

Bibliographic Data

Author Ba Tha (Buthidaung)
Article Title Rowengya Fine Arts
Title (Book/Series) **The Guardian Magazine**
Issue and Volume Vol.8, No.2 (February 1961)
Edition
Place/Publisher
Distributor
Ed. Date February 1961
Pagination 20-22
Annotation
Subject 1. ART AND SOCIETY -Rowengya
Key Words

ROWENGYA FINE ARTS

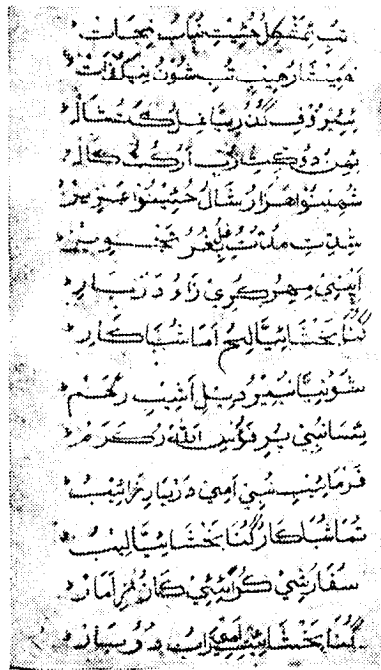
by

Ba Tha (Buthidaung)

EVERY racial group of Burma has its own fine arts. The Roewngyas, whose ancestors made Arakan as their permanent home since 7th century A.D., have their own arts distinctive from the arts of other races of the Union of Burma. I have great pleasure in taking up my pen to write about these arts divided, by me, into three classes such as calligraphy, painting, and music. But the pottery, an occupation of the Roewngyas, also played an important part in their arts. If time favours I shall write about it in future.

Calligraphy:—Muslim calligraphy, or the art of beautiful hand-writing had flourished all over the Muslim world even in Arakan for though it was not a Muslim country or Kingdom, but once it was the vassal of the Muslim kings of Gaur. It is based on the early Arabic script known as Kufic character which was used in the oldest Arabic coins, inscriptions and documents. The Kufic style was called after the name of the city of Kufa in Iraq. At the beginning of the tenth century a new style known as Nask with correct spelling became popular while the Kufic style became more difficult to write. But in course of time the Nask character was used in Arabic writing, while the Nastalik style which, with rounded circles, took place in Persia at the end of the thirteenth century, was adopted for the writing of the Persian language. In India the Nask character was used in copying the Quran, the Muslim Holy Book, and other books in Arabic language, and in the Urdu language the Nastalik character was used. When the Muslims entered Arakan they also adopted these characters. The Roewngya poets and authors wrote many books in Arabic and Persian scripts using these two styles. Most of Alawal's works are found in Persian script. But it is very regrettable that we could not find any full record of the Roewngya calligraphists, except

to say that there were Roewngya calligraphists in Arakan who were encouraged by the Arakanese kings in Myauk-u dynasty, for otherwise it was impossible to inscribe the coins as well as the inscriptions in Arabic and Persian scripts which are still found in the country. A book entitled "Keyamatnama" in clean and neat hand-writing was in the possession of Maulvi Wajullah, my father, of Rowangyadaung village, Buthidaung township. Now it is in my possession. It was



A page from the book "Keyamatnama" written in Arabic script in Nask character. It is an admixture of Bengali, Arabic, Urdu and Persian. With many sheets torn away, it is beyond the bounds of my knowledge to mention the author and the year of writing of the book. Ten years ago my father, before his death, told me the name of its author and the year of writing, but I forget them all. But it seems to be of the 16th century. The papers on which it was written are very rough. Haji Abdul Ghafoor of Keem village, Minbya township had a book entitled "Maula-tu-

U Ba Tha, with his patriotic concern for the Rowengya people, has already written several articles in this Magazine on the history of the Rowengyas that is nearest to his heart. In the present article he deals with some of the rich heritage of his people: calligraphy painting and music. He points out with genuine anxiety the near-extinction condition of his national culture and calls upon the authorities to take timely heed.

