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Source: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1963), pp. 559-571

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of [School of Oriental and African Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/611566>

Accessed: 06/01/2015 07:38

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THREE 'IMMORTAL' BURMESE SONGS

By HLA PE, ANNA J. ALLOTT, and JOHN OKELL

Burmese scholars recognize—some with reservations—the existence of five songs or poems in Burmese literature memorable for having been composed at a critical moment in the lives of their authors. Students accept their authenticity as a matter of fact, and a large section of the Burmese public is familiar with at least one or two of these songs. It is not so much by virtue of their literary merit that they have attained their eminent position. They are widely known and admired because the dramatic circumstances of their composition, known from the Burmese chronicles or from tradition, invest them with a special appeal.

The first is said to have been composed in 1173 by a courtier named Anantathuriya a few minutes before the executioners put him to death; the second in 1751 by the Burmese king Mahādhammarājādhipati (or 'Maha Dhamma-ya-zadi-pati') while he was a captive in the hands of the Mons in Lower Burma; the third and fourth about a decade later by the minister Let-wè Thon-dara in exile; and the fifth in about 1866 by U Pon Nya as he awaited execution.¹ These songs have long been known and loved in Burma—so much so that they have become what might be called 'immortal' songs.

Much though the five 'immortal' songs have been acclaimed by Burmese lovers of literature, there are certain points of authorship and date which have never been decisively settled. Of the five, the first, fourth, and fifth in the list above have been selected for particular attention here.

1. '*Allaying the royal anger*', by *Anantathuriya*

This short poem is in the standard type of Burmese verse, with lines of four syllables and rhymes 'climbing' from the end towards the beginning of successive lines. The structure of the poem shows that it is not one of the specialized genres of Burmese poetry, and it is therefore called 'lin-ga'²—a term applied in Burmese generically to all verse, or, as here, specifically to verse not in one of the recognized forms.

The circumstances which led Anantathuriya to write this poem are related in the 'Glass Palace Chronicle' as follows: ³

¹ Mahādhammarājādhipati's poem is in *ABL*, II, 64–6. References to texts of the others are given in the following sections. A list of works cited is given at the end of this article.

² Transliterated *laṅkā*, from Sanskrit *alaṅkāra*, used in Burmese in the sense of 'ornamentation', 'embellishment'.

³ The following passage, including the poem, is taken from the translation of the 'Glass Palace Chronicle' by Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce, 139–140. Where we strongly prefer a different interpretation we have altered their version, as follows: 'son of the nurse of his brother' for their 'tutor to his brother'; and in the poem:

line 7: they have 'shadow';

line 9: they omit 'Lasts but a lifetime';

line 15: they have 'Verily it is the nature of every living thing to decay';

line 24: they have 'Dissolution lures'.

‘ Then he [King Narapatisithu, 1173–1210] seized Anantathuriya, the son of the nurse of his brother Minyin Naratheinkha [1170–3], and gave him over to the executioners to slay him. Now Anantathuriya was of a brave and constant heart ; about the time of his death he spake four verses of *linka*, and gave them saying, “ Offer them, I pray thee, to the king ”. Nevertheless the executioners tarried not but slew him, and afterwards gave the writing to the king. These are the four verses of that *linka* :

သူတည်း တယောက်၊^a ကောင်းဘို့ ရောက်မှု၊ သူ တယောက်မှာ။^b ။ပျက်လင့်^c ကာသာ
မေ့တာတည်း။

ရွှေအိမ်နန်းနှင့်၊ ကြွန်းလည်း ခံ၊ မတ်ပေါင်း ရံလျက်၊^d ပျော်စံ ရိပ်ငြိမ်၊ စည်းစိမ် မကွာ၊ မင်း
ချမ်းသာကား၊ သမုဒ္ဒရာ၊ ရေမျက်နှာထက်၊ ခဏ တက်သည်။ ။ရေပွက်ပမာ တသက်လျာတည်း။

ကြင်နာ သနား၊ ငါ့အား မသတ်၊ ယခု လွတ်လည်း၊ မလွတ်^e ကြမ္မာ၊ လူ တကာတို့၊ ခန္ဓာ
ခိုင်ကျည်၊ အတည် မမြဲ၊ ဖောက်လဲ^f တတ်သည်။ ။မချွတ်စသာ သတ္တဝါတည်း။

ရှိခိုး ကော်ရော်၊ ပူဇော် အကျွန်၊ ပန်ခဲတံ၏။ ခိုက်ကြူ ဝိပါက်၊ သံသာ စက်၍၊ ကြိုက်လတ်^g တွန်မှု၊
တို့ မယူလို၊ စိတ် မြဲသိ၍၊^h ကြည်ညို လွတ်ပြန်၊ⁱ သခင်မွန်ကို၊ ချန်ဘိ စင်စစ်၊^j အပြစ် မဲ့ရေး၊^k ခွင့်
လျှင် ပေး၏။ ။သွေးသည် အနိစ္စာ ငါ့ခန္ဓာတည်း။

