

Socio-Economic Conditions from the Wall Paintings of Mahasakkyia Ramsi Kyauk Taw Gyi Pagoda

Khin Myint Swe

Abstract

Although there were many urban and rural human Settlement areas in Myanmar of Konbaung Period of Myanmar history, the entire Socio-economic life of the country depended upon the capital which was the centre of royal residence. From the year 1784 to 1852 A.D, Amarapura was the royal capital for Sixty years. Later the royal capital was moved from Amarapura to Mandalay. Therefore it should be noted that as the centre of trade and commerce lasted only 68 years. The economy and livelihood of the Amarapura period as portrayed in the wall paintings of Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda, was mainly feudal, which meant that the economy and livelihood of the Kingdom was based on agriculture and cultivation of crops. Besides, there were products from natural resources such as oil, Jade, timber and forest products. And the trade and flow of goods were primarily executed through the Kingdom's capital.

Socio-Economic Conditions from the Wall Paintings of Mahasakkyia Ramsi Kyauk Taw Gyi Pagoda

The economy of Konbaung period, centered on the kingdom's capital, could be divided into two sectors: internal and external trade. From 1784 to 1852 A.D. Amarapura was the capital of Konbaung Kingdom for 68 years and after 1852 the Capital was transferred to Mandalay, and so Amarapura was the centre of the Kingdom's trade for only 68 years.

The economy and livelihood of the Amarapura period, as portrayed in the wall paintings of Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda, was mainly feudal, which meant that the economy and livelihood of the kingdom was based on agriculture and cultivation of crops. Paddy was the major crop cultivated in the later period of Konbaung dynasty; the lower region of Myanmar was the main area of cultivation as the land was fertile and the seasonal rains were regular. However in the central region of Myanmar paddy cultivation was done with the supply of water from rivers, lakes, streams and ponds.

In the kingdom peasant cultivators were allowed to till the land and could be banded down to succeeding descendants, and the tillers of the land possessed the right of ownership. And the ownership of land was classified as thus: Land owned by the King known as *La-Maing Myay* and *Ah-ya-daw Myay*, Land granted to the King's subjects, such as village headmen and courtiers, ancestral land and lands donated to the *Sasana* or monks.¹

As the lower region of Myanmar was subjected to regular seasonal rains there were huge areas of paddy cultivation, but in Upper Myanmar the supply of water was from rivers,

Dr.Toe Hla, *Konbaung Khit Kyay-let Lu-Hmu Si-Pwar-yay Bawa*, (Socio-economic aspect of Rural life during Konbaung Period (1752-1885)), Yangon, Yangon University Press, 2044, P-91 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 2004)

Toe Hla, 2004, 87

streams, lakes and ponds. Thus, Myanmar kings had annually repaired and preserved these main sources of water supply in the central region of the kingdom.²

The Royal Order proclaimed on 15th September, 1787 was found to order queens, princes and princesses, courtiers and subjects to participate in repair and preservations of lakes, streams and ponds; the Royal Order ran thus:

“As the ponds, streams in the South (9) *Kha-yains* are in a state of disrepair, queens, princesses, courtiers and subjects shall participate in the repair work, duly supervised by the pertinent officials and clerks.”³

King Badon, who ruled from 1782-1819 AD, was one of the Konbaung rulers who paid much attention to the development of agriculture, and the Royal Order he proclaimed ran as follows:

“Wherever arable land supplied by water from lakes, ponds and streams such crops as paddy, corn beans and Lu grains shall be cultivated intensively; it is the Royal Order to be reminded.”⁴

King Badon granted arable lands to courtiers and soldiers around the vicinity of the capacity to increase the population and the food supply. And the granting of land was carried out till the reign of King Thibaw,⁵ granting *Ayadaw* Land to anyone who would work on it. However, Land tax was not imposed for three to ten years,⁶ and clearing of the forest to develop arable land system of land-ownership who really worked on it was encouraged.

During the Konbaung period the peasant cultivators were mostly in debt and the land were in the hands of creditors. As the economy was suffering the cultivators were unable to repay their debts, and during King Badon's reign laws were proclaimed giving shelter to the cultivators from being taking them to court and that law was still valid up to the reign of King Thibaw. Taking cue from King Badon, King Mindon issued the following proclamation:

“As the rain reason comes, the subjects in the kingdom are busy in their cultivation work; if they engage in the case against than at court, all the cultivation work will be delayed so cases against than should be pursued after the cultivation season of 1217 Myanmar.”⁷

³ Dr. Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part. IV, (AD 1782-1787), Kyoto, Center for Southeast Asia Studies, Kyoto University, 1986a, P-594 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 1986a)

⁴ Toe Hla, “*Ahlaungmintayagyi Ei Konbaung Shwe Pyi*”, (Golden Konbaung Kingdom of Alaungpaya), Yangon, Hse-Thain Press, 1993, P-127 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 1993)

⁵ Khin Myint Swe, *Urban Society of Amarapura, The Immortal City* (1785-1858), Doctor of Philosophy, Mandalay, 2007, P-54 (Henceforth: Khin Myint Swe, 2007)

⁶ Toe Hla, 2004, 93

⁷ Dr. Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part IX (AD 1853-1885), Kyoto, Centre For Southeast Asia Studies, Kyoto University, 1989, P-411 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 1989)

