

Ramayana in Myanmar (Burma) Literature and Performing Arts

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The Indian epic Ramayana came to Myanmar and other countries of south-east Asia with the early Indian Traders and Merchants, some of whom settled down to form Hindu Communities.

The people of Bagan (11th A.D. to 13 century) knew the Ramayana story and there was certainly an oral Tradition which they received either directly from India or through the Mon People of lower Myanmar. There is evidence in the ethnic Inscriptions stone sculptures, Terra-cotta plaques and pictorial art of the frescoes which enable us to say definitely that the Rama story, both as an incarnation of Vishnu, The Hindu God and also as a Buddhist Jataka Story was known at the time.

Many centuries earlier in Beikthano. Myo or Vishnu city near taungdwingyi which was Probably founded in late 2nd century BC, the Pyo People who were Buddhist as well as Brahmanist must have known of Rama, Avatara of Vishnu as they were Vaishnavites.

Only in Bagan depictions of Rama are first seen. In the Aboyadana Temple built during king Kyansittha's reign (AD 1084-1113) painting of Hindu and Mahayanism deities can be seen in the hundreds of lovely ton does. There are painting of both Vishnu, Rama and Hanuman.

The Rama story is known in three forms to the Myanmar people.

1) Rama is an Avatar, an Incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. In old Bagan the Vaishnava Brahmans played an important role. In court Ceremonies, even as they did in later Myanmar kings' times right up to the annexation of the Myanmar Kingdom in 1886. These Brahmans worshipped Rama; one can still see Rama as a Hindu deity worshipped by the Hindus of Mandalay upto the present day.

The Myanmar call this "Original" Rama (Vishnu) Rama or "Pashuyama (Rama). This is probably Parasu Rama (also spelt Parashurama) or derived from the word Vishnu.

2) The Rama story as incorporated into the 550 Buddhist Jataka tales where Rama is depicted as a future Buddha a Buddhist. The Myanmar term for this Buddhist Rama is "Alaung - dawyama (Rama)" or the Bodhist Rama. This story is Jataka no. 461, the Dat. Thaya-ha (Dasartha) Jataka. There is a belief among Myanmar Buddhist that Rama will become a Buddha after Maitreyai!

3) The third Rama story is that of Valmiki and Later Recensions. The Myanmar's probably received this enlarged version of the Ramayana not only from India but also from Thailand and Laos form about the 16th century. The Myanmar call this Rama story "Pondaw Yama (Rama)". This version is also known as "Nan-dwin Yama (Rama)" or "The Palace Rama" as this version became the Royal court drama of the Myanmar king's Palace.

Literary Versions

According to U Thein Han, the earliest Literary reference to the Ramayana is in the Myanmar pyo (Jataka Poem) written by Shin Agga Thamadi in 1527 A.D. entitled Thuwunna-Sham Thahtay-Khan Pyo, based on the Suvannasama Jataka. The first Myanmar dated literary of the Ramayana is the Yama (Rama) Tha-gyin by U Aung Physo, written in 1775 A.D. at innwa (AVA) near the end of king Hsinbyushin's reign (1763-1776).

U Aung Physo was a popular reciter of ballads and he wrote the Ramayana in a poetic form called tha-gyin which was used for recitations. He probably roamed the country and recited his ballads including the Rama Tha-gyin. The story of Rama in Myanmar was Gradually enlarged in a period of about 600 years from the simple oral tradition of the Bagan period to the complex story as it was written down by U Aung Physo. It begins with Ravana's birth and ends when he is killed by Rama. It locks the Uttara Kanda on Sita's banishment. This version is now being edited from Palm-Leaf copies to be published as a printed book.

There is also an undated earlier work in prose called the Yama wuthu (Rama Vatthu) which U Thein Han considers to be from the 17th century and therefore, it is probably the earliest Ramayana literary work in Myanmar. The story as given in this prose version is very similar to the poetic work of U Aung Physo who himself acknowledged that he used an earlier prose work. It is a slim volume of only 54 Palm-Leaves and the story begins with Ravana's birth to Sita's banishment and reconciliation with Rama.

An enlargement of the Rama Vatthu, also in prose is the Maha Yama (Rama) Vatthu, a work probably written in the late 18th century. The most complete text of the Ramayana written for dramatic performance is only now being printed from paper parabi and Palm-leaf manuscript forms. It is the Rama Pya-Zataw-gyi, or Thiri Yama (Rama) written by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung in the late 18th or early 19th century.

This (Verse) drama written in prose and poetry with instructions for the various types of music to be played and songs to be sung, is available on over 1320 Palm-Leaf manuscript pages at the Myanmar National Library.

The Ramayana original text in Myanmar reached their Zenith in early 19th century developing from the nucleus of Valmiki text with influences from Indian vernacular recensions and a result of Myanmar's cultural contacts with Thailand (both Chiang Mai and Ayudhya) Laos, Assam and Manipal Malaya and Java.

Between 1968 and 1972 the all Burma Hindu National Central Council published a direct translation from Sanskrit into Myanmar, in 6 volumes of Valmiki's Ramayana. The translation was made by the Myanmar monk shin Kaitima, the Migadawun Sayadaw of Benares. A translation into Myanmar from a modernized Hindi version has been made by Myanmar writer Porag U which is being serialized in a local magazine. Also there are a number of retold Ramayana Stories in condensed form published in the last century.

Dramatic Performance

Although music, Song and dancing has been a part of Myanmar Culture from the Pyu period.

Before the court Drama a few scenes from the Ramayana might have been performed by the Hindu communities in Myanmar especially during their festivals like the **Deepavali** which the Hindu Brahmins think is the day when **Sita** and Rama returned to **Ayodhya** after **Sita** was rescued from **Ravana**.