(The above text is based on *MY*, I, 260, but incorporates a few variant readings taken from *ABL*, I, 16–17 ; *HY*, I, 347, and *JBRs*, IX, 3, 1919, 155 :

^a သူတယောက်သည် *MY*. ^b သူတယောက်ကား *ibid.* ^c ပျောက်လင့်ကာသာ *ibid.* ^d မတ်ဗိုလ်ရံ၍ *ibid.* ^e ဝိပါက် *ibid.* ^f ဘောက်လဲ *ibid.*, ဘောက်လဲ *HY*, *JBRs*. ^g ကြိုက်လတ် *JBRs*, *MY*. ^h Line omitted in *ABL*, *HY*, *JBRs*. ⁱ ကြည်ညို စိတ်သန် *ABL*, *HY*, *JBRs*. ^j ချန်ဘိစိစစ် *MY*. ^k အပြစ်ဖယ်ရေး *ibid.*)

When one attains prosperity,
Another is sure to perish.
It is the law of nature.

Happiness of life as a king—
Having a golden palace to dwell in,
Court-life, with an host of ministers about one,
Enjoyment—shade—peace,
No break to felicity—
Lasts but a lifetime, is but a bubble mounting for a moment to the surface
of the ocean.

Though he kill me not,
But in mercy and pity release me,
I shall not escape my *karma*.
Man's stark-seeming body
Lasteth not ever ;
All living creatures are subject to inexorable decay.

Thy slave, I beg
But to bow down in homage and adore thee !
If in the wheel of *samsara*
My past deeds offer me vantage,
I seek not for vengeance.
Nay, master, mine awe of thee is too strong !

If I might, yet I would not touch thee ;
 I would let thee pass without scathe ;
 For the law of Impermanence lures the elements of my body.

Now when these four stanzas were read before the king and he heard them, he commanded, saying "Set him free". But the executioners spake into his ear and said "The deed is done".

This is a moving story to the Burmese Buddhist. After the king had executed his predecessor, his own eldest brother, his vengeance fell on the dead king's companion Anantathuriya. The innocent man, a devout Buddhist, far from feeling ill will against the king, composed a poem exonerating him. He attributed his fate to *karma* or the principle of 'as you sow so shall you reap'. He pointed out the vicissitudes of life and its impermanence ; he remembered the law of reincarnation and retribution ; and he faced death with courage and forgiveness. But did Anantathuriya really write this poem ? Literary and linguistic considerations indicate a later period, and this is supported by the absence of early references to the poem.

The date of the poem is given in the chronicles, and generally accepted to-day, as 1173. In extant Burmese literature it appears for the first time in an eighteenth-century chronicle¹ by U Kala (*fl.* 1714-33). No reference to this incident has been traced in any of the earlier works written on palm-leaf, of which the earliest extant example dates from 1455. This is all the more significant since the two most common themes of this literature, namely Buddhism and the king, are the very subjects of Anantathuriya's poem, and the incident might therefore be expected to have had a strong attraction for later writers. Furthermore the chronicles, of which U Kala's is the earliest surviving work to cover the period of Anantathuriya's death, are not generally reliable for events prior to the fifteenth century. The best evidence for this early period is found in the stone inscriptions, which date from the early twelfth century onwards ; but here too one finds no reference to Anantathuriya—though it is of course possible that there had been no cause to mention him, or that inscriptions referring to him are now lost.

Turning to the text of the poem, one finds an orderly disposition of the rhyme (except in stanza 2, lines 6-7), and a regular eight-syllable end-line to each stanza—both marks of a well-developed form, and too neat for a twelfth-century Burmese poem. These features are found in the early palm-leaf poetry from the mid-fifteenth century onwards ; but poems written before this, in the early fourteenth century, are preserved in the inscriptions and they show no such stylization, though they were composed over a hundred years after the accepted date for Anantathuriya.

There are also a few verbal anachronisms in the poem. The words and expressions for 'palace', 'court life', 'lifetime', and 'stark-seeming' came

¹ *MY*, I, 259-60.

into currency only in the late fourteenth century. The word for palace, *nan:*, superseded the older word *rhwe toñ*¹ (literally 'golden mountain') in the late thirteenth century. The remaining three words—*kra-ñhan:*, *ta-sak-lyā*, and *khuiñ kyaññ*—are usually used in poetry, and occur frequently in fifteenth-century poems, but are not used in earlier texts.

The absence of historical evidence, the developed verse structure, and the anachronistic vocabulary all combine to cast doubt on the date of 1173 for Anantathuriya's poem, and suggest rather that it was written in or after the fourteenth century by a poet whose identity is now lost.