On 16 August, 1783 King Badon issued a royal proclamation to the effect that rain thus:

“To get regular supply of rain for bumper harvest of crops the Deities of Wind, Water and Rain shall be propitiated; Paritas and Virtues of Lord Buddha shall be recited; in doing so wise men and scholars should be consulted”⁸

The cultivated land owned by the King were called *Aya-daw* or *La-maing* land and was supervised by *La-maing Wun*, *La-maing* clerk and *la-maing Hmus* (officers) for food supply to royal granaries. A royal order was issued to register accurately the lands owned by the King and the A-thè (commoners) subjects. The royal order was proclaimed as follows:

“In the registration list of Chauk-Su-Taing there are no land records owned by the King; so the land officers should accurately register the lists of *La-maing* lands, like the lands of commoners presented to the list of Treasury by A-thè (commoners) village headman.”⁹

In the kingdom's capital employees of the royal administration were the majority and there were just a few commoners or *A-thès*. The queens, princes, princesses and relatives of King were granted fiefdoms over village and cultivated lands:¹⁰ the *Myosas* (lord of towns) and *Ywar-sas* (Lord of village) had to collect the paddy which was paid as tax in kind and had to send to the royal granaries. On 5 January, 1788 such an order was issued which ran as follows:

“The taxes accrued from the Fiefdoms of the queens, princes and princess, courtiers throughout the kingdom must be checked and collected and shall be sent to the granaries.”¹¹

The king's employees were fed from these royal granaries and monks were also offered rice alms and donations from this royal treasury. Thus, the paddy taxes in kind was the main source of supply of food for King's courtiers and soldiers.¹²

On 15 September, 1808 royal order was issued to distribute supply of paddy to the King's employees; it was expressed thus:

“Paddy must be given out from the Mingun royal granary; if the supply from that granary runs out, the distribution must be made from Nanda-wun royal granary”¹³

⁸ Than Tun, 1968a, 272

⁹ Than Tun, 1986, 400

¹⁰ Khin Myint Swe, 2007, 59

¹¹ Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part V (AD 1782-1806), Kyoto University, Centre for Southeast Asia Studies, 1986b, P-336 (henceforth: Than Tun, 1986b)

¹² Khin Myint Swe, 2007, 60

¹³ Than Tun, 1986, 572

Thus, it could be found that the King issued royal orders to distribute food to the welfare of his employees as necessary.

Lower Myanmar was endowed with natural blessings: regular rains and fertile lands that produced bountiful supply of paddy production. The produce was exported and necessary commodities for the kingdom were imported such as cloth and household utilities. In a royal proclamation made on 18 November, 1807, the following was announced:

“Kyaw Htin Yar-zar shall be appointed royal clerk. Cash will be paid when foreign cloth from Hantharwady arrives. Also foreign cloth from Dinyawadi, Ramarwadi, Dwar-yar-wadi May-ga-wadi will be paid in paddy as an exchange.”¹⁴

In external trade, paddy was a royal commodity that could be sold or exported with special permission from the King.¹⁵

A royal order that was announced on 13 November, 1787 banned the sale of royal paddy from royal granaries in Yangon, Patheingyi, Dawei at whose ports foreign merchant ships were berthed. The royal order ran thus:

“Paddy accrued from the 10 per cent royal tax should be stored in the royal granaries in Rakhine, Thandwe, Yan-bye and Mann-aung. The lords of that towns shall see to it that paddy from royal granaries must not be carried by ships; this order must be informed to lords (*Myo-wuns*) of Yangon, Patheingyi and Dawei.”¹⁶

Paddy was sold after three successive years of bumper harvest, and at other times it was not allowed to export; illegal trade of paddy was severely punished.¹⁷ And it could be assumed that kings were much concerned about the shortage of this staple commodity and providing sufficient supply of food to the subjects of their kingdom.

Cotton was another major crop raised in *Anyar* (Upper Myanmar) after paddy, for clothes were woven by the people themselves throughout the kingdom. Cotton, becoming an indispensable commodity, was raised from the time of Boda-phaya to the time of King Thibaw, and it also became a product for export as well as a royal commodity. Officer for administering this products, Wach-Yone-Taw,¹⁸ were opened and in 1854 AD all the cotton produce of the Kingdom became a royal monopoly, buying up all the produce and selling it.¹⁹

In late 1853, one Nga Kula presented a petition to the King to allow him exclusively to buy up all the cotton products; the petition ran as follows:

¹⁴ Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part VI (AD1809-1810), Kyoto, Centre for Southeast Asia Studies, 1987a, P-541 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 1987a)

¹⁵ Toe Hla, 1993, 133

¹⁶ Than Tun, 1986, 650

¹⁷ Toe Hla, 2004, 86

¹⁸ Toe Hla, 2004, 124

¹⁹ Tekatho Nay Win, *Innwa Shwe Nan Yauk British Envoy Hmat-Tan 1885*, (Record of British Envoy at Innwa 1885), Yangon, Tagaung Bookhouse, 2004, P-253 (Henceforth: Nay Win, 2004)

