

Study of A Rakhine Manuscript Deposited in the British Library

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I. Introduction

For over a thousand year, the region, which now forms as the Rakhine State in the Union of the Republic of Myanmar, flourished the thriving civilization of its own, which possesses a long and rich history and a unique culture. Since the early colonial period, the western scholars such as Sir Arthur P. Phayre, Maurice Collis and the native intellectual San Shwe Bu have long studied this long and rich history of Rakhine based on the traditional historic records. Though the traditional historic records need to testify its historic authenticity, it is true that the traditional historiography of a region or country gives us a record of events of the past and how space of one's own history was defined. Unlike the Myanmar historical materials, the Rakhine historical materials were fairly available datable to the end of the 18th and the early 19th centuries.

The Rakhine historical records which are now available are located in Myanmar, particularly in the National Library¹⁾, the Universities'

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¹⁾ Three palm-leaf manuscripts concerning Rakhine historiography are found in the National Library: Sithu Gamani Thingyan. 1887, *Rakhine Razawin* (Palm-leaf manuscript number 2297), *Rakhine razawan kho Min Razagri sadam* (Chronicle Rakhine called Min Razagri sadam) (No date) AMs. (Palm leaf manuscript number

Central Library in Yangon²⁾ and some of them are preserved in private possession³⁾. Apart from these, outside the country, some of the Rakhine historical records are well- preserved in libraries, such the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library in London and the Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Kolkata. Like many Myanmar texts, Rakhine historical records seemed to have been carried away as trophies by the British soldiers and officers, but were later donated to the colonial libraries. Moreover, the British colonial officials who were interested in the histories of Myanmar managed to obtain the historical records of Myanmar for their studies, and later these records made ways into the libraries when they had passed away. As an attempt to investigate on the regional historical records of Myanmar, which are now placed outside Myanmar, this paper will focus on OR 3465 A or Nga Mi Chronicle deposited in the British library in London.

The data required for this paper have been mainly obtained from OR 3465 A deposited in the British library. The External Criticism and Internal Criticism of the examination of manuscript will be used as the methods to investigate this manuscript. For the External Criticism, the authorship of the manuscript: For instance, the questions like when did the manuscript write? For what purpose did the author of this manuscript write? What was the motive? Under what conditions did this manuscript write? ...are discussed. For the Internal Criticism, the contents of this manuscript is generally overviewed and discuss one of the problematic confusions described in OR 3465 A in order to

2093) and *Rakhine Razawin* (No date) AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript number 1483).

²⁾ *Rakhine Razawin Akauk Shyauk htoon* 1848. AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript number 96336 (kha)), *Rakhine Ayepon* 1849. AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript number 49887 (tabasa)), *Razawingyi* 1851. AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript number 9837 (tabasa)) and *Dannyawady Arei:to pon hnin Maha razawan* (No date), AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript number 5302) are deposited in the Universities' Central Library in Yangon.

³⁾ Lack of information, we could not trace properly about the Rakhine historical documents owned by the private possession. Thus, one private possession by U Tun Yi (Researcher on Myanmar Literature): *Rakhine razawan, Rakhapura*, 1870, AMs. (Palm-leaf manuscript) is mentioned in this paper.

highlight how the treatments of the sources is essentially important for the authenticity of the historical documents.

II. Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin

The manuscript, the accession number OR 3465 A, is deposited today in Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library. It is a manuscript on Rakhine history. There is no information about the name of the title, the authorship of the text and the date of composition in this manuscript. This text is in the form of paper manuscript and has 283 pages with 27 lines to each of a page.

Patricia Herbert, Retired Curator of Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, confirmed that this manuscript, the accession number OR 3465 A of Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library, is one of the collections of Sir Arthur P. Phayre and this manuscript is the original text of Nga Mi's compilation (Herbert 1975: 63).

