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# SOME ASPECTS OF BURMESE CULTURE <sup>1</sup>

by

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## Introduction

Burma is a young nation judged from modern world standards, but from a historical viewpoint our nation has had at least fifteen centuries of civilization and culture behind us. It is not possible to deal adequately in this short lecture with the origin of the earliest settlers and the traditional tales about the Burmese people. Suffice it to say that we came down with a nomadic type of culture some milleniums ago from the Tibet-Chinese border in different waves of migration. Among these peoples the Mons and the Pyus were the first to emerge into an advanced stage of culture. They seemed to have attained a certain degree of refinement about two thousand years ago, and were influenced by immediate neighbours by about the 3rd-4th century A.D. The authentic history of the Burmans begins with the reign of Anoratha at Pagan in the 11th century A.D., but archaeological discoveries have revealed us the first stage of cultural development in the 5th-6th century at S'rekshetra, the capital of the Pyus.

## Pyu Culture

S'rkishetra, often called Old Prome to distinguish it from the modern town of Prome on the Irrawaddy, covers a large area. It is the site which yielded the oldest and the most valuable finds, which have enabled us to push back somewhat the history of Burma, however slightly, beyond the 11th century, and have enabled us to get a glimpse of the culture of the Pyus. In many places the ruins of the brick-walls which surrounded the city and the moat at their foot can still be traced. It is studded with numerous shapeless mounds, big and small, which are the ruins of ancient stupas, temples and monasteries; there may also be seen here and there, old buildings still standing, though mostly in ruinous condition. Significant among them are the solid stupas of brick and mortar, the Bawbawgyi, the Payagyi and the Payama, and the square temples with vaulted roofs and arched entrances, namely,

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1. Read at the Sixth Annual Research Conference on December 31, 1957, with U Chit Thoung in the Chair.
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the Bèbè and the Lemyethna where interesting stone sculptures are enshrined. The Pyus had occasional if not constant contact by sea with South India. This is attested by the alphabet, used on the earliest inscriptions and manuscripts discovered at S'rikshetra, which was derived directly from the old Telegu-Canarese alphabets of South India, and more closely allied to the Kadamba alphabet of Vānavāsi, the capital of the Kadamba in North Canara. There is no doubt that S'rikshetra was also deeply influenced by the culture of Kañcipura (Conjeeveram) which was a great centre of the Southern or Theravāda form of Buddhism in the 5th century. Two gold plates found at Maunggan near Hmawza (Old Prome), a small stone inscription found near Bawbawgyi, and a set of twenty gold-leaf manuscripts found at Hmawza, are all inscribed in the same script, the language being Pāli, consisting of excerpts from the Buddhist scriptures. Funeral urns found in the royal vault near the Payagyi Pagoda, each bearing one or two lines of writing in the Pyu Language, revealed the existence, about the 6th-8th centuries A.D., of a dynasty totally unknown in Burmese chronicles. A silver reliquary embossed with figures of Buddhas and their disciples also bears inscriptions in Pyu and Pali on the lower rim and on the lid giving the names of another king and queen who flourished about 6th-7th century A.D. The Pyu writing on votive tablets, stones, manuscripts and scrolls helped to settle definitely the fact that the Pyu people possessed an alphabet and were acquainted with the Buddhist scriptures and were highly cultured in the 5th-6th century and that they were colonized much earlier by emigrants from Kalinga, on the south-east coast of India, who brought with them their alphabet, their religion and their arts. These inscriptions, as well as a few in Sanskrit, and the statuettes and stone sculptures, further established the fact that three religions flourished at Prome, whose adherents probably lived peacefully side by side, that is, the Theravada or Southern form of Buddhism, whose sacred language is Pali, another school of Buddhism with their scriptures written in Sanskrit, and also Hinduism.

Many other objects brought to light include personal ornaments: necklaces of semi-precious stones, finger-ring, ear-rings, bracelets, etc. all votive offerings of women and girls at the foundation of a pagoda. The Pyus struck their own coins in silver which are of symbolic character. They burnt their dead and the ashes were preserved in earthen pots in the case of commoners and the stone

urns, often inscribed, in the case of royal personages. From Chinese historical sources we learn that the Pyus had advanced a great deal in the art of music.

Halin near Shwebo in Upper Burma was another centre of Pyu culture, but apart from the discovery of a few Pyu inscriptions and symbolical coins we have not enough evidence to trace their original settlement and the intercourse with foreign elements.