“With great obeisance at Your Majesty’s feet, your servant Nga Kula, working day and night at the Royal Cotton Administrative centre, presented this supplication to Your Majesty. Because of good weather and of Your Majesty’s Glory the cotton produce of Ahlone region, north of Ayeyarwady river, is 500,000 viss; ten villages of Chaung-Oo 200,000 viss; Shweyin Mar 200,000 viss; Ratana Theinga Taunglet Myin Myay villages 120,000 viss; Sagaing 100,000 viss; Ah Wa (South of Ayeyarwady) 500,000 viss; Gyoe Min Gyi Ta-yoke Town Myingyan 700,000 viss, Taung Thar 300,000 viss, Nyaung Oke 3200,000 viss; Pindale 1200,000 viss; Meikhtila 530,000 viss; Shwe Pyi Yan Aung Ah-nauk let 1 500,000 viss; total 7770,000 viss. As there are no Indian and Chinese traders to buy please permit your servant to buy up all the produce at 70 *kyats* per 100 viss in the name of Your Majesty.”²⁰ (Collection, of Ko Pyinnya, Amarapura).

In 1881 AD, one Chinaman Ko Hset Kyee petitioned the King to purchase on behalf of His Majesty all the year’s cotton produce for *kyat* 120,000; 60,000 viss of cutch and 120,000 *kyats* for leather.²¹

All the cotton produce was carried up the Ayeyarwady river to Bhamo, a trading town with China; the cotton was packed in bales weighing from 10,000 to 25,000 viss and carried in Myanmar boats yearly from October to May. From Bhamo a caravan of mules and horses were used to transport to the Chinese border.²²

Another important sector in the economy of the Konbaung period was the cultivation of crops on silting lands (Kaing) and garden produce. Many river areas where floodwater flowed and ebbed were centres of such kind of *Kaing* cultivation. Not only poor citizens, but also employees of the King’s administration engaged in this kind of agriculture and this sector produced a major supply of food for the kingdom.²³

Cultivation of garden crops and fruits was a long term affair in the kingdom’s agricultural economy. During the reign of King Thibaw, cultivation of this type was encouraged by permitting and granting new lands who wanted to engage in this type of long term cultivation and by granting tax-free periods for limited stretches of time. And areas around the capital like Kyaukse, Sagaing and Madaya there were gardens granted to queens, princes, princesses and courtiers, and in the Konbaung period court cases there were no instance of gardens being pawned to creditors.²⁴

Another important sector in Konbaung economy was the toddy palm cultivation and palm sugar production, and fishing was also an important livelihood for the people. Sagaing and Shwebo areas were key centers for toddy palm products: toddy palm leaves for weaving mats, baskets and ropes.²⁵ Palm sugar or jaggery was an important food stuff for the people, and taxes had to be paid on the number of trees which produced toddy juice, and tax imposition varied from village to village. During the rule of King Badon, imposition of taxes on palm-sugar trade was granted to private traders. Palm sugar traders plied the Ayeyarwady river carrying 1,000 viss of that product and paid 1,500 viss of palm sugar as tax for a year. A private trader

²⁰ Toe Hla, 2004, 125

²¹ Than Tun, *Ne-hle Yazar Wun*, (History on a Tour), Yangon, Pyae Sone Press, 2003, P-425 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 2003)

²² Nay Win, 2004, P-225

²³ Toe Hla, 2004, 140

²⁴ Toe Hla, 2004, 103

²⁵ Toe Hla, 2004, 127

had got a grant to pay 30,000 viss of product to the King for a year in return for the right to charge taxes on palm-sugar traders.²⁶ Besides, palm-sugar traders Nga Htun Sa and Nga Shwe Thar from Pakhangyi got the permission to trade the product with 30 big and 20 small boats, and they paid 4,800 viss of palm sugar in tax to the King,²⁷ and the toddy palm business was the second most important trade after agriculture in Konbaung era.

The toddy-palm livelihood of the people during the reign of Konbaung, King Bagan (1846-1853 AD) was portrayed in the wall painting of Maha Sakya Ranthi Kyauk Tawgyi Pagoda; the painting was at the right wall of the north gate of the Pagoda. The painting described shirtless toddy climber wearing a topknot hair and a loincloth tied across the legs to the back, and was lowering down a bunch of toddy to the ground²⁸ fruits which he had cut.

Fishing was another livelihood of the people who dwelt around lakes, ponds and along the river banks, and the major livelihood for the people in lower regions of Myanmar Kingdom and it was mainly a family profession handed down for generations. But in that region fishing was also a trade and taxes were paid according to the region concerned.²⁹

Fishing taxes' were paid family-wise, and some who could pay the highest taxes got the right of that livelihood. The list of taxes paid at Ko Yan Ywar in Pakhangyi area showed the varying amount of tax rates paid on 23 March, 1851.³⁰

Name	Tax	Gift	<i>Khaw-wut</i>	Acknowledgement
Kyaung-da-gar				
Nga Ngwe Thie	5	0.75	1	
Kyaung-da-gar Nga Po	30	13	0.05	1.2
Pike-Thu-gyi Nga Nwe20	5	0.75		
Pike-Thu-gyi Nga Au 5	2.5	-	-	
Pike-Thu-gyi Nga Kwe5	2.5	-	-	
Wun Pu Pike Thu Gyi				
Nga Nwe	80	20	-	-

