

The Study of Myths in Burmese History

Michael Aung-Thwin is Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i (Manoa) and has published extensively on Burmese history. The present work is divided into thirteen chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion ("Without the Mon Paradigm"). The main goal of the book is to debunk what Aung-Thwin calls the "Mon paradigm," which, he argues, was the result of the work of colonial historians who combined two indigenous myths into one interpretation of Burmese history. As the author explains:

"In the nineteenth century ... Dhammazedī's fifteenth-century claim that the ancient Suvannabhūmi was Ramannadesa and U Kala's eighteenth-century account of the conquest of Thaton--two temporally, causally, and textually unrelated narratives--were combined for the first time by colonial scholarship and synthesized into a new theory that the Mon Theravada Buddhist culture of Lower Burma 'civilized' Burman Upper Burma. This is the thesis that I call the Mon Paradigm.... Because Pagan is considered to have been the 'Golden age' of Burma's culture and therefore also the foundations upon which the country's subsequent culture was built, the Mon Paradigm implies that the Mon people and the culture of Lower Burma were the ultimate origins not only of Pagan civilization, but also of Burma's culture in general" (p. 2).

This paradigm was maintained, Aung-Thwin argues, because specialists on the country did not heed the reservations of non-specialists on Burma, especially of those external specialists not trained in indigenous languages, such as Pierre Dupont. In other words, had scholars on the country not been trapped by their own historiography and been able to view Burmese history without knowledge of it, they might have seen the inconsistencies of the paradigm (pp. 4, 6). This sets up a demanding case for Aung-Thwin to demonstrate, but unfortunately, the present study fails to convince the present reviewer, as discussed below.

The present reviewer has examined Burmese myths, also using a textual approach as well as the same indigenous chronicles used here regarding the Abhiraja myth.[1] Thus, he is in a position to comment on the merits of Michael Aung-Thwin's analysis of the emergence of one of the "myths"--the Thaton conquest story in Burmese history--which was integrated into Aung-Thwin's Mon paradigm. This story or "myth" holds that upon the advice of his teacher, Shin Araham, the eleventh-century Burmese king, Anawrahta, marched against and took the town of Thaton in Lower Burma . From Thaton, Anawrahta took back to Pagan thirty sets of the Pali Canon (the Pitakas) and they were used to instruct Burmese monks in the correct religious teachings. Aung-Thwin argues that this myth does not appear in its full form until the twentieth century in Mon texts and only in the 1730s in Burmese texts. Thus, he argues, the story's acceptance represents a Mon paradigm used by colonial historians and others later to understand Burmese history in a particular way that allowed them (and the Mons) to view the Burmese as the recipients of

culture from the Mons . Aung-Thwin draws attention to the lineage of the story and to the fact that inscriptions do not support it and thus draws the Mon paradigm into question. He makes use of a limited number of indigenous texts, some translated into English and some into Burmese. It is unclear if Aung-Thwin understands Mon, but other than Burmese chronicles, he relies on translated versions of a small sampling of Mon texts and a translated version of a Pali chronicle.

An important problem with this work is that Aung-Thwin, likely unwittingly, selectively presents part of the historical context that would support his claims, but remains silent on changing aspects of this context that would work against them. A good example, one that would call the entire argument of this book into question, was the alternating mood of Bodawhpaya (r. 1782-1819). Certainly, Bodawhpaya did favour the Thaton story--initially. However, when he and the monastic order were at odds concerning his claims regarding the religion, he

attempted to undercut their position by making a similar claim as that made by Aung-Thwin in the present book, that Ramannadesa was not an ancient country, in order to challenge the authenticity of the religious texts taken from from Thaton.[2] Bodawhpaya thus had his own special reasons to obstruct the historical record regarding Thaton. This is important, as Bodawhpaya--who spent much of his reign collecting extant copies of chronicles, religious texts, and other works, as well as inscriptions, and then culled them to support his views on the religion and society--presents a serious obstacle to our understanding of what was written (or inscribed) before his time. While Bodawhpaya could not collect and correct everything, it makes it extremely difficult to say--concerning views not shared by Bodawhpaya--what did not exist prior to his time, as asserted in the present study. Thus, while one might be able to confidently trace the Abhiraja myth, a myth supported by the court at this time, one wonders whether the argument can really be made that the Thaton story definitely did not exist. Certainly, this problem should have been discussed. The Twinthin taik-wun is clearly an exception and an understandable one. As one of the men put in charge of collecting and revising, the Twinthin taik-wun wrote his chronicle, which was not officially sanctioned by the court, prior to Bodawhpaya's shift regarding the Thaton story and after much of the text collecting had been completed. This cannot be said of earlier manuscripts.

The discussion of Bimala Churn Law's translation of Shin Pannasammi's Sasanavamsa is also problematic for several reasons.[3] First, the translation is frequently poor. Grammatical errors, contradictions, and the like, pepper the book. For those of us unable to read Pali, understanding what the translation is supposed to say, requires examining Shin Nyanabhivamsa's "Thathanalinkaya-sadan" (from which the Sasasanavamsa borrows extensively verbatim) for sections on which they share coverage. A re-translation is necessary from the original Pali (which the present reviewer is not able to read). Pending that re-translation, the passage cited does not clearly show a contradiction with a later passage, as argued by Aung-Thwin,

regarding the Thaton 'myth.' Admittedly, it is under the heading of Ramanya, but the paragraph in which is included is less geographically circumspect than this heading would suggest:

"the king named Anuruddha of the town of Arimaddana brought an Order of monks from there together with the Pitakas. After that ... the great king Sirisamghabodhi-Parakkamabahu purified the religion in the island of [Sri] Lanka. Six years after that ... the Elder named Uttarajiva became famous in the religion" (Pannasammi, p. 44).