### The Mons

In the meantime the Mons had also attained a high stage of civilization. Their contact by sea with Conjeeveram gave them the south Indian alphabet which they adopted and adapted to suit their own language and literature. They had prepared a written record of all the authentic teachings of the Theravada school of Buddhism in the Pali language. Their kings in succession had become the patrons of their religion. Their monks endeavoured to spread the written dogma of the Buddha all over Burma. Thaton, known as Suvan-nabhumī, their capital, is a very ancient city; it is already mentioned in the Pali commentaries of the 4th-5th century A.D. as a great centre of Buddhism. Unfortunately, very few of its ruins now remain and it has yielded but few antiquities up to the present.

### Pagan Historical Background

On the disintegration of the Pyu kingdom, probably owing to the pressure of the Mon tribes from the South, the Pyus moved northwards and merged with the Burmans who were late comers to the land. Thus at Pagan was founded the first Burmese kingdom. There then prevailed the spirit worship, nature worship and the ari cult, of a sect of the Northern school of Buddhism, one trying to get supremacy over the other. In fact there existed a conglomeration of faiths during the pre-Anoratha period. When Anoratha came to the throne in 1044 A.D. he was facing a grave religious problem. He knew from oral tradition that some of the religious practices of the Aris were not in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. But he had no written authority to cite. A learned Mon monk, a missionary from the Mon country, came to his rescue. From him Anoratha learnt that the Mons had written records of the entire teachings of the Buddha in Pali and Mon. He first made peaceful negotiations to get a copy of the Pitakas. His pure motives were misunderstood by the Mon king who refused his

request. He then waged war on Manuha the Mon King, conquered the country and carried back to his capital thirty sets of the Pitakas together with the king and many of the countrymen as captives.

Buddhism introduced and championed by King Anoratha at Pagan moulded the character of the Burmese as a nation. It gave and still gives the Burmese the idea of art and architecture, language and literature, grammar and philology. For all their customs and manners, their domestic dealings, their social intercourse, their commercial transactions and their economic planning the Burmans received their guidance from the Pali Pitakas. Immediately after the conquest of Thaton many places of Pali learning sprang up at Pagan and Pali Universities came to be established. For the long endurance of the Universities Anoratha made endowments of lands and slaves and began to build pagodas to provide the university students and his countrymen with places of worship. He improved the irrigation system of the rice areas for the economic soundness of his universities and the maintenance of the pagodas, and in his search for relics to be enshrined in his pagodas he had contact with Thailand, Ceylon, Manipur, Yunnan and Tenasserim.

When the Burmese people started studying Buddhist books and production works of Buddhist art and architecture under Anoratha and perfected their culture under Kyanzittha, the Hindu in India had commenced a rigorous campaign of driving out Buddhism from its land of origin, although one school of Buddhism and Buddhist art subsisted under the benevolent Hindu kings of the Pāla dynasty. Several scholars of Buddhism from India went over to Ceylon and many took shelter in Burma as they feared religious persecution. These immigrants from India brought with them useful information and knowledge of art and architecture, language and literature, and imparted them to the people of Burma who evolved the art of their own.

Beginning with these events we enter the long and colourful period of Burmese history when mostly the whole of Burma was under one rule and the traditions of Burmese culture became firmly rooted then. Let us now consider the different aspects of Burmese culture with the aforesaid historical background.

It has been seen that Buddhism particularly brought artistic developments and innovations of Indian origin, but the Burmans envolved their own art, and in time foreign patterns were altered to fit

national tradition. Though it was Anoratha who brought the Mon architects to Pagan it was only during the reign of Kyanzittha (1084-1112) that the fine arts of the Mon appeared at their best. As the twelfth and thirteenth centuries progressed, more and more monuments evolved on purely Burmese aims of architectural design and decoration were built by successive kings and the citizens until an area of about sixteen or seventeen square miles at Pagan was practically filled with religious edifices. The magnificent monuments still preserved and the numerous ruins which stand today testify to the splendour of the city eight centuries ago.

