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# A STUDY OF MYANMAR AGRICULTURE DURING THE LATER KONBAUNG PERIOD

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## Abstract

In the monarchical days, agriculture was an important role in the economy of a state. In the later Konbaung Period, Myanmar being an agriculture-based country, the crops varied from region to region. In King Mindon's reign, some crops were monopolized by the king as the restricted royal goods, and were first exported to Lower Myanmar as the surplus crops. In Upper Myanmar, paddy was grown for domestic consumption rather than for sale. Although there were two kinds of economy, namely the monarchical economy and the capitalist economy, it is observed that the economic form of the monarchical system continued to prevail.

## Introduction

During the reign of Myanmar kings, agriculture had existed as the principal livelihood. The kings throughout Konbaung Period built new water tanks and maintained the old ones. The agriculture in the reign of Myanmar kings was four kinds: paddy land, farmland, alluvial land and garden land. With the division of the country into Upper Myanmar (the Myanmar kingdom) and Lower Myanmar (British Burma), King Mindon endeavored to develop the economy of Upper Myanmar. It is observed that the rice transportation from British Burma to Upper Myanmar had declined in King Mindon's reign from year to year. Since Myanmar relied on agriculture, the King gave priority to agriculture, as proved by the royal ploughing ceremony. It was in the month of Nayon that such a ceremony was held. On 16 June 1853, during King Mindon's reign, the royal ploughing ceremony was held. It is assumed that such a ceremony was meant to develop the agriculture. During Konbaung Period, land ownership was divided into three types: the Royal Land (*Ayar-taw Mye*), *Wuttaka Mye* belonging to the Buddhist *Sāsana*, and ancestral land on which the common people worked for their livelihood.<sup>2</sup> The royal land or *Ayar-taw Mye* was divided into four: *Nan-Sin Ayar-taw Mye*, *Sone-the Amwe Pyat Ayar-taw Mye*, *Thein-su Ayar-taw Mye*, and *Yun-Paung Par Mye*. The Royal Land throughout the successive kings was called *Nan-Sin Ayar-taw Mye*. The land with no one surviving to inherit was called *Sone -the A-mwe-pyat Ayar-taw Mye*. But should there turn up any one who was entitled for the inheritance, the land could be retrieved for the ownership within ten years. It is observed that if the land had not been retrieved within ten years, it was free from the royalty land type. The *Thein-su Ayar-taw Mye* was referred to the land taken into possession from those who had committed the crimes (The land which was confiscated by the king from a man who had offended a great crime). The *Nan-sin Ayar-taw Mye*, the *Sone -the A-mwe-pyat Ayar-taw Mye* and the *Thein-su Ayar-taw Mye* were usually placed under the on-loan cultivators called *Thee-sa*. The lands belonging to the queens of successive periods were called *Yun-Paung-Par Mye*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> U Toe Hla, *Konbaung-khit Lè-yar Thèt-ka-yit-pa Lu-hmu Si-pwa-ye Tha-maing* (Socio Economic History Recorded in the Paddy Land Thetkayits of Konbaung Period), Research Project, Department of History, University of Education, September 1981, p.62 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 1981)

<sup>3</sup> U Tin, *Myan-mar-min Ôk-chôk-pôn Sar-danhnint Bodawpayai Ya-za-that Khaw-tho A-meint-daw-dan-gyi* (On the Administration of Myanmar Kings and the Royal Orders of King Bodawpaya), Yangon, Seik Ku Cho Cho Sarpay, 2012, p.570 (Henceforth: Tin, 2012)

The ancestral lands on which the commoners worked for their livelihood consisted of the *Dhama U-cha Mye* (Land acquired by the right of first cleaning), *Min-PayMye* (The kind of land which consisted of *Ne-mye Sa-mye*, *Sa-mye*, *Tha-ye Moe Tha-ye Mye*. The land type of *Ne-mye Sa-mye* was the land allotted for both settlement and for cultivation for the sake of livelihood) and *Ngwe-we NgwePaungMye* (The kind of land which could be owned from generation to generation since it was sold or mortgaged by the owner who officially owned the *Dhama U-chaMye* or *Min-payMye* was called *Ngwe-we Ngwe-paungMye*). The *WuttakaMye* belonging to the Buddhist *Sāsanā* was divided into three types, the *WuttakaMye* related to the pagoda, the *Pitakat*, and the monastery.<sup>4</sup>

To rehabilitate the economy of the country, King Sagaing (1819-1837) exempted the common people from the one-tenth taxation for three years. Although King Sagaing took measure for restoring the economy of the country at his best, as he came to be faced with the impending threat of the imperialists, he could not make a good foundation of the country's economy. Because of first Anglo-Myanmar War, the economic conditions of Myanmar had gone from bad to worse. As the peasants had to leave their paddy fields for the battle fields, the fields remained un-cultivated. As they also had to pay the expenses of war, the poor commoners were in the pit of debt.<sup>5</sup> The deteriorating economy which resulted from the First Anglo Myanmar War in King Sagaing's reign, still continued to prevail also in the reign of King Tharayawaddy (1837-1846).

