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MATRIMONIAL PRACTICES OF KONBAUNG KINGS

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Abstract

The Myanmar kings contracted marriages for consolidating their hold on power and administration and for the prevalence of peace and prosperity in the kingdom. Similarly, those who presented their daughters, sisters or relatives to the kings as if women were chattels, did so because they wanted to gain special privileges from the kings, because they were indebted to the kings, or because they wanted to express their loyalty to the kings. Marriages arranged for political gains can be divided into five categories. By offering their daughters, sisters and relatives to the reigning king, tributary rulers and royal officials tried to become members of the royal family. Thus, women became pawns in political movements. Moreover, women were installed as queens or removed from their positions as queens for political reasons. Due to such marriages of convenience, the number of queens increased, and palace intrigues ensued. Women tried to gain influence in the court. Therefore, although there were some women in Myanmar society who played a part in politics and administration, their number compared to that of the queens was too low, and women were mostly exploited for political gains. It seems that the kings used women mainly for securing their positions rather than for maintaining peace and stability. It can therefore be concluded that women had too little chance to become involved in politics.

Aim

The purpose of this research is to study the important role of matrimonial alliances in feudal system and to study the role of women in the Konbaung politic.

Introduction

The roles played by women in politics and administration were very limited. Queen Shin Sawpu, was famed as an able woman in administration. Although the roles played by women in politics and administration were very limited, a woman who was elevated to chief queen or queen could engage in administration and politics to some extent. Compared to the number of queens, however, the number of women who played leading roles in administration and politics was too low. Women did not have much chance to play a leading role in politics; they mostly were exploited by the kings for securing his position and consolidating his hold on power and for seeking peace by marrying them.

As there were women who were involved in politics and administration, there also were women whose marriages were arranged for perpetuating the king's rule, for strengthening the king's position, or for ensuring the country's peace. Matrimonial alliances were important in feudal system. A king cemented his relations with other

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rulers by marrying off his daughters, sisters or relatives to them, and this strengthened his position. Thus, the kings contracted marriages for political gains. The reigning king married

1. The princesses of royal blood
2. The daughters of hereditary chiefs such as *sawbwas*
3. The daughters of ministers and royal officials
4. The daughters of the officials who were important in the administration of the kingdom, and
5. The queen of one's predecessor,

Myanmar kings, to elevate themselves to royalty and to distinguish themselves, married princesses of the blood royal. King Alaungmintaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, needed to marry a person of royal lineage to make himself become a member of the royal family. Therefore, the early kings of the Konbaung dynasty-Kings Alaungmintaya and his sons, King Dipeyin and Myedu married the relatives of the previous kings. When the king of Hanthawady, losing the war, presented his daughter to King Alaungmintaya on 22 December 1756 (the 2nd day of the waxing moon of Pyatho, 1118 ME), Alaungmintaya installed her as Bago Queen. (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 215) Furthermore, King Alaungmintaya married the daughter of Mine Thihayaz who held Thayet in fief and who was a son of King Tanninganwe of the Nyaungyan dynasty in 1757 (the 14th day the waxing moon of Wazo, 1119 ME), and named her Htutcha Dewi. (*List of Queens, Sons and Daughters*, p.9) She also was a niece of Maha Dhammayazadipati. (Tun Aung Chan, 2005, pp.1-29) Moreover, in the reign of his son King Dipeyin, Min Shwekya who held Hkepaung in fief, a niece of Maha Dhammayazadipati, who was taken to Hanthawady, was made Queen of Central Palace. (*List of Queen, Sons and Daughters*, 5b, Tun Aung Chan, 2005, 8) In King Myedu's reign, Htutcha Dewi, Maha Dhammayazadipati's niece, was installed as Queen of the Northern Palace, and Min Shwe Pwint and Min Hteit Pan, Maha Dhammayazadipati's daughter, were elevated to the position of queens. (*List of Queens, Sons and Daughters*, 7, 11, Tun Aung Chan, 2005, 14) Thus, King Alaungmintaya and his sons-Kings Dipeyin and Myedu married princesses of the blood royal to enter into the royal family. Besides, they behaved as if they were members of a royal family by intermarrying. For instance, King Myedu raised his sister/ cousin Me Hla to the status of the Chief Queen. He also married the sister of the Chief Queen, Mi Shin who bore the title Thiri Maha Dewi and who held Taungdwingyi in fief. (*List of Queens, Sons and Daughters*, 7, 11, Tun Aung Chan, 2005, 13) In the reign of King Singu Shin Minpaung, the king's sister became the Queen of the Northern Palace. (*List of Queens, Sons and Daughter*, 16) As the kings of the Sakya clan intermarry to preserve their lineage of pure blue blood, intermarriages began in the Konbaung period in King Myedu's reign. There were intermarriages among the royal relatives in King Badon's reign too. Intermarriage had profound effect on the succession. A prince both of whose parents were of blue blood was more entitled to the throne than another prince. This became more important after