2. 'A poem written in exile', by Let-wè Thon-dara

The second 'immortal' poem to be considered here is by a minister, court poet, and judge who served under several Burmese kings in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Named Maung Myat San, he is more generally known by one of his honorary titles, Let-wè Thon-dara. He had various appointments in the palace and is the author of some fifteen poems of different kinds, including a legal treatise in verse;² but his immense fame and popularity in Burma rests largely on the two short pieces given above in the list of the five 'immortal poems'.

At some stage in his career Let-wè Thon-dara incurred the displeasure of the king and was banished to Mèza, a penal settlement in an unhealthy valley over a hundred miles to the north of the then capital, Shwebo. His two famous poems were written during his exile, lamenting over the miseries of life in Mèza and expressing his longing for the capital and his family. The poems eventually reached the ear of the king, who is said to have been so moved by them that he immediately ordered the poet's recall.

The form in which the poems are written is known in Burmese as 'yadu'.³ The yadu ordinarily consists of three stanzas of verse in rhymed four-syllable lines, like the *lin-ga*, linked to form a whole by having the first line of each stanza rhyming with the first lines of the other stanzas in all four syllables; the longer final lines of each stanza are similarly rhymed, and in addition the last two or three syllables are usually identical in each of the three stanzas. This form came into prominence in the latter half of the sixteenth century. One of its most characteristic themes is the mood of longing and wistful sadness evoked by the contemplation of forest scenes or by being parted from home and family. There is often a reference at the beginning to the power and majesty of the king, and at the end to the writer's wife or lover.

The first of Let-wè Thon-dara's two yadu describes his longing for Shwebo, the royal city, with its bright golden palace and pagodas, and contrasts with

¹ See, e.g., *IB*, pl. 36, l. 4; pl. 74, l. 11. The earliest occurrence of the word *nan:* so far traced is in pl. 283, l. 7 (A.D. 1294).

² See entry for Let-wè-thon-dara, *JBR*, x, 3, 1920, 139–40.

³ Transliterated *ratu*. The origin of this word is obscure: as some yadu are reminiscent of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* and *Ṛtusamhāra*, Burmese scholars derive it from Sanskrit *rtu* 'season'.

it the dark, heavily wooded scenes at Mèza, the overcast sky, the mountain mists, and the cold. In the second poem he again expresses his longing to return from outlandish Mèza to the sunny capital, pictures its brightness and peacefulness, and concludes with a reference to his wife and children.

Of the two poems, the first has had perhaps rather more than its fair share of attention in Burma. It has been frequently prescribed in schools; a song was composed on it by U Sa in the early nineteenth century;¹ it has been translated four times in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*,² where it is also the subject of several essays in interpretation; and in the 1930's it reached the remotest corners of Burma through the records of the famous singer U Po Sein.

Apart from two translations (with the first yadu) in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*,³ the second poem has received comparatively little notice, and appears to have been almost forgotten in Burma; and yet there is a good case for considering it to have greater merit as poetry. The human feelings revealed by the poet's description of his longing for his wife and children add a personal element which is lacking in the first poem. There he seems to be less tender, more the dutiful courtier missing the stately scenes of the royal capital.

There are also verbal felicities in the second poem which are not quite matched in the first. There is, for example, the effective use of the 4/1 rhyme, in place of the usual 4/3/2, in the phrase translated 'these are other plains, strange woods, an alien soil'; the neat matching of 'when I go to rest I reverently pay homage, and thither I turn my gaze when I wake from sleep'; and both these features in 'I speak but she hears not; I go, but we meet not'.

It was felt that there were enough points of difference between our interpretation of the second yadu and those of our two predecessors to justify a new translation. It should perhaps be pointed out that Ratanasingha is another name for Shwebo, then the capital of Burma; that Shwebo is spoken of as the central point of Jambūdīpa, which, though only one of the 'Four Islands' of Buddhist cosmology, virtually represented all the known world—hence our rendering 'world'; and that it was conventional to represent the Burmese king as the ruler of all the kings in Jambūdīpa.

(၁) ဝေဇ္ဇန်း စန္ဒာ၊ ချမ်းရိပ်သာသို့၊ မျက်နှာ တူရူ၊ တသည်^a သူလျှင်၊ ဇမ္ဗူ အောင်ခန်း၊
ရွှေပြည်နန်းသို့၊ ရောက်ပန်း ကြီးအင်၊ နေ မရှင်ခွဲ။

လွင်လည်း တဆိုင်၊ မြိုင်လည်း တထွေ၊ မြေလည်း တထူး၊^b ဝေးခေါင်ကြူးသို့၊^c ရောက်ဖူးမည
ထား၊ ရွှေညာဖျားလည်း၊ ရှေးကား မဆွ၊^d ကြားရသည်သာ၊ ဘယ်ရပ်မှာဟု၊ ကြောင်းရာ^e တစီ၊
တပ် မသိခွဲ။

ကျွန်းကြီး၊ ချက်ချာ၊ တို့နေရာနှင့်၊ ဘာသာ ကွဲလမ်း၊ မြိုင်တောဝှမ်းဝယ်၊ အချမ်း မတူ၊ အပူ မမျှ၊
ကြုံပြန်^f ရရှင်။

¹ *JBR*, XII, 1, 1922, 36.

