Myanmar Historiography in the Pre-colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

Historiography is the writing of history, and obviously, there could be several motives that prompt a writer to produce a work of history. In Myanmar, historiography starts with the writing style of royal autographed so-called Rajavamsa that explained only a chronology in the 16th century. The Chronicles described the continuous registers of events in order of time and events around the Myanmar kings. The prose chronicles are called in Myanmar, Yazawin (in Pali) or Chronicle of kings. Chronicles can be analyzed that there are many reasons and objectives for writing this historical record. This style of historiography flourished under the auspices of the kings or provincial governors until the downfall of the Myanmar monarchy in 1886. The 19th century, which marked the highest stage of development in writing Chronicles, was an age of official chroniclers. The compilers were very scholarly and learned; hence, one of the great merits of the chronicles lies in their literary qualities. In my paper, I would like to explore the transformation of the style of historiography in the Burmese language and the presence of an outstanding local Chronicle.

Keywords: Rajavamsa , Myanmar Chronicles, Yazawin

Introduction

History in one sense is a relation of incidents only of those professedly true. The written account constitutes a continuous methodical record of events in a country or about a people or an individual in order of time, of importance, or of public interest. In another sense, it is not history if there were no records to base upon. The march of events is systematically reduced to writing in logical sequence and the account in this way differed greatly from fiction or legend.

A historian becomes an author of history as distinct from the simple annalist or complier who writes only on a chain of events. But a historiographer is different. He is an analyst employed by a court to record important events of the court. On the other hand, historiography is the writing of history and obviously there could be several motives that prompt a writer to produce a work of history. Differentiation of history from chronology could have been evident in the middle of the 16 country A.D. in Europe though in Burma even the last official or royal autographed Rajavamsa is only a chronology. Great pains were taken to trace the genealogy of ruling family and to mention the good deeds done by each king was considered enough to satisfy everybody and in this sense, the descent of a king and his exploits became chief entries in every chronology.

In Myanmar epigraphy as shown by lithic inscriptions, we could not find any written record

that could be dated safely before the 7th century A.D. The inscriptions are not records that could give light to any historic event. They are simply extracts copied from Buddhist scriptures. In addition, there are a considerable number of urn inscriptions left by Pyu at Sriksetra.

The Nature of Chronicle in Myanmar in 16th Century

In Myanmar, almost all the histories of olden times begin with the beginning of the universe and the appearance of Mahasammata. Mons Myanmar and Arakanese (Myanmar nationalities) vie with each other to claim that Buddhism reached their land during the lifetime of the Gautama Buddha. In order to support this claim, they had invented several stories.

It is simply the love for antiquity that the chronicles vied with each other to say without any scruples for evidence that a capital city is always very old. It is most probably from the Mahavamsa of Srilanka that the Myanmar got the idea to mention the Buddha's visit to some particular place in their country, say a word of prophecy as to its later growth in support of the religion and to start writing their chronicle from the Mahasamata, the very first king on this earth, down to Siddhattha. Words spoken about kings are generally to be considered as themes contrary to the attainment of Nirvana. Even the most powerful king is subject to rise and fall, separation and death. An absolute monarch should be reminded frequently that he is also a mortal man. And so, he is given various advices to become a popular king ruling over a prosperous kingdom with no danger of external attack.

Early Accounts in Myanmar

There are accounts of early events in Myanmar such as Silavamsa: Rajawankyoau, Mon Kulà: Maharajawan, Bagan Rajawnsac, Twan: Nui: Rajawnsac, and Mhannan: Rajawan. The stories are from Hindu cosmology for the creation part, from the Mahāvamsa for the genera logy of the Buddha and a collection of myths and legends of various localities for the origin of places on the Burma side. For the later periods, the accounts are more or less of the nature of journals (recording day-to-day events) and put together as annals (yearly). Perhaps the Chinese imperial annals are taken as models. The Mhannan: Rajawan & would be the best example to illustrate. It begins with the destruction of the world. Then a new world was created. Mankind appeared after that. Men lived longer and easier life than now. Because of *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (ignorance), the span of their life became shorter and the way of their life harder. They decided to elect a leader. Eventually, the President-Elect and his descendants became dynastic kings. This is the beginning of private property, family, and state.