King Tharayawaddy did maintaining the damaged canals in the Nine District region, and appointing the position of *SèWun* or officer to the canal affairs.<sup>6</sup> After the Second Myanmar Anglo War, the canals, lakes and water tanks were maintained and repaired to develop the sector of agriculture during the reign of King Mindon.<sup>7</sup> *Lè* cultivation, *Ya* cultivation, *Kaing* cultivation (i.e. cultivation on alluvial formations) and garden cultivation were carried on in the later Konbaung Period. *Lè* was paddy land. *Yawas* farm land and peas and beans, maize, sesame, cotton, etc. were cultivated in *ya*. Beans, cotton and sesame were important cash crops in the Konbaung Period. Maize was main crop grown in *ya*.<sup>8</sup>

There are two kinds of paddy land: *ThanLè* (Irrigated land) and *MuyinLè* (Paddy land grown during cold season). Rain-fed paddy lands were found in Lower Myanmar while irrigated paddy lands were found in Central and Upper Myanmar, especially in Kyaukse, known as the Nine District Region (*Ko-kha-yaing*) and in Minbu District known as the Six District Region, Mattaya and Shwebo regions.<sup>9</sup> In those regions, the Myanmar kings organized the war captives brought from different parts of the country into *A-su-a-hmu-htan*, or in service in groups, and set up villages for them. The Nine Ledwin Districts where irrigated cultivation

<sup>4</sup> Tin, 2012, 575-577

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Toe Hla, *AlaungmintayagyiiKonbaungShwe-pyi* (The Golden Kingdom of Konbaung Period), Yangon, ShweChinthe Press, 2008, p. 140 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> U MaungMaung Tin, *Konbaung-zèt Ma-ha Ya-za-win-daw-gyi* (The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty), Vol.III, Yangon, University Historical Research Department, 2004, p. 221 (Henceforth: Maung Maung Tin, 2004c)

<sup>7</sup> Toe Hla, 2008, 140-144

<sup>8</sup> Ma Kyan, *Konbaung -khit A-khun-daw-ye-yar* (Taxation in the Konbaung Period), Yangon, Monywa Press, 2009, P.168 ( Henceforth: Kyan, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Than Tun, *Khit-haungMyan-mar Ya-za-win* (History of Ancient Myanmar), Yangon, Maha Dagon Htoke-Lokeyay Press, 1969, p. 110-112 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 1969)

thrived well during the reign of Myanmar Kings was also known as the granary of Myanmar. The kinds of *La-maing* paddy fields were mostly found in the region of Shwebo, Kyaw Si Taik, Mattaya Region and Kyaukse Region. During King Sagaing's reign, during the First Anglo-Myanmar War, the *La-maingA-su* (Royal land cultivators) were also to join the army, so the *La-maingA-su* men working on paddy fields had to serve the military service in times of safeguarding the country.<sup>10</sup> Paddy was grown all over the country, and there were 187 kinds of paddy. In paddy lands, the *Thèt-nu* (short term) paddy and *Thèt-yint* (long term) paddy were mainly grown.<sup>11</sup> The Myanmar traditional terms to identify the paddy land were *Ta-kwet*, *Ta-kant*, and *Ta-khin*, etc.<sup>12</sup> Price of a paddy land was identified according to the type of soil, width, distance from the water source, etc. Because of the drastic weather conditions or other circumstances, the common people were faced with financial difficulties, had to do selling or mortgaging their paddy lands, or take loans of paddy or cash. In their loans, they used to mention the reasons: in need of money, having run out of money, to consume paddy, to settle the debt, to fulfil the intention (to buy, cattle, to do nursery, to make investment and to do trading), to pay for the fees of royal service, to hold novitiation ceremony and to do burial service.<sup>13</sup>