² VI, 1, 1916, 13-14; VII, 1, 1917, 52-3; XI, 2, 1921, 102; XXV, 3, 1935, 129-35.

³ VI, 1, 1916, 15-17; VII, 1, 1917, 53-4.

သိပ် အောင်မြေ၊ လယ် ချက်ဗွေ၊^၈ နေလည်း တဆန်း၊ နန်းလည်း တခြား၊ မထွေ ပြားတည့်၊^၉ ကိုးပါး နဝရတ်၊^၁ ရွှေပြာသာဒ်က၊^၂ မျက်မြတ်လှူရည်၊^၃ ထွန်း လှည့်^၄ လည်သည်။ ။နေခြည် ထဲတွင် ပါလိမ့်မည်။

(၂) နေဝန်း ဖန်ဝါ၊ ထိန် စကြာလည်း၊ အာကာ ဖိတ်ဆီး၊ ကျွန်းလုံးညီးမျှ၊ ထိန်း မိုးလယ်၊ ဖြိုးဖြိုး ကယ်၍။ အံ့ဘွယ် ယှက်သန်း၊ ရှု မခန်းတည့်၊ ရွှေနန်း မှန်စီ၊ ရှိရာဆိုသို့၊ မြောက် ချီ ဦးတင်၊ စက်ရာဝင်လည်း၊ ကြည်လင် ရှိခိုး၊ စက်ရာ နိုးလည်း၊ လက်မိုး လှည့်လည်၊ မြော်မိ^၅ သည်ရှင်။

ရွှေပြည်တော်မှာ၊ ခုချိန်ခါကို၊ သူဇာ သာစံ၊ မိတ်နံ မပြား၊ ဓာတ် တံခါး၏၊ ယွန်းစား ရွှေမှာ၊ ပျော်ဖွယ် သာရှင်၊ သိတာ ပတ်ကုံး၊ မြစ်နှင့် ကျုံးလည်း၊ တလုံးတည်း ရေ၊ စီး တွေ့တွေ့တည့်၊ မိုး နွေမခေါင်၊ လက်ယာ မြောင်လျက်၊ နတ် ဆောင် ယူပို့၊ လေ၏သို့လျှင်၊ ရွှေမြို့ ရွှေပြည်၊ ဝန်း ပတ် လည်သည်။ ။ရေကြည် သဲပြင် သာလိမ့်မည်။

(၃) နွေ ကျွန်း သန်က၊ ခု ချိန်ခါကို၊ ကျောင်းသာ ရာမခင်း၊^၆ စေတီတွင်း၌၊^၇ သီတင်း အလှူ၊ ရွှေပြည်သူတို့၊ ဆုယူ စည်းဝေး၊ ဖြူဖြူ ဖွေးလိမ့်။ စက်မှေးခိုက်တွင်၊ အိပ်မက် မြင်သို့၊ မရှင် ရှုတ၊^၈ လွမ်း လိုက်လှရှင်။

ညွှန်ပြ ကျိုးဆက်၊ ဆယ်ကျော် သက်က၊ ကြင်ဖက်အတူ၊ တောင်းဆု ယူသည်၊ အိမ်သူ ချော သွယ်၊ သုံးယောက် မယ်နှင့်၊ ပင်လယ် ခြားရာ၊ ခရီး ကွာသို့၊ မှာလည်း မကြား၊ သွားလည်း မသင့်၊ ဖြစ်သဖြင့်လျှင်၊ ပူခွင့် ရှည်ရေး၊ ရှိချေသေး၏။

ရင်သွေး ရွှေတောင်၊ သား မောင်နှမ၊ ဆင်း သိင်္ဂီတို့၊ မွေးဘ ရင်ခွင်၊ ရွှေ လက် တင်၍၊ ယူငင် ပိုက်ဖြား၊^၉ ဖျော်မည်များနှင့်၊^{၁၀} နှစ်ပါး မျက်ခြည်၊ သား နှင်းရည်သည်။ ။ရွှေလည် ဆွဲချင် ရှာလိမ့်မည်။

(The above text is based on *ABL*, II, 228–9, but incorporates a few variant readings taken from *JBR*S, VI, 1, 1916, 15–16, and VII, 1, 1917, 53–4 :

1. ^a တသည့် *JBR*S, VII. ^b မြိုင်လည်းတထူး for မြိုင်လည်း တထွေ၊ မြေလည်းတထူး *ibid.* ^c ဝေးခေါင် ကျုံးကို *ibid.* ^d ရှေးဖျားမဆူ *ibid.*, omitted in *JBR*S, VI. ^e ခြင်းရာ *JBR*S, VII. ^f ကြုံဘိ *ibid.* ^g လယ်ချက်ဘွေနှင့် *ibid.*, VI, နန်းချက်ဗွေ ဝယ် *ibid.*, VII. ^h မထွေပြားဘဲ *ibid.* ⁱ ကိုးပါးလှပတ် *ABL*, *JBR*S, VI. ^j ရွှေပြာသာဒ်နှင့် *ibid.* ^k မျက်မြတ်လှူခြည် *ibid.*, *ABL*. ^l ထွန်းလင်း *JBR*S, VII.

