

## Health Activities Under King Mindon (1853-1878)

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### Abstract

In Myanmar, astronomical medicine had appeared since the Bagan period and well developed in Nyaungyan period and became prominent in the konbaung period. The Buddhist monks provided health knowledge to society by teaching medicines. During the reign of Mindon, massage art became important in Myanmar medicine. King Mindon, taking care of the aged person were well undertaken. The medical treatment of both indigenous physicians and Western doctors provided extraordinary healthcare service. Therefore, masseurs and physicians played an important role in administration of King Mindon.

**Key words:** massage, King Mindon, Konbaung and medicine

### Introduction

In the early Konbaung period, less attention was paid to the economy, religion and education. There was indeed no progress in medical subjects. But the indigenous physicians were appointed at the royal palace. During the later Konbaung period, progress of indigenous medicine contributed greatly to the healthcare of the people.

### Aim and Objectives

This research paper aims to study health activities under king Mindon. This new finding research paper will be a significant value for research studies.

### Health Activities under King Mindon (1853-1878)

During the reign of King Mindon, taking care of the aged persons were well undertaken. It is known that there were 10 buildings at the royal city of Yandanabon in 1863 for the residence of the aged persons. There were five brick buildings for aged persons and five brick buildings for unhealthy persons. The aged persons came to live brick buildings for unhealthy persons. The aged persons who came to live in the home for the aged were provided fully with clothes. They were well given foods with persons of charges. The unhealthy persons were given medical treatment and physicians were on duty permanently. There were three Bei-thit-za Vi-du Pa-ra-gu Physicians and masseuses were kept ready. Moreover, when the aged persons died, expense for funeral was granted out of the royal treasury (U Maung Maung Tin, 2004). In the homes for the aged persons during the Konbaung period, western doctors and indigenous physicians were kept in joint. At the Yadanabon Home for the Aged, Dr. Calimo, Dr. Hazeltine, and Dr. Marfets were appointed and salary was granted

sufficiently to them (*Myanmar Than-daw-sint Newspaper*, 25 June 1874). The medical treatment of both indigenous physicians and western doctors provided extraordinary healthcare service to the Home for the aged.

In the early Konbaung period, although indigenous medicine did not improve, it was developed in the middle and later Konbaung period. But the public health was still not taken well. The people of the Konbaung period encountered three catastrophes: *Yogan-da-ya Kat* (Time of pestilence), *That-tan-da-ya Kat* (Period of great catastrophe characterized by war) and *Dote-bate-khan-da-ya Kat* (period of famine). According to Myanmar tradition, Myanmar women cast a spell by anger, they say "*Kar-la-nar Taik-par-sei*" (Be infected with epidemic disease.). *Kar-la-nar*" means the "epidemic diseases". The epidemic diseases were small-pox, measles, and cholera etc. When someone suffered epidemic disease, he was not allowed to stay inside the village or ward as it could be infectious to other people and the whole village could be destroyed. During the Konbaung period, such villages as Bagan, Salin and Yaw area were destroyed due to the outbreak of epidemic diseases (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004). Therefore, although there was the progress of indigenous medicine, the public health could not be well taken carefully.

It is found that prevention and medical treatment was still weak in the public healthcare of the Konbaung period. Although there were physicians in every village, the ratio of physicians to population was very few. (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004). Among the physicians, there were very few physicians who made systematic learning in medicine. The majority of physicians used homely remedy and folk medicine. In giving medical treatment, they read medical notes and cured the patients. When a monk became successful in curing diseases, he left monkhood and turned into physician. Some wealthy persons collected medical notes and formulated medicine, by which they gave treatment to the people living surrounding areas (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004). Therefore, during the reign of Mindon,

indigenous medicine progressed, but in practice, there was a large gap in the ratio of physician and population. Moreover, the majority of physicians were not the persons who were well-trained systematically under the great physicians, but they became physicians by giving treatment to the people nearly as experimental treatment.

Prior to the Konbaung period, Myanmar monarchy took no responsibility for the public health. It gave priority only to security and judicial administration of the subject people. When disease broke out, there was no hospital or dispensary. When someone was ill, a physician was fetched to the house for medical treatment. During the Konbaung period, intelligent king with good nature paid attention to the public and healthcare was carried out.