During the reign of Myanmar kings, the width of a paddy field was mentioned in *Pè*, but the common people did not use that measurement, since they referred to the width of field in terms of *Pyo-wun* (holding of the seedlings) or *Myo-kyè* (dispersing of the seeds). The value of a paddy land was mentioned in terms of *Pyo-wun*. With a holding of a hundred seedlings as a standard, the maximum price of a paddy field was from at least 7kyats to 100 kyats at most. The prices of paddy lands were sold according to the types of soil and different regions in the later Konbaung Period. One noteworthy fact was that in the six Districts of Minbu, which were Saku, Salin, Pwint-phyu (*Le-kaing*), when selling or purchase of paddy lands was made, the standard area that of the man labour (transplanters). In a selling contract of paddy land dates 1821, the paddy land on which ten transplanters worked was sold at 280kyats. In that region, in 1822, the paddy land for 40 transplanters had the standard price of 500kyats. These facts show a gap between the two prices.<sup>14</sup> It is observed that one *Pè* of paddy lands yielded the minimum of 15 baskets to on the maximum of the 30 baskets of paddy. It is noted that one *Pè* of paddy lands was equal to 1.77 acres and that one acre yielded around 20 baskets of paddy. It is also observed that some evidences show the holding of seedlings parallel to the rate of yield.<sup>15</sup>

Upper Myanmar was faced with the insufficient rainfall and the poor soil, and as a consequence, the scarcity of paddy. To get out of such tight circumstances, King Mindon dug canals for irrigation in Shwebo and Amarapura regions, and took measures for cultivating

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<sup>10</sup> U (MaungMaung) Tin, *Konbaung-zèt Ma-ha Ya-za-win-daw-gyi* (The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty), Vol.II, Yangon, University Historical Research Department, 2004, p. 276 (Henceforth: (MaungMaung) Tin, 2004b)

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Toe Hla, *Konbaung-khitKye-lèt Lu-hmu Si-pwa Ba-wa (1752-1885)* (Socio Economic of Rural in Konbaung Period), Myanmar Historical Commissioner, Yangon, 2004, p.87 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 2004)

<sup>12</sup> Toe Hla, 1981, 62

<sup>13</sup> Toe Hla, 1981, 28-42

<sup>14</sup> Toe Hla, 1981, 76-79

<sup>15</sup> KhinOhn Tint, *The Economy of Late Konbaung Period*, Ph.D Dissertation, History Department, Mandalay University, 2013 p.16 (Henceforth: KhinOhn Tint, 2013)

plenty of paddies. He also maintained the Lakes such as Maha Nanda, Yin Mar, KyoKyar, Kadu and Aung Pin Le, etc Moreover, in 1856; Meiktila Lake, Maung-ma Kan, Tanni Lake and Byè Taw Lake were repaired and maintained under the supervision of WetmaswutMyo-sa. Then money loans were also lent to peasants to purchase cattle, and seeds, for cultivation. In 1867, the damaged canals from Aung Pin Le Lake and Nanda Lake were repaired. The poor peasants in the surrounding regions were provided with necessary money for paddy cultivation, Because of the endeavors of King Mindon, the yield of paddy had increased. With the increase of the yield, Upper Myanmar did not need to purchase plenty of rice from Lower Myanmar.<sup>16</sup>In the former years of drought, as paddy was a scarcity in Upper Myanmar, the paddy from Bago, Lower Myanmar, was exported to the Royal Capital.<sup>17</sup>

**Rice exported from British-Myanmar (Lower Myanmar)  
to Upper Myanmar**

Year	Rice (in Ton)	Value (in Rs)
1867-68	1,00,465	41,30,000
1868-69	74,500	24,37,000
1870-71	96,307	35,82,332
1871-72	57,123	16,80,084
1872-73	26,655	92,234
1873-74	24,718	60,432

Source: MyintMyint Than, 1969, pp-80-82

According to the table above tons of rice exported from British- Myanmar (Lower Myanmar) had gradually declined.King Mindon endeavored to develop the economy of Upper Myanmar.It is observed that the rice transportation from British Burma to Upper Myanmar had declined in King Mindon's reign from year to year.

In farmlands, except paddy, peasants grew sesame, millet, cotton and beans and wheat. The regions where farmland crops were mainly grown were villages in the regions of Mandalay, and Magwe in Central Myanmar and villages in Sagaing Division.<sup>18</sup>In Upper Myanmar, in regions which did not get good rainfall or irrigation and which did not have canals or creeks or lakes, millet was grown. Millet seeds were consumed by people while its stem was kept for a long time for cattle fodder, so millet had been an important crop of these regions.<sup>19</sup>

In farmland cultivation, cotton was another important crop. The regions where cotton was grown in large numbers were the regions of the East Direction of Shwe Pyi Yan Aung, and the West Direction of Shwe Pyi Yan Aung: Myingyan, Meiktila districts, Talôk Township and Sagaing, ChaungOo, and Alon in Sagaing Division.<sup>20</sup>The cotton yielded from those regions