No mention is made of the place to which Anuruddha (Anawrahta) brought the pitakas--although Aung-Thwin inserts "Pagan" within brackets to make it so--"from there" could refer to either Pagan or to Thaton (the subject of the previous paragraph), or, given the problematic translation (or of the Pali original, if a new translation demonstrates this), it could refer to any range of places (Aung-Thwin, p. 146).

Pannasammi actually includes two accounts of the "Thaton Conquest" episode. The second is a full elaboration of the story, as rejected by Aung-Thwin. The first, quoted by Aung-Thwin, is a nearly verbatim repetition of the version of the episode found in the Pali section of the Kalyani Inscriptions, probably preserved in an intermediary text.

The three versions relevant here can be arranged as follows:

[Kalyani] "King Anuruddha, the Lord of Arimaddanapura, brought a community of priests together with the Tipitika (from Ramannadesa), and established the Religion of Arimaddanapura, otherwise called Pugama" (Kalyani, p. 49).[4]

[Pannasammi A]: "the king named Aniruddha of the town of Arimaddana brought an Order of monks from there together with the Pitakas" (Pannsammi, p. 44).

[Aung-Thwin quotation of Pannasammi A]: "the king named

Aniruddha of the town of Arimaddana [Pagan] brought an Order of monks from there [Pagan] together with the Pitakas" (p. 146).

Clearly, Aung-Thwin's adjustment of the sentence has the effect of single-handedly replacing Ramannadesa with Pagan, not presenting new evidence that contradicts the Kalyani Inscription. As demonstrated above, the Pannasammi story [version A] is not an entirely different version of the episode, but the same Mon version of the story datable at least to 1476, and, certainly, it can be read any way that one wishes to, depending on which name they insert into the brackets, even as evidence supporting the Thaton conquest account. What makes this problem important is that Aung-Thwin then makes a jump, by ignoring the more reliable account [Pannasammi B] and then telling his readers that Pannasammi (A) provides a unique third version of events, that Anawrahta "took the scriptures to Thaton" (p. 147), which is only conjecture on the part of Aung-Thwin. In fact, the only precolonial tradition (Aung-Thwin cites three competing traditions) that offers an alternative story is derived from a text that can be reliably dated only to the nineteenth century.

The overall argument of the book is sometimes not supported by the evidence cited. Oddly, Aung-Thwin expends a considerable amount of effort discussing chronicles and other texts that would not logically mention the Thaton story in an effort to demonstrate that their failure to include the Thaton story constitutes some sort of proof that the story did not exist at the time they were written. 'Zatatawpon Yazawin' and 'Yazawinkyaw' are not histories per se, but deal almost exclusively with royal lineage (and the latter, especially with horoscopes), with little discussion of anything but regnal titles, dates, and filial relations. 'Razadhirat Ayeidawhpon' as well was not intended to cover the Pagan era (pp. 133-135). Further, one, the 'Zambu Kungya', cannot be dated to the pre-nineteenth century period, although its contents can be traced in part to U Kala in the early eighteenth century and to the 'Maniyadanabon' in the late eighteenth century, but is nonetheless presented as

evidence that the earliest Burmese chronicles had a different version of the Thaton story than that provided in U Kala (p.123).

The author also fails to put his work into the broader range of literature on myths and their emergence in Burmese history. In neglecting related work in the field, *_Mists of Ramanna_* remains only important to those concerned with the relevance of the Mons to Burmese history per se, rather than realizing its potential value within the broader context of the study of history writing. Further, in directing readers to other work on specialized topics and regions, Aung-Thwin's suggestions are sometimes unrepresentative of the state of the field (at least for the past decade). Closer attention to more recent decades of Burmese historiography would have helped to prevent this problem.

As Aung-Thwin explains, his study is "not an indictment of evidence but of methodology; of the way data have been assessed and used to conform to a preconceived notion" (p. 3). This criticism was directed at colonial scholars, but might be appropriately redirected at the present study. The case against the Mon paradigm remains unproven. The data is sometimes poorly handled in the present volume; vague references and observations by the author based on equivocal evidence he mobilizes in defense of his thesis represent questionable methodology.

In sum, "Mists of Ramanna" presents an interesting journey through a particular set of indigenous source materials and is easy reading. An unconvincing analysis of the chronicles and a failure to place the current study into the broader context of research on myths in Burmese history, however, hinder the book's value. Perhaps a revised edition will help the author make *_Mists of Ramanna_* a stronger contribution to the body of research on premodern Burmese history.

□ □ Notes

[1]. Michael Walter Charney, "Centralizing Historical Tradition in Precolonial Burma: the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja Myth in Early Kon-baung Historical Texts, "South East Asia Research" 10, no. 2 (2002): pp. 185-215.

[2]. Royal Edict, 7 August 1817, in Than Tun, ed., *The Royal Orders of Burma, A.D. 1598-1885* (Tokyo: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1988), 7: p. 390.

[3]. Shin Pannasammi. "The History of Buddha's Religion (Sasanavamsa)", trans. Bimala Churn Law (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1952).

[4]. The full citation is *The Kalyani Inscriptions Erected by King Dhammaceti at Pegu in 1476 A.D. Text and Translation* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1892).

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