2. ^a မျှော်မိ *JBR*S, VI, VII.

3. ^a ကျောင်းသာရန်ကင်း *JBR*S, VI. ^b စေတီတွင်းဝယ် *JBR*S, VII. ^c မရှင်ယူတ *JBR*S VI, VII. ^d ယူငင် ပိုက်ဖျား *JBR*S, VI. ^e ဖျော်မည်များနှင့် *ABL*, *JBR*S, VI. ဖျော်မည်သားနှင့် *JBR*S, VII.)

1. My face turned to the moon, that haven of serene content, I am filled with longing. I yearn with all my heart to be at the golden palace whence victory is borne throughout the world. Here life holds no joy.

For these are other plains, strange woods, an alien soil; to this too far distant place I little thought to come. I only heard tell before of the extremes of our golden land, but I knew not with any certainty whereabouts they lay.

Now in this wooded wilderness, in nature quite unlike our homeland—the very hub of the world—I have come to know their unfamiliar warmth and cold.

But there at the heart of Ratanasingha, conquering city, the palace and

the sun may not be told apart—they shine as one. For the light of precious stones, shining from the golden palace spire with all Nine Jewels, must be mingling now with the beams of the bright revolving sun.

2. And the crystal disc of the sun, the shining solar wheel, spills its light to stream throughout the sky dazzling all the world, while the glass-studded palace of gold sends back its spreading rays in wondrous mingling to reach the very centre of the sky: a sight of endless joy. Thither I raise my suppliant hands; and when I go to rest I reverently pay homage, and thither I turn my gaze when I wake from sleep, my hands in reverence at my head.

At this time at the golden capital, to the east of the lovely city-gate Sūjā—endowed with strange power through the magical conjunction in its name—all is delight; for the encircling water, river and moat in one, ceaselessly flows by. Never failing in rain or drought, it curls away to the right, as if directed by some god. All around the golden citadel, the golden capital, it must be lovely now, the water clear and level sand.

3. At this time, when summer is over and the rains begun, the people of the golden land, all in purest white, will be gathering to pray, to make offering and keep holy vows within the fair precincts of monastery and pagoda. As if in a dream, when I close my eyes, I see it all; in sorrow and yearning I long to be there.

For there with my sweet wife, who bore me three children—we have prayed lovingly together, linked by our guiding fates since past the age of ten; and now we are parted, as if by a long sea journey. I speak, but she hears not; I go, but we meet not; and so our sorrow will last on.

And my sons, my daughter, children of my heart, my golden ones, and fair as gold—should they lift up their golden hands to their dear father's breast, I would hold them tight and comfort them. Jewels of their parents, precious as rare perfume, they must be longing now, poor children, to cling about my neck.

Though both Let-wè Thon-dara's yadu stand well enough on their own merits, they no doubt owe a part of their great popularity to the dramatic circumstances of their composition. The main features of the story, as given above, seem to be well established; curiously enough, there is no mention of it in *Hman-nan ya-zawin-daw-gyi*,¹ an official record compiled in 1829, though the much earlier incident of Anantathuriya has a place in both this and the earlier (eighteenth-century) chronicle of U Kala; however, the verbal testimony of Let-wè Thon-dara's grandson, U Tunt, was recorded in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* by Saya Thein in 1916, to the effect that the poet was in exile for a period of 49 days in all—whether the rest of Saya Thein's information came from the same source is not clear. Saya Thein also refers² to a notebook belonging to a certain U Thin, who was the Minister for the Heir Apparent in the reign of King Mindon (1853–78), but he seems to have used this source only for the list of the descendants of Let-wè Thon-dara—though one might expect that this information could more easily be supplied by U Tunt.

¹ *HY*, see p. 570.

² *JBR*, vi, 1, 1916, 12.

