

## **OBITUARY**

### **Dr. U HLA PE (1913-2007)**

Dr. U Hla Pe, Emeritus Professor of Burmese in the University of London, died peacefully at his home in Moulmein (Mawlamyine), Burma, on 31 July 2007. He was 94 years old. Saya Hla Pe worked in or for School of Oriental and African Studies for 41 of those years, before retiring to live in Burma in 1980. He wrote numerous articles, gave many talks both at SOAS and elsewhere, and taught a succession of devoted students. His most substantial publications are *Konmara Pya Zat*, vol 1, Introduction and translation (London 1952), which is a study of Burmese dramatic literature in the 1870s, and the six fascicules of the unfinished Burmese-English dictionary (London, 1941-1981).

Saya Hla Pe, the son of a Burmese traditional doctor, was born in 1913 in the village of Khare, near Moulmein, where he was brought up by four spinster aunts. His reverence for scholarship was demonstrated at an early age: as a toddler he was seen making obeisance to a book he had accidentally trodden on. He progressed from the village school to high school in Moulmein, thence to a BA in Burmese language and literature at the University of Rangoon, and on to take an MA, achieving honours and distinctions as he went.

In 1938 he received a state scholarship to attend the Institute of Education in London, where he gained a Diploma in Teaching. At this stage he met Dr. J. A. Stewart, Professor of Burmese at SOAS, who recognised Saya's talent and commitment to Burmese literature, and persuaded him to abandon his plans for further studies in education, and to join him at SOAS instead. During the war years Saya did the research work for his thesis, part of which was later published as the *Konmara Pya Zat*; assisted Dr. Stewart and C. W. Dunn with the compilation of the Burmese-English dictionary; and worked occasionally as a translator and announcer for the BBC's Burmese language service.

From these beginnings, Saya established a niche in SOAS. He was appointed to the Panel of Additional Lecturers in May 1946, and appointed Lecturer in Burmese in 1948. The files have a letter from Dr. Stewart urging the School to snap up Maung Hla Pe before

Rangoon University lured him back. Saya was made Reader in Burmese in 1954, and Professor in 1966. On his retirement in 1980 he moved back to Burma, where he continued to contribute articles on Burmese language and literature to Burmese journals, as well as pieces on life abroad and how to succeed. His book-length publications include Burmese proverbs (London 1962), a selection with observations on the light proverbs throw on Burmese life; Myanmar-sa-pe e-gan sa-dan (“Introduction to Burmese literature”, Rangoon and Mandalay 1966, reprinted 1969 and 1980), a series of essays; Burma: literature, historiography, scholarship, language, life and Buddhism (ISEAS 1985), a collection of talks given to schools and other audiences; and Wiri-yago htu, nyan-hnint chu, kan-ga hpe-ma-thu (“Thanks to application, brains and luck” Rangoon 2001), an autobiography. Two companion volumes of the Konmara Pya Zat (notes on the text, and the full text) were prepared but not published.

Progress on the Burmese-English dictionary was high on Saya’s list of priorities. This ambitious project, to compile a dictionary as detailed and authoritative as the OED, was launched in Rangoon in 1924. It underwent several changes of funding, location and personnel, and was eventually taken over by SOAS. When Saya first became an assistant to Stewart and Dunn the dictionary project was housed in a purpose-built office in the garden of Dr. Stewart in Bishop’s Stortford. Over time, Saya rose from being a part-time assistant to principal editor.

This was in the days before computer programs for lexicographers, and the process of compilation was traditional and laborious. Saya and his fellow editors had access to a collection of over 400,000 index cards, amassed before the project was moved to England with the then editors Stewart and Dunn on their retirement from government service in colonial Burma. Each card bore an entry word, a quotation and reference to a source text, and some indication of the way the word was used. Editing entailed sorting all the cards for the same entry, deciding how many meanings or sub-meanings the entry should have, adding one’s own observations, and then choosing appropriate English glosses, and selecting and translating illustrative quotations. This stage was followed by typing out the draft, sending it to the printers -- who didn’t read Burmese script but were able (mostly) to relate its characters to the numbers on the matrix – correcting proofs, and checking the corrections.

Saya and his colleagues naturally had other duties at SOAS and it is not surprising that the dictionary made slow progress. When Saya decided to retire in 1980, the dictionary had just reached the end of the entries beginning with the prefix A-, about a sixth of the total entries. It was clear that an undertaking of this magnitude was only feasible with far greater manpower than two or three part-time editors, and it was agreed that with the retirement of Saya Hla Pe, the end of the A- entries was a suitable point at which to bring work on the dictionary to an end. Although the grand project was never fully realised the work completed up to that point does cover a discrete segment of the Burmese lexicon, and the scholarship that went into drafting its entries will be a resource for many years to come.

One of Saya's referees for his scholarship to come to London was written by the historian G. H. Luce. In it, he describes the young Hla Pe as having an "exceptional charm of manner and a modest unselfish character." Saya retained these characteristics throughout his life. He was much loved by his colleagues and friends, from the UK, from Burma and from other European centres. He was invited to speak at schools all over the UK, and at universities in England, France and Germany. Saya was always deeply aware of his debt to Stewart and Dunn. He had promised each of them before they died that he would continue work on the dictionary for as long as he was able, and he kept his promise. It is perhaps thanks to their guidance and encouragement that Saya succeeded in stepping beyond the traditional Burmese reverence for authority with which he had been brought up. He felt strongly about erroneous ideas that were passed down uncritically from one generation of teachers to another and took great delight in pointing out, both in his writings and his teaching, where these ideas were wrong. He used to recount with glee how at one meeting of respected scholars in Burma, people were claiming Pali origins for various Burmese words, purely on the strength of their looking alike. Saya was so appalled by this unscientific approach to etymology that he solemnly proposed to regard Burmese *ani* "near" and *awe* "far off" as being derived from the English *near* and *away* -- a suggestion so preposterous that he hoped it would encourage the venerable pundits to re-examine the grounds for their claims.

For many years Saya lived the life of a confirmed bachelor, happily looked after by a pair of devoted spinster sisters, an echo of his early

upbringing. When the two sisters died, Saya's friends and family in Burma decided he needed a wife, and so it was that Daw Than Mya, like Saya a resident of Moulmein, was approached and brought to England.

Saya wanted to go and fetch her himself, but at the time there was a ban on visits to Burma by Burmans who had taken a different nationality. They lived for many years in Welwyn Garden City, and when Saya retired they moved together to Moulmein, where Daw Than Mya survives him.

Saya was a cheerful companion, with a boyish sense of humour. He found time for everyone who needed his advice or his company. He was proud of his house and carefully tended garden in Welwyn Garden City, and often invited students, colleagues and friends to visit him there. During the years of his retirement too, he gave a warm welcome to visitors, both Burmese scholars who came to pay their respects, and colleagues and admirers from abroad.

To add a personal note, I record with gratitude the unstinting help Saya provided in the early days of my learning the language, and the numerous helpful introductions he gave me for my first trip to Burma. I still use his anecdotes in my own teaching, and I mourn his passing.

John Okell, with input from Patrica Herbert and Anna Allott.