

Historical Perspective on Mon Settlements in Myanmar

Khin May Aung
Department of History, Mawlamyine University, Myanmar

Abstract

The Mon who belong to the Mon-Khmer stock of Austro-Asiatic sub-family were the old inhabitants of both Myanmar and Thailand. In Myanmar, they migrated from the north along the rivers of Mekong, Thanlwin and Ayeyarwaddy. When the Mon came to Myanmar, they were known as *Raman* which name was later simplified as *Raman* and shortened to Mon. The usage of '*Ramañña*' is also found in Bago Kalyani inscription of 1476 AD. Thus the name '*Ramañña*' did not emerge only in 15th century AD but existed from the early centuries. It was also found that the all-inclusive term '*Ramaññadesa*' has its roots in the three Mon regions of Patheingyi, Muttama and Hanthawaddy. Since the terms *Ramaññadesa* and *Suvaññabhumi* were alternately used in the old Indian literature and oldest chronicles of Srilanka, *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa*, composed in 4th and 6th century. Traditionally, *Suvaññabhumi* (Thaton) was the centre from which the Buddhism spread up to the whole country. Different concepts of the old city site of the Mon settlements were reviewed and the finding of the artifacts and the tradition revealed that the coastal area of Lower Myanmar happened to be of the settlements of Mon inhabitant.

Key words: Raman, Ramañña, Ramaññadesa, Suvaññabhumi

Introduction

The Mon who belong to the Mon-Khmer stock of Austro-Asiatic sub-family are one of the oldest inhabitants of both Myanmar and Thailand. They are known to have descended from Mongoloid and originated in Mongol. Evidently, the region of Southeast Asia was inhabited by the Mon - Khmer people who had contact with India from very early times. Since the Austric speaking people inhabited the whole of Southeast Asia, they comprised of the Mon of Myanmar and Thailand, Khmer of Cambodia and Khasi of Assam. Originally, the Mon and Khmer were one and the same people. However, they were separated afterwards and, as they could not communicate with each other, they lived in their new regions and established their own kingdoms respectively in Thailand and Myanmar.

The Mon migrated from the valley of the Yangtze Kian to the Southwest along the rivers of Mekong, Thanlwin, and Ayeyarwaddy inhabited mostly in Lower Myanmar and Lower Thailand. U Ye Sein, former member of Myanmar Historical Commission suggests that the Mon had their settlements in the south as far as Malaya. Similarly the Mon of the Thanlwin valley went further

west slowly to reach the valleys of Sittaung and Ayeyarwaddy, before the advent of the Christian Era.

The oldest records of the ethnic name of the Mon can be found not in Myanmar or Thailand but in Khmer land. In the Khmer Inscriptions of 6th to 7th century AD, Mon was written as *Raman* and *Rmman*, and in the 9th and 10th century as *Ramanya*. In Java, the inscription of 1021 AD, recorded as *Rmen* and in the 11th century Mon inscription of King Kyanzitta of Myanmar as *Rmen*. The spelling had changed to *Raman* in the 15th century in Mon inscription and on a Mon copper plate in the National Library of Bangkok. The copper plate was engraved on Friday 10th November, 1503 during the reign of King Banya Ram II, son of *Ramadhipati*. Etymologically, the word “Mon” is derived from the word “Rmen” through the intermediate terms “Rman and Mon”.

U Pho Latt supposes that a group of the Mon-Khmer moved down from the Yangtze River Valley along the Thanlwin and the Mekong River. Another group made its way down to the Mae nam River Valley in Thailand and a third group turned west from Myanmar and Yunan to reach Assam in India. Dr Than Tun said that they could have totally occupied Lower Myanmar no later than the 2nd century BC. The Mon entered Lower Myanmar from the east, some along the Thanlwin River and some taking the diagonal course to Ayeyarwaddy Delta via northern Laos and Upper Thailand.

The physical features of the area between Sittaung and Thanlwin rivers are located in the southeast of Myanmar. There is evidence that Mon cities, metropolis and culture developed. The area between Sittaung, Thanlwin and Lower Myanmar was called Ramannya and there is also evidence in the Subudipa U Saung treatise:

The northwest of Ayeyarwaddy river is Thunarparanta Taing,
the east and south of Ayeyarwaddy is Tampadipa Taing,
Kaytumadi Taungoo is Zay Yar Wudhtana Taing,
Pathein, Bago, Muttama are Ramañña Taing.