Though Myanmar Kingdoms professed Buddhism there were many fish ponds owned by the pagodas; on 30 July, 1787 AD, King Bodaw-Phaya issued a royal instruction to register the taxes at the royal treasury charged from fish ponds within the precincts of Shin Phyu Shin Hla Pagoda. And the names of the ponds owned by the Pagoda were: Zaung Chan Pond, Nyaung Phyu, Ta-Htwe, Ta-pyet, Taung Inn, Da-non, Pin-twin, Myar Inn, Myauk Inn, Let-Hse Kan and Than-bo pond.³¹

There was a list of taxes paid on 16 December, 1783 during the reign of King Badon charged on the following Inns (fish ponds):

Names of Ponds	Taxes paid in <i>Kyats</i>
1. Saw Hla	7
2. Myaung Inn	7.5
3. Inn Tha Beik Hse	10
4. Kan Taya	

²⁶ Toe Hla, 2004, 142

²⁷ Toe Hla, 2004, 132

²⁸ Photo (1)

²⁹ Toe Hla, 2004, 149

³⁰ Toe Hla, 2004, 146

³¹ Than Tun, 1986a, 523

	Kauk Oh	
	Inn Yaung Inn	
5.	Chaing Net	30
	Ta Myeik	
	Pike chaing	
	Pyay Pan	
6.	Khe Tat	96
	Nga Kyin Aing	
	Asing Pyin	
	Seing Ma	
	Hsin Choke	
	Yoe Kya	
	Yite-Ma-Thet	200 ³²

In the above lists there were some ponds not mentioned, for it seemed that those ponds failed to pay up taxes, and the ponds were Pin Le, Yan Chan and Inya ponds. Ta-Pyar Pond was the biggest taxpayer with 400 *kyats* annually, and showed the importance of ponds in the livelihood of the people.³³

In the fishing trade, surplus fish stocks were preserved as fish paste, dried salted fish and turned into fish sauce. All these preserved fish products were sent with 140 boats up the river Ayeyarwady, and one trader who got the permission to trade paid in taxes 1 viss of gold and 5,000 tins (baskets) of paddy.³⁴ And that showed the extent of fishing trade in Konbaung era.

In 1846 during the reign of King Bagan there was a wall painting in the left wall of the south gate of Kyauk-Taw-Gyi Pagoda. That painting portrayed three boats with two fisherman on each,³⁵ in the painting one was rowing the boats, another was casting a fishnet; in another boat there were a woman, a man and a child, and in another a figure was angling with a fishing rod. And that painting described the livelihood of the fishermen of the Konbaung period.³⁶

Weaving was one of the important cottage industry for clothing in Myanmar society of Konbaung period, and the King and his family had their own special weavers for their royal wardrobes. Ta-loke and Sale towns were noted centers for weaving; silk was imported from China and Manipuris (Kathes) worked in the handlooms apart from Myanmar in silk-weaving. In late Konbaung period a few weaving machines arrived in the Kingdom; handlooms were the standard in the days of Konbaung Era.³⁷

Oil digging was another cottage industry in Konbaung Era; right of oil digging was granted to families, and some oil wells were the royal property of King. Families who had grant to dig oil had to pay taxes³⁸ and oil digging was done in the areas like Yenangyaung, Magwe, Pakokku and Myingyan.³⁹

³² Toe Hla, 2004, 148

³³ Toe Hla, 2004, 149

³⁴ Toe Hla, 2004, 150

³⁵ Photo (2)

³⁶ Photo (3)

³⁷ Tin Myint, *Konbaung Khit Hnaung Lu-Hmu-yay Tha-maing*, (The Social history of late Konbaung Period (1820-1885), MA Thesis, Mandalay Arts and Science University, History Department, 1974, 125(Henceforth: Tin Myint, 1974)

³⁸ Fytche, Lt.General Albert, *Burma: Past and Present with Personal Reminiscences*, Vol I, London, Keegan Paul, 1878, PP-312-313 (Henceforth: Fytche, 1878)

³⁹ Scott, J.G, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and Shan State*, Part I, Vol.ii, Rangoon, Government Printing Press, 1900, P-267 (Henceforth: GUBSS,1900)

Salt making cottage industry was another livelihood in the Konbaung Kingdom and could be found in the lower parts of Mya nmar which was adjacent to the sea. Bago slat was famous,⁴⁰ and Sa-Taung was also noted for its salt in Upper Myanmar. In southern Shwebo district there were about 2000 salt workers, and salt industry paid taxes getting the grant to work freely.⁴¹ Kin Taik Soe Min official bought 100,000 viss of salt from Than-lyin Headman Mg Myat Phyu at a cost of 1,430 *kyats*, but the Headman could not deliver the agreed amount of salt resulting in a court case.⁴²

Pottery works was another cottage industry of Konbaung era, and Mottama (Martaban) was famous for its pot-making since ancient times. Foreign ships visited the Mottana bank and pots were bought for storage of fresh water for the ships on their sea voyage. Twante was also another place famous for its pot-making; and even now pot-making is a major livelihood in that area.⁴³ In the Upper part of the Kingdom, Shwebo and Kyauk Myaung were noted for their pottery works, and there were also pottery works in Shwebo, Shwe Ku and Sale. In the Kingdom pottery works played a major role in the livelihood of the Kingdom; the pottery-making livelihood is still continuing up to the present⁴⁴.