The Myanmar were already familiar with the Ramayana in Prose and poetry and therefore the dramatic performance introduced by the Thai actors and actresses became very popular not only at the Royal Court, but also in courts of the provincial governors like the one in Bago (Pegu) Hanthawaddy.

Twenty-two years after the fall of Ayudhya during the reign of Bodawpaya (1782-1819), the crown Prince (1762-1808) issued a Royal order in 1789 appointing a commission of eight high-ranking royalty, officials scholars, writers and musicians to make Myanmar translations of the stories and plays brought back from Ayudhya and Chiang Mai.

The Myanmar Commission worked with Thai nobility and artistes and there were translator proficient in Thai Language. Myanmar scholars think that some Commission members travelled to Thailand Cambodia, Java and Laos in 1785 to collect material for the their translations as well as to study music, songs and dances.

Many Yodaya Ayudhya or Thai songs and music were also adapted to Myanmar words and music.

There are now over 35 yodaya songs in the official collection of Myanmar classical songs out of these songs at least four and a number of musical items are for the Ramayana.

The Stage :

The 'stage' for the Ramayana dramatic performance was at first only on open court, lighted with Lamps and torches as seen by Michael Symes in 1795. Sometimes there was a branch of a tree stuck in the middle of the circular space where the players performed. But it gradually grew more elaborate, probably under the influence of the foreign theatrical troupes which visited lower Myanmar after Bago (Pegu) and all the coastal areas were annexed by the British in 1853.

From the time when Ramayana was first performed, within a period of about 75 years theatre were being built as part of the palace complex.

Also the simple nearly bare stage which could portray Ravana abducting Sita and conveying her on an aerial journey by use of ropes and pulleys. The theatre was constructed so that actors could disappear underneath the stage floor or re-appear. A pond with water lilies could be created in the middle of the stage. Even vehicles carrying humans drawn by small elephants and horses could be brought on stage. The setting of this elaborate stage for the palace Theatre was recorded fully in the Royal chronicle when two special theatre were built for the Ear-boring ceremony of king Thaibaw's royal daughter in January 1885.

Dramatic Presentation: In both and live stage and the marionette stage the Ramayana from early times to the present is being presented using four techniques.

- 1- Dramatic words and gestures.
- 2- Dramatic words interspersed with relevant songs.
- 3- Dramatic reaction with a musical back ground.
- 4- Dance and miming to relevant music designated as appropriate to particular dramatic situations.

In the old days the Ramayana took 65 days to present at the Myanmar Royal Court, but later it was shortened to 45 days and still later to about a month. Unlike some of the Myanmar Pwes, theatrical dance and drama presentations the Ramayana was presented for only three to four hours per night, with only occasional presentations lasting about six hours at a time.

Costumes and Masks: One of the reasons why the Myanmar audience has for many years loved the Rama Zatw, the dance drama is because of the gorgeous, colourful costumes and the striking masks, differentiating the two groups of good and bad characters.

For the main characters, richly costumes with gold and silver thread were made from silk, Satin and Velvet imported from China through Yunnan and used for the Royal Dance. Troupes. By the 18th century weavers brought back by the Myanmar king from Manipur and Assam to Amarapura were already producing special silks clothes for the court.

Sita is the only character who does not wear special adapted from Thai dress as she uses typical attire of a Myanmar court lady, usually dressed like a princess with a silk htamein (nether garment) a htain mathein ein-gyi (him-length jacket with curved edges). She also does not need to cover her face with a mask, but only wears a ceremonial, decorated head-dress. Sometimes, she just wears flowers in her hair and of course a lot of costume jewellery, especially pearl necklaces, ear-rings beads and gold bracelets. Sita also uses with much effect a transparent shawl, a pa-war, usually of an emerald green, blue or pink in colour.

Rama is always dressed in green and Lakshmana in gold, with both the masks and costumes with these two respective colours predominating. Rama also has tied across his breast a large pa-war, a green shawl.

The masks are of two types-(1) an-kite with mouth closed and (2) an-ha with mouth open. The principal actors mostly use the an-kite type of mask and so they have to tilt their masks to articulate the dialogue for better delivery. Rama is the only character who has two masks, one as a student and the other as a prince. The minor characters, the monkeys and demons usually wear the a An-Ha type of masks.

The most spectacular mask is of course for Ravanna, a fierce demon face with an expression of ferocity with two huge protruding white incisors, jutting out sabre-like from bright red lips. On the two sides of the head-dress and at the back are three

smaller demon heads, each facing a different direction? The masks were considered sacred and when not in use kept in two groups (1) of those for the good character and (2) for those of bad characters (demons) on an altar-like sand. Hanuman and his monkey troops of course belong to the good side.

The Ministry of Culture therefore, formed a main committee with Ramayana experts, academic writers and officials for producing a standard, classical Myanmar version of the Ramayana based on old texts and also to produce a three hour dramatic performance version with dialogue, costumes, masks and scenes based on the court Drama of the late Konbaung Dynasty. Five sub-committees, were formed to carry out research into the literary text, not only of Myanmar but also of some of the other countries which have a Ramayana Tradition also to study stage performances, costumes, masks, music, songs and so on.

Though the Ramayana has been a popular tale in Myanmar for a thousand years or more with literary versions for reading for about three hundred years and dramatic performance popular with the public for about two hundred years or so.

The old Ramayana text in Myanmar is being printed in book form, at least one translated into English and the dramatic performances are being revived. We hope that Ramayana experts from Thailand and other countries will join us in our efforts.

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