All the Chronicles of olden times begin with the beginning of the universe and the appearance of Mahāsammata. We understand that the king who was at the beginning elected as a just man with little or no self-interest and a good organizing ability. He promised security so that the subjects would be free of all external and internal dangers. He also took care that all misdeed among men were eliminated. Everybody's life and property was safe at all time. When the king devoted full time to the welfare of his subjects, he could not have any other means to support his existence and in consideration of this devotion, one and all of his subjects premised to give him one-tenth of their yearly income. In this way, tax collection began. This constitutes a form of contract. The king promised security and the subjects promised payment in the form of tithe. As is usual with all contracts, both parties must benefit and any one party who goes in default of this promise is liable to punishment. Subjects who fail to give tax would be either imprisoned or have their property

confiscated. A king who failed to provide security in his kingdom would be dethroned or exiled or suffer a worse fate than these. This kind of social contract works very well when the society was simple and the ways of life were not complicated as now-a-days. This concept of king was, however, Indian and we wonder what systems of administration there were before the influence of Indian culture which became quite considerable from about the 4th century A.D.

How Buddhism Reached Myanmar

Mons in lower Myanmar, Myanmar in the centre and Arakanese in the west, vie with each other to claim that Buddhism reached their land during the lifetime of the Gautama Buddha. In order to support this claim, they had invented several stories and it seems that at present they would not like to be pointed out to them that such stories were all fabrications. A Mon chronicle in lower Myanmar claims that one there Gavempati & come to Sathum & or Sudhummapura and through his good office the Buddha visited that town where Siha was king. Gavampati & requested the Buddha to visit his capital. And in the eighth year after he had gained the highest wisdom, the Blessed One with many hundred monks came by air to Shdhammapura in the Ramanna country. When (the Buddha) had come and dwelt at the jeweled hall, he gave the essence of immortality to the inhabitants of the country together with their king and established them in the three refuges and five precepts.

A merchant of Ukkala, he and his friend Bhalluka (Bhalliya) while on their way to Rājāyatana tree, in the eight week after the Enlightenment. They became the first lay disciples of the Buddh. The Buddha gave them, for worship, eight handfuls of his hair, which he obtained by stroking his head. They took the hair with them to their city and there built a *cetiya* (with the hair relics enshrined). After having received the hair from the Buddha they returned to their native and built a cetiya with the hair relics on top of the Tambagutta hill and Mons claims that the cetiya so built later came to be known as the Rhwedagum pagoda, now in Yangon.

The Asoka Buddhist mission of Sona and Uttara arrived. Another inscription that mentions the Sona-Uttara mission is the Pagui Kalyānī inscription of AD 1480 in Pali and Mon languages. The mission, however, has no contemporary evidence to support it. After the Third Council held at Pātaliputta in 247 BC, King Asoka sent mission to the southernmost regions of India, including Ceylon (Sri Lanka today) and to five Hellenistic Greek kingdoms ranging from Syria to Macedonia. Rock Edict XIII gives the place names where these missions went. Unfortunately, there is no mention of Suvannabhumi among the names where the missions went to propagate Buddhism. On the other hand, the Singhalese chronicles Dpavamsa (of the 4th or 5th century AD) and Mahavamsa give a list of names where missions went and the names of the leader of each. ~~with which particular there as leader~~. Mahavamsa continues to recount how Buddhism was firmly established in Suvannabhumi after the leaders of the mission. The Pagui: Kalyānī Inscription (1480) even made an attempt to identify the capital of Suvannabhumi country. The story of Sona -Uttara mission to Suvannabhumi is of Singhalese origin. We find some senior members of the Buddhist order of monks went to Srilanka and they brought back some learned *theras* from that country when they came back.

The Myanmar, however, claim that in the very first year that the Buddha obtained his enlightenment in 528 BC, he visited Central Myanmar and converted tens of thousands of people to Buddhism. The earliest written account of this story appears in Silavamsa and Rajavankyoau which was partly finished in 1502. The river is Erāwatī. On its north there is the land of Sunāparanta on its south there is the land of Tampadīpa. With five hundred prāsādas,

the Buddha went to the city of Sāketa. He also came to the land of Sunāparanta and resided for seven days at the sandalwood monastery. During this sojourn, he went back every day to his (Jetavana) monastery, but he appeared daily at the sandalwood monastery. Even before the constructions on the sandalwood monastery began, he visited repeatedly in order to be present at nights and preach so that 84,000 people of Sunāparanta were saved from being heretics. When the promised seven days were over, he did not go away straight but went to a place close to the Namantā River in order to visit the city of Nagā. Before he left there, Naga requested him to leave one of his footprints and so he left one for them to revere. To benefit the hermit on top of the Sacvabandha, he left another footprint. According to this statement, the Buddha came to central Burma "not only ones but several times" and the Burmese made another bold statement like this.