Trade in the late Konbaung period prospered, both domestic and foreign. King Badon opened four trading centres or Pwes in the capital Amarapura such as Kyun-Taw-Yin, Zaung Ka-Law, Paliek and Ma-tè trading centres. Traders and merchants could do their trade in those assigned centres, but traders from indigenous races were allowed to do as they wished in the capital.⁴⁵ Shan traders came down from the highlands to trade in the royal capital, La-wa indigenous races from the Kingdom's borders like Meing Tein, east of Thein-ni, also traveled to the capital to trade their local produce.⁴⁶ And merchants were classified into two classes; Ta-seik-kinn-sar traders or big merchants and small ones trading at Kinn Seik-pwe with taxes paid but traders who could pay taxes the most had the sole right of trading a certain fixed commodity.⁴⁷

During the reign of King Thibaw rich men Seitta Nga Kyaw, Nga Shwe Thar and Nga Pwint were given the right to levy taxes with the payable amount of 1200,000 *kyats*, but in 1883 AD the Chief Queen delegated that right to Nay Myo Thiha-thu with the payable amount of 165,000 *kyats* in taxes, half of the former amount.⁴⁸

The trading centres or circles in the royal capital were fixed according to the nature of the commodities; salted dry fish and fish paste in Sagaing and Innwa and riverbanks towns like Pa-Lo, Pyawbwe, Mi Kyaung ye and Hsin-baung-we; La-phet or pickled tea in the capital in such places as Ma-Te, Kyun Taw Yinn, Paleik, Myo Thit, Madaya and Taw Inn. At that trading centres or circles royal tax collectors were appointed and one tical of gold and 100 *kyats* had to be paid. The taxes charged on 14 March 1810 AD were expressed in the Royal Order that ran as follows:

⁴⁰ Tin Myint, 1974, 129

⁴¹ Tin Myint, 1974, 129

⁴² Khin Myint Shwe, 2007, 64

⁴³ Toe Hla, 2004, 169

⁴⁴ Burma Gazetteer, *Bhamo District*, Compiled by G.W.D Dawson, ICS, Rangoon, Government Printing, 1960, P-61 (Henceforth: Burma Gazetteer, 1960)

⁴⁵ Toe Hla, 1993, 130

⁴⁶ Tin Myint, 1974, 114

⁴⁷ Toe Hla, 1993, 131

⁴⁸ Taw Sein Kho, *Hluttaw Hmat-tan*, (Royal Council Records), Yangon, Government Printing Press, 1960, P-77 (Henceforth: Hluttaw, 1960)

“ Whatever commodities of fish and other derivatives arrived at the ports of Sagaing, Pyaw-bwe, Mi-Kyaung-ye, Hsin-baung-we shall be traded in one place; likewise *La-phet* (pickled tea) arriving at such places like Ma-te, Kyun-taw-yin, Paleik, Ba-naw, Myo-thit, Mandalay, and Taung-inn. Shall also be traded in a single market. Royal taxes hall be Levied by tax official Min Kyaw Thiha and his employees Nga Can, Nga Pwa, Nga Pyay, Nga Pan Nyo, Nga San, Nga Mg, Nga Toke Gyi, Nga Shwe Lu, Nga Hsan, Nga Pin, Nga Myat Gyi and Nga Pu Lay. An annual tax of 100 *kyats* on fish paste, one gold tical on *La-phet* (pickled tea) shall be imposed.

Royal clerk Shwe Taw Thein Kha paid the above taxes charged, and similarly commodities reaching San-Pe-nago gate and other reverie towns shall be charged and must be traded in appointed places. Taxes shall be increased to one and a half ticals of gold and 150 *kyats* from 50 *kyats* and one-half tical of gold for the development of the Kingdom's economy.⁴⁹

Apart from big and small traders there were traveling traders on boats and bullock carts and vendors on foot, they were taxed at toll gates levied on bullock carts and boats.⁵⁰

There were toll gates and were administered by Tax Officers (Kin-win), clerks (Kin-Sa-Ye) and Kin-Taing (assistants). There were toll gates that dealt with foreign traders and such toll gates (Kin-Sa-Khan) were Mottama Kin, Man Aung Kin, and gates placed by Shan Tat-oo choke (Shan troops).⁵¹

There were toll gates that had to pay gold, muskets, lead and gun powder, but some gates merely had to pay toll fees to the King's government. And that was expressed in the royal proclamation of 6 September 1807 that ran as follows:

“ kyauk Ta lone toll gate (Kin) had to send gold, muskets, lead and gunpowder; as such that toll gate shall not levy money as other toll gates shall have to. At that gate there is no need to appoint large number of employees; Kin Kain nara-theinkha shall be dismissed, and Kin-sar Thiri Thu Kay-thar shall appoint necessary personal to maintain security”⁵²

In the left wall of the south gate of Kyauk-taw-gyi pagoda, there was a wall painting that portrayed two Shan men carrying a basket of *La-phet* (pickled tea) on their shoulders wearing Shan Taik-pon (overwear jacket) and trousers; on their heads they wore Kha-mauks (a form of circular hat) and that painting described the livelihood of the Shan nationals.⁵³