### Religious Architecture.

The pagoda is a prominent architectural structure in Burma. It took its aspiration from a stupa, a structure which originally enshrines the relics of the Buddha and is of Indian provenance. The pagodas in Burma are usually built of brickwork, covered with stucco, though stoen is also used here and there, as in the case of the Shwezigon shrine at Nyaungoo and laterite pogodas, in Thaton district. The outside is usually whitewashed and in many cases it is gilt either all over or only the spire. Gilding is a favourite way of acquiring merit among the Burmese. The most sacred pagodas, images and monasteries are all heavily gilt, not always to the advantage of the details. In shape, the pagoda takes the form of a bell, raised on a series of receding terraces and crowned by a conical finial. The earliest extant examples are the Bawbawgyi, the Payagyi and the Payama of S'kikshetra, Old Prome, and the Bupaya of Pagan. Tradition ascribes those at S'rikshetra to the 1st century B.C. but archaeologically they belong to the 5th century A.D. These are more or less cylindrical in form, and the stupa assumed the shape of a bell from the 11th century. The typical pagoda can be divided into four distinct portions. The first is a square masonry plinth on which are generally placed small pagodas, sometimes miniature ones of the main stupa which they surround. Steps ordinarily lead up to this plinth on four sides. At the corners are frequently found huge figures of human-headed lions called *minussiha*. The second portion is made up of receding terraces with bold mouldings, and often, projecting angles occur at this stage. The third portion is the bell which is the representative of the hemispherical body of the ancient stupa. The forth is the spire, consisting of a number of diminishing rings and decorative features.

Above the rings is a band of lotus leaves pointing downwards and another with the leaves upturned, the two being intercepted by a bead moulding. The next component of the spire is a cone designated *amalake* in Indian architecture and known in Burmese as *khayathee*. The whole structure is finally surmounted by a richly gilt iron umbrella. It consists of several rings rising in diminishing stages and the central iron rod which bears a gilt and bejewelled iron vane is topped by a "diamond-bud" often made of crystal or genuine precious stone.

In most cases it is quite impossible to ascertain the exact age of a pagoda. Historical accounts of noted pagodas are often recorded on palm-leaf manuscripts but the details and dates are not always convincing. It seems probably, however, that shrines of this kind were erected in Burma as far back as the time of King Asoka who reigned in India in the middle of the 3rd century B.C. when he sent missionaries far and wide, besides causing more than eighty thousand relic shrines to be built. Earlier structures than this cannot therefore be expected.

The Shwedagon pagoda at Rangoon is the most interesting example of the growth of these buildings. It began by being a simple, humble relic shrine and gradually grew to its present noble dimensions.

Notable examples of such solid structures are the Shwezigon, the Shwesandaw and the Mingalazedi at Pagan, the Shwemawdaw at Pegu the Shwesandaw at Prome. Lesser shrines are scattered throughout the whole country and the religious fervour of the Burmese people is so great that no amount of hardship would detract them from erecting stupas in the remote places or on mountain peaks.

The second type of building is the temple formed of a square hollow structure, rising up in gradually diminishing terraces and pyramidal roofs and culminating in the curvilinear spire. The prime purpose of the temple is to enshrine the image of the Buddha, but in course of time interior arrangements consisting of galleries and corridors are designed for religious ceremonial. Earlier examples are at S'rikshetra. The most imposing structure of this type at Pagan is the Ānanda temple built by Kyazittha in 1091. A.D. about the time of the Norman conquest of England. It is in plan a square of nearly 200 feet to the side broken on each side by the projection of large gable vestibules. Above the main structure rise successively diminishing terraces the last of which is crowned by a spire, the total height being 168 feet above the ground. The interior consists of two vaulted and high

but narrow corridors running parallel to each other along the four sides of the temple. In the centre is an enormous cube, on the four sides of which are deep and high niches enshrining four colossal Buddhas. The Ananda stands unique in the whole of Burma for its lavish ornamentation, the most striking feature of which is the crowd of terracotta bas-reliefs and stone sculptures. The basement as well as the terraces are ornamented with glazed tiles. The plaques of the basement represent the two principal phases of the Buddha's attainment of Omniscience, those on the western half depicting the hosts of Māra assailing the Buddha, and those on the east his glorification by the gods after his victory, each scene being explained by a short legend in Mon. The tiles round the next storey illustrate the 537 shorter Jātakas, each of which is numbered and the title given in Pāli. The upper terraces are ornamented by a series of nearly four hundred bas-reliefs illustrating the last Ten Great Jātakas, there being an average of 38 to 40 plaques to each scene. In the first corridor along the side of the inner face of the outer wall are two rows of niches containing stone sculptures, nearly 4 feet high, illustrating the principal events in the Buddha's career until his attainment of supreme wisdom. The whole series contains eighty scenes. But these are not the only sculptures, for the walls of both the corridors are honeycombed with numerous small niches in which are Buddha figures, either seated or standing, in various attitudes. In each of the four porticoes also are sixteen other sculpture, mostly repeating themselves, but among which are a few interesting scenes from the Buddha's life. The western sanctum also enshrines the life-size statues of its founder, Kyanzittha, and the primate, Shin Arahān.

