

Announcement: Translation of the Rajadhammasangaha online

Euan Bagshawe has made a translation of the Yaw Mingyi U Hpo Hlaing (the Wetmasut Myoza Wungyi)'s "Rajadhammasangaha," edited by Maung Htin (U Htin Fatt), published in 1979 by Sape U Publishing House (the original text was composed in December 1878 and published for the first time about 1915). This has recently been republished (2002) by Unity Press and is currently available in some bookshops in Burma/Myanmar for 1100 *kyats* (as of December 2003). The translation can be accessed in David Arnott's Online Burma/Myanmar Library at:

http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/THE_RAJADHAMMASANGAHA.pdf

The Online Burma/Myanmar Library also has a description of the text which includes some of the bibliographic information included above. The translator has kindly sent us a copy of his preface for inclusion here.

M. W. C.

RAJADHAMMASANGAHA – TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

L.E.Bagshawe
Independent Scholar

I

In many parts of the world, the middle years of the nineteenth century were a time of major political changes. There was a growing realisation in many countries that others were doing better than they were and that something should be done if they were not going to be left behind. An idea spread that a long established autocracy was not necessarily the best way of managing a country in the modern world and that matters would run more smoothly if the people of the country could be induced to work with the government and not be a dead weight to be dragged along forcibly. That might involve taking steps to find out the wishes of at least the most

prominent of the country's citizens in any matter. Constitutions were drawn up in many countries with this in mind, even in many subject to colonial administrations.

The Kingdom of Burma was no exception. When the Mindon Prince took the throne from his brother, Pagan-min, at the end of 1852, the country had been through more than thirty years, three reigns, of kings of at least doubtful mental stability, and had also been subjected to humiliating defeats by and loss of territory to the British government in India. Great changes were called for if the kingdom was to survive and the new King, with the assistance of his younger brother, the Kanaung Prince, tried to set a new course. Developments for the next fourteen years went in two directions. The King himself attended to matters of morale, to the construction of a splendid new capital at Mandalay as the central point of a newly unified and purified religion, while the business of modernisation - the nuts-and-bolts of learning modern techniques and putting them into practice - was given to the Kanaung Prince, and his staff. Putting modernity into practice involved bringing in the Industrial Revolution in the shape of ironworks, cotton mills, rice mills, saw mills and the rest. Contracting for the supply, installation and working of such machinery called for much work. Other steps were taken also, that do not fit precisely into either of these categories. For one reason or another Burma did not use coined money and all transactions were by barter in kind, which might be odd pieces of metal to be carefully assayed and weighed out at the point of sale. Revenue collections were also made in kind and recompense to government servants was usually by assignment of revenues from a particular source, again in kind. This cumbersome system was a serious hindrance to trade, both internal and external and to reform it a coinage was introduced, with the establishment of government mints. This led the way to a new system of revenue collection, with the institution of the *thathameda* tax, a tax levied in cash upon households. Government servants were now to be paid a fixed cash salary in place of the old revenue assignments, although the old practice of designating officials to be *myozas* of towns, assignees of revenues, continued. Presumably it became more or less purely honorific, but the exact nature of the relationship between a *myoza* and his appanage after the change is not very clear. Steps were also taken to reform the central machinery of government; the chief executive governing body was the group of four Ministers, acting jointly, known as the Hluttaw. There had in the past been some natural tendency for individual ministers to develop separate interests and responsibilities and this was now formalised. Lines of responsibility were demarcated and separate offices were set up.

In 1866 these changes came to a sudden halt with the murder of the Kanaung Prince in a revolt staged by two of his nephews, the Myingun and Myingondaing Princes. It is not at all clear what their real intentions were, but they escaped with what might seem suspicious ease and found refuge in British territory. No extradition agreement was possible between the jurisdictions since

the Burmese did not formally recognise the annexation. Reform made little further progress. The King had been badly frightened by the revolt, which might have been an expression of unsettlement caused by the earlier reforms. It was clear that he was not going to part with anything of his personal power, which he defended with an efficient network of informers in the Court and in the country. Reform would have to wait for another reign. Discussion of reform did not cease, however, though it might have to be postponed for some years; the King was only about 50 in 1866. One prominent figure in this discussion must have been U Hpo Hlaing, whose biography is set out in U Htin Fatt's preface that follows. He had been prominent in Mindon's entourage since 1846 and from the start of the reign had been associated with the Kanaung Prince's work although he had been dismissed from office in 1865. He was too useful to leave out of office for long and soon returned but was not fully rehabilitated until 1869 and finally lost responsibility for the industrial schemes in 1872.

Another figure was U Gaung - eight years older than U Hpo Hlaing, but not a member of Mindon's household till 1850, four years after Hpo Hlaing entered it. He already had some experience of dealing with the British authorities in his position of Kin Wundauk and governor of Alon, in charge of all the government posts down the river and gained much more in the next two years in his appointment as Ambassador in charge of the Burmese King's missions to Europe in 1872-3, now as Kinwun Mingyi. In the course of these missions he had, and used, many opportunities of examining western institutions, governmental as well as private, and discussing them with prominent members of the Establishment. He does not seem to have formally learned English, but must have understood a good deal by the end of his time in Europe - and no doubt found it convenient not to make his understanding too obvious. In any case, after his return from his missions abroad the King's confidence in him was great and his prestige in the Court pre-eminent, buttressed with his new title *Thettawshei* which in theory gave the holder a guarantee of personal immunity, whatever unpalatable advice he might give to the King.