Sir Arthur P. Phayre was one of the early-distinguished British administrators in Myanmar and the first Chief Commissioner of the British-Burmah (Burma). Phayre served in several posts in Myanmar. He was appointed Senior Assistant to the Commissioner of Rakhine in 1837 and served as District Officer at Akyab (Sittwe), Kyaukphyu and Sandoway (Thandwe) until he has been transferred to Tenintharyi as Principle Assistant to the commissioner in 1846. He relinquished his last post as a Chief Commissioner of Myanmar in 1867 (Tinker 1961: 267-278). As the nature of the British administrators, Phayre, during his long service in Myanmar, was inspired himself in the study of Myanmar history and collected the manuscripts for his studies. Phayre who served as District Officer from 1837 to 1846 sought out the early Rakhine chronicles. He had observed that many copies of Rakhine

Razawin (chronicles) were to be found among the Rakhines, differing from each other in details. He thus commissioned Nga Mi, one of the most learned literati of Rakhine, to make a compilation of Rakhine history from the various local chronicles (Phayre 1844: 23). The manuscript that Nga Mi provided became known as the “Nga Mi Chronicle” or “Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin”. In 1886, one year after Sir Arthur Phayre’s death, the British Museum acquired his collections. Among his collections , this manuscript is also included. This manuscript is completed with Sir Arthur Phayre’s personal notes in the margin.

III. External Criticism

Concerning the date of compilation, it is to assume that this manuscript was available before Sir Arthur Phayre contributed his article “On the History of Arakan (Rakhine)” in 1844 because Phayre noted that he proceeded to furnish an epitome of the contents of the historical compilation by Nga Mi in writing his article. Therefore, it is to suppose that this manuscript seem to have compiled during the intermediate period between 1837 and 1844.

Nga Mi Chronicle may be divided into five parts based on its subject matter:

1. Cosmology (emergence of the world and its beings), account of King Mahasammata (the first Great Elected King) and the succeeding dynasties, a short account of Buddha’s life, Majjimesa (India) and its cities, moral principle of kings and court officials, and about the India kings from Bimbisara to Asoka.
2. Rakhine pre-Buddhist historic period describing a genealogy of kings from Vasudewa of Dwarawati (Thandwe⁴) to the

founder of Dannyawadi city, Marayu, and besides to the kings of Tagaung dynasty starting King Abiraza and his decedent Kanrazagyi.

3. Journey of Lord Buddha to Rakhine and about the kingdoms of Dannyawadi, Vesali and Laungret.
4. Rakhine history in Mrauk U period from 1430 to 1785.
5. The period of Myanmar administration (1785-1824) and a brief description of condition of Rakhine after the British annexation in 1826.

Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin is a merely compilation drawn from various Rakhine chronicles and there is no mention about the names of the chronicles which Nga Mi was based on. Thus, we cannot say exactly that which parts were faithfully copied verbatim or which parts were ignored from these chronicles when Nga Mi compiled this manuscript.

IV. Internal Criticism

After Sir Arthur Phayre commissioned Nga Mi to compile this manuscript, Phayre wrote his article “On the History of Arakan” in 1844. In his article, he confessed that that he proceeded to furnish an epitome of the contents of the historical compilation by Nga Mi in writing his article. Moreover, Phayre also wrote his book, “History of Burma”, in 1883. The chapters relating to Rakhine in his “History of Burma” are to a large extent a summary of Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin or OR 3465 A. This shows that Phayre wanted a chronicle account with an outline of the royal dynasties that he commissioned Nga Mi to compile. Without analysing the mythical, supernatural and improbable elements in Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin, Phayre contributed his account

⁴⁾ The town is situated in the southernmost part of the present Rakhine State.