The architectural accomplishment of the Ananda is rivalled by the massive and majestic Thatbyinnu temple built by Alaungsithu, grandson of Kyanzittha. Standing within the ancient city-walls, some five hundred yards to the south-west of the Ananda, the Thatbyinnu rises to a height of 201 feet above the ground and overtops all the other monuments. Besides the solid stupas and square hollow temples there are other types of religious buildings, namely, the ordination hall of priests, the cave temple, the library and the monastery. All these architectural features are purposive. They are dictated by the Burmese conception to make a symbol for something spiritual. The Burman erects a pagoda over sacred relics and puts up an image of the Buddha



in a temple, not to worship blindly, but to afford, to the pious followers of the faith, the means of localising their feelings and concentrating their thoughts on the supreme model. The craftsman's ideas are not confined to mere artistic appeal but imbued with national traditions and religious beliefs. So there is hardly any architectural design or artistic motif in Burmese religious art which does not suggest any spiritual significance.

### Civil Architecture

Of civil architecture, walls are most prominent. Every city has had one and many traces of them still surviving. Their primary purpose has been defence, and this they have fulfilled most usefully. They are usually of clay or earth faced with brick. A circumference of five or six miles is not unusual. City walls are pierced by gates which usually are closed at nightfall and opened at dawn. Over the gates rise wooden pavilions usually decorated with exquisite carvings, and in front are secondary curtaining walls allowing oblique entrances to the gates. The wall is often surrounded by a moat and its top is crenelated. The eastern main gate of the old city of Pagan can still be seen today. The superstructure had disappeared but the lower portion of brick and plaster with remains of architectural mouldings is in a fair state of preservation. At Amarapura, another old City built by Bodawpaya in 1783 A.D., only two masonry buildings survived which are popularly described as the royal watch tower which may be also the royal library and the treasury. The custom of building places of timber on a masonry basement is very ancient and was found from one extremity of the Asiatic world to the other. The Mandalay Palace, the last representative of a long series of similar building in Burma was razed to the ground during the Burma campaign of the last world war, and the finest specimens of Burmese wood carving and mosaic work were rendered to become things of the past.

### Painting

The Burmese had achieved a fair standard in the art of painting also, especially Buddhist in character. The earliest paintings extant in Burma belong to the Pagan period beginning from the 11th century A.D., but in as much as an earlier school of architecture and sculpture was active since the 5th century there is no doubt about the existence of

an art in Burma in pre-Pagan times. Technically speaking the mural painting of Pagan are not frescoes in the strict sense of the term. The method is actually that of tempera painting as is still practised in the present day. Very few of the early paintings therefore survive today in their original charm of colour. A characteristic feature of these mural paintings is the outlining of all forms with a clear black line and rarely with red and the absence of perspective and shading in the earlier period is discernable. Yet most of them are of absorbing interest as they fulfil the primary object of telling edifying stories in an attractive way and producing works of art which are epic in character rather than artistic in the modern sense. The religious theme of paintings mostly centres round the Buddha, incidents from the life of the Buddha and the Jatakas. These afforded vivid representations and illustrations to supplement the teachings of the elder monks to their students at the Buddhist universities of Pagan. The style of the Pagan paintings show strong South-Indian influence in the earlier stage and the technique of the Varendra school of Bengal could be traced in the

### Lacquerware

Lacquerware, once a great industry in several parts of the country deserves mention here. The articles produced are usually objects of utility, namely, betel-boxes, cups, bowls, and trays. The chief centre of manufacture is Pagan, but the art was introduced into Burma from Northern Siam not earlier than 14th - 15th century. The framework of of painting, it is due to the fact that the motive of ornamentation and decoration is solely dedicated to religious devotion and the forms of expression are rarely the product of conscious effort exclusively towards that end.

Burmese sculpture in stone and wood carving also are mainly devoted to the service of the religion and need no more stress than that relevantly mentioned in the accounts concerning art and architecture.

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the articles is composed of the slips of bamboo neatly and closely plaited together, over which a thick black varnish is put on after filling the crevices with a mixture of cow dung and paddy husk. The article is then left to dry and to let the varnish set. When the varnish is quite fixed an iron style is used to grave the lines, dots and circles forming the pattern which is coloured coat by coat. The surface may be decorated in a number of ways and the design may be very elaborate landscapes, group of mythological figures and scenes from the Jātaka stories. The surface may be painted often with gold and sometimes the pattern is placed on it in relief. It may be inlaid with semi-precious stones or it may be carved sometimes very exquisitely. There are different centres of manufacture and each has been noted for a particular kind of workmanship and type of decoration.