According to this passage, in Lower Myanmar, there are two divisions, Zay Yar Wuntana Taing and Ramannya Taing. Zay Yar Wuntana Taing is the Upper part of Sittaung river valley. Ramañña Taing comprises of Ayeyarwaddy delta region, Sittaung delta region and Thanlwin delta region. This division are included Pathein, Hanthawaddy, and Muttama.

Pathein division includes Pathein town and the towns (32) are called Pathein (32) ancient city. Hanthawaddy (32) ancient city and Muttama (32) ancient city are also established. The Pathein (32) ancient city are at Ayeyarwaddy delta region. Hanthawaddy (32) ancient city are at Sittaung delta region and Muttama (32) ancient city are at Thanlwin delta region.

Hanthawaddy (32) towns are (1) Hanthawadi, (2) Kyaw mar, (3) Ann, (4) Donzayit, (5) Kyeeku, (6) Sittaung, (7) Zin mei, (8) Zayedon, (9) Athar, (10) Mawlon, (11) Lakunbyin, (12) Arkharein, (13) Ma U, (14) Yanmar Nago, (15) Yammar Wati, (16) Mawbi, (17) Hlaing, (18) Baunglin, (19) Htangtawkyi, (20) Titoot, (21) Zay Hla, (22) Zaungtu, (23) Bar Alng, (24) Ton Khan, (25) Ye New, (26) Maw Rizaya, (27) Tangar, Paung, (28) Min Ye Hla, (29) Kaw Liya, (30) Paingtar, (31) Win Mying, and (32) Yun

Zalin. Among the above town some of the towns still significantly have the marks of old city walls and moats.

The Muttama town and its (32) towns group are (1) Muttama, (2) Kalein Aung, (3) Ye, (4) Lamine, (5) Warkaru, (6) Zayar, (7) Mawlamyine, (8) Attaran, (9) WinYaw, (10) Zami, (11) Gungyi, (12) Kyeik, (13) Taung Poh, (14) Zweya, (15) Kyaing, (16) Myawadi (17) Thazine (Kazine), (18) Kar Kyaing, (19) Hlaing Bwe, (20) Myaing, (21) Bilugyun (22) Zaye, (23) YinNyein, (24) Kawt (Gawt), (25) Don Wun, (26) Lagon Byee, (27) Yun Zalin (28) Win Myaing, (29) Min Pine, (30) Yin Ohn, (31) Katha Sittaung and (32) Taik Kalar.

Pathein (32) towns are (1) Pathein, (2) Mynaung, (3) Kanaung, (4) Hinthada, (5) Kwinbauk, (6) Oakpho, (7) Duya, (8) Zalun, (9) Danuphyu, (10) Thamyinkone, (11) Myaungmya, (12) Seikkyi, (13) Kaepaung, (14) Melaung, (15) Tagaung Phaya, (16) Kyaikpi, (17) Yekyi, (18) Kyonpyaw, (19) Kyaikkamepura, (20) Athok, (21) Htanbu Magyikone, (22) Phyuikwin, (23) Kyaukchaunggyi (24) Kyaukchaunggyitaik, (25) Zaungyarkyun (26) Zaungyarkyun Hlaytannal, (27) Kyaukhtaungkaw (28) Ngathaing chaungnal, (29) Kyaikbamon Kyoneton, (30) Khay nan, (31) Phayahla and (32) Kyaikhto.

In Myanmar, the Mon established three Mon Kingdoms, Thaton, Muttama, Bago and Hanthawaddy. In ancient times Thaton was known as Sudhamavadi.

According to Thaton Razawun, Sudhamavadi was governed by King Thudhamanawa, the genealogy of 24 kings, the region was called *Thubeindanagara*. When the city was ruined, it was shifted to Suvaññabhumi (Thaton). Thaton comes from the Pali word "Sudhamma". Sudhamma means "Perfection with excellent Doctrine". So, this meaning is in accord with flourish of Buddhism in ancient Thaton.