The details of the story, however, are hidden in doubt. The main points of controversy are: when Let-wè Thon-dara was exiled; how long he was away; and to whom the poems were sent. U Tunt's statement that the period of exile was 49 days has been doubted¹ on the grounds that the poems contain references to the 'Nyaung-ye' festival, and to another festival held at the beginning of the rainy season. The Nyaung-ye festival (when water is poured on banyan trees), usually takes place on the full moon day of Kason, the second month of the Burmese year; and the rains traditionally begin on the full moon day of Wa-zo, the fourth month. The argument is that in order to have witnessed both festivals at Mèza, the poet must have been there for at least two months. The length of the period has been extended still further² by taking the extreme cold described in the first poem to indicate winter, i.e. between the eighth and the tenth months of the Burmese year. These and other views are set out in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*³ and it would be unprofitable here to go into the whole question again in detail; but it is perhaps worth pointing out that the reference to the cold need not mean that the poet was in Mèza in winter—it can be cold in the hills at any season; and that the reference to the Nyaung-ye festival in Mèza likewise need not mean that the poet was there at the time—he only introduces the festival as a feature of the pagoda: 'the Shwe Gu-daw (pagoda) where the people of Mèza, in accordance with ancient custom, go devoutly to pray, and always pour water at the time of the Nyaung-ye festival'. The only really clear time-reference then is in the third stanza of the second yadu, 'At this time, when summer is over and the rains begun'; and this in itself gives us no cause to doubt U Tunt's statement that Let-wè Thon-dara was in exile for 49 days. Why should he have invented this figure?

There are several views as to when the poet was exiled. Saya Thein states⁴ that it was during the reign of Hsin-byu-shin (1763–76); 'a not very reliable record'⁵ favours the reign of Alaung-paya (1752–60); and 'three independent records'⁶ give the reign of Naung-daw-gyi (1760–3). As the records referred to are not named it is impossible to evaluate their authenticity. The poems themselves, however, give some help; the poet is unmistakably referring to Shwebo as the capital, which limits the period to 1752–65—respectively the years when Shwebo was founded and when the capital was moved to Ava. In the first yadu the Zabu-hsi-mi pagoda at Shwebo is called 'the work of the royal grandfather (Bo-daw)', and there is some reason to suppose⁷ that the 'royal grandfather' was Alaung-paya's father. As he would not yet have been known as 'grandfather' in Alaung-paya's time, the poem must have been written after Alaung-paya's death, and the period is thus narrowed—if the identification of Bo-daw is correct—to between 1760 and 1765. Saya Thein's detailed account of Let-wè Thon-dara's career places the incident in the reign

¹ *JBRS*, vii, 1, 1917, 45.

² *JBRS*, xi, 2, 1921, 99–100.

³ *JBRS*, vii, 1, 1917, 45; xii, 1, 1922, 35.

⁴ *JBRS*, vi, 1, 1916, 10.

⁵ *JBRS*, vii, 1, 1917, 45.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *JBRS*, vii, 3, 1917, 277–8.

of Hsin-byu-shin, and if this comes from a reliable source, the poems would have been written between 1763, the year of Hsin-byu-shin's accession, and 1765, when Shwebo ceased to be the capital. Until further evidence becomes available it seems impossible to date the poems with any greater precision.

To whom the poems were sent is a question on which little help is to be found in the texts of the poems. U Po Byu's view,¹ that they were 'composed in such a beautiful and pathetic style as would appeal touchingly to the king to whom they were presented', seems unlikely since many yadu were composed in the same vein by people away from home, and there is no suggestion that they were all designed to secure the king's permission to return. It was a conventional form for the expression of such feelings. It seems rather that Let-wè Thon-dara had been moved to write his two yadu on this theme and sent them home where they would be appreciated. Who actually received them at Shwebo, who took them to the palace, and how they came to the ear of the king, then become questions of historical detail—Saya Thein gives an account² which there seems little reason to doubt; and Let-wè Thon-dara may well have been surprised to hear that his two poems had secured his recall.

3. '*The song of the chastened*', by U Pon Nya

The third piece is a short song called le-gyo (transliterated *le:khywi:*), i.e. a song in four sections, written not in the classical four-syllable verse form of the two previous poems but in the freer and more colloquial style³ of the poems and songs that were being widely written by the beginning of the nineteenth century. This song is attributed to U Pon Nya (? 1807–66), one of Burma's greatest literary figures. He was one of the court poets of King Mindon (1853–78), and in addition to a considerable amount of courtly and religious poetry, he wrote six or seven plays, numerous letters, and sermons full of elegance and wit. 'The clarity of his language, the vividness of his descriptions, his delicacy of touch, his elegant wit and his power to adapt the music of verse to the subject with which he is dealing are qualities which every discerning reader will recognise both in his plays and other writings.'⁴

U Pon Nya also wrote works on astrology and won considerable renown as an astrologer. His reading of the stars, tradition holds, showed that he was himself likely to die at the hands of an executioner, so he begged the king as a special favour to grant him exemption from punishment by death. This the king did. The most widely accepted account of the circumstances leading up to the writing of this poem is as follows: in 1866 two of King Mindon's sons decided to make a bid for the throne. They asked U Pon Nya, as an astrologer, to name an auspicious day, and the time he gave was chosen for the start of the rebellion. Although they succeeded in killing the Heir Apparent, the revolt

¹ *JBRS*, vii, 1, 1917, 46.

² *JBRS*, vi, 1, 1916, 10.