<sup>16</sup>DawMyintMyint Than, “*Mindon-min Let-htêtÔk-chôk-ye hmint Si-pwa-ye A-che-a-ne*” (Economic and Administrative Conditions during the Reign of Mindon Min), *Union of Myanmar Literature and Social Sciences Journal*, Vol.II, No.3, September, 1969, pp.80-82 (Henceforth: MyintMyint Than, 1969)

<sup>17</sup>D.G.E. Hall, *The Dalhousie-Phayre Correspondence (1852-1856)*, London, Oxford University Press, 1932, pp.144-145 (Henceforth: Hall, 1932)

<sup>18</sup>Toe Hla, 2004, 50-62

<sup>19</sup>Toe Hla, 2004,106

<sup>20</sup>KhinOhn Tint, 2013,25

had become a crop whose yield was sufficient not only for local use, but also for export in large number to China. Thus, it had been declared to be the monopolized property of the king.<sup>21</sup> It is noted that even in King Mindon's reign, the weight of cotton that the British purchased has increased from year to year.<sup>22</sup> The alluvial land cultivation took place along the flooded river sand banks and the delta region. In the alluvial land cultivation were grown sugarcane, onion, chili, tobacco, beans, gourd, pumpkin and cucumber and vegetables.<sup>23</sup> The plenty of acres of onion were grown in Sa-le, and large acres of tobacco were also grown in Bago, Ngamyar, Mye-htè and Sa-le.<sup>24</sup> In MyaTaung Township, tobacco and other crops were grown. In Bagan, Sintku, Ywathar, Talôk, Min Ye Hla, Kyauk-pyaryaw, and Kyauk-sa-yit, the towns included in the Thirty Two Towns of Hanthawaddy, there took place alluvial land cultivation.<sup>25</sup> In the alluvial land cultivation in later Konbaung Period, the plant important for the economy of the country was indigo. It was grown even before 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup>

Toddy was important garden plant like paddy.<sup>27</sup> Toddy Plantations were grown in Kyaukpadaung, Sa-le, Salin, HsinPyuKyun, NyaungOo, Bagan, Pa-khan and Shwebo. The toddy palm-woven boxes were usually carried along on the tour of the Kings in the olden times, and for making such boxes, the toddy palm leaves were to be submitted from the region of Shwebo.<sup>28</sup> Toddy climbing was an important remunerative occupation in Kyaukpadaung, NyaungOo and Sa-le in central Myanmar.<sup>29</sup> The toddy cultivation was an important livelihood like the alluvial land cultivation. The major crops grown in Sa-le and its surrounding areas in the later Konbaung Period were paddy, sesame, maize, cotton, tobacco, peas and beans, and onions. Sesame, maize, tobacco, peas and beans and toddy were cash crops of Sa-le area in the later Konbaung Period.<sup>30</sup>

As the business of exporting the indigo prospered more and more, the cultivation of indigo had become an economy of the country. King Mindon promoted the indigo cultivation by building indigo factories. The indigo business prospered well in this time. The indigo was not declared as the royal commodity, but for free trading or cultivation for anyone. The Indigo

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<sup>21</sup> Toe Hla, 2004, 94

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt, "Myan-mar-min Mya Lèt-htèt Wa-gun Yaung-wei-ye" (Cotton Trading in the Reign of Myanmar Kings), *Shumawa Magazine*, Vol. XXV, No. 289, July 1971, pp. 97-99 (Henceforth: Khin Maung Nyunt, 1971)

<sup>23</sup> Toe Hla, 2004, 126-127

<sup>24</sup> Michael Symes, *An Account of Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava*, sent by the Governor General of India in the year 1795, London, Nocol and Wright, 1800, p. 276 (Henceforth: Symes, 1800)

<sup>25</sup> San Yee, "Konbaung-khit Myan-mar-min-myai A-khun-taw Tha-maing" (History of Revenue of the Myanmar Kings during the Konbaung Period), M.A. Thesis, Yangon, Department of History, Arts and Science University, 1976, p. 4 (Henceforth: San Yee, 1976)

<sup>26</sup> San Yee, 1976, 5

<sup>27</sup> Kyan, 2009, 172

<sup>28</sup> *The Royal Orders of Burma (A.D. 1598-1885)*, Collected and Edited by Dr. Than Tun, Part. VI (A.D. 1807-1810), Kyoto, The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1987, P. 587 (Henceforth: ROB, VI)

<sup>29</sup> Thein Tun, "Konbaung -khit-oo Si-pwa-ye Tha-maing (1752-1819)" (An Economic History of the Early Konbaung Period (1752-1819), M.A. Thesis, History Department, Arts and Science University, Rangoon, 1978, P. 23 (Henceforth: Thein Tun, 1978)

