

# **History of Founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar**

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## **Abstract**

The Portuguese kings sent envoys to Myanmar, Siam (Thai), Malaysia and Ceylon after establishing their footholds in India. The Roman Catholic chaplains who firstly reached in circa 1500 tried to evangelize most of the native peoples, inhabited along the littoral zones in Myanmar. However they did not succeed. The spread of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar was to assess on how the bishops and chaplains founded their religion during the time of Myanmar monarchs. This paper, "History of Founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar," was written in using historical sources in Myanmar and English. This research paper will give those who learn history on and when the Roman Catholicism was founded in Myanmar. Myanmar monarchs had the religious toleration on the alien religions and so the Christianity and Islam exist today in Myanmar. This paper examines on how and when the Roman Catholicism was founded in Myanmar.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism, Portuguese, chaplain, Myanmar, religion

## **Aim**

To know the spread of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar and to assess on how the bishops and chaplains founded their religion during the time of Myanmar monarchs.

## **Introduction**

The Portuguese laid foundation of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar in 1600 with the growing power of Philip Debrito at Syriam. However, the Roman Catholic chaplains came to Lower Myanmar for evangelization of their religion soon after Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route to the East in 1497. When the rival feudal kings in Myanmar knew the military needs that they appointed the Portuguese mercenaries in their royal armies for the handling of the guns and artilleries. This factor introduced the Catholicism to the natives of Myanmar. The natural resources and agricultural products from the oriental countries persuaded the westerners from Christian countries in Europe for their interests.

In 1600 De Brito built the first Catholic Church at Syriam for his conferrers. In 1613 King AnaukphetLun of Ava kingdom took 5000 followers as war captives to Ava although Debrito and some leaders were executed after the conquest of Syriam. Therefore the Myanmar kings' religious toleration upon the alien religions gave the favorable circumstance to the foreigners to spread their religion. Later as they intermarried with the local people the Catholicism grew rapidly in Myanmar. In this way the Roman Catholicism could be founded in Myanmar.

This paper focuses on how and when the arrival of the Roman Catholicism in Myanmar. The founding of this religion in Myanmar is mainly concerned with the political, economic, military and social affairs. Some of Roman Catholic Church Buildings' age last for 500 years. These church buildings comprise the cultural buildings. The founding of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar highlights the society of Myanmar.

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### Research Questions

1. Why did the Catholic chaplains reach Myanmar?
2. How did the bishops and chaplains spread in Myanmar?
3. Why did King Anaukphet Lun allow 5000 Portuguese war captives to settle at Ava?

### Research Method

In writing this research paper, main sources were used from the Sacred Heart Cathedral (Mandalay) and some are also available from our department library. In addition, Fathers' advices were taken into account in this paper. Interview method, survey method and questionnaire method are used.

### Literature Review

There are many papers on arrival of the Roman Catholic Churches in Burma (Myanmar) such as the arrival of Europeans in Burma from Journal of Burma Research Society, books which aimed to the spread of Christianity published by the Christian Churches, Chronicles of Taung- U, the Great Chronicles written by U Kala, Royal Order of Burma compiled by Dr Than Tun, Myanmar historian and other research papers and history of Burmese Nationalism and Christianity for Ph.D (dissertation). It is found that in most of these papers and books the arrival of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar is explained in view with the political, economic and military affairs. In addition, the then Myanmar monarchs can be considered as the generous and sagacious kings because they did not view to only their adherent religion especially Buddhism and looked to the development of the country. Therefore, today Christianity, Islam and other religions remain in Myanmar due to the Myanmar monarchs' religious toleration.

### Finding and Discussion

Roman Catholicism which prevails in much of European countries and the America and Latin America and some African countries formally reached the East after the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco de Gama 1497. In truth, Muslim, Hinduism, Buddhism were prevailing in the East at that time. Especially the Moors of Muslim were dominating not only in the Indian Ocean waters but also controlling the commerce of the East. The discovery of the sea route to India instigated the Portuguese to penetrate into the East. The Portuguese adventurers, traders, looters and mercenaries then replaced the Moors in the Eastern political, economic and cultural affairs. The eight key factors will be discussed concerning with the history of founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar.

