

## **Anglo-Myanmar Relations (1878-1885)**

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### **Abstract**

King Thibaw ruled from 1878 to 1885. This period was to be the last years of Myanmar as an independent sovereign nation. They also happened to be the regal years of King Thibaw, the last king of Konbaung dynasty. This paper is written for the purpose of studying the royal knowledge on the importance diplomatic relations with the British. When King Thibaw succeeded the throne Britain showed her might by dispatching an armed vessel to Thayet Town, the border town between independent Myanmar and occupied British Myanmar. During the intervening years Britain tried to show tolerance towards Myanmar. But the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation case finally goaded the British authorizes to champion the cause of her traders and merchants. On 14 November 1885 British India Government declared war on the King Thibaw and occupied Mandalay and stripped King Thibaw of his throne and territory. This comportment mounted political pressure from Britain on King Thibaw' sovereign status. Eventually because of the British, the events of the relationship between Myanmar and British led to the annexation of Myanmar on 14 November 1885.

**Keywords:** the events from 1878 to 1885, last king of Konbaung dynasty, Diplomatic relations with the British, Britain's intervening, the events of the relationship

### **Introduction**

This paper studies and analyzes the relations between Myanmar, English and French in the period 1878-1885 that had ruled by King Thibaw. The period from 1878 to 1885 happened to be the last years of Myanmar as an independent sovereign nation. King Thibaw ascended the throne of Myanmar 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1878. He was the last king of the Konbaung dynasty. A growing of imperial rivalry between France and Britain not only in Europe but also in Southeast Asia impacted on the existence of Myanmar Kingdom. To counter this situation King Thibaw tried to seek friendship with other European countries such as France, Italy and Germany. On 14 October the British Resident at Mandalay Robert Bakley Shaw visited Minthado Mingyi Maha Minhla Sithukyaw, the Myanmar Minister for Foreign Affairs. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October the Court of Mandalay gave intimation to the British Government of Thibaw's accession and a month later to the Italian authorizes. The British Resident Shaw died suddenly at Mandalay in June 1789 and just over three month later the British withdrew their Residency from Mandalay that its safety could not be guaranteed. However despite the absence of British representation the Court of Mandalay showed its willingness to be on amicable terms with the British. So a Myanmar Mission went to Simla in 1879 but the Mission

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proved abortive, with the British delaying it for about eight months at Thayet-myo. While in July 1881 the British mercantile interests petitioned the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company to raise the issue of the king monopolies, Myanmar again made peaceful overtures to the British, Maha Minhla Sithukyaw urged to meet the Governor-General at Yangon in December 1881 to settle Anglo-Myanmar differences.

### **Anglo-Myanmar Relations**

When King Thibaw ascended the throne of Myanmar on October 2, 1878, the official communication was arranged under strict protocol and the bilateral note was written by royal command. It was carried out by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Min Thado Mingyi Maha Minhla Sithukyaw.<sup>1</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1878 the Court of Mandalay intimated the British government of King Thibaw's accession to the throne. Queen Victoria, the British monarch at first refused to sign the official note of recognition.<sup>2</sup>

After King Thibaw ascended the throne, the British Resident in Mandalay was Robert Bakley Shaw. The British authorities in Lower Myanmar became apprehensive about their Resident at Mandalay at the time of king Mindon's impending death.<sup>3</sup> At the very outset of King Thibaw's reign when he was still insecure on his throne the British pressed for an enhanced status and position for their Resident at Mandalay.

The British Resident Shaw died suddenly of heart attack on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1879 in Mandalay. After the death of Shaw the British authorities appointed the Pegu (Bago) Commissioner Colonel Browne to take his place temporarily. Browne arrived in Mandalay on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1879.<sup>4</sup> He was welcomed by the Myotha *Wundauk*, Judge of the Mixed Court, and other officials, and elephants were placed at his disposal. The Myanmar Foreign Minister received Colonel Browne in the evening after intimation was given of his arrival on 23 June.<sup>5</sup> He had been sent in a temporary capacity to serve until a permanent Resident could be appointed. Browne left Mandalay on 29<sup>th</sup> August. There was no more diplomatic representation of the British at Mandalay and Bhamo after the withdrawal of St.Barbe and the British communicated with King Thibaw directly.<sup>6</sup> Once source of friction between the British and the Myanmar after the accession of King Thibaw were the disputed which