Shareef" in Arabic language written in Nask character. Some of its pages are in bounds which are in floral designs. At present it is in the possession of Mr. M.K. Rahman, the author of *Burma Muslims* (in Urdu language), who showed it to me with great pleasure when I approached him to discuss about the historical background of the Roewngyas. He has also other historical books written by the Roewngya poets and authors in Roewngya-Bengala while Bengali literature was in force in the Royal Court of Arakan during the Myauk-u dynasty. Copies of the Holy Quran are to be found in Arakan. I have seen several calligraphic copies of the Holy Quran in our mosque, but all are in disorder. Moulvi Abdul Aziz of Maungdaw south had transcribed twenty-nine parts of the Holy Quran, which were destroyed by the Japanese during the Second Great World War. He could read the Quran very sweetly. He was a man of good speaking (1) Roewngya architects introduced the art of beautiful calligraphic curves in their architecture. To the memory of the dead, Roewngyas inscribed inscriptions in Arabic and Persian scripts on the walls of the tombs, but now-a-days English and Burmese are also used so that every citizen of the Union of Burma can read and know who the deceased is. Beautiful calligraphic curves in glass frames in floral designs can be seen in most

(1) *Inquilab* dated 24th October 1960

houses of the Roewngyas. Most of them are the adjective names of Allah, the Kalema, Bissimillah and the quotations from the Holy Quran.

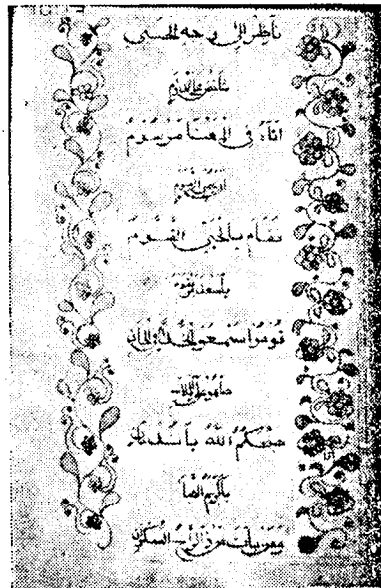
The practice of clean and neat hand-writing played an important part in the art of calligraphy before printing was invented. When printing was invented all significance of calligraphy was lost. Roewngya calligraphy was in Nastalik type while Urdu was used by them as a written language from the end of the 19th century up to the British re-occupation of Burma in 1945.

Painting:—If Roewngya is a Muslim race in Arakan there is Muslim painting which is a continuation of Muslim art that was developed in Islamic countries. The contribution of the Muslim art of painting is the development of small painting. In 1237 when Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols, Muslim miniature painting was developed in Baghdad. When the progress of Islamic art painting took root there it was then reborn in Persia. The Persian influence of the Muslim painting came to India with the Moghuls. But the Muslim painting in India and Pakistan was based on the painting of Baghdad while the Sultans of Delhi had close relations with the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. During the Moghul period, Muslim painting was greatly developed in India. The influences of Baghdad painting in India was assimilated by the Moghul painting which had created entirely a new school of painting, Muslim painting in this part of the world is based on the Indian Muslim painting. The Muslims including the Moghul from India with a knowledge of painting entered Arakan, the rulers of which had tied up in friendship with the Muslim kings of India. The pictures of birds and animals, the interest in landscapes, and all the calligraphic curves are Muslim painting in Arakan which are all in miniature forms and in floral designs.

Music:—Music was looked upon as an idle pastime by the religious circles. But the Arab rulers had patronized it while the people gave their views and supported it.

Granada, Baghdad and Damascus then played an important part in the art of music. European music was enriched by the Arab music. "European minstrels, prior to the Arab contact, only had the cithara and harp among stringed instruments and they only had their ears to guide them while tuning. The Arab brought to Europe their lutes, poudores, and guitars, with the places of the notes fixed on the finger-board by means of frets (cf. Arab farida, fard) which were determined by measurement."(2)

When Muslims came to Arakan they were not only the heir of



A page from the book "Maula-tu-Shareef"

Arab music but also the heir of Indian music including Bengali. They brought to Arakan a variety of musical instruments such as Dhols, Bela, zans, moorali, zuri, etc. The popular musical form was the ghazal which was sung in Persian style. Persian ghazals are still sung by some of the Moulvis who are educated in Persian language.

During Min Bin's reign many Bengali musicians including Muslims were brought to Arakan and appointed as Court Musicians. One evening while King Min Bin and the Centre Queen were in a

pavilion which stood by an ornamented water the Queen took the opportunity of communicating the news of the Descent of God on Taung Ni, the Red Mount of Man-aung Island, which was heard of by her through the Prior of the Three Baskets Monastery of the Island. This news was not reported by the Taung Shin, Southern Lord, a nobleman of independent and active nature who, before the end of 1553, had been appointed by Min Bin to be the Governor of the Crown to administer the Island. The classical name of which is Mayghawaddi, while the British name is Cheduba. When the Queen was telling the news, the tunes of Bengali music were heard of. Speaking of this music Maurice Collis writes, "Musicians from Bengal had been giving a concert, the classical music of old India. Such music is sometimes heart-breaking, and the melody they played was a lament that may still be heard at twilight on the Ganges, coming from boats far out on the stream." (3) The king was much affected by the music. He turned to the Centre Queen and in mournful cadences he said that the melody reminded him of one night when he was encamped on the shore of the Megna River. He had fought a battle all day on the other shore where so many of his soldiers lay dead. It was like the wailing of his wounded men crying at their pitiful fate. It was also as if the souls of his dead men were flying in the wind. He was much troubled and anxious and was thinking of death. At that time the king was over sixty and the Queen was a young lady who did not think of death.