#### 1. Portuguese's aim

Soon after Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India around the Good Hope Cape in South Africa in 1497, Portuguese could establish their foothold in Goa, India. Then they established contact with Thai, Myanmar, Malaya archipelagos, and Ceylon based on political, military and diplomatic and economic reasons.<sup>2</sup> Their relations with the Eastern countries opened the way for arrival of Roman Catholic religion in the East. The Portuguese who came to the East had three main purposes as follows;

1. to earn the fortunes
2. to spread Roman Catholic religion and,

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<sup>2</sup>James Myint Swe, "The Arrival of the Portuguese in Burma (Myanmar), National Church History of Myanmar," St. Joseph's Catholic Major Seminary, Yangon, 2014 (Henceforth; Myint Swe, 2014), p.11

### 3. to wage Crusade war against the spread of Islam.<sup>3</sup>

In the first quarter of 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese were able to dominate the Indian Ocean and the Eastern trade. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the power struggles were broke out among the rival feudal kingdoms in Myanmar; Rakhine Kingdom, Ava kingdom and Mon kingdom. Their power struggle paid the way for the Portuguese mercenaries to recruit in the royal armies respectively. Portuguese came collectively or personally to the East to serve the kings as mercenaries, palace guards and king's body guard.

## 2. Fillip de Brito's role in founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar

Fillip de Brito took a role not only in Myanmar politics but also in founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar. He began his career as mercenary in the royal army of Rakhine army in 1590s. His military talent enabled him to become the most reliable man of King Min Yazagyi. Rakhine king seized Syriam(Thanlyin) in 1600 with the help of the Portuguese mercenaries led by De Brito. After seizing it, the king appointed De Brito as governor of Syriam.

Later De Brito rebelled against his master and built a separate kingdom under his sole rule at Syriam.<sup>4</sup> He endeavoured the spread of Roman Catholic religion there.<sup>5</sup> Therefore it can be said that Philio de Brito began to lay foundation of Roman Catholic religion in Myanmar.

## 3. Arrival of Catholic chaplains in Myanmar

While De Brito was establishing the foothold at Syriam and its surroundings for over ten years the missionaries from India and Europe came there for spread of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar. During De Brito's reign the first Roman Catholic Church was built at Syriam. In 1613 two Jesuit priests from Goa named Fr. Boves and Fr. Fernandez were sent to his domains in order to do missionary works.<sup>6</sup> The fruits of missionary works were considerably sprung out. These priests could convert the Mons, followers of De Brito into Roman Catholicism.

The chaplains, bishops accompanied by the Portuguese mercenaries reached in Lower Myanmar in circus 1500 in order to evangelize the natives, especially Talings of Lower Myanmar. But their attempt was in vain. Therefore, it can be said that the Roman Catholicism could spread in Myanmar in the first quarter of 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## 4. Ava Kings' religious tolerance towards the Bayigyis

Most of Myanmar king through ages who professed Theravada Buddhism held the religious toleration (tolerance) upon alien religions. After King Anaukphetlum had conquered Syriam in 1613 De Brito and some of his principal followers executed. However, the king took 170 Portuguese, 5000 Eurasians and Indians to Ava as the war captives. Among those, the Roman Catholic chaplains were taken to Ava as war captives. The names of these priests were as follows;

1. Fr. Emmanuel da Fonseca (1613-1653)

2. Fr. Diego Nunes

<sup>3</sup>Zam Khat Kam, *Burmese Nationalism and Christianity in Myanmar: Christian Identity and Witness in Myanmar Today*, Ph.D. (Dissertation), Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Department of Systematic Theology, 2015 p.25 (Henceforth: Zam Khat Kam,2015)

<sup>4</sup>U Tun Nyo, "*MahayazawinThit* (Taung-U Set), New Chronicle of Taung-U)," edited by Dr Kyaw Win, Vol. II, Yar Pyay Book House, 2012,p.42 (Henceforth; Tun Nyo,2012)

<sup>5</sup> The Unfortunate two nations: Portugal in Crisis and the end of the Burmese Toungoo Dynasty," National Church History of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014,p.47 (Henceforth: National Church History of Myanmar,2014)

<sup>6</sup>S.J Sigmund J .Laschenski, "Jesuit Assignment to Burma," National Church History of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014,p.61 (Henceforth; Laschenski,2014)

3. Fr. Gonzalo

4. Fr. Manoel Fereyra

5. Fr. Rafael de Sao Francisco

6. Fr. Joao Battista<sup>7</sup> were

Why did King Anaukphet Lun allow 5000 these war captives to settle at Ava? The Myanmar soldiers in his royal army skillfully failed to handle the weapons which were taken from Syria. On the contrary, Portuguese skillfully handled these weapons. Therefore, King Anaukphet Lun appointed them as gunners and musketeers in his royal army.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the king spared the lives of many of Debritto's followers for the military needs. The military unit in which the Portuguese served was called the *Bayingyi* unit<sup>9</sup>. They served as the Myanmar kings' own gunners and musketeers till 1885 when King Thibaw was deposed.<sup>10</sup>