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<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung Tin, 2004, p.797

<sup>2</sup> Hla Thein,2010,110

<sup>3</sup> U Hla Thein, " Thibawmin Partaw-mamuhmi Thon-hnint-atwin English-Myanmar setsany" (Anglo-Myanmar Relation before three year of King Thibaw's dethrone), Researches in Myanmar History, No.4,1979,p.126 (Henceforth:Hla Thein,1979)

<sup>4</sup> Maung Maung Tin,2004,417

<sup>5</sup> Maung Maung Tin. 2004.423

<sup>6</sup> Hla Thein, 1979,126

arose between the Myanmar government and the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. Trouble flared up between the two sides with regard to the Yankeentaung, the Shinsawboo, the Shwemyo and the Yunnan. The first two incidents took place before the severance of diplomatic ties between Myanmar and the British Indian Government.<sup>1</sup>

After the withdrawal of the British Residency, the Shwemyo incident occurred on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1879. The Surti trader named Muhammed Ismail refused to avoid the painted portion of the boat when he boarded the Shwemyo at Myingyan. According to the British, Ismail seemed to have refused to go round the restricted area and instead abused the ship's Captain. The British thereupon took the case up to Mandalay and laid it before Kinwun Mingyi. When compromise was sought by the Myanmar authorities the British party appeared to be rather reluctant. They declared that the Myanmar had infringed certain articles of the 1862 and 1867 treaties concluded between Britain and Myanmar. Nevertheless wise counsel prevailed and the dispute was settled amicably after some time.<sup>2</sup>

The Yunnan incident turned up on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1880. The Sale Myowun halted the steamer which was bound for British Myanmar. The flotilla Company declared that Her Majesty's mail carrier had been interrupted in her regular run.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless the matter was dropped when it was learnt that the Myanmar had stopped the boat in good faith. They had done so to prevent the steamer from entering an area of unrest in the vicinity of Sinbaungwe where prince Nyaungyan and his forces were staging a rebellion.<sup>4</sup>

After the withdrawal of the British Residency from Mandalay the Myanmar Government showed its willingness to get on friendly relationship with the British by the letter of the Myanmar dated 10<sup>th</sup> October 1879. The letter instructed the Myanmar Agent to publish in the local paper the account of the hasty withdrawal of the British Residency and the adverse repercussions it caused to the trade between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> October 1879, the Myanmar government dispatched a Mission to the Governor-General of India. The Delegation was headed by *Wun-dauk* Myaunghla Myosa Mingyi Thiri Maha Kyawhtin Zeya, *Saye-gyi* Minhti Thiri Zeya and *Ahma-ye* Nemyo Minhtin Kyawsa.<sup>6</sup>

Maha Minhtin Kyawthu took the journey to Yangon on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1881. But unfortunately, the Myanmar dignitary missed the Viceroy by a few days margin. He could therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Than Tun, " Ne-hle Yazawin " (Peripatetic History), Yangon, Pyaeson Book stall, 2004, p.417

(Henceforth: Than Tun,2004)

<sup>2</sup> Hla Thein, 2010,112

<sup>3</sup> Hla thein,2010,118

<sup>4</sup> Than Tun,2004,527

<sup>5</sup> Hla Thein,2010,123

<sup>6</sup> Maung Maung Tin,2004,381

only see the Chief Commissioner who queried him on affairs of the Shan State and the king's monopolies.<sup>1</sup> The Chief Commissioner remarked that the chief desire of the British Government in respect of Upper Burma was that trade should be free. The British did not wish to interfere in any way in the internal affairs of the king's country, but commercial intercourse between Upper and Lower Myanmar should be free and unrestrained. In fact, he could not but regard the maintenance of the monopolies and the restriction of trade in Upper Burma as decidedly unfriendly course of action, and he trusted the Burmese Government would be brought to see the matter in the same light.<sup>2</sup>

The British stated that the monopolies were contrary to the 1867 Treaty. According to that treaty only earth-oil, timber and precious stones were declared as king's monopolies. The same treaty also stipulated freedom of trade for other goods for a ten year period beginning from 1867. The monopolies which King Thibaw had granted to certain merchants were highly disapproved of by the trading community in Lower Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> Their view was that the granting of monopolies by the King on such items as cotton, catch hides and other produce was greatly harmful to British trade and commerce. The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, in particular, feared that it would lose greatly in its earnings. It reminded the British authorities that it had invested over half a million sterling on its fleet in Myanmar. Though interference was requested the British Chief Commission felt that this was yet uncalled for and in turn admonished those concerned that the existing commercial treaty should not be declared null and void until a good substitute could be found.<sup>4</sup>

