform then was initiated by a group of liberal-minded ministers and royal officials led by the Crown Prince, or widely known as *Kanaung* Prince, younger brother of King Mindon. *Yaw Mingyi* U Po Hlaing and *Kinwun Mingyi* U Kaung, among others, had been most prominent in this regard.
 - 3 Maung Suu Zann: *Bamah Seebwayay Sittan* (Survey of Burmese Economy, 1968, pp.2-3).
 - 4 Furnivall had been an economic advisor to the Union of Burma Government until 1962
 - 5 Andrews was an economic professor of the then Judson College in Yangon.
 - 6 Furnivall's *An Introduction into the Political Economy of Burma* and Andrus's *Burmese Economic Life* are widely accepted as the classical works on political economy of old Myanmar.
 - 7 See Mya Maung 1991, pp. xxiii & 3 and Maung Maung Gyi (1983)
 - 8 See, for instance, Seagrave (1979).
 - 9 As cited in Trager 1966, p.143
 - 10 For information on Myanmar Kings, see *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (Translated by Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce in 1960)
 - 11 Hagen, 1956, pp. 7-12
 - 12 Maung Maung Gyi, 1983, pp.154-58
 - 13 *The Guardian*, vol. 2, no. 4, Feb., 1955, p.7; Maung Maung Gyi, 1983, pp.154-5
 - 14 These rituals were mostly derived from the Hindu cosmology and planetary system.
 - 15 The descendants of these *ponnars* can still be found in Mandalay and some other cities and towns in central and upper Myanmar.
 - 16 Bamar is one of the ethnic groups of Myanmar, but forms majority in the population.
 - 17 As cited in U Maung Maung Gyi, 1983, p.160
 - 18 *ibid*
 - 19 Tin Soe 1991
 - 20 In this regard, there are ample evidences that can be cited. For instance, see U Maung Maung Gyi (1983, pp. 172-4) on two interesting incidents in which Chairman U Ne Win's men took the law into their hands.
 - 21 The First Interim Report...1949
 - 22 The concept of the supremacy of rule of law was noted to be given three meanings. First it means absence of arbitrary power. Second, it means equality before the law or the equal subjection of all classes to the ordinary laws of the land. Third, it means the law of the constitution. (For further detail, see E.C. Wade, *Constitutional Law*, London: Longmans, Green, 1960, pp.60-61).
 - 23 *Hanthawaddy Daily*, March 14, 1957.
 - 24 Under Myanmar kings, officials or administrators were not given wage nor salary, but awarded the right of rule and administration of certain region or activity.
 - 25 The account of Father Sangermano, based on his long residential experience in the capital of Myanmar Kingdom during the middle to the late 19th Century, carried invaluable information (See Father Sangermano 1833, pp.83-5).
 - 26 For example, the scale of respect and regard depend on whether a person is a *phongyi* (monk), or a *min-so-yazar* or *ah-yar-shi* (government official), or a *bo* (military officer), a *thu-haty* (rich

man), or a *sin-ye-thar* (poor man), a *saya* (teacher), an *ah-loke-the-mar* (labourer), or *taung-thu-le-loke* (peasant) or *le-tha-mar* (farmer) and so on.

- 27 Maung Maung Gyi, 1983, p.171
- 28 See the Upper Burma Gazetteer, Rangoon, Govt. Printing Press, 1900, p.96
- 29 For further details, see Maung Maung Gyi 1983, and also see Mya Maung 1991
- 30 The Guardian vol.4, no.3, pp.33-35, 'Blue Print for Free Burma' by Aung San
- 31 See U Tun Pe, 1949, pp.55,73
- 32 *Burma Weekly Bulletin*, 1958, pp. 275, 382-83
- 33 As cited in Maung Maung Gyi 1983, p.163
- 34 Nisbet, 1901, p. 223
- 35 The Irrawady, Arakan and Tenasserim divisions were now renamed as Ayeyarwady, Rakhine and Tanintaryi respectively.
- 36 See Father Sangermano, 1893, p.153
- 37 See, for instance, Mya Maung, 1991, p.16
- 38 The *Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* opens with the prayer to "Lord Supreme Sakyam King" (*Thartbye-nyue Satkyah-watay Yazar Min*) who conquered all enemies and ruler of the three world systems or universe (*Chakkavatti*), with the sacred preaching.
- 39 Mya Maung (1991, p.11) argued that the existence of so-called pure Myanmar or Bamar in Myanmar today is a myth. The term, *kalar*, was initially used to connote all foreigners since late Konbaung Dynasty period, but during and after the British rule, the term, *kalar*, came to specify Indians. This term in Hindustani means 'black', indicating the racial element in its usage.
- 40 It says *athar-ye-phyu lu-bei-mo-lar, athar-daw-nyo-pyar-nyet-ke nan-daw-htet-bwar* which states that "...although white skin is also a human being, only the brown-bluish skin (Bamar) reflects the birth on royal throne".
- 41 See Mya Maung, 1991, p.11
- 42 *ibid*, p.4
- 43 People were then represented by four social classes- *min myo* (royal class or nobles), *ponnar myo* (the royal Brahman astrologer class), *thu-htay-myo* (the wealthy class) and *thusinye myo* (the poor class).

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