During King Mindon's final sickness, which began in August 1878, preparations were made for putting reform into action, and this movement was largely led by U Gaung and U Hpo Hlaing. The first task was to arrange for the recognition of an heir, since King Mindon had never dared to fix on any of his sons as his successor. He had too many sons, none of them outstanding enough to pick without risking the start of an endless series of plots, assassinations and coup attempts, and was now deemed incapable of the decision. Towards the middle of September a conference of all senior ministers and military officers in the capital was held to determine the succession. It looks as though there may have some difference of approach between U Gaung and U Hpo Hlaing, but there was no argument when U Gaung forced the Thibaw Prince upon the meeting. We do not

know whether U Hpo Hlaing had an alternative to propose since, according to Pagan U Tin, he had only just started on a recital of the classical qualifications for a Crown Prince when he was firmly shushed by the Yindaw Wundauk. In any case, the Thibaw Prince's appointment was, at least, acquiesced in by the meeting. He was also approved by the powerful Centre Queen, Hsinbyumashin, who needed a suitable, unattached, husband for her daughters, the Suhpaya Princesses, and the appointment was made formal. Thibaw-min was very young, barely twenty, and inexperienced, and seemed likely to be easily persuaded to accept the changes that were intended in the relative positions of the King and the Ministers. These involved a great expansion of the Hluttaw, the executive council of the Burmese kingdom. Instead of consisting of only four sections under the four Wungyis, jointly responsible to the King, there would now be fourteen separate ministries, each with its own minister and powers. There would also be two lower-ranking committees in which matters might be brought up for discussion to make a total of something over sixty members. The King, presumably, retained a right to be consulted, but probably no right of veto and, particularly, no right of spending tax collections without approval from the finance minister, now U Hpo Hlaing. King Mindon finally died early in October and a few weeks were devoted to his obsequies and the installation of King Thibaw. The new system of government was in place by the beginning of November and at the beginning of December U Hpo Hlaing was ready to present to the new King the volume of his thoughts upon how the monarchical government of Burma should be exercised. This is the *Rajadhammasangaha*[1] which follows U Htin Fatt's introduction below. It was at this time that U Hpo Hlaing seems to have been rewarded with promotion to a Wungyi's status and the award of his late father-in-law's appanage of Magwe. Perhaps initially the King was pleased, but if so, it did not last long, for at the end of January the King summarily dismissed from office U Hpo Hlaing and two other senior ministers closest to him, the Yeinangyaung Wungyi and the Myothit Wundauk. The reformers seem to have been taken completely by surprise and there was no effort to protest or to present a common front against the King, who had now considerable military force behind him. How and why reform was so quickly and so easily defeated is a question that can be endlessly debated, but there seems to be no good answer. The new structure remained nominally in being up to the end of the kingdom, but it was clear that the King's (and the Queen's) will was not to be gainsaid.

II

In this translation we are concerned with two eminent writers in Burmese. The career of the earlier, U Hpo Hlaing, is described very well and completely by the second, his editor and biographer, U Htin Fatt, in this book. Any addition could only be repetitious. U Htin Fatt, on the other hand, has little to say about himself, and an introduction is called for. He has been a prominent feature of the Burmese literary scene for most of his long life, mainly under his usual pen name of "Maung Htin." Born in 1909, he started his literary career at the Rangoon University, as an undergraduate, writing in both Burmese and English for various magazines. He continued to write after leaving the University in 1934, as well as performing the duties of a township officer for the government. When the war came, he served as Deputy Secretary in the Information Section of Dr. Ba Maw's Foreign office, where he wrote a play on a story provided by U Nu, the future Prime Minister. With the war's end, he shared the responsibility of organizing the broadcasting service. The great success of his novel *Nga Hpa* and other stories, published in 1947 gave a promise of a more interesting livelihood than government service and in 1949 he turned to full-time literary work, joining the staff of the Hanthawadi newspaper.

Since then his literary production has been large, including short stories and translations from English into Burmese - Lafcardio Hearn, H. G. Wells, and Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" - and he has given much service to literary and historical commissions. As a crowning point, last year he was awarded the National Literary Award for life-long work. I very much hope that he may approve of my translation of his work, but communication has been difficult and I understand that his health is poor. I am given to understand, however, indirectly, that he has at least no objection to my project.

III

It seems appropriate that this account of an earlier attempt to provide a satisfactory system of government for Burma should be made available at this time when at last a new Constitution is under discussion and I hope that it may be helpful in the deliberations. I have only three final remarks:

1. In the above I have referred to people by their personal names; incorrect for the period, but less confusing than the changeable and multiple official titles used in the records.
2. All footnotes to the translation, unless otherwise stated, are my responsibility only. In some I have indicated an uncertainty about a meaning. I shall be glad to be corrected at <lebagshawe@vance.net> .

3. I have to acknowledge the many hours of painstaking editorial work that David Arnott has put into making my efforts presentable.