Until now, Myanmar calls Roman Catholicism, *Bayingyi* religion. In reality, the word "*Bayingyi*" derived from the Persian word "*Ferinji*" meaning foreigner.<sup>11</sup> Its word was begun to use during the period of Crusade war that broke out between Islam and Christianity in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 5. The Founding of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar

On 10th April, 1630 King Thalun reorganized his royal army including *Bayingyi* military unit for the state defence.<sup>12</sup> King Thalun granted *Nay Myay* (settled land) and *Lup Myay* (farm land) to Portuguese decedents. In his order on grant of land to servicemen,

Feringi (Guns), Myay Nan (Guns), Shwe Wa (Guns), ShweWa (Guns), Tada U (Guns), Thu NgeDaw (Guns)<sup>13</sup>.

In a Pageant these gunners must surround His Majesty in the front, on the left and right and in the rear. On the occasion of fetching the Water for Ablution, they must participate by carrying each one a pot of water.<sup>14</sup>

In 1635 King Thalun settled *Bayingyis* at Payeinma. Then they were allowed to settle the areas; Monhla, Chaung U, Nabet, Chanthaywa and Chaungyoe, located between the Mu river valley and Chidwin river valley.<sup>15</sup>

It can be said that the legal settlement of the Portuguese decedents in Upper Myanmar caused the spread of Roman Catholic religion. After their settlement there, Pope at Vatican continually sent the missionaries to Myanmar in order to look after them.

<sup>7</sup>E.P.Evans, "Early Missionaries, National Church History of Myanmar," St. Joseph's Catholic Major Seminary, Yangon, 2014, p.48 (Henceforth; Evans, 2014)

<sup>8</sup>Yaw Han Tun, 2014, 13

<sup>9</sup>Dr Than Tun, "Royal Order of Burma," A.D. 1598-1885, Part One, A.D. 1598-1648, The Center For Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, 1983, pp.28-29

<sup>10</sup>Maung Kaung, The Roman Catholic Mission From 1721-1824," Fiftieth Anniversary Publications No. 2, Selections of Articles from the Journal of the Burma Research Society, Rangoon, 1960, p.121

<sup>11</sup>Yaw Han Tun, "Arrival of Portuguese in Upper Myanmar during the reigns of Myanmar kings," Historical Research Papers submitted for 500 Years Memorial Ceremony," Association of Catholic Bishops of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014, p.13

<sup>12</sup>Dr Than Tun, The Royal Order Of Burma, A.D. 1598-1885, Part One, A.D. 1598-1648, The Center For Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, 1983, p.28 (Henceforth; ROB1, 1983)

<sup>13</sup>ROB.1, 1983, 62

<sup>14</sup>ROB1, 1983, 62

<sup>15</sup>Dr .Than Tun, "History in Royal Order," Seik Ku Cho Cho Sarpay, Yangon, 2011, p.122 (Henceforth; Than Tun, 2011)

## 6. Arrival of chaplains after founding Bayingyi religion

From the reign of King Anaukphetlun of Ava period to the reign of King Sinphyushin of Konbaung Period, ten priests from different missionaries came to Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> These priests were as follows;

**Table**

| No | Year  | Name                          | Missionary            |
|----|-------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | 1613  | Fr. De Fonseca                | Jesuits               |
| 2  | 1615? | Fr. Denis Atumed              | Jesuits               |
| 3  | 1652  | Fr. Simon Rodrigues           | Jesuits               |
| 4  | 1692  | Fr. Genoud and Fr. Joret      | Paris Foreign Mission |
| 5  | 1719  | Fr. Sigimondo Mario Calchi    | Banabite              |
| 6  | 1728  | Fr. PioGalliza                | Banabite              |
| 7  | 1749  | Fr. Nerni                     | Banabite              |
| 8  | 1760  | Fr. Donati                    | Banabite              |
| 9  | 1761  | Fr. Gallizio and Fr. Avalnati | Banabite              |
| 10 | 1763  | Fr. Percoto                   | Banabite              |

The chaplains looked after the *Bayingyisat* Nabet, Monhla, Chaung U, Chanthaywa and Payeinma. They built the schools, dispensaries for not only Christians but also the Buddhists.<sup>17</sup> In 1639, 26 years after the Portuguese were marched north from Syriam, Father Denis Atumes, a priest in the community, conducted a census of the “*Bayingyi*” population. He recorded 400 each living at Nabet, ChaungOo and Depayin, 200 at ThitSeint, 150 at Innwa, 80 at Singu, 70 at Shwebo and 60 at Halin.