the reign of King Badon. (Koenig, 1990, 178) Elevating Me Nu who was not of royal blood to Chief Queen by King Bagyidaw led to Tharyarwady's rebellion, which resulted in the deposition of King Bagyidaw. Therefore, King Bagyidaw's successors rebellion, which resulted in the deposition of King Bagyidaw. Therefore, King Bagyidaw's successors only installed princesses of the blood royal as chief queens. Especially, King Mindon made the sister of King Pagan who was the daughter of King Tharyarwady his chief queen rather than choosing Me The.

The daughters and relatives of Sawbwas and other hereditary chiefs also were involved in the marriages arranged for political purpose. The Sawbwas often offered the hands of their daughters to the Myanmar kings to gain Myanmar king's favours, to admit their inferiority to the Myanmar kings, and to express their loyalty, humbleness and friendliness towards the Myanmar kings. (Soe Soe Aung, 1992, 38) Sometimes, the rulers presented their daughters to their rivals for averting war and for maintaining peace.

The Myanmar kings also seem to have believed that they could prevent the *sawbwas* from rebelling against them by having their daughters at the royal capital. (Soe Soe Aung, 1992, 39) The king who received the daughter of a tributary ruler would be proud, comparing himself with Sakka (Indra). When Hanthawady was defeated by the Myanmar army in 1765, the king of Hanthawady presented his daughter to King Alaungmintaya, who accepted her "like Sakka accepted Princess Athura". (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 219-20) King Badon (1782-1819) was the king who got most consorts presented by his subjects in the Konbaung period. Most of the daughters presented to the Myanmar kings aged between eight and fourteen. That the daughters presented to the Myanmar kings included very young girls can be learnt from a royal order issued on 6 September 1817 (the 12th day of the waxing moon of Thadingyut, 1179 ME) which mentions. "The ears of the Princess of Vesali, whom the king had received, have not been pierced because she was too young." (Than Tun, 1988a, p.424) The fact that young daughters were presented to the Myanmar kings shows that the tributary rulers did not care much about marriageable age, but presented their daughters to the Myanmar kings to form alliances with the Myanmar kings. In the reign of King Badon, Chinese merchants, the *sawbwa* of Bamaw, and officials from Yunnan and Beijing, purporting to be sent by the Chinese monarch to present his daughter to the Myanmar king, visited the Myanmar king with a view to obtaining special trading privileges. (San Oo, 1995, 8) In King Mindon's reign, the king adored the daughter of the *sawbwas* of Mone, and treated the *swabwa* of Mone like a prince, letting him sit nearest to himself on formal occasions. When the royal seat was moved to Mandalay, King Mindon allowed a hundred families from Mone to settle in the northern part of Mandalay. (Khin Lay Yi, 1997, 27) Therefore, the tributary rulers improved their relations with the Myanmar kings and tried to obtain special privileges by presenting their daughters to the Myanmar kings. However, there were instances in which a tributary ruler refused to present his daughter to the Myanmar king. When the Myanmar army marched to Rakhine in King Badon's reign,