### Silver & Gold Work

Burmese silver work is another characteristic art of the country. The objects made were chiefly images of Buddha, bowls and betel boxes. Of late years, the variety has increased and flower-vases, tumblers, salvers and sheaths of swords are made all in the traditional style. Many of the larger vessels have scene, from plays represented on them in repousse work. Like most other civilized peoples the Burmese have developed jewelry. Gold, Silver and precious stones are used to make a variety of personal ornaments. Mention has been made of the Pyu jewelry discovered from the mounds of old shrines Śrīkshetra where they were deposited as votive offerings. The inscriptions of Pagan frequently refer to the nine kinds of gems which are popularly known as used to the present day. Adornment of jewelery was common to both the male and female and till the last few generations all men had their ears bored like the womenfolk. In fact jewelry has been, naturally, chiefly for purposes of ornamentation, but it has also been a means of saving capital for the proverbial rainyday,

### Weaving

Cotton weaving is one of the most important domestic industries in Burma from the earliest times, being done by daughters and wives to supply the household raiment. Mention of cotton fabrics, usually white and black, is frequently made in the lithic records of Pagan. Silk-weaving is also popular though silk is not locally produced. Since cotton goods are now imported cheaply in large quantities the arts of

spinning and weaving are inspired only in the rural areas. Burmese silk manufacture, however, still holds its own in spite of the competition of imported stuff because the silk skirt is an indispensable holiday attire for both men and women of all status. Centres of silk-weaving thrive in different parts of the country, and as many as 37 plain patterns 30 wavy patterns of traditional character are known and used today. Embroidery of tapestry and wrappers for palm-books is also done in the traditional Burmese manner.

### Language & Literature

The Burmese language belongs to the Tibeto-Chinese family whereas the language of the Mons belongs to the Mon-Khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic family. The Burmans, having subdued the Mons, assimilated their culture and adopted their script. The Burmese language is monosyllabic and the principal feature is the use of tones. Auxiliary words are also added to the base-word to make clear the case or the sense and so give the effect of inflection. The arrangement of words in a sentence, which is written from left to right, is somewhat the reverse of the order followed in English. The Burmese employ what in effect are compound words often made up of Burmese and Pāli or Sanskrit words. The use of compound words in Burmese is clearly seen when, as in late years, we have been under the necessity of finding terms for new ideas and objects.

It was the introduction of the Theravāda Buddhism which created the impetus for the dawn of the Burmese language as a literary vehicle. The pioneers and ardent workers in this sphere of culture were of course the Burmese monks who have been the sole repositories of all literary knowledge in Burma. Studying the Pāli language as the instrument of the highest teaching, commenting and composing in that new tongue, and later interpreting the teachings in Burmese, our monks have left us a very valuable heritage in Burmese literature which could occupy an equal rank with any other contemporary literature.

Handreds of lithic inscriptions at Pagan afford us materials for studying the early forms of the language and to trace its evolution in orthography, phonology and vocabulary. The Burmese language in the 11th century was struggling to achieve the literary standard when the Mons had almost attained perfection in their language and the Pyu language was already dying out. This fact is testified by the Myazedi

Inscription at Pagan. This pillar set up by Prince Rājākumar, Kyanzittha's son, about the year 1112 A.D., records a memorable historic event in four languages, namely Pyu, Pāli, Mon and Burmese. It is the Rosetta Stone of Burma, for the subject matter is the same throughout the different languages, thereby enabling scholars to decipher the extinct Pyu writting. In this dated document we find that the Pāli inscription has been composed in verse and the Pyu face of the stone is found to be the only complete narration of some length in that language. But the Burmese text is in simple, straight forward prose with signs of unsettled orthography and phonology. The great mass of the epigraphs at Pagan are of dedicatory character but they incidentally give us invaluable information on Burmese history and provide much material to the philologist.