<sup>30</sup> Nwe Ni Aung, *Sa-le and its surrounding regions in the later Konbaung Period (1819-1885)*, Ph.D. Dissertation, History Department, Mandalay University, 2012, P. 110 (Henceforth: Nwe Ni Aung, 2012)

Factories produced indigo of about 8,000 viss per year, and the price fetched 400kyats per viss.<sup>31</sup>

There also existed gardening cultivation, a kind of long-term cultivation, and not a seasonal cultivation. Gardening cultivation was found in large numbers in Mattaya Region, Kyaukse Region and Lower Myanmar. Betel leaves, betel nuts, banana, mango and coconut were grown in large numbers in gardening plantations.<sup>32</sup> In King Mindon's reign, in the demarcation area of Mandalay, there were plenty of natural lakes and ponds and creeks, and many betel plantations, toddy plantations and many mango plantations were grown.<sup>33</sup> In the reign of King Thibaw, anyone who would clear the virgin soil for cultivation was given permission to cultivate for gardening cultivation. In 1864 (during King Mindon's reign), the crown, paying cultivation expenses, ordered the cultivators in Sa-le to grow hemsps.<sup>34</sup> Crown monopolies in Upper Myanmar (the Myanmar Kingdom) in the Konbaung period were oil, juggery, cotton wool, chillies, onions, peas and beans, pickled tea, tobacco, wheat, catechu, lac, indigo, petroleum and teak. Petroleum and teak were declared monopolies by the successive kings of Myanmar.<sup>35</sup> In Myanmar agriculture, cattle were very important. Without the cattle it would be hard to do cultivation. So the land mortgage or money loans were done in order to buy the cattle.<sup>36</sup> In 1855, in order to do cultivation, the hire of one pair of oxen was to be paid for 20 baskets of paddy.<sup>37</sup> In these economic conditions the cultivators could not afford to buy a pair of oxen and had to hire oxen for cultivation. A person who wanted to take a buffalo or cow from one locality to another, even within the same jurisdiction, had to seek permission from the *Ywa-gaung* and *Ywa-ok* concerned. He could transport or sell a cow or buffalo only after he had received permission.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

To make a survey of the whole agriculture in the late Konbaung Period (1819-1885), in the reign of King Bagyidaw (King Sagaing), as the First Anglo-Myanmar war took place; the priority was given on the politics, rather than the country's economy. In 1852, when the country's economy had been deteriorating, there broke out the Second Anglo-Myanmar War and then Lower Myanmar fell under the British. As that region had been lost, there was no chance for Upper Myanmar to rely on Lower Myanmar, as in the former times. So King Mindon endeavored to develop the economy of Upper Myanmar. Under the British rule, rice cultivation in Lower Myanmar had changed from local consumption into commercial cultivation. In 1867-68, the rice was purchased from the British-Burma (Lower Myanmar),

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<sup>31</sup> Daw Kyan, "*Ya-da-na-pôn-khit Myan-mar Mène Lôk-ngan*" (The Myanmar Indigo Business during Yadanapon Period), *Ngwe Tar Yee Magazine*, No.58, Yangon, Myawaddy Press, April, 1968, pp.47-48 (Henceforth: Kyan, 1968)

<sup>32</sup> Toe Hla, 2004, 127

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Than Tun, *Ne-hlè Ya-za-win* (Peripatetic History), Yangon, Pyae Son Press, 2004, P.79 (Henceforth: Than Tun, 2004)

<sup>34</sup> Nwe Ni Aung, 2012, 101

<sup>35</sup> Toe Hla, 2008, 131

<sup>36</sup> Toe Hla, 1981, 119

<sup>37</sup> Htun Yee, *Money Lending Contracts of Myanmar Rural Areas in Konbaung Period*, Vol.III, Japan, Aichi University, Toyohashi, 1999, p.19 (Henceforth: Htun Yee, 1999)

<sup>38</sup> Nwe Ni Aung, 2012, 137

because in Upper Myanmar, the climatic conditions were unfavorable. So it was assumed that, if the climatic conditions were favorable, there was a good yield of crops, and the social life was a complete one. Naturally, people did not work for their local consumption only, and not more than necessary. The reign of King Mindon (1853-1878) saw the sufficiency of local consumption and the prosperity of agriculture, but in King Thibaw's reign (1878-1885), the conditions of Myanmar had been in financial difficulties while agriculture had deteriorated, and the whole Myanmar fell under the British rule on 1 January 1886.

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