⁴⁹ Than Tun, 1987, 689

⁵⁰ Tin Myint, 1974, 117

⁵¹ Tin, *Myanmar Min Oke-choke-pon Sartan and Bodawphaya Yazar-that khaw Amaitaw Hmattan Gyi*, (Myanmar Monarchy Administration and laws by King Bodaw), Culture Monstry, Yangon, 1983, P- (Henceforth: 1983)

⁵² Than Tun, 1987a , 476

⁵³ Photo (4)

Besides, on the north wall of the Eastern gate of the pagoda there was a painting that described the two Shan men and a child visiting the pagoda on a pilgrimage. The men wore a Shan vest inside the overwear and bags hung on their shoulders and holding smoking pipes in their hands. They wore Shan trousers but the men did not wear slippers.⁵⁴ And another painting showed four Shan men in the precinct of the pagoda, one holding a flower vase and the other two were carrying streamers and paper flags for the offering. All four men wore Shan-style national costumes: Shan Kha-maut hat and a bag, Shan Taik-pon overwear and Shan trousers.⁵⁵

On the south wall of the East gate there was a wall painting that showed the Pa-oh national visiting the capital Amarapura. In that wall painting the dress of pa-oh nationals were expressly drawn: the Pa-oh man wore a hair top-knot on top of the head, the shirt wearing long to the knees. The Pa-oh woman was carrying a Pa-line (a woven basket) hanging onto her head; the painting described the kingdom's national races visiting Konbaung capital, whether on a pilgrimage or on a trading mission.⁵⁶

Another painting that described the ways of travel of the Konbaung era was on the right wall of the west gate of Maha Sakka Ranthi Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda; in that wall painting, bullock carts and horse carts were drawn clearly to show the methods of travel in those days.⁵⁷ A caravan of bullock carts were rested near the *Zayats* (rest halls) within the precincts of the pagoda; the wheels were made of hard cardboard cover materials. The camping travellers were cooking rice to offer to the monks and for their meals.⁵⁸

Travelling by boat was the theme of the wall painting on the left wall of the South gate of the Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda. In the painting there were boats in the river, some race boats rowed by many, some boats were merely used for transport. The painting portrayed a boat with two boatmen, one at the bow and one at the stern with a canopy for shade in the middle which clearly showed that it was used to transport passengers. A lone rowing boatman in the painting showed that man carried Soon (rice meal) for monks. And some boats might have to pay tolls for using the water way.⁵⁹

Another wall painting on the left wall of the south gate of Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda portrayed the water transport of goods for trade. In the painting there was a huge boat with a big canopy with masts for sails and tiller at the back. This painting clearly described the trade journey of the boat that plied up and down the waterways.⁶⁰

In the Konbaung period there was much trade between the Myanmar Kingdom and China, mostly at the border of the two kingdoms. Bhamo and Thein-ni in Shan state were the trade route taken by foreign traders,⁶¹ and the security of the trade route was guaranteed by King Badon.

On 1st march, 1806 AD, a robbery incident took place which involved two Chinese traders from. The two Chinamen traders were robbed in Thibaw Township, and so the officials of Tali and Gonsin Thibaw had to take responsibility. A royal order was issued concerning the case and it ran thus:

⁵⁴ Photo (5)

⁵⁵ Photo (6)

⁵⁶ Photo (7)

⁵⁷ Khin Myint Swe, 2007, 78

⁵⁸ Photo (8)

⁵⁹ Photo (9)

⁶⁰ Photo (10)

⁶¹ Toe Hla, 1993, 133

“The information that two Chinamen traders, from Tali and Gonsin, were robbed reached His Majesty’s ears. The robbers must be arrested, and if the robbers were not caught, the responsible officials of Thibaw Township must repay the goods those Chinese traders lost due to the act of robbery.”⁶²

The security of the trade route taken by Chinese merchants had to be taken by Shwe Taik Wun (Lord of Treasury), and another robbery incident happened on 26 April, 1807 during the reign of King Badon and the case was settled by the kingdom’s officials.⁶³

The Chinese traders brought silk, dry tea leaves, pepper and various fruits and the Myanmar trader’s sold cotton, raw cotton, salt, bird feathers and bird nests,⁶⁴ Cape Negrais and Tanin-thar-yi coastal strip in the southern part of the Myanmar Kingdom produced bird nests and bird feathers which were bought by Chinese and Indian traders. But these products, along with diamonds, gems, textile, cutch, could be traded with the royal approval from the capital Amarapura.⁶⁵ A royal order to that effect was issued on 21 September, 1808 which ran:

“Taking into consideration the appeal presented by ship broker-trader Nga Yar, trader Yan Aung Kyaw Htin, Nga Shoon, Nga Lun, Nga Nyein, Nga Shoon, Nge San, Nga Chan Nyein, Nga Aye, Nga Thar Hla, Nga Htwe, Nga Pike, Nga Pu Tin and Nga Pei Toe, the commodities brought to Sagaing and Innwa such as diamonds, gems, textiles, cutch, bird nests and feathers, and betel shall be taxed and Myin-su-gyi Wun Min Kyaw Thiha shall supervise and allow broker Nga Yar, trader Yan Aung Kyaw Htin, Nga Aye, Nga Thar Hla, Nga pike, Nga Htwe, Nga Pu Tin and Nga Pei Toe to trade the above goods and shall pay 100 *kyats* as royal tax.”⁶⁶