During King Mindon's reign, infant mortality rate declined and it could be attributed to the arrival of European medicine with some western doctors who came to serve under King Mindon. Although nutritious foods and good medical treatment were available in the royal court, the healthcare works of people in rural areas are assumed worse (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004).

During King Mindon's reign, Thamada Dhamma Khanda took the treatise "Beithiza Myitzuthar", from Sri Linka and presented it to King Mindon. This treatise was translated into Myanmar in 1867 by Linkarama Sayadaw (Pahtama Linka Rama Sayadaw Phayagyi, 1963). The last section of this treatise was translated into Myanmar by U Dhamma Yadana Mahte at the request of Mongkhaing Myosa Pitaka Tawok Min Maha Thiri Zeya Thu.

There also appeared many physicians who encouraged Myanmar indigenous medicines during King Mindon's reign, and among whom U Phoe Hlaing was well-known. He translated the treatise "Thway San Kyan" which is written in Sanskrit into Myanmar on 21 August 1859. Under the royal order of King Mindon, Ponna Balibi, Rama Kissana, Sanda Mani, Balakathi Sanda, Eiti Ketha, Thama Laka were assigned the task of translation into Myanmar (Min Yu Wai, 1968). It was in that time that indigenous medical treatises were compiled in association with the Western medical books. Yaw Atwin Wun and Phan Chet Wun Min Htin Pyinya Theiddi Kyaw Gaung jointly translated the treatise "Lokadat Say Kyan" into Myanmar on 22 July 1868. U Phoe Hlaing translated the medical treatise "Datu Pya Than Tha" into Myanmar (U Phoe Hlaing, 1928).

It is known that the royal prince and princesses themselves were interested in medicine during the later Konbaung period. On 18 March 1876, at the request of King Mindon's daughter, Salin Princess, U Phoe Hlaing composed the treatise "Kaya Nupattana" (Yaw Atwin Wun, 1953). Moreover, U Phoe Hlaing had compiled the treatise "U-tu-baw-za-na Thin-ga-ha Kyan" on 15 May 1880. In writing this treatise, U Phoe Hlaing made references with the sermons of Lord Buddha, Pali and Sanskrit medical treatises, ancient Myanmar medical treatises, and western medical books, including the Chinese and Tibet

medical methods without having affect on the Myanmar traditions.

A-le-taw-ya Sayadaw had compiled the treatise "Da-tu Di-pa-ni" on 8 January 1879 (Aletawya Sayadaw, 1956). It is found that there appeared medical treatises which were written not only in prose but also in verse and poem. Salay U Ponnya had compiled the treatise "That-ta-wa-tha" during King Mindon's reign (Nagathena Biwantha, 1972). Besides, he also compiled the treatise "Thek-ka Einda" (Mya Thaw Ta, 1955). Among the literary works compiled by Nyaung-bin-tha U Ponya, Thar-mon-drika Lak-kha-na, Loka Myit-zu, and medical poems and verses were well-known (Thuta, Sar-so-daw-mya). King Mindon had endeavored to emerge the physicians and to develop indigenous medicine in future. In 1865, Taung Thar Saya Hmont had compiled the treatise "Abidhamma Taung-thar Dat Kyan" (U Tin Myaint, 1935).

During the reign of King Mindon, there appeared a number of European medical treatises written in Myanmar language. The British Commissioner Corony Barani's medical treatise was edited and added by Francis Mason and republished it under the title "Say Hnit Ana Ku A-kyau Sar" (Paper on medicine and way of giving treatment) in 1868 (Mason, 1868), in which Mason described that Myanmar people had no belief in English medicines and they had suspicion as follow:

The English medicines and Myanmar medicines are not alike and the English medicine is good for the English and it is suitable for Myanmar people to take indigenous medicines. It is reasonable to obey one's own traditions. (Mason, 1868)

During King Mindon's reign, Myanmar youths were sent abroad for study of western medical subjects. The Mon youth, Shawlu was sent to America and learnt the western medicine and he returned to Myanmar in 1867 (Min Thu Wun, 1974). He translated the Western medical treatise "Pain-ki-lar" into Myanmar language (Myo Thant Tin, 1987). It is known that there had been no Myanmar people who knew English medical subject up to 1831. Myanmar had to learn the western medicine from the Dutch and the Portuguese. Similarly, *Pyinnya Wun* (Education Inspector) Phayre had written the treaty "Jana Thukha Ni-deit-ha" (Myo Thant Tin, 1987). In 1881, Saya Htoke republished this book under the title "English Say Kyan" (Saya Htoke, 1881).