The Arakanese made a better story. They also claim that the religion of Buddha reached their land very early in the life of the Buddha and the Great Image Mahāmuni (now at Mandalay) was made at their capital even in the very presence of the Buddha. Kamrajakr of Takon came to live at Kyokpan : ton : (across the Rakhuin & range) 934 years before the Buddha attained the Enlightenment. Candasūriya, the 29th in the line of kings from Ramrajakr, ascended the throne in 554 BC. After having reigned 26 years, the Buddha had obtained the enlightenment and king Candasūriya heard about it. Desiring to meet the Buddha, he asked the wise men what he should do. They advised him to make offerings of flowers and perfumes and simply pray that the Buddha visits his place. The Great King Candasūriya did exactly what he was told. The Buddha at that time was residing at the Veluvana monastery of Rājagriha and with compassion, he sought where and whom he must go to so that the people may benefit from his teachings. By visiting this king's palace, there were three good results to be had. Firstly, the king with queens, concubines, and retinue would reach the state of *sotapatti*. Secondly the people there would accept the Three Refuges and respect the Five Promises. Finally, an image in the likeness of the Buddha would be casted in an alloy that would last for all the five centuries of the religion.

The Political Centre

It is simply the love for antiquity that the chronicles vied with each other to say without any scruples for evidence that a capital city is always very old. Later it becomes almost a formula that the city was already in existence when Kakusanda was the Buddha. To maintain that it was an old place, the chronicle says: It was Ptthapati in the time of Kakusandha Buddha, Punnavati in the time of Konagamana Buddha, Bagan in the time of Kassapa Buddha, and Sarekhettarā in the time of Gotama Buddha.

The chronicle quotes a ham prophesy to given the impression that it too is old. While the Buddha was living, he left Majjhimadesa for a long journey. When he reached the place where Bagan or Arimaddanā would one day come into existence, he stopped on top of Tan,Krañ, hill and he perceived a Butea tree (Pok Pan) standing on top of a steep bank. On the tree top were perched a white heron and a brown crow, between the two main branches of the tree sat a water lizard with a forked tongue, and at the roots of the tree rested a frog. He smiled and brother Ananda asked the reason of the smile. He replied: "After 651 years of my death (AD 168) a city would come into existence here. Birds represent the presence of both true believers and heretics in the city. The lizard represents time trading class that would not hesitate to say a lie. The frog foretells peace among the people."

The chronicles given another sham prophesy in which the Buddha foretold the founding of various

places in this Erāvatī river valley including Ava. When the Buddha was living, (once) he made a long journey (outside) Majjhimadesa. He came to Nachonkhyam. He left a prophesy on Nachonkhyam. Then he came to Kon : can. He left a prophesy on Kon : can. Going downstream he stopped at Tan, Krañ, and left a prophesy on Takon :. On arrival at Mantale: with reference to Accamukkhī ogress who offered her breasts (for food), he prophesied that a great city called Ratanapum & would appear there. Thence he continued to Krakyak where the four brothers of Accamukkhī ogress offered him a broil for food. He left a prophecy on Ton Saman Ton Kyañ: One a (Bodhisatta) cock and its sister a hen used to feed in this area and retired each night to the place called Krak Thon, he left a prophecy on that area. Continuing the journey to Cakuin : he met one hundred ogress. The youngest of the hundred stole the bathrobe of the Buddha and fled. The Buddha preached and 99 ogres reached the state of Sotāpatti. The place is still known by the name of Sotāpan. The stolen bathrobe was recovered and with the Lord's permission, a *paribhoga cetiya* was erected by 99 ogres led by Jeta. The cetiya is still called by the name of Jetavana. The Lord gave a sermon to the ogres and left a prophecy on Cakuin.From there he reached the site where Ava was to be erected. A cultivator gave him three ripe cucumbers. He said this cultivator would be born three times in this place and he would be king in all these three lives and he would support the religion. Meanwhile, a little monkey came forward and with a pleasant turn of mind offered a beehive to the Lord who put his hand on its head. Suddenly the monkey seized a thread that was falling out of the Lord's robe and ran up a tree. The Buddha smiled and Ananda asked why. He replied that this little monkey would become king here thrice. He would indulge in Dāna (charity) but he would ignore sīla (morality). Now the place is known as Tampadīpa and under Tacirhan Sīhasū it would be called Innwa. Then the Lord went to Mrancuin and Bagan where he left prophecies too.