A letter of 7<sup>th</sup> July 1881 showed that fifty merchants and thirty companies petitioned the I.F.Coe to raise the issue. It included Chinese, Indian and native merchants. At the same time certain British firms urged the authorities to restrict the export of fish paste, salt and betelnuts into Upper Myanmar.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately Charles Bernard broached the matter to the Myanmar Minister for Foreign Affairs and informed the latter that if the monopolies continue, trade with Mandalay will come to an absolute stand still, and will thus cause serious loss if not suffering to the traders of the two countries. He also reminded him that although King Mindon had granted monopolies it was modified from time after British representation. This new British diplomacy soon resulted in the temporary abolition monopolies from 16 February 1882.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung Tin, 2004, 397

<sup>2</sup> Maung Maung Tin, 2004, 611

<sup>3</sup> Hla Thein, 1979, 135

<sup>4</sup> Hla Thein, 2010, 181

<sup>5</sup> Htin Aung, 1974, 163

<sup>6</sup> Htin Aung, 1974, 165

Anglo-Myanmar negotiations were resumed at Simla in April 1882. The Myanmar representative group headed by *Atwin-wun* Kyauk-myaung *Myo-sa* Mingyi Thiri Maha Zeya Nanda Kyawhtin was accompanied by *Wun-dauk-taw* Wetmasut *Myo-sa* Mingyi Minhtin Maha Sithu, *Wun-duk-taw Thanchet-wun* Mingyi Minhla Maha Sithu Kyaw, *Sayegyi* Maha Minkyaw Yaza, *sayegyi* Maha Minhla Thinkhaya, and *Letthon-daw-kain thaynat-bo* and Myinsaing Myosa Maha Minhla Min Khaung Thihathu, another gunnery officer.<sup>1</sup>

Before the commencement of discussions the Myanmar Envoys presented their credentials and gifts the Viceroy. The gifts were:-

- One emerald ring
- One gold drinking cup
- One woolen blanket
- One golden salverstand for  
Drinking water complete  
With cup and lid
- Five *pasoes* woven with many  
Shuttles design

The first meeting took place at the residence of the foreign secretary on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1882 at 3 pm.<sup>2</sup> The Myanmar presented a draft treaty forty-three articles and this became the basis of discussions. The first point on which disagreement arose was the Myanmar proposal for mutual representation at Mandalay and London.<sup>3</sup> The British side wished Myanmar to deal only with India which had enough authority to conclude treaties and agreements with neighbouring states. The two sides argued to some extent. The article stressed the right of the Myanmar authorities to search vessel on arrival at river ports. The British side wished statements pertaining to this to be excluded from the body of the treaty and shown only as annex schedule or convention. Opinions also differed on the question of monopolies and the increase of duties on certain articles.<sup>4</sup> Other points which the two sides discussed involved such matters as foreign nationals, the prevention of conspiracy in British Myanmar extradition of political officers and the right of arm purchase.<sup>5</sup>

A second meeting was convened on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1882 at the Simla Foreign Office. In their discussions the British side emphasize that the commercial clauses were injurious to them and should therefore be reconsidered. They advocated the promotion of free intercourse and trade. Although agreement was to some extent reached on the arms purchase with the Myanmar side

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<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung Tin,2004,414

<sup>2</sup> Maung Maung Tin,2004,415

<sup>3</sup> HlaThein,1978,128

<sup>4</sup> Htin Aung,1974,165

<sup>5</sup> Htin Aung,1974,165

agreeing to a quota basis, other points still showed the need for harmony. Finally, the British side turned down the ordinal Myanmar draft treaty of forty-three articles and proposed their own draft of twenty-six articles. In it they laid great stresses on the smooth running of trade and commerce between upper and lower Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

The Myanmar Government once more approached the Chief Commissioner of British Myanmar for a renewal of political relations in December 1882. The Insignia Bearer or Asaung-daw Kain arrived in Yangon on 20 December, bringing with him a number of papers for the British authorities.<sup>2</sup> These were; -