After the fall of Pagan, Pinya and Sagaing rose into power and Ava was founded in the year 1364 A.D. Inscriptions of these periods are also found in abundance and in the records of the Ava period, both lithic and palm leaf manuscript, we find the Burmese language had already assumed the literary shape as may be evidenced in the Ratanabeikman epigraph and the inscriptions of Saw Omma and also in the poems such as the *Pyo*-epics and the *Ramu*-lyrics. The 15th century witnessed the full flowering of the Burmese literature, and under the royal patronage a host of learned and celebrated writers gathered round the court of Ava. Amongst them were members of the religious order, namely, Shin Silavaṃsa, Shin Raṭṭhasāra, Shin Uttamagyaw and Shin Aggasamādhī. It was Raṭṭhasāra, the court-poet of Ava who wrote the *Haṭṭhipāla Pyo*-epic which set the standard of elegant Burmese in the matter of spelling, diction and style. Shin Silavaṃsa's *Pāramigan Pyo* is the archetype of later religious poetry. It is an epic poem and gives a vivid description of the hard mental struggles which the Buddha underwent in his previous existences. The author drew his material from the whole range of Buddhist scriptures. Shin Uttamagyaw won fame as the greatest composer of nature-poem of all times.

With the annexation of the Mon province in the 16th century there was an expansion of the Burmese empire and with it the advancement of the Burmese language as well. It was the period in which the victors and the vanquished met each other and worked together on the common literary platform. The result was the mutual

borrowing of each other's vocabulary and we may notice many Mon words and their corruptions in our later Burmese and also many of our domestic and social terms in the later Mon.

It was, however, during Alaungpaya's dynasty in the 18th and early 19th centuries that Burmese language attained the height of its glory. It became the national and official language throughout his empire. Siam was conquered during Sinbyushin's reign and amongst the captives were Siamese songster and artists from whom the Burmese writers obtained fresh and creative material for their writings. Towards the end of the reign of Sinbyushin Myawadi-wungyi wrote the Burmese adaptations of Siamese songs and the Siamese version of the Rāmāyanat. Two more adaptations of this epic were next produced during the reign of Bodawpaya by U Toe and U Aung Pyo. Belle-letters also had their origin in this epoch, the versatile authors being Kyigan Shingyi and Shin Ukkamsamālā. While many writers were busy at the capital with their translations and new forms of literature, Rev. U Awbatha of Minbu produced a series of unique prose works on the Great Jataka's the former birth-stories of the Buddha. His Vessantara Zattawgyi Vatthu is the most popular and has always been the model for the best Burmese prose.

Another school of writers sprang up during the reign of King Mindon, the last but one king of Burma. Amongst them was the celebrated poet, author and dramatist, U Ponnya, the Shakespeare of Burma. He was a literary genius and a versatile writer of letters and his contribution towards Burmese literature is of immense value.

The biographies of Burmese poets and writers through the centuries are as chequered as the development of the literature. Early in the Pagan period we learn Minister Anantasuriya who made the king repent his vile act of ordering Anantasuriya's execution by the spontaneous composition of his swan-song. About the year 1766 another minister, Letwèthondara, was recalled from exile when the king learnt the minister's penitence from the lyric despatched to him. Prince Natshin Naung, a star-crossed lover of the 16th century, produced masterpieces of romantic lyrics in admiration of his suitor; and in early 19th century Princess Hlaing-Hteik-khaung-tin by composing enchanting songs, won back her consort who had diverted his attention to another lady. Kings and courtiers, monks and laymen, princes and

maidens, all shared the task of building up the world of Burmese literature which to day covers the multifarious subjects of astrology and history, law and medicine, religion and fiction, and the greater part of which has appeared in print. There has also been much of what may be called unwritten literature in the form of folklore, songs and proverbs. The Burmese literature is written in the classical style and until recently composition in the speech of everyday was considered beneath the dignity of scholars. Of late years, however, an increasing interest has developed in fiction and science and serious efforts are now being made to resuscitate the Burmese language and to translate modern scientific books into Burmese.

### Drama

Closely associated with literature, and indeed, often as phases of it, have been drama and music. The drama has had a great fascination for the Burmese and has been and is a familiar feature of their life. The Rāmāyana was the earliest drama acted in Burma. Later, Burmese productions with themes centering round the Jātakas (or birth-stories of the Buddha) and great events in the nation's history were staged. Maniket was the first Burmese drama, followed by adaptations of Malayan and Indonesian dramas, namely, I-naung and Vijaya. Depicting the Great Birth-Stories of the Buddha and historical events the leading actor and actress, i.e. the hero and heroine, naturally had to play the roles of the prince and princess. These assumed characters had so much impressed the Burmese mind that leading performers in any theatrical entertainment, or the hero and heroine of a play or novel are called a prince and princess respectively though in fact, they have not the slightest relation with royalty. The dialogue of the play, often in verse and in the stately language of the court, is always helped out with much singing and dancing accompanied by music. Similar plays are enacted by means of marionettes whose manipulation is exceedingly effective and involves considerable skill. The professional singers are true artists and are able to command the feelings of their hearers. The *ngo-gyin*, weeping song, invariably brings tears to the eyes of the hearers. The love songs are full of pathos. An indispensable scene in all the dramas is the separation and meeting again of the lovers. It is the most interesting part of the play and is eagerly awaited by the playgoers. The best songs are sung in these scenes and the best talents of the performers called to play.