the crown prince and officials of Rakhine court, believing that they would not be able to repel the Myanmar forces, advised the king of Rakhine to present his daughter to the Myanmar kings; but the Rakhine king left the city to avoid presenting his daughter to the Myanmar king. (*Konbaungzet, 2004a, 24-26*). Some rulers, however, after presenting their daughters to the Myanmar kings, rebelled against the latter. In the reign of King Thibaw, relations between Myanmar and Mone became tense, and Myanmar forces marched to Mone in February 1881. As the *sawbwa* of Mone, strengthening his and Myanmar forces marched to Mone in February 1881. As the *sawbwa* of Mone, strengthening his following and procuring arms, attacked the towns near Mone-Kyaingtaung, Hopon, Maingpun and Maingpyin, the Hluttaw demanded his elder sister who was a former queen to call the *sawbwa* to the royal capital. The *sawbwa* of Mone, however, refused to come. Hence, the former queen of Mone fled the Myanmar capital, disguising herself as pilgrim; she was caught in the Thindigon village near Kyaukse, and was imprisoned. (*Konbaungzet, 2004b, 375*) Therefore, although presenting one's daughter could improve one's relations with the Myanmar king, if one rebelled against the Myanmar king after presenting one's daughter to him, she would be held as a hostage. However, such incidents were rare. Hence, it seems that the tributary rulers achieve their aims in presenting their daughters to the Myanmar kings.

Another type of marriage relationships used for political purposes was the marriages between the king and daughters of his royal officials. As to installing the daughters of royal officials including ministers as queens, it is not known for certain whether the kings married the relatives of the officials after they had been appointed to their posts or appointed the relatives of their queens as officials. Nevertheless, most of the royal officials were the king's relations by marriage. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1991, 7) Myanmar in the Konbaung period was a despotic monarchy. The kingdom was administered by central and local governments. The capital was administered by the five offices of the Hlutyon i.e., the Hluttaw or Supreme Council, the Bye-daik or Privy Council, the Sheiyon or Eastern Court serving as the Criminal Court, the Naukyon or Western Court serving as court of law for palace ladies, and the Taya-yon or Civil Court, while the provinces were governed by *hkayaing-wuns* (provincial governors), *ne myo wuns* (township officers) in cooperation with local hereditary chiefs. All the officials with the exception of hereditary chiefs were appointed by the king. The officials normally administrative appointed at the five offices of the Hlutyon were : four wungyis of the Hluttaw, the Myinzugyi wun, the athi-wun, four wundauks and their assistants. However, the number of officials of these offices depended on the king's wishes. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1991, 8-9)

The officers of the five offices of the Hlutyon who were related to the queens were: the Yindaw Wungyi in King Naungdawgyi's reign, (*List of Queens, sons, and Daughters, 5b*) the minister Maha Thihathura in the reign of King Singu, (*Konbaungzet, 1989, 507*) the minister Maha Zeyathura in King Badon's reign, the ministers Thado Minhla Nawrahta and Thado Thiri Uzana in King Bagyidaw's reign,

(Khin Maung Nyunt, 1991, 23-24) Thado Mingyi Mha Minhla Mingaung, the Yenangyaung Wungyi, Thado Mingyi Maha Sithu, the Laungshe Wungyi, Mingyi Maha Minhla Mingaung, the Wundauk who held Myothit in fief, Mingyi Maha Mingaung, the mayor of Mandalay who held Yindaw in fief and Mingyi Maha Minhla Thiri, the mayor of Mandalay in King Mindon's reign. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1991, 7)