In the Pali Kalyani Inscription, the settlement of Mon was mentioned, Suvaññabhumirattha Sankhata Ramaññades. Professor G. Coedes is of opinion that "The delta of Myanmar was occupied by the Mon and their main centre was Suddhamavadi". G.H. Luce considered that Suddhamavadi situated at the foot of Mt. Kelasa some 30 miles north of modern Thaton. Moreover, Thaton is also called Suvaññabhumi that means "Golden land". Malalaskera's Dictionary of Pali proper names defines Suvaññabhumi as follows.

Suvaññabhumi is generally identified with Lower Myanmar
whose chief city was Suddhamavadi
at the mouth of the Sittaung river.

Ptolemy, a geographer from Alexandria had recorded in the 2nd century AD, that the inhabitants of the east side of the gulf of Besynga were cannibals. Neighbouring Besynga Island, was the country of Chryse Chora meaning golden Land. Regarding the historical terminology of Suvaññabhumi, Ptolemy the Greek geographer of Alexandria mentioned that he saw cannibals at the Gulf of Besynga and is identified as the Gulf of Muttoma and the neighbouring Chryse Chora is the Greek counterpart of the Pali Suvaññabhumi, "The Golden Land". Evidently, the Jataka tales such as Maha Janaka and Sussandi mentioned voyages across the sea to the country of Suvaññabhumi. Both the two terms Ramaññadesa and Suvaññabhumi were alternatively used in the old Indian literature

and the two oldest chronicles of Sri Lanka, Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa composed in the 4th and 6th century AD.

Historically, the Mon had close contacts with Sri Lanka as well as India. In connection with this point, Sri Lanka chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa composed in the 4th and 6th century AD described the deputation of a Buddhist mission headed by the two Theras Sona and Uttara sent by Asoka to Ramaññadesa in the 253 BC after the Third Buddhist council. This legend was repeated in the Kalyani inscription engraved by King Dhammazeti at Bago in 1476 AD. The Kalayanisima Inscription read in part as:

When Sonathera and Uttarathera arrived a King named Sirimasoka ruled over the city of Suvaññabhumi. This capital was situated to the northeast of the Kelasa. This city was called Golamattikanagara because it contained many mud and wattle houses.

Thus the Ramans who came there after called it Taikkala. The ancient Golomalttikanagara of the Kalyani Mon inscription is rendered into Modern Myanmar as Kalataik. The Mon called it Taikkala. Any structure built of loom earth, brick or stone is called "Taik" in Modern Myanmar. Gola occupied into gula and keela. The first two syllables "gola" unmistakably point to the Sanskrit root "gouda" which was the name of that portion of India now known as the district of Gour, the central part of Bengal extending from Wanga to the border Orissa. Gola people were south Indians. The site was originally settled by the south Indians who had migrated from India in the 3rd century BC.

In the following section, I will discuss three popular Mon nursery rhymes written on palm leaf manuscripts. These nursery rhymes express the fact that three main groups of Indian immigrants had come to Mon country because of the King Asoka military campaign on Kalinga, modern Madras Coast.

Nursery Rhymes

Mon daung

Hi Le yo Le! From the bank of the River Ganges,
land and country of the Mons.
We, the Mon daung, for our part cross over the sea and
reached Lagon, Tikumbha city.
Due to our deeds done in the previous lives and according to our fate,
We have been separated from our parents.
In what year and what time,
Shall we return to our original place of abode?
Oh! My beloved son!

Mon da

Hi Le yo Le!
From the mouth of the river Godavari.
The country and place of Mons.

The coast of Coromandal at the shore of the sea is
our original region.

Being without a King and because of the past acts
performed in the former existences ,

We have to be parted and came over to

Smaung island (Bilugyun) ,

On the flank of Zaya (Mudon) country side.

Oh! My beloved son!

Mon ña

Hah! From our beloved realm Tilangana,

the Mon land;

The King being poor in merit and defeated,

We fled hastily towards eastern direction ;

And reached Donwun ,the laterite landmark

Which was the old country side of the barbarious Milikkha.

A young man Suddha by name ,

led the way and we have come over here.

Oh! My beloved son!