³ On this point see further Hla Pe, 'Dawn songs', *BSOAS*, xx, 1957, 345.

⁴ *KPZ*, i, 14.

was put down and the leaders fled the country. U Pon Nya was arrested and tried on a charge of treason. His defence, that he had deliberately given the rebels an inauspicious time, was of no avail, and he was placed as a prisoner in the house of the governor of the city. However, the interest shown by the governor's junior wives in U Pon Nya aroused the jealousy and distrust of the governor, who was so angry that he had U Pon Nya secretly executed one night. (Another version of the story is that he escaped to Lower Burma, there to die of a fever a year later.) After a few weeks the king pardoned U Pon Nya. Upon learning what had happened he is reputed to have said 'Alas, a dog has killed a man'.¹

U Pon Nya wrote the poem, according to one authoritative Burmese writer,² in the presence of the men who had come to execute him. In it he blames his *karma* for his disgrace, draws a lesson from the fate of the mighty king of Kosala,³ and confesses his error in sinning against his benefactor the king by aiding the conspirators. He says he knew very well that it was a sin, but he was powerless against the force of his *karma*. We may assume that, faced with imminent execution, U Pon Nya wished to express his regret at his past actions. This story of jealousy, regrets, and a belated pardon is largely responsible for the popularity of the poem.

ဟုတ်ပလေ၊ နှုတ် ချွေ ဟရမှာဖြင့်၊ ပုဗ္ဗေထ ထင်ရှေ့လေ။ ။
 ကောသလငယ်တို့၊ ဘဝ အသရေ လန်းပါတဲ့၊^a ရွှေ နန်းစံ ရာနရိန်မှ၊ ခါ ချိန် တန် ပျက်စမြဲဟာမှ၊
 စွဲမိ သံဝေ။ ။
 အကုသိုလ် ဘာတကတ်ရယ်က၊^b ယခုလို လာလို့ ဖြတ်တာကြောင့်၊^c ဇရပ်သို့^d ပြေးရလေ၊ ခွေး
 သေသို့ သေရငြား။ ။
 သိလျက်ပင်၊^e ဝိပါက ကြမ္မာ ငင်ထင်၊^f ရွှေဉာဏ်ရင် မဝေခွဲနိုင်ဘု၊ ပွဲတွေ အမှား။ ။

(The above text is based on *History of Burmese literature*, 342, but incorporates a few variant readings taken from *Gaṅga māla pya zat*, 163 [abbreviated to *HBL* and *GMP* respectively] :

^a ဘဝအသရေလျှမ်းပါတဲ့ *HBL*. ^b ဘာတကတ်ကယ်က *GMP*. ^c ဖြတ်သော်ကြောင့် *ibid.* ^d ဇရပ်သို့ *HBL, GMP*. ^e သိလျက်နှင့်ပင် *GMP*. ^f ဝိပါကတကယ် ထင်လို့ *HBL*.)

Well, there it is. If I must part my lips to speak, I'd say the outcome of my former lives is now revealed.

Even such as the king of Kosala—monarchs and rulers of people—living lives of great renown in their palaces of gold, must ever perish when their time is at an end—this thought gave me a pang of fear.

And as the sins committed in his past existence, turned against him, came—as mine do now—to cut him down, he fled to a rest-house, there to die like a dog, unheeded.

Well I knew the wrong, and yet when driven on by fate—the return for actions of the past—this splendid intellect of mine did not see so clear. Now am I face to face with my misdeed.

Tradition holds, and most scholars believe, that the poem was written by

¹ See also *Burmese drama*, 76–8.

² *History of Burmese literature*, 342.

³ See *Buddhist legends*, 43.

U Pon Nya, but there are many difficulties in the way of establishing this for certain. If we search for external evidence we find firstly that this untimely death of a figure famous in his own day in literary and court circles, and well known to the public by reputation and through his plays, is not mentioned in the chronicles, although the rebellion is described in detail.¹ This is not necessarily surprising if one bears in mind that a chronicle in Burmese is a 'story of kings' (*rājavan̄*, from Pali *rājavan̄sa*). Presumably the chroniclers thought the event had no bearing on affairs of state and was too insignificant to be included. On the other hand it may not have occurred at all.

Secondly, the records of both contemporary and later court scholars disagree on several points concerning U Pon Nya, such as the date of his birth and his parents' names, and even the authorship of many of the works attributed to him is in doubt.² When some of his plays were first printed in 1872—17 years after his death—no biographical details were given. The fact that there are two versions of how he ended his life shows how uncertain we are about the life of a poet who died only a hundred years ago. That he was a prolific writer is certain, and as a result many letters, poems, and songs have been attributed to him which are probably not his at all. Contemporary poets complain in songs³ that all their best work was taken for U Pon Nya's.