Music in Burma has had a long history and into it many influences have entered. External sources point out that the Pyus had gained approbation in the use of various kinds of musical instruments. The inscriptions of Pagan also recorded the dedication of musicians to pagodas and monasteries. The names of some members of the musical troupes at Pagan indicate that the artists were Indian, and the instruments used by them were often mentioned. Even today music is indispensable on all important occasions: festivals, dedication ceremonies and so forth. There is therefore a variety of styles to suit each occasion, for instance the martial music is played at boxing matches, races and grand tugs-of-war which excites the Burmese to action. The typical Burmese orchestra today consists of a big drum, a circle of small drums of graduated sizes, a similar circle of gongs, cymbals, a clarion or oboe and bamboo clappers. The Burmese harp is not meant for lively music but is suited to classical tunes. The adaptation of the Siamese tune has been so cleverly done that it now forms one of the classical styles of music. But the modern tendency has been the imitation of Western music with the use of assorted novelties of instruments—the piano, violin, guitar, band, cornet, etc. The traditional style is, however, retained for formal occasions.

Until the advent of British rule there were no school confined to the secular curriculum. Burmese children were sent to the monasteries where they had to learn reading and writing of elementary standard, simple arithmetic and religious scriptures such as the Buddhist Beatitudes. On attaining the early teens it was and still is compulsory for the Burmese lads to be initiated into the Buddhist order as novices. They usually spend a month or sometimes three in their yellow robes, after which most of them left the monasteries to take up apprenticeship in trades or engage themselves in husbandry. Those inclined towards the pursuit of religious learning prolong their stay at the monasteries and on attaining the age of twenty are admitted to the higher order of monkhood. Girls were not sent to the monasteries but they received their education at the primary schools run by the laity. Thus the percentage of literacy was high though advanced learning by the modern educational standards, of education throughout the country has become continuous and very rapid, the monasteries form the backbone of national instruction in the rural areas.

### Astrology

From the earliest times the Burmese have been greatly interested



in astrology and this has influenced the Burmese life in no small measure. Indian astrologers were always in attendance at the Burmese court and their advice was sought for even at occasions of the slightest importance. Inscribed pillars in the Mon language found near the Saraba Gate of Pagan record how, at the ceremonial attending the building of Kyanzittha's palace, certain rituals were performed by the Brahmins. A similar account is also found in the lithic inscription recording the foundation of the palace at Ava in the 10th century, and in founding the city of Mandalay in 1857 by King Mindon, astrological instructions in every minute detail were followed. The commoners pinned no less faith in astrology than the royalty. Everyone, even in the present day, has a horoscope prepared on palmleaf with which to consult the astrologer at times and to fix auspicious dates for performing ceremonies or to embark upon business ventures. The sophisticated generation would at least have the dates chosen for them for marriage, and the exact time calculated for foundation of new buildings. This belief in astrology holds the Burmese mind so firmly that we become accustomed to follow many general injunctions and recommendations of astrological character. For instance, the present day Burmese calendar indicates for general guidance, lucky and unlucky days of the week in each month. The Burman rarely commences a journey by boat on Friday, nor does he crop his hair on his birthday, Friday and Monday. A child is usually given his first lessons on Thursday.

### Burmese Era

Speaking of calendar you may also like to know something of the Burmese era. The basic foundation of the Burmese era is Buddhism and is invested with certain facts of history, but the influence upon it of astrology is of no mean importance. The year of the Religion which is reckoned from the time of Buddha's demise was in vogue at the first stage of Burmese civilization. But in Burmese astrology time is divided into periods, which consist of a varying number of years, and the terminal year of the astral period is considered to be inauspicious to the king and the country. The year 624 of the Religion was the end point of the Period termed Dodorasa and was therefore viewed with dismay. To ward off the evil consequences, not only the principle of elimination was suggested but also the exact extent of it. Thus King Thamuddarit of Skirkshetra elided 622 years from the Religious Era and introduced the Kha Ca Pañca