- a. two treaties, one to be concluded with Queen Victor and the other with the Governor- General of India
- b. a letter to the foreign secretary of the Government of India
- c. a letter to the Chief Commissioner
- d. a letter to the Deputy Commissioner

The Myanmar Government made this approach after having carefully considered the draft of twenty-six articles that the Myanmar Delegates brought back from Simla.<sup>3</sup>

There was considerable friction in Anglo-Myanmar relations over the question of the demarcation of the Manipur-Myanmar boundary from 1882 until 1884. Its origin was in the absence of definite demarcation pillars between Manipur and Myanmar when the Kabaw Valley was surrendered to the Myanmar King in 1834. Because of frontier disturbances the British proposed the establishment of a joint boundary commission. In 1881 the British requested the Court of Myanmar to send representatives to be present at the demarcation.<sup>4</sup>

The Myanmar Minister for Foreign Affairs replied that demarcation was unnecessary and that they could not abide by the British demarcation on 3 October. A unilateral boundary demarcation was carried out in November and December 1881 by Colonel Johnstone. The British disliked any infringement on the borders of Manipur. Accordingly they directed the Chief Commissioner of British Burma to consider carefully whether it is practicable to take measures for bringing under discussion between himself and some responsible representative of the Burmese government the whole question of the recent relations between Myanmar and Manipur.<sup>5</sup>

The British considered that this might even pave the way for a resumption of diplomatic exchange between the two countries. The Myanmar side argued in their letter dated 8 May 1884, that the British should agree to the immoveable Marein Range as the boundary between Manipur

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<sup>1</sup> D.G.E Hall, A History of Southeast Asia, London,1955, Pp543-547 (Henceforth Hall,1955)

<sup>2</sup> Htin Aung,1974,165

<sup>3</sup> Htin Aung,1974,165

<sup>4</sup> Hall,1955,545

<sup>5</sup> Hall,1955,532

and Myanmar as previously agreed to in 1833 when the Court to Mandalay was represented by Wundauktaw Maha Minkyaw Raza and the British by Grant and Pemberton.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the British, in retaliation against King Thibaw's sudden recall of his Envoy from Calcutta in 1882, rushed reinforcements to the Raja of Manipur. They also authorized the Raja to use force in case of any Myanmar infringement of his territory. There were no more disturbances on the Mainpur boundary but Anglo-Myanmar relations became strained.<sup>2</sup>

A good deal of missionary activities were carried out by the British in Upper Myanmar; the Roman Catholic, the American Baptist and the Anglican Missions being the major church denominations taking up educational work in Buddhist Myanmar. In the region of King Thibaw Marks and Colbeck were prominent English missionaries. Marks set up the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Church and Royal School at Mandalay in June 1869.<sup>3</sup>

Trade between British Myanmar and the Court of Myanmar received a setback when rumours of King Mindon's impending death prevailed in September 1878. Merchants from lower Myanmar became tremendously excited and many who held stocks in Mandalay and in other towns beyond the frontier brought them back to Yangon. Nevertheless, as soon as King Thibaw had himself firmly seated on the throne and was proclaimed King, business improved.<sup>4</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that Myanmar teak was thoroughly appreciated by the British. Their interest in it became so much the greater when their own oak forests were depleted as result of their maritime conflicts with the French and the teak from Myanmar came to play a vital part in British ship building. Thus from an early time the British traded in teak and other timber with the Myanmar authorities. Later, regarding the trade between the two territories, teak exports from upper Myanmar came by way of the Ayeyarwady, the Sittaung and the Thanlwin, with Thanlwin handling the most traffic. In order to collect revenue the British Government maintained Forest Offices at Taungoo and Yangon.<sup>5</sup>

The forest Department carried out salvage operations in areas far away from Upper Myanmar in 1882-83. But because of the increased value of teak and a reduction in the import duty a great amount of timber was sent down to Mawlamyaing from Upper Myanmar forests near Taungoo and the Siamese frontier. A part from Government projects the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation, had started timber business in Myanmar and during 1864-65. It was stated that the business which had been carried on by the largest permit holder on the Sittaung and the holder of

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<sup>1</sup> Hall,1955,541

<sup>2</sup> Hall,1955,549-550

<sup>3</sup> U Kaung," A Survey of the history of Education in Burma before the British conquest and after", Journal of Burma Research Society, 1963 November, p.44 (Henceforth: zKaung,1963)