Originally, these were written in southern and eastern Indian languages but they came down through many generations in Mon translation and eventually the Mon version was written down in the 19th century. The first rhyme was left by the people of the Ganges valley who lived in Tikumbha and they were hoping to return home. The second rhyme mentions that some people from the Godavari river valley came to live at the Bilugyun on the mouth of Thanlwin River. The third mentions that the people of Tilangana came to settle in Suvaññapura and they too wanted to return home. It is also impossible to say that they were real Mon who crossed the sea for living in the land around the Gulf of Muttama. Obviously, the Indians of Odda, Andra and Dravida were inhabited among the Mon of Lower Myanmar. Three people who called themselves Mon came respectively from the Ganges valley, the mouth of the Godavari from Tilangana.

The three clans mentioned in the rhymes are Mon Daing, Mon Da and Mon Na respectively. Some other sources identified different names including Mon Ti, Mon Sa, Mon Na and Mon Da. However, it is evident that the Mon nursery rhymes embody a perspective of three dialects among the Mon people.

Buddhism in Ramaññadesa

The religion of the Mon is Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is known to have flourished among the Mon since the 5th century AD and seems to have come from India. According to the Sasanavansa of Pannasami written in 1861 AD, it was Lower Myanmar known as Ramaññadesa which received Theravada Buddhism. Pannasami wrote this book using the materials, collected from the various Buddhist canonical and non-canonical texts. Traditionally, it was mentioned that Suvaññabhumi (Thaton) was the centre from which the religion spread up to the whole country.

Mahavansa stated that in the 2nd century BC when the Buddhist King of Ceylon, Duttagamani held a great alms-giving ceremony on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of his great temple, a delegation of monks from Kelasa monastery was present. Professor G H Luce notes:

Suvaññabhumi was Thaton and Kelasa, the monastery founded by the Sona and Uttara. In any case, it is clear that at least by the 2nd century BC, Thaton had close religious relation with Ceylon, the centre of Theravada Buddhism and Anawrahta received his Buddhism from Thaton.

In accordance with Thaton Razawun, there were 58 monarchs in succession to the throne, from King Thiha Radza to King Manuha. The Mon King Dhammapala was so pious in Buddhism that he asked a Buddhist monk called Buddhaghosa for a complete set of three Pitakas from Sri Lanka to Thaton.

The Glass Palace chronicle described that Buddhaghosa went to Sri Lanka from Thaton and brought back the Tripitakas as follows:

In the time of Mon King Dhanmapala 25th in line from Siharaja, the first King of Thaton, the King was ardent in his zeal for the promotion of the Buddhist religion, requested the high monk Buddhaghosa to cross over the sea to Ceylon to bring back the three baskets of Buddhist scripture to Thaton.

The pitakas that were brought by Buddhaghosa, were enshrined in a Zedi which is now popular and famous as the Pitaka Taik Zedi.

During the reign of King Manuha, Thaton was gradually weakened by starvation, disease and lack of unity among the nation. This undesirable condition made the fall of the Kingdom of Thaton. A new Kingdom was founded in Upper Myanmar at Bagan, which controlled the land and the river trade routes. As a result of its commercial advantages it became a powerful Kingdom. When Anawrahta ascended the Bagan throne, Buddhism had not yet flourished. At the beginning of Anawrahta's reign, there was no relationship between Bagan and Thaton where Theravada Buddhism had already existed.

King Anawrahta was converted to Theravada Buddhism and remained steadfast and so rooted in the faith and immovable as poached by Shin Arahana. The King remained firmly as his devoted disciple and attempted for the spread of Theravada Buddhist faith in his kingdom.

On the advice of Shin Arahana, the King of Bagan requested the Mon King Manuha to present him certain sacred texts and relics. But Manuha flatly refused Anawrahta's request. Thaton was defeated by King Anawrahta in 1057 AD and then took the scriptures, King, Queen and also some scholars, various craftsmen and artists to Bagan.

Despite taking away of the Buddhist scriptures to Bagan from THE Mon capital, Thaton, Buddhism in Ramaññadesa never faded away. In connection with this fact, India ancient archaeology scholar, Niharangan Ray said that:

such loss is just temporary, Not long before it will be active
under the preach of the Buddhist monks at the monasteries.