Era beginning with the year 2. It coincides with the Saka Era of India and corresponds to 78 A.D. During the reign of Poppa Sawrahan of Pagan the Kha Ca Pañca period came to end in the year 562 of that era. And for the second time a new era was introduced by eliminating 560 years from the old one. The present Burmese era therefore began with 2 and has now attained the year of 1319 which differs by 1182 years from the Sasana or Religious Era and by 638 years from the Christian Era. The Burmese New Year does not fall on the same date, the year being reckoned by the lunar months. This event is calculated and predicated by the Committee of Astrologers every year. About a month or two before the good old year passes away, they circulate their prognostications and minute astrological calculations for the information of the public. The days of the week in the Burmese calendar are named after the sun, moon and planets. The month is divided into the waxing and waning moon of 15 days each, alternately with months of fifteen days waxing and fourteen days waning. To catch up the solar year, an intercalary month is admitted at each appropriate period. Therefore in leap years the month Wazo is repeated under the name Dutiya Wazo. The day is divided into sixty *nayi* or hours, but since the introduction of clocks and watches it has become obsolete and the day of 24 hours has become universal.

### Weights & Measures

The appreciation and use by the Burmese of minute division in time, weights and measures are apparent. For instance in linear measure the lowest unit is a *san-chi* or hair's breadth, though a finger's breadth is used as the lowest for all practical purposes.

The table is as follows:

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 10 <i>sanchi</i> , hair's breadth | make a <i>hnan</i> , sessamum seed,                               |
| 6 <i>hnan</i> ,                   | = a <i>muyaw</i> , a grain of rice,                               |
| 4 <i>Muyaw</i>                    | = a <i>let-thit</i> , finger's breadth,                           |
| 6 <i>let-thit</i>                 | = a <i>maik</i> , breadth of the palm with<br>the thumb extended, |
| 12 <i>let-thit</i>                | = a <i>twa</i> , a span,  |
| 3 <i>Maik</i> or 2 <i>twa</i>     | = a <i>taung</i> , cubit,   |
| 7 <i>taung</i>                    | = a <i>ta</i> , unit of land measure,                             |
| 1000 <i>ta</i>                    | = a <i>taing</i> , about 2 miles.                                 |

The *maik*, *twa* and *taung* are still in use today, especially in measuring piece-goods.

The unit of land measure is the *pè* for paddy lands, which contains about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  acres. Bodawpaya set up in 1786 two squares of masonry a few miles south of Mandalay as a guide for land measure. The larger one is the *min* (or royal) *pè* and the smaller, *pakati* (or people's) *pè* which is exactly half the former in area. On two inscribed stones at the site is engraved the standard *taung* which measure 19.05 inches.

### Coinage

Currency and coinage, however, was not systematically established till the reign of King Mindon in 1852. Before the introduction of coinage gold and silver bullion were used for exchange. The earliest silver coins found at Sriksheṭra and Halin and copper coins of Bodawpaya of the 18th century are commemorative in character. The Arakanese kings also issued silver coins from the 16th century onwards, but in all probability they were not in wide circulation and were never in use in Burma proper. The Burmese rarely invest capital and few people hoard up money, for they attach more importance to the possession of land, and when they do save they usually bury it in the ground. But normally they spend in works of merit or give away in charity at religious and social functions, ever remaining content and happy.

### Festivals & the Burmese Spirit

The Burmese are gay people. We have many seasonal festivals Buddhist as well as Hindu in origin, all through the year. But they are not merely occasions for merry-making or idling. Nor are they mere focal points of social life or religious fervour. They are the expression of our philosophy of life. The strains and stresses of everyday life, and the demands of economic necessity are disturbing to spiritual equilibrium and are always a source of weariness to the inherently gentle Burmese. The festivals are a great remedy for this. We recover sanity and a sense of proportion, poise and generosity in festival time, and revert to the natural good-fellowship of real Burmese society. For instance, the real Burmese way of water-throwing at the New Year festival is intended to give our friends a sense of affection through the means of coolness in the heat of the weather. The Thadingyut festival

of lights is celebrated in remembrance of the Buddha's return to earth from a short sojourn in the heavenly abode and is symbolic of the sense of relief and joy in the open season. This beautiful festival, noble in significance and observance, always conveys a message of hope and cheer to the Burmese people.

### Conclusion

There remains a lot more to be said about the cultural life of the Burmese. I have not tried to be exhaustive. I have just attempted to show the main characteristics and the achievements in the chief artistic and social aspects of Burmese culture and hope to have conveyed you a fairly perspective view of the subject.