Fr. De Fonseca was regarded as saint by his captive-followers. In addition, the ministers of Ava kingdom paid respect to him. He persistently served for captives who scattered at different places to promote religious and social welfares. Fr. Fonseca built three churches at Ava.<sup>18</sup>

In 1640 Fr. Denis Antunes came to Ava to substitute Fr. De Fonseca who was old. Fr. Denis Antunes instructed the Christians, scattered in Upper Myanmar to hold the religious ceremonies and to build one Church of their own at one place. In 1648 Fr. Denis Antunes returned India because of his health condition. However, Fr. De Fonseca remained at Ava.

## 7. Arrival of Jesuit Society Missionary and Oblate Franciscan Missionary in Upper Myanmar

Different missionaries under the guidance of bishops and fathers came to Upper Myanmar for propagation and prosperity of Bayingyi religion. These missionaries were as follows;

1. Jesuit Society Missionary led by Fr. Emmanuel da Fonseca(1613-1652)
- 2 Jesuit Society led by Fr. Denis Autunes (1644-1648)

<sup>16</sup>Aung Nyunt, *Catholicism in Mandalay and The Bayingyi Villages*, Mandalay, 2014 (Henceforth; Nyunt,2014) pp. 18-32

<sup>17</sup>Daw Mornica, “Missionaries, Nationalities and Christian Education (1856-1900),” *Historical Research Papers*, submitted for 500 Years Memorial Ceremony,” Association of Catholic Bishops of Myanmar, Yangon, p.81 (Henceforth; Mornica,2014)

<sup>18</sup>J Sigmund Laschenski, , “Jesuit Assignment to Burma,” *National Church History of Myanmar*, Yangon, 2014,p.61 (Henceforth; Laschenski,2014)

3. Jesuit Society led by Fr. Simon Rodrigues (1652-1655)
4. Oblate Franciscan Missionary led by Fr. Rafael de Sao Francisco (1610-1634)
5. Oblate Franciscan Missionary (OFM) led by Fr. Joao Battista (1610-1634)
6. Oblate Franciscan Missionary (OFM) led by Fr. Francisco das Chagas (1641-1648)
7. Oblate Franciscan Missionary (OFM) led by Fr. Joao de Santa Ilena (1663-1713)<sup>19</sup>

In addition to these missionaries, priests from many other missionaries came to Lower Myanmar. These missionaries were as follows;

1. Fr. Francisco d'Annunciacao, O.P, 1627
2. Fr. George des Ursins, O.P, 1627
3. Fr. Manoel Battista, OSA, 1634-1636 at Syriam and Martaban
4. Fr. Augustin de Jesus, OSA at Syriam and Martaban
5. Fr. Simon Rodrigues, S.J, 1655 at Ava and 1655-1659 at Pegu
6. Fr. Giovanni Battista de Castelnuovo, OFM, 1682
7. Fr. Andre de Santa Maria, OFM<sup>20</sup>

These missionaries also paid attention to the Bayingyi villages in Upper Myanmar. So the Bayingyivill ages's social conditions progressed due to the missionaries' carefulness. In 1615 Ava King, Anaukphetlum deported the French, Dutch and Eurasians who professed Roman Catholicism to Upper Myanmar after the conquest of Chiangmai.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the Catholic population rapidly increased in Myanmar. In 1767 King Sinbyushin, ruler of Konbaung Dynasty also deported other Catholics together with Portuguese to Tavoy as the war captives except for Bishop Pierre Brigot, Vicar Apostolic of Siam who were taken to Rangoon (Yangon) after the conquest of Ayuthia (Thailand).<sup>22</sup>

Bishop Pierre Brigot settled the dispute took place between Portuguese (Padroado) priests and the Barnabite missionaries sent by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. Then he was appointed Bishop of Ava, Tavoy, Negraise Island and Nicobar Island. In 1768 the condition of the Missionaries in Siam (Thai) deteriorated day by day. In 1774, Thai King passed the Order on other religions. This order reads as follows;

If the Bishop, the missionary or any other Christian or Moslem makes a single Siamese or Peguan enter into the Christian or Moslem ceremonies, that Bishop or missionary, Christian or Moslem whoever he, should be seized, arrested and counted worthy of capital punishment.<sup>23</sup>

Thai king's attitude on alien religions hit a great impact on the Christian missionaries. So more Christian missionaries entered into the Myanmar territories; Mergui (Beik), Tavoy and Malamein (Malamyine), which were adjacent to Thai territory than ever before. In 1780 the Thai king expelled all missionaries from his country.