Syed Shan Alawal, the greatest Arakan Muslim poet, was impassioned with music and had a natural ardour for songs, and he had written many of them. Shah Shujah was appointed as the Viceroy of Bengal in 1639. During his viceroyalty he made his court a great cultural centre. His father, Emperor Shahjehan, had allowed the two prominent and royal musicians by the name of Misri Khan and Gun Khan to accompany him to Bengal. He had also other musicians from Bengal.

(2) Legacy of Islam, p. 374.

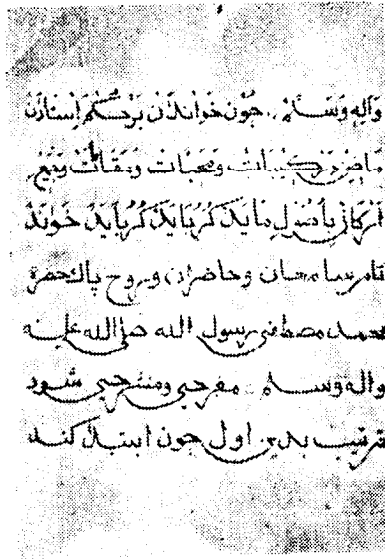
(3) Maurice Collis: The Descent of the God, p. 72.

When in 1660 he fled to Arakan he brought all his musicians and other artists to Arakan because he was fond of music and art.

The Roewngyas have a large class of singers and musicians. In Arakan Roewngya music found influential supporters among Sufi saints: for example, Babajee of Akyab and Moulvi Meah Hussain of Kyinuthi village of Buthidaung township were great lovers of music. Moulvi Meah Hussain's Mashbandali is famous in Northern Arakan. Sufi musicians are to be attributed for the general encouragement they give to the Roewngya music in this part of the world. Marfati, Murshidi and Mashbandali songs are concerned with the type of Sufi music.

Zari, the memorial song, is very old and popular entertainment in the villages. It enacts the story of Karbala and other episodes from the Islamic history. It is generally performed in the month of Muharrum in which Imam Hussian, son of Hazrat Ali was killed in the battle field of Karbala in A.D. 680. One of the zari songs translated into English is:—

The Muharrum party has come,
In the field vast crowds,
Have gathered in eager delight.
The pathetic cries of Karbala
Are piercing through the waves
of the zari song
Moistening the eyes of the
audience.
The leader plays the hero with
a red napkin
Wrapped round his head, dances
with his party.
Sakina breaks her necklace on
her marriage day,
The tragedy of Karbala breaks
her collyrium case.
The Duldul horse comes back
bearing
The dead body of her husband,
But still she wears the marriage
garment.
Dressing him in war robes she
had sent him to the battle,
How will she cover up his body
now with the shroud?"



A page from the book "Maula-tu-Shareef"

Batali, the tune of the rural singers, has become very popular. It is a sort of indigenous theatre, with music and dancing playing important parts in it. It is generally performed at night in a spacious ground by two parties. The songs of Koti are sung in it. Ali Muddin of Rowangyadaung village, Buthidaung township, was a popular singer. He could sing a mournful song so sweetly that tears welled up in the lookers-on. His two brothers named Ramzan Ali and Iman Shorif are also singers. His youngest son Amir Ali is a Qawali singer.

Barama-hya is a musical item. It is very difficult to sing. Mohamed Inu Meah of Rowangyadung village is the popular singer of Baramashya. He generally sings at mid-night when the village is quiet and calm. At night in the calmness of the village he sings so sweetly that most of the villagers get up from their beds to listen.

With the advent of Urdu literature during the British Rule, Qawalis became popular in Arakan, and the greatest Qawal was Jafar Ahmed of Ali Khang Para of Buthidaung township. A singer in Urdu Qawali like him has not been in Arakan for the last hundred years. He was also a great composer of songs. He himself was a musician and set his songs to his own tunes. The melody of the Urdu Qawali and songs has become very popular today.

After the Independence of Burma Roewngya fine arts are almost disappearing. The disappearance of Roewngya arts is a great loss to the Union. The Government of the Union is encouraging the cultural arts of every race in Burma. But it is very regretful for the Roewngyas that the Government has paid no heed to their cultural arts. Therefore it is time now for the Roewngyas and their Government to develop their ancestral arts so that they can take pride in showing their artistic genius.

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