In all the reasons given to build a new capital, the main one is to identify the new site with an old and sacred place where at least the king founder and his advisers believed to have peace and prosperity.

A Manual of Kings

In the introduction to his work Mahārājawan, U Kulā: mentioned explicitly the reasons why he wrote it. He said: Words spoken about kings are generally to be considered as themes contrary to the attainment of Nirvana. This is the Buddha's attitude. Nevertheless, when it comes to such specified subjects as even kings suffered exhaustion or destruction, the record might become a treatise pertaining to *kamatthāna*, reflecting that all things are unstable, grievous, and illusory. Illuminating the law of impermanence, the thesis become worthy of good moral men. So this work on lineage of kings has an emphasis on the said theme.

King who is a future Buddha, all beings in these three worlds of men, devas and Brahmas are miserable in the sense that they cannot escape the eight vicissitudes of life. In another words, even the most powerful king is subject to rise and fall, separation and death. An absolute monarch should be reminded frequently that he is also a mortal man. In particular, advices to a king fall under four categories. (i) how to reign long, (ii) how to keep the dynasty lasting, (iii) how to promote peace and prosperity in his country, and (iv) how to support the religion.

The Chronicles: Their Source, Nature, and Development

The chronicles considered here are detailed and continuous registers of events in order of time, events revolving round the Myanmar kings. They may be in prose or in verse. The prose chronicles are called Ya-zawin (in Pali, rajavamsa), or chronicle of

kings Or Mahā-ya-zawin-gyì in Myanmar. The Mahā-ya-zawin-gyì was the first full-scale historical work in Burmese. Its author is Ù Kalà (1714–33), son of a rich man. He wrote and presented it to the king at Ava, then the capital city of Myanmar. This chronicle marked the beginning of Myanmar historiography and is a valuable bequest to posterity. Ù Kalà prefaces his chronicle with an apology and a justification for compiling it. He cites passages from the Buddhist scriptures which state that idle discourses about stories of kings, ministers, generals, robbers, and such like are not conductive to spiritual development. But he justifies his action by citing the commentary on these passages which says that if such discourses are treated as themes to show the impermanence of things, such as how even mighty people cannot escape death, then it is permissible to compose them, for they will be perused as subjects for meditation and lead of spiritual advancement.

Ù Kalà's ya-zawin

Ù Kalà's ya-zawin is in the main an account of the lives of kings. It is modeled on the pattern of the Mahāvamsa. But as other Myanmar scholars did to other imported cultural commodities, he has cast his history in a Myanmar mould. It sets out chronologically and formally the life of each king practically from his birth to the grave. Whenever he can, he give the king's lineage and his life as a crown prince. Unlike the author of the Mahāvamsa, he never misses out such matters as the year or date of the king's accession to the throne, the chief events during the reign, his death (not omitting the omens which preceded it), his family and, as in the Mahāvamsa, his works of merit The style is mostly narrative though sprinkled here and there with discursive passages; the diction is dignified and ornate; and the language is embellished with the specialized vocabulary appropriate to royalty when dealing with kings and the court, and with figures of speech. For example, a king does not invade another country; he freshens the fatigue of his army. If another king attacks his territory, it is not an act of war, but of intrusion. It is not proper to speak of a king giving an audience; he receives the gaze of the 35 multitude. A king never dies; he merely reaches the state of impermanence or he goes to the abode of celestial beings.

Conclusion

For various reasons that a chronicle is compiled, it seems that one important reason is to establish how the religion of Buddha came to Burma during the very lifetime of the Buddha. To make this foot convincing, the chronicle maintains that the Buddha visited Burma and left several prophecies. Next the chronicle tries to prove that each political centre starting with Tokon: is very old. It is supposed to be about 3,500 areas old while Sarekhettarā is 2,500. "The Race of Mahasammata" is another important reason to have the chronicle compiled. A prince of the Sakya tribe in India came to Myanmar and started a dynasty. And from father to son, the lineage of this prince is linked up to Mahāsammata on the one hand and down to king Thibaw on the other hand. Finally, the chronicle is compiled to serve well. A king is often warned that he too is a mortal man and is therefore object to the vicissitudes of life. He should try to be benevolent and he is given various advices to become a popular king ruling over a prosperous kingdom with no danger of external attack.

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