The documents indicate that the number of officers related to the queens increased in King Mindon's reign. As the kings married the relations of queens to consolidate their power, the officials became influential in the palace. Therefore, U Hpo Hlaing, the Yaw Atwin-wun criticized that the king favoured incompetent officers who had presented their sisters and daughters to him. (Hpo Hlaing, 1960, 92-93) Although the kings normally consulted the Hluttaw for appointing provincial governors (*awe hkayaing-wuns*), King Mindon fill a vacancy for awe myowun at the advise of his queens; hence the Pahkan Mingyi disregarded his order. (Mawpi Saya Theingyi, 1967, 22) In King Mindon's reign, Maung Toe, captain of the South Dawe Musketeers, who was a younger brother of the Hkunnit Ywa Queen, tried to be overbearing towards the ministers, the Pabe Mingyi had to "punish him by elbowing." (Mawpi Saya Theingyi, 1967, 53-54) Therefore, it seems that the officers related to the queens increased in King Mindon's reign, and they became influential in the palace. However, as the kings installed the daughters and relatives of royal officials as queen because of their trust in them, they would be removed from their positions if the king did not trust them anymore. In King Singu's reign, the king had his Northern Queen executed and removed her father Minister Maha Thihathura from office because he did not trust them. (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 540)

The kings also married the daughters and relatives of the persons who were important for politics and administration. By studying the genealogies of the chief queens of the Konbaung period, whom their ancestors were, why they became queens, etc. can be learnt. A study of the genealogies of principal queens indicates that the chief queens and the principal queens of the early kings of the Konbaung period were the relations of Min Thiri Yantaza, Commander of the 1000 Shields of Sipottara. All the principal queens of Kings Alaungmintaya, Sinbyushin, Singu and Badon were close relatives of Min Thiri Yantaza, Commander of the 1000 Shields of Sipottara, the Sitha Mingyi and the myowun (governor) of Yandanatheinga. Min Thiri Yantaza probably was an influential person around Shwebo. (Koenig, 1990, 190) His son-in-law, the Sitha Mingyi had been a minister with the title Sithu Kyawhtin Mingyi Kyawswahtin in the reign of the king who was taken to Hanthawady. (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 31) The relationship between King Alaungmintaya and Sitha Mingyi can be learnt from the *Konbaungzet* Maha Yazawin. When Innwa fell, Sitha Mingyi fled to the Kwes. That King Alaungmintaya received the envoys sent by the Kwes because Sitha Mingyi was in their hands, (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 22) that Alaungmintaya plced Sitha Mingyi among his sixty-eight comrades, (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 29) and that he made his forces attack the Kwes only after the Kwes had sent Sitha Mingyi to Moatsobo (*Konbaungzet*, 1989, 31) indicate how important the Sitha Mingyi was for

Alaungmintaya. Therefore, the kings of the early Konbaung period installed the daughters of Min Thiri Yantaza, Commander of the 1000 Shields of Sipottara and of his sons-in-law the Sitha Mingyi and the myowun of Yadanatheinga who were influential local administrative officials, as queens with a view to consolidating their hold on power and rehabilitating the kingdom. The descendents of Min Thiri Yantaza were installed as queens only till the reign of King Badon.