From the 5th century onwards, the Mon in possession of Lower Myanmar split up into Two Kingdoms, the one at Thaton and the other at Bago. After the fall of Thaton and its eclipse as a religious centre in the 11th century, Bago became the principal center of Mon influence.

The last king of Wareru dynasty was Banya U (AD 1348-1383). In the first half of the 14th century, he moved his capital from Muttama to Hanthawaddy (Bago) and so Bago became well known again. Since the time of King Banya U, all the Mon kings made a great effort for the flourishing of Buddhism. Especially Mon Queen Shin Saw Pu (AD 1453-1460) and King Dhammazedī (AD 1460-1492) made great efforts for the development of Theravada Buddhism.

During the Hanthawaddy dynasty, a Mon Queen Banya Htaw known as Shin Saw Pu made great efforts for the development of the Buddha Sasana. She offered food to monks at Myatheindan Pagoda in Muttama and donated Wuttaka Myay for Kyaikmaraw pagoda. She left a stone inscription that proved Queen Shin Saw Pu was a staunch Buddhist. This inscription mentioned that she donated for religious purposes in the presence of monks who gathered at the foot of the Myatheindan Pagoda in Muttama.

Queen Shin Saw Pu's performance of Sasana was widespread not only in the country but also abroad. The Ceylon King Siripa Gottama Barhu (AD 1410-68) had sent to Queen Shin Saw Pu, three golden shrines of the pattern of a relic casket made with Ceylon artistic craft.

During the reign of Shin Saw Pu at Hanthawaddy, there was peace and prosperity in the country. The people enjoyed peace, physically and mentally. After the death of Shin Saw Pu, Dhammazedī ascended the throne in 1458 AD. He decided to carry out the religious purification in Ramaññadesa. At the time of King Dhammazedī in Ramaññadesa, there were two Buddhist sects: Kanpucha sect and Siri Lanka sect. He was not prepared to support any one of these two. Because of the various sects, King Dhammazedī remarked:

when doing Sangha deeds such as, designating the ordination hall and initiating the entering of priesthood, there were no monks who had general knowledge, courage and strength and ability to unite to meet and discuss. Thus the Maharhtays of the various sects believed that they were the only one who were polite and capable. With these views, they accepted the Sangha deeds.

Therefore, in the reign of King Dhammazedī, it became his duty to take the purification of the Sasana of Lower Myanmar. In carrying out the above acts, King Dhammazedī believed that the ordination hall was fundamental. As Sangha are the main strength of Buddhism, any more to

improve the religion means a drive to keep them in so good a condition as prescribed by the scriptures. Thus he started a religious purification work because he was worried that the Upasampada. Ordination services were not correct in Ramaññadesa. If the ordination hall was not designated properly, the entering into priesthoods would not be legal. If this priest initiated the entering into priesthood, the novices would not become legal priests.

With the glorious intention of reorganizing the order of monks in Ramaññadesa, a mission of twenty two theras went to Srilanka on 21 January 1476. The King of Sri Lanka welcomed the Ramaññadesa country monks and permitted them to pay obeisance the tooth relic on 6th July 1476. The Myanmar monks were ordained at the ordination hall which demarcated according to the Sri Lanka system that was they ordained the monks whom the Sri Lanka King had chosen to his satisfaction. As they had new monks, in Myanmar, Sri Lanka's Sasana had reappeared again in a new form. Then, King Dhammazedī donated the large bell on 2nd October 1476. Among the donors of the bell, King Dhammazedī was the first donor of the large bell. It can be said that the donation of the large bell was an indication that Sri Lanka Sasana had become rooted on Bago.

With the help of the Sri Lanka monks in Ramaññadesa, King Dhammazedī was able to carry out the purification and unity of Sasana and the emergence of monks who were well-versed in Pariyatti (learning Dhamma) and Patipatti (practice Dhamma)

The new Kalyana Sima was consecrated and a total of 14,265 monks were ordained. On imitation of the Sima of Srilanka, the Sima was named as Kalyanisima. The consecration of new Simas all over Ramaññadesa began in 27 November 1476. In this way altogether 397 Simas were donated. To let the people know about the Sima, he left a stone inscription, which became famous as THE Kalyani inscription. King Dhammazedī renewed the ordination of the Ramaññadesa sect leaders and monks of the new Kalyani Sima.