The taxes must be paid directly to the King’s Treasury; a royal order dated 25 September, 1808 instructed the traders of Bird Nests Mountain to pay up annual taxes.⁶⁷

Jade trade was the speciality of Chinese traders; there was a list of Chinese jade prospectors at Amarapura Chinese Temple and since early 19th Century about 6000 Chinese lost their lives in search for this gem.⁶⁸ Jade trading was mostly done at the Kingdom’s capital, and some Chinese were allowed to work in the jade mines at Kanton area in the Eastern part of Shan state.⁶⁹ Another area of jade mining was in Kachin state and native Kachin races were used as laborers;⁷⁰ since 1806 AD a royal custom officer and 30 soldiers were stationed there to tax and supervise that area.⁷¹

⁶² Than Tun, 1986b, 816

⁶³ Than Tun, 1987a, 429

⁶⁴ Toe Hla, 1993, 133

⁶⁵ Khin Myint Swe, 2007, 65

⁶⁶ Than Tun, 1987a, 577

⁶⁷ Than Tun, 1986b, 816

⁶⁸ Than Tun, 2003, 301

⁶⁹ Rev. Father Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire*, Rangoon, Govt Press, 1885, P-174 (Henceforth: Sangermano, 1885)

⁷⁰ Khin Mg Nyunt, *Myanmar Min Myar let Htet Kyauk Sein Youn We Yay*, (Jade Trade during Myanmar Kings), Shumawa Magazine, Yangon,

⁷¹ Than Tun, 2003, 301

The boom in jade trade was in the years 1831-1840, but the Anglo-Chinese war in 1841 had disrupted the jade business and the tax revenue in 1847 amounted to 6000 *kyats*.⁷² In 1836 when the jade trade was at its height, the annual tax amounted to 21,000 *kyats*, and since 1840 the annual tax did not rise above 3,000 *kyats*. In 1861 the residents of Kaung-ton bought the jade and the tax rose to 27,000 *kyats*; the three year tax from 1866 to 1868 AD was 60,000 *kyats*, from 1870 to 1872 the tax amount was 12,000 *kyats*, in 1880 the tax amounted to 50,000 *kyats*. It was found that jade mining was done with the permission of the king and 33 percent tax was levied on that trade.⁷³

The involvement of Chinese traders in the kingdom's external trade was portrayed in the wall painting at the left wall of the south gate of Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda. The painting depicted three Chinamen wearing yellow Chinese shirt; their hair were braided and pig-tailed, and wore Kha-mout lats. There was a caravan of mules, 4 in front and 4 animals behind them. A Myanmar soldier, wearing a military cap and long-sleeved shirt tied with a band at the waist, was sheltering himself with an umbrella, he seemed to be guarding the Chinese traders or accompanying them to the royal officials.⁷⁴

Other foreign traders involving in the external trade of the Konbaung kingdom came from Britain, France, Germany and Italy. Mostly these foreign merchants used the ports such as Hanthawady (Yangon), Yan-bye, Dwar-yar-wadi (Than-dwe) and May-ga-wadi (Man-Aung).⁷⁵ The major exports of the Kingdom were mostly teak and the value of the export item amounted to 200,000 ponds annually. Other export commodities were copper, betel, cutch, raw cotton, salt, ivory, bird nests and feathers, crude oil, wool and fruits, while the imported items were glass and chinaware, muskets, gun powder, dried fruits, metal wares and cloths. Royal port officials, tax officers and appraisers were appointed by the king to administer the ports of entry.⁷⁶

Royal Order issued on 22 May, 1795 described the management of the port of entry; it ran thus:

“Rakhine was the port of trade for foreign and Myanmar traders, and Royal Tax officer yar-za Dhamma-rat Kyaw must appoint tax personnel to inspect and impose tax on such commodities as gold and silver valuables, clothes and other goods.”⁷⁷

Another royal order proclaimed on 7 August 1806 described the punishment handed down to Royal Tax officials who had failed in their duties to tax properly on traders; the order was expressed thus:

“Traders who departed from the ports of Dinya-wadi, May-ga-wady, and Ran-ma-wadi on business did not pay tax properly, and Royal

⁷² Than Tun, 2003, 301

⁷³ Than Tun, 2003, 302

⁷⁴ Photo (11)

⁷⁵ Tin Myint, 1974, 118

⁷⁶ Toe Hla, 1993, 133

⁷⁷ Than Tun, 1986b, 531

officials failed to tax on Ducca cloth and other goods. So these officials must be called to the capital to face punishment”.⁷⁸

During the reign of King Badon, a Bengali trader named Razal was robbed in the Kingdoms territory of Kanaung, Danubyu and Hlaing town areas; a royal order was issued concerning the case and it ran as follows;

“Razal presented his case to this Majesty that he was robbed of his possessions. The robbers must be captured, if not the headmen of that areas must repay what he had lost in the robbery.”⁷⁹

The Royal Tax officials charged 10 per cent as tax at the kingdom’s ports on commodities that were traded, and the rates of taxes were imposed by the royal appraisers.⁸⁰