of Rakhine history credibility in his book. Phayre did not problematize any historical issue. One of the outstanding examples is the legend of King Min Saw Mon, the founder of Mrauk U capital, who is said to have re-conquered his kingdom with the help of Muslim troops from Bengal Sultan (Majumdar et, al Syed Murtaza 1967: 333)⁵⁾. These traditional stories about the founding of Mrauk U are not confirmed by the other sources; especially the involvement of the Bengal sultanate cannot be confirmed by Bengali history (Hussain 2003: 111-113; Galen 2008: 34). The history of Bengal during the time of Jalal Ud-Din provides no clues to all to his involvement in the creation of Min Saw Mon's new kingdom of Mrauk U (Galen 2008: 34). As Arthur Phayre took this account from Nga Mi Chronicle and framed the story into a convincing narrative in his "History of Burma" that the most respectable writers on Myanmar history such as Maurice Collis(1925) and G. E Harvey(1967) have continued to present the legend of Min Saw Mon as a historical fact. In fact, it is a missing link in Rakhine history, which needs to be investigated carefully. Such confused account is happened essentially due to a superficial and uncritical internal criticism treatment of the sources.

As it has been stated earlier, the External Criticism of this manuscript shows that it is a manuscript which was commissioned Nga Mi to compile by Sir Arthur P. Phayre by making references of the existing Rakhine chronicles in the early colonial period as Phayre wanted a historical account with an outline of the royal dynasties. The

⁵⁾ No Name is given for the kings of Bengal in Rakhine Chronicles and the Phayre's works. Instead of the names of the kings, it was used as "*Thura-tan* (Sultan). However, Aye Chan, in his M.A Thesis of *Mrauk U Khit Asaw Paing Rakhine Thaming* (1430-1666) [History of Rakhine in the Early Mrauk U Period, 1430-1666], submitted to Department of History, Yangon University, 1980 and Jacques P. Leider, "These Buddhist Kings With Muslim Names ...A discussion of Muslim influence in Mrauk U Period, P. Pichard and F. Robinne ed., *Etudes Birmanes en Hommage á Denise Bernot*, Paris: École française d' Extrême-Orient, 1998, mentioned the name of the king of Bengal who helped Min Saw Mon to raise the throne Rakhine might have been Jalal Ud-Din by making references to *An Advanced History of India* written by Majumdar, R.C. Chaudry, Ray and Dutta, K. (Macmillan. 1963: 345).

Internal Criticism reveals that the compiler Nga Mi did not invent the writing of his own but drawn the sources from various Rakhine chronicles in compiling his work. Moreover, Sir Arthur Phayre who used this Nga Mi Chronicle or OR 3465 A as the chief source in writing Rakhine history did not analyse the mythical, supernatural and improbable elements in Nga Mi Rakhine Razawin. Phayre did not problematicize any historical issue from Nga Mi Chronicle. One of the outstanding examples of the legend of King Min Saw Mon is discussed in this paper. As Arthur Phayre took this account from Nga Mi Chronicle and framed the story into a convincing narrative in his “History of Burma”, the scholars after Phayre have continued to present the legend as a historical fact. This gives us a hint that the history of Rakhine should be re-constructed by the available historical sources. In other words, it would be very hard to know about the Rakhine history before 19th century, using the contemporary source materials.

V. Conclusion

The history of a country has been continuously occurring from ancient to modern and then to contemporary. Accordingly, the ancient, modern and contemporary history of a country placed consecutively without interruption. However, Myanmar was happened to be colonized by the British, the invaluable Myanmar’s manuscripts in the form of parabaik (folded paper writings) and pe-sa (manuscript written on dried palm-leaf) were being damaged by the British occupation of Mandalay in 1885, and some were scattered. For that reason, the old manuscripts inscribed by the Myanmar people which are scattered in the whole Myanmar and abroad need to be traced, collected and preserved energetically, and studied them for the understanding of the

country and its people of Myanmar and the mythical, supernatural and improbable elements in these old manuscripts should be treated carefully. In this sense, the Rakhine historical document, which I have presented in this paper also, need further detail study of its contents, its contradictions and similarities with the other available Rakhine historical documents and the cotemporary primary sources of other nations for the better understanding of Rakhine historiography which will partly contribute to the knowledge for the study of Myanmar historiography.

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Key words : historiography, OR 3465 A, Sir Arthur P. Phayre,
External and Internal Criticism