As for internal evidence, there is again nothing conclusive. The song is very short and does not offer any positive clues as to its authorship or precise moment of composition. One of the reasons Burmese scholars put forward for believing U Pon Nya to be the author is his use of double, triple, and multiple rhymes—the triple rhyme, it is claimed, was invented by him. To illustrate these :

Double rhyme : *hou²pəle* | *hnou²chwe* ⁴ 1. 1

Triple rhyme : *hnou²chwe ha'* . . . | *pou²beza'* 11. 1-2

Multiple rhyme : *a'ku²ðo gateka²* . . . | *yekhu²lo la* . . . *phyā²* 11. 8-9

However, as the popular dramatists, writing from 1875 onwards, were equally skilled at producing such rhymes, the poem could well have been written after U Pon Nya's death.

It can also be argued against U Pon Nya's authorship that the poem displays none of the caustic wit so much in evidence in his other work, especially his letters, and that its whole tone is out of character with the arrogant and defiant spirit that he usually shows. Nevertheless this is all speculation, and in the present state of Burmese literary studies we are unable to say for certain whether U Pon Nya was, or was not, the author of this, the third of the 'immortal' poems.

This uncertainty concerning the authorship and dating of many Burmese

¹ *KBZ*, III, 328 f.

² See *UPNW*, 318 f.

³ *History of Burmese literature*, 341-2.

⁴ For an explanation of this transcription see J. A. Stewart, *Manual of colloquial Burmese*, London, 1955, 1-3.

literary works is the result of the attitude to imaginative literature that prevailed in Buddhist Burma right up to the beginning of this century. In spite of the fact that the king and court were the patrons and focus of imaginative literature until the downfall of the monarchy in 1886, there were always present at the court other scholars with orthodox Buddhist views who maintained that literature was nothing but *gīta*—songs, musical pastimes, and ‘a thorn in the side of the religion’.¹ A Burmese minister describing the spoils gained after the fall of Arakan in 1785 expressed his regret at obtaining only worthless Burmese literary compositions and not a complete set of the scriptures!² The Burmese word for library is literally ‘building for the scriptures’ (*piṭakat tuik*), and in fact it seems that no attempt was made to keep a collection in the court library of the works of imaginative literature that were composed under court patronage. The Buddhist scriptures, however, and other religious writings, were carefully preserved in the library.

There was a slight change of attitude during the reign of King Mindon (1853–78). This enlightened monarch felt that Burmese literature must also contain much valuable knowledge on religious and linguistic matters and that it should be collected and studied. In 1864 or thereabouts he ordered a minister, Min-hla Zey-yathu, to compile an annotated list of all the known works of Burmese literature.³ This was not at all an easy task as many of the copies written on palm-leaf had perished through the turmoil of war or the ravages of heat, damp, and insects. He completed the work in 1888 and gave it the title ‘Official record of the history of the *Piṭaka*’ (*Piṭakat thamaing sa-dan*). The work is a list of Buddhist scriptures, of Pali works written in both Burma and Ceylon, and, most important for us, of works of Burmese imaginative literature, with their authors. But it omits all dates. What knowledge we have of dates and of the lives of authors comes mostly from the colophons of the works themselves; for at that time it was felt by Burmese scholars to be more important to establish acceptable texts, orthography, and interpretations than to record who wrote what and when.

During the first half of the twentieth century, partly as a result of Western interest and scholarship, scholars in Burma have been endeavouring to fill in some of the gaps. It is in the hope of encouraging them in this task that we offer these observations on three of the ‘immortal’ poems.

List of works cited

(a) By abbreviated title

- ABL *Anthology of Burmese literature*, I, II, ed. Kyaw Dun, Rangoon, 1922, 1927.
 BSOAS *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*.
 HY *Hman-nan ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (‘Glass Palace Chronicle’), I, by court chroniclers, Mandalay, 1921.
 IB *Inscriptions of Burma*, ed. Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce, OUP.
 JBRS *Journal of the Burma Research Society*.
 KBZ *Kon-bawng-zet maha ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (history of Burma, 1752–1885), I, II, III, by court chroniclers and thereafter U Tin, Mandalay, 1922, 1922, 1923.

¹ See KLD, 92.

² *Tha-thana-lin-ka-ra*, 151.

³ KLD, 93.

- KLD* *Kawi lakkaṇā-dīpanī*, by Thirizeyyathu (1865), Rangoon, 1930.
- KPZ* *Konmara pya zat* (drama), 1, transl. with an introduction by Hla Pe, London, 1952.
- MY* *Maha ya-zawin-gyi* (history of Burma), 1, by U Kala, Rangoon, 1926.
- UPNW* *U Pon Nya wutthu-baung-gyok aphyē . . .* (commentary on religious discourses and anecdotes), ed. U Po Sein, Rangoon, [1929 ?].
- (b) By full title
- Buddhist legends* (HOS, xxix), translated from the original Pali text of the Dhammapada commentary by E. W. Burlington, Harvard University Press, 1921.
- Burmese drama*, by Maung Htin Aung, OUP, 1936.
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