<sup>4</sup> Lyall,1968,8

<sup>5</sup> Hla Thein,1979,135

the whole of the Southern forests, was transferred to the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation Limited.<sup>1</sup>

The Corporation was a large Joint-stock concern with its head office in Bombay. Three contracts were signed between King Thibaw and the Corporation. The first lease was signed on 8 July 1880. Two contracts were executed in 1882 and 1883. By the 1880 contract the corporation undertook to pay the King for all timber extracted from the forests at fixed per log. Under the second contract signed in 1882, the Corporation undertook to pay a lump sum of one lakh annually for the right to extract the inferior and undersized timber.<sup>2</sup>

The Bombay Burma Trading Corporation worked the Taungoo, Yamethin, Thitchaitgyee and the Chindwin Mu forests, and had its vast Timber yards at Dallah, opposite Yangon. The firm employed thousands of employees of whom 15 to 20 were Europeans and the remaining workers British subjects. To work its huge undertakings were hundreds of elephants and nearly ten thousand buffaloes. About 16 Europeans were still in the forests when hostilities broke out in November 1885 between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

The records convinced the Hluttaw that the allegations made by the nine Foresters tallied squarely. Judgement was then passed by the Hluttaw on 12 August 1885. It was read by at the Byedaik. The Hluttaw found in favour the declared that had been defrauded by the BBTC for the expenses of 56177 logs. The Hluttaw furthermore ruled that since the British Timber Firm had also defrauded the Myanmar Government of the royalty on these logs it should pay double the royalty as a fine. The sum demanded was Rs2359066 to be paid in four installments and within four months.<sup>4</sup>

The friendly relations of the two countries are based on assistance to be rendered for the increase of trade, and of exports and imports from one country to another. If therefore merchants and traders, whether English or other race, ask the Burmese Government to endeavour to facilitate trade and the increase of exports and imports with China, they will be assisted in conformity with the customs of the land.<sup>5</sup>

The British thus interpreted the Myanmar reply as an outright refusal or an evasion of their terms and although the door was left ajar for further consulation and negotiation, the British authorities declared war on King Thibaw on 14 November 1885.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hla Thein,1979,138

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Harvey, History of Burma, Longmans, 1923, p.284(henceforth:Harvey,1923)

<sup>3</sup> J.Nisbet,Burma Under British Rule and Before, Westminster, Constable,1901,vol.2,pp.423-424 (Henceforth:Nisbet,1901)

<sup>4</sup> Maung Maung Tin,2004,431

<sup>5</sup> Nisbet,1901,429

<sup>6</sup> Hla Thein,1979,135

In conclusion the declaration of war and the annexation of Upper Myanmar had much to do with the pressure exerted by the mercantile interests of lower Myanmar on the governmental authorities. Sometimes they would complain of their own plight and at other times describe Thibaw's kingdom as being in utter chaos. Either way, their object was the same to be able to conduct trading activities unhindered and unhampered by Myanmar rules and regulation.

### **Conclusion**

The Government of Myanmar made another effort to improve Anglo-Myanmar relations when it sent a Delegation headed by Atwinwun Kyaukmyaung Myosa Mingyi Thiri Maha Zeya Nanda Kyaw Htin to Simla in 1882 the negotiation but achieved nothing. The Myanmar approached Charles Bernard in December 1882 for resumption of political ties between the two countries. The attempt met with no response from the British side. Rebuffed and frustrated by the British King Thibaw sent a Myanmar Mission to Europe on 30 April 1883. The declared objective of that was to take information regarding the industrial arts and sciences. Meanwhile there was mounting pressure on the British authorities from the British mercantile community. The British government more or less ignored such pleas in the initial stages. The British authorities initially reluctant were finally goaded into championing the causes of the merchants and traders. The excuse for war came with a dispute between the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation. The cause culminated in the position by the Hluttaw of a fine of 23 lakhs on the Corporation. The British Government then pressed the Court of Mandalay to accept its arbitration in the case. King Thibaw rejected this proposal a stiff ultimatum was delivered to him. As the reply of Myanmar government was not to satisfactory of the British. The British declared war on the Myanmar Government on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1885 and within a fortnight occupied Mandalay and stripped King Thibaw of his throne and territory.

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