In addition, Myanmar kings often marry the consorts of their predecessors. How a reigning king married a queen of his predecessor is mentioned in the Glass Palace Chronicle as follows: “The queen who had been consecrated in never disparaged by later kings.” (Khin Khin Ma, 2004, 13) A new king could secure his position by marrying a consort of his predecessor whose position had been secure, and could win over her friends and relatives to his side. (Khin Khin Ma, 2004, 13) In the Konbaung period, King Dipeyin installed the Queen of Minywa, one of King Alaungmintaya’s consorts, as Queen of Northern Palace; (*List of Queens, sons and Daughter, 5b*) King Myedu made Htutcha Dewi, another queen of King Alaungmintaya, Queen of the Northern Palace; (*List of Queens, Sons and Dauthters, 9*) and King Singu installed Shin Minhla, a concubine of King Sinbyushin, as the second Queen of the Northern Palace. (*List of queens, sons and Daughter, 16*) The Minywa Queen was a younger sister of Minhla Pyaunchi, the Minywa Bo, When Minhla Pyanchi came to his side, King Alaungmintaya married his sister. (*Konbaungzet, 1989, 81*) This Minywa Queen Sanda Mahe was the queen who was allowed to accompany King Alaungmintaya when he went on a military expedition to Hanthawady. (*Konbaungzet, 1989, 111*) She probably became friendly with Alaungmintaya’s son Dipeyin and the Myanmar commanders on this trip. (Tun Aung Chain, 1989, 111) It seems that King Dipeyin reinstated her as Queen of the Northern Palace because she was an important queen in his father’s time. Htutcha Dewi, King Alaungmintaya’s consort was the niece of Maha Dhammayazadipati. She seemed to have accompanied King Alaungmintaya when he marched to Ayudhya. When Alaungmintaya passed away while laying siege to Ayudhya, Sinbyushin and Htutcha Dewi seemed to have attempted to seize the throne. Mingaung Nawrahta reported to Dipeyin after Alaungmintaya’s death that Htutcha Dewi and Sinbyushin had been chatting. (*Konbaungzet, 1989, 312*) Therefore, Htutcha Dewi seemed to have a relationship with Myedu for political gains when she accompanied King Alaungmintaya on his march to Ayudhya. (Tun Aung Chain, 2005, 14) This probably was the reason for King Myedu to install her as Queen of the Northern Palace when he ascended the throne. The reason for King Singu to take the hands of Shin Minhla, King Myedu’s concubine, however is not known.

The number of queens of each king had increased since King Badon’s reign. The kings came to have more wives to secure their positions, which in turn brought about palace intrigues. As there were no rules for succession, the sons of all the queens had right to inherit the throne, and this led to problems concerning succession. Queens became involved in palace intrigues, and influential queens and ministers

tried to control the court. In the reign of King Mindon, as neither the Chief Queen nor any of the principal queens-the queens of the Northern Palace, the Central Palace and of the Western Palace-had a son, the sons of all the other queens had their eyes on the throne, and their struggle for power brought about rebellions and massacres. When King Mindon named his brother Prince Kanaung Crown Prince, the relationship between his brother and sons probably deteriorated. Therefore, the king arranged the marriage of his son who was born of the first queen of the Thaung Shweye Zaung and who held Myingun town in fief and Princess of Taung Nyo, Prince Kanaung's daughter. However, the tension never abated; and on 30 July 1966 Prince Myingun and Myingondaing rebelled against the king, and Prince Kanaung lost his life in this rebellion. (*Konbaungzet, 2004b, 230*) After the death of Prince Kanaung, King Mindon did not choose another successor; and it seems that his queens began to involve in the conspiracies. As there were no specific rules for succession and as there were many queens, their sons vied for power, which led to palace intrigues. That was why the princes and princesses including the king's sons, daughters and grandchildren who were entitled to the throne were killed.

Conclusion

The Myanmar kings contracted marriages for consolidating their hold on power and administration and for the prevalence of peace and prosperity in the kingdom. Similarly, those who presented their daughters, sisters or relatives to the kings as if women were chattels, did so because they wanted to gain special privileges from the kings, because they were indebted to the kings, or because they wanted to express their loyalty to the kings. Marriages arranged for political gains can be divided into five categories. By offering their daughters, sisters and relatives to the reigning king, tributary rulers and royal officials tried to become members of the royal family. Thus, women became pawns in political movements. Moreover, women were installed as queens or removed from their positions as queens for political reasons. Due to such marriages of convenience, the number of queens increased, and palace intrigues ensued. Women tried to gain influence in the court. Therefore, although there were some women in Myanmar society who played a part in politics and administration, their number compared to that of the queens was too low, and women were mostly exploited for political gains. It seems that the kings used women for securing their positions rather than for maintaining peace and stability. It can therefore be concluded that women had too little chance to become involved in politics.

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