Therefore, in the reign of Dhammazedī in Lower Myanmar, there were many monks who accepted the Ceylon monk ordination. King Dhammazedī and the ministers donated soon, robes, prescribed articles for use by Buddhist monks and other articles.

During the reign of King Dhammazedī, he made renovations to Kyaik Depazaw, Kyaik Zanan, Kyaiklunbun, Kyaik Mouk, Kyaik Tale and Kyaik Manaung, the meritorious buildings of former Mon kings. Repairs undertaken to the Kyaikpon pagoda and Shwegugyi pagoda by King Dhammazedī was also well known. The images of Buddha in Kyaikpon pagoda had some connection with the handicraft of Cambodia and so it can be argued that the civilization and culture came to Lower Myanmar through Thailand. King Dhammazedī encouraged his sons, daughters and ministers to make meritorious deeds like him such as building the pagoda and monasteries.

Artifacts

In Ramaññadesa or Lower Myanmar Laterite was the oldest material used for making wells, drains, pillars, pedestals, platforms, city-walls and Pagodas.

A laterite Pagoda was found in Zokthok is called by *Kyaik Kalok Dak*, meaning pagoda built by demons. Huge beams of laterite blocks about four feet square were assembled and piled to construct the edifice without using any sort of cement. There are various identical evidences of laterite culture found in Kumaraceti in Winka, western slope of Mt. Kelasa, and Thagyapaya in Thaton .

Laterite was mostly employed in and ancient constructions by Mon in Ramaññadesa . It is still indispensable in modern residential buildings in Mon areas. A long line of fortifications near Zokthok, known as Sindat - Myindat are constructed in laterite. But they are lions and tigers carved on huge laterite blocks. Therefore laterite was the first native material used for Buddhist and pre Buddhist constructions by the Mon in Myanmar before burn brick was introduced from India.

Conclusion

From the historical perspective of Mon settlements, it may be highlighted that the migration of Mon-Khmer peoples spread south and southeast to all the valleys of Southeast Asia. When the Mon came to Myanmar, they were known as *Rmeñ* which was later simplified as *Ramañ* and shortened to Mon.

Mon were most numerous in the deltas of Thanlwin, Sittaung and Ayeyarwaddy. They came into close contact with South India at about the beginning of the Christian era. In accordance with the paleographic and archaeological evidences, it may be observed that the field data yielded by the excavations do not refute the authenticity of the literary reference on the historical perspective of the Mon settlements. Yet, these narrative records can hardly be ignored as they contain ample information about the flourishing of early Mon culture. These reveal the early Mon culture at Ayethama and Winka, Kyontu, Zokthok and its association with the culture of Pyus and the common cultural bondage of India, as an Indianization and cultural orientation. According to the Sasanavansa written in 1861 AD, Lower Myanmar was known as Ramaññadesa which received the Buddhism. The Mon country Savaññabhumi was to which the first Buddhist Missionary headed by Sonathera and Uttarathera were deputed by the Asoka about 250 BC, after the third Buddhist council in Pataliputta. There was a commercial relation between southern India and *Savaññabhumi* since the Christian era.

When in the middle of the 11th century, King Manuha ruled at Thaton and Buddhism spread throughout the land. Shin Araham, went to Bagan and converted King Anawrahta as Theravada Buddhist. As a consequence, Anawrahta marched on Thaton . Then, he took back to Bagan the copy of the scriptures together with the Mon King Manuha and monks and also some scholars of Thaton.

After the fall of Thaton and its eclipse as a religious center in the 11th century, Bago became the principal centre of Mon influence. During the reign of Queen Shin Saw Pu, she made efforts for the development of Buddha Sasana. She repaired the Pagodas and observed religious practices. After becoming the King of Hanthawaddy, Dhammazedi put strenuous efforts in religious works and decided to carry out the religious purification in Ramaññadesa. Thus, the great works of purification of the Buddhist religion in the Mon country of Ramaññadesa have been accomplished completely. The land comprised very fertile deltas of three rivers such as Ayeyawwaddy, Sittaung

and Thanlwin. Because of heavy rainfall it is very difficult for preservation of stone inscriptions and other stone sculptures. However, the remains of ancient cultural evidences can be found all over Lower Myanmar.

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