The trade was monopolized by brokers (*Ah-we-taw*) who had the rights of trading granted by the King; those merchant-brokers bought up all the commodities and paid annual taxes to the king. These *Ah-we-taw* or licensed traders were Myanmar nationals of the Kingdom, but some foreign traders also got this license to trade in certain commodities.⁸¹

In the kingdom’s capital city Amarapura, trading of goods were restricted; commodities not to be traded by ordinary citizens, goods to be traded only by foreign companies and certain goods banned outright. A Royal order issued on 21 January 1823 detailed the goods to be traded and goods banned:

“Ordinary citizens shall not trade these goods: salt and opium are the sole royal goods, and from the sale of the royal monopoly goods, His Majesty will use as expenditure and make donations. Cultivators will pay an annual tax of one coin; those citizens who do not own farm lands shall pay 11 coins for their homes; traders shall pay 6 coins for trading 1,000 *kyats* amount of goods and so 60 coins for trading 100 *kyats* amount of goods; in time of peace Sawbwas (Shan lords) and other officials must leavy taxes and shall send the taxes to the Treasury.”⁸²

During the Konbaung Era there were money-lenders, and they were mostly land-owners, rich merchants and brokers and officials of the Kingdom. If the borrowers could not repay the loans they had taken out, they would lose their collateral. The collateral for getting loans could be in many forms: their cultivated lands and their service to the money-lender as a personal slave. The money-lenders in a way were fleecing the poor citizens of the Kingdom. nother profession in the Konbaung Era were craftsmen in the traditional arts of goldsmith,

⁷⁸ Than Tun, 1986b,947

⁷⁹ Than Tun, 1987a,721

⁸⁰ Khin Myint Swe, 2007,72

⁸¹ Tin Myint, 1974,120

⁸² Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part VIII,(AD 1819-1853),Kyoto, Centre for Southeast Asia studies, Kyoto University, 1987, P-402(Henceforth: Than Tun, 1987)

silversmith, carpentry, coppersmith, sculpting and blacksmith. And muskets and weapons were made by royal blacksmith.⁸³

During the rule of king Badon or Bodawphaya, silver coins were used as a medium of exchanged, lead was an important metal in minting silver coins. Lead extraction was done by King appointed Chinese and Manipuris officials; lead mines in Shan State and Myay-latt Villages were given to some Chinese for extraction.⁸⁴

Manipuris also were given the right to work the lead mines, but the extracted lead were not offered to the king. They bought the lead from the market and offered to the king instead. On 25 July 1806 AD a royal order was issued removing the Manipuris from the lead mines.⁸⁵ And during the reign of king Badon, lead extraction was encouraged with the aim of minting lead coins to be used as a medium of exchange in the kingdom. Lead producing areas had to pay taxes, and a royal order was issued on 27 January, 1810 AD to pay 1000 lead as tax to the royal Treasury.⁸⁶ King Badon prohibited the use of inferior quality of lead (Ngwe Hsoe, Ngwe kyan) and repeatedly issued royal orders to use quality lead; a royal order issued on 6 March 1784 stated thus:

“An order to use *Ywet so*, *Ywet thay* and *Ywet Ni* lead have been issued, but the pertinent officials of the royal administration failed to inspect the use of lead; so the use of *Ngwe Kyan* reached the ears of His Majesty So *Myowun* (Lord of the Town) *Htaung Hmu* (Lord of Jail) and *Myo-sayay* (Town Clerk) should make inspections again.”⁸⁷

Moreover, on 23 July, 1784 a royal order was again issued to use only *Ywet Ni* as the currency.⁸⁸ So in the early years of the reign of king Badon in 1784 three forms of medium *Ywet so*, *Ywe Thay* and *Ywet Ni* were used as currencies, and silver coins were not in use everywhere; gold and silver were mixed with lead to use as currency in the capital Amarapura and in Rangoon (Yangon) at that time; a cock brand was imprinted on that coins.

In conclusion varied livelihood of the citizens of Konbaung Era were found in many strata of the kingdom, namely: paddy growers, cotton growers, toddy climbers and toddy palm-sugar makers, handloom weavers, oil diggers, salt maker, pottery makers and money lenders.

Major paddy growers were in the lower region of the Konbaung Kingdom, the Ayeyarwady delta and Bago region, and in Upper central part of the Kingdom cultivation was done by irrigation from rivers, lakes, ponds and streams. The kings repaired the lakes and ponds, dug new ponds for the cultivation of crops in the regions around the capital. Domestic and foreign trade of the Konbaung Kingdom prospered to a considerable extent generating tax revenues for the royal coffers; taxation policies of the King became more comprehensive.

⁸³ Tin Myint, 1974, 131

⁸⁴ Than Tun, 1986b, 711

⁸⁵ Than Tun, 1986b, 937

⁸⁶ Than Tun, 1987a, 638

⁸⁷ Than Tun, 1986a, 314

⁸⁸ Than Tun, 1986a, 369

Trade was found to be restrictive; there were royal goods and commodities for the monarchy, granting trade concessions were for trader who could offer the highest revenue for the king. In the latter part of the Konbaung era there were attempts to systematize the currency in use to promote development of the kingdom's economy.

The wall paintings in the Maha Sakkyia Ramthi Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda testified the fabric of the socio-economic pattern of the Konbaung monarchy, the last Myanmar Kingdom that finally gave way to the rise of the modern Myanmar state.