In 1867 Bayingyi population could be numbered 500 at Mandalay, 300 at Nabet, 400 at Chaung- U, 483 at Monhla, 120 at Ye-U and 600 at Yaungthar, totaling 2403 Catholics in

<sup>19</sup>James Myint Swe, "The Arrival of the Portuguese in Burma (Myanmar), National Church History of Myanmar," St. Joseph's Catholic Major Seminary, Yangon, 2014, p.48 (Henceforth; Myint Swe,2014)

<sup>20</sup>Myint Swe,2014 ,49

<sup>21</sup>Myin Swe,2014 ,48

<sup>22</sup>Myin Swe,2014 ,51

<sup>23</sup>Myin Swe,2014 ,51

Upper Myanmar.<sup>24</sup>Till 1841 the French missionary, based in Siam (Thai) continued to maintain its spiritual works in Tanasserim. In 1856 Tanasserim Region became a part of Vicariate Apostolic of Southern Burma (Myanmar).<sup>25</sup>

In 1868, Papacy at Vatican was divided into three regions; East, North and South in Myanmar for the spread of Catholic *Sasana*.<sup>26</sup> Vicariate Apostolic of Northern Burma (Myanmar)<sup>27</sup> took in charge of taking care of Catholics in Myanmar. With the practice of laissez faire policy, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were more power struggle among the European powers especially Britain and France. This power struggle pushed the European traders, colonists including the priests to go to the underdeveloped countries in Asia and Latin America for commercial interests. This factor encouraged the development of Christianity.

In Konbaung Period they served King Alaungmintaya for his reunification. They were conferred the royal titles by the king. So the Portuguese decedents served the kings of respective dynasties till the late Konbung Dynasty.<sup>28</sup>During the reign of King Badon (1782), Fr. Giuseppe d' Amato, Father of Italian Barnabite missionary came to Mon Hla. He took care of the Portuguese decedents. He translated some Buddhist literature into Italian and the Bible into Burmese (Myanmar). He was also famous for being the first foreigner to visit the ruby mines at Mogok. He died at Mon Hla in 1832.

### Research Findings

This research paper, "History of Founding Roman Catholicism in Myanmar," is well evaluated in studying the other research papers and books on the Christianity and interviewing with not only the historians but also the Fathers. In the field of research finding, the Myanmar kings and the natives were sympathetic on the war captives who professed the Roman Catholic and Islam and other religions and lived with them in peace and amity.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the Catholic chaplains who ministered the Portuguese adventurers, traders, mercenaries carried the Roman Catholicism to Myanmar. The Catholic chaplain who reached Myanmar took the charge of spread of their faith at the East. The bishops and chaplains spread their religion in Myanmar by supporting the Myanmar monarchs' political, economic and social needs. King Anaukphet Lun allowed settling 5000Portuguese war captives in order to recruit them as gunners and musketeers in his royal army. In short, the Portuguese sow a seed of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar in 1600. The causes for the arrival of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar indicated the main five points. The first points indicate the voyage between the East and the West.The second point was the military need of Myanmar monarchs. The third factor is that the Roman Catholic missionaries could persistently perform for the spread of their faith. The fourth reason concerned with the growing struggles based on

<sup>24</sup> Dr Than Tun, "History in the Royal Order," Seik Ku Cho ChoSarpay, Yangon, 2011, p.42 (Henceforth; Than Tun,2011)

<sup>25</sup>Myin Swe, 2014,51

<sup>26</sup>Mornica, "Missionaries, Nationalities and Christian Education," Historical Research Papers submitted for 500 Years memorial Ceremony," Association of Catholic Bishops of Myanmar, Yangon,2014,p.13

<sup>27</sup> Catholic Directory of India, 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Issue of the Madras Catholic Directory and Annual General Register, The Catholic Supply Society, Madras, 1925, p.327 (Henceforth; Catholic Directory of India,1925)

<sup>28</sup>U Maung Maung Tin, "*Konbaungset Mahayazawintawgyi*,"Vol.. I, Yangon,Yar Pyay Press, 2020, p.212 (Henceforth; Maung Maung Tin, 2020)

politics and economy took place among the Burmese kingdoms. The last fact was the Myanmar kings' religious toleration upon the alien religions. Above the five points were the key factors for foundation of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar. At now, according to the 2014 census, there are 740,000 Catholic populations out of over 50 million populations in Myanmar.

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