During King Mindon's reign, there also broke out malaria in different parts of Myanmar including the royal city of Mandalay. But no person died of this disease and so it was named "Pyi Lone Chan Thar Nar" (Disease by which anyone in the kingdom did not die). Nevertheless, it is known that Myauknan Mibaya Thu Thiri Maha Yadana Mingala Devi died of malaria in 1872 (U Maung Maung Tin, 2004). At the same year, many persons in the royal city of Mandalay had suffered malaria.

King Mindon had built the homes for the aged persons and unhealthy people and rest-houses were built and donated to the Buddhist monks. The King

sent physicians and masseurs to give treatments when the monks were unhealthy (U Tin, 1970). The well-known physicians during King Mindon's reign were U Chan Thar Myo Pyin Saya, U Doau (Mandalay Dat Saya), U Po (Dat Sayagyi), U Ba Thein (Tatiya Taungthar Sayagyi), U Hmet (Dutiya taungthar Saya), U Hmont (Taungthar Sayagyi), U Ya Kyaw, U Thar Kywe (Patta Sayagyi), etc. (*Taing-yin Say-pyin-nya Thamaing*). It is also known that King Mindon appointed spies to investigate the intrigues and the spies included masseurs and physicians. Therefore, masseurs and physicians played an important role in the administration of King Mindon. Similarly, physicians and masseurs had to accompany the delegation when the Myanmar envoys were sent abroad. For example, when a Myanmar mission under the leadership of Nanmadaw Wun Mingyi Min Gaubg Raja was sent to Bangladesh during King Mindon's reign in 1854, physicians and masseurs had to accompany him (U Maung Maung Tin, 2004).

During the Konbaung period, there were a variety of medical sects as there were religious sects, such as Beindaw Gaing, Dat Gaing, Taungthar Gaing, Payawga Gaing, Astronomy and astrology sect, Inga Weitza Gaing, Thabawa Gaing, and Tekkatho Gaing, etc (Marga, 1324). Taungtha Gaing and Thabawa Gaing were similar in giving medical treatment.

A physician by the name of Dhamma Khanda brought back medical treatises from Sri Lanka during the reign of King Mindon and the treatises which included Beithiza Myitzu Kyan was presented to King Mindon. Due to the request of King Mindon, Linka Rama Sayadaw ("Dipa Linkaya" title recipient) translated the Beithiza Myitzu Kyan into Myanmar in 1867 (Maungdaund Sayadaw, 1960). Then Bengala Sayadaw continued the translation of this treatise. After 1885, Bengala Sayadaw went to India where he lived for five years and studied thoroughly and translated the treatise. Due to Sayadaw's edition and translation, Beithiza Myitzu Kyan which appeared in later Konbaung period was very important for the development of indigenous medicine.

Prior to the Konbaung period, there was evidence that the massage art had been flourished in Myanmar. It was only in the reign of King Badon that the massage art began to arrive at Myanmar. During the Konbaung period, massage art became important in Myanmar medicine. From the reign of King Badon of the Konbaung period up to the reign of King Mindon, there are many evidences on massage art. During King Badaon's reign, there were Manipuri Kassey hand masseuses. During the reigns of King Mindon and King Thibaw, there were such Masseuse as *Ah-neik-daw Giri*, and *Ah-neik-daw Seit Ta* etc. There appeared a very well-known Baleba physician at Inwa. He was very skillful in the treatment of Akyaw, Asit, leg breaking hand breaking. He gave medical treatment to *A-kyaw-tin* (Stiffness in the muscle) and *A-sit-lwe* (Joint dislocation) etc., practically. The descendants of Baleba still existed up to the present time. The masseuses during King Mindon's reign were 10 male masseuses including Saya Htay, Saya Na Ban

san and Saya Lu etc. and 7 female masseuses led by Ma Hnyar. The female masseuses had to give treatment to the Chief Queen down to the junior queens and concubines. These 17 masseuses by turn had to enter into the royal court and attend to the king and queens. When they were granted salary of 35 kyats per month (U Maung Maung Tin, 1960). The massage art began to flourish during the Konbaung period, but it was constituted as the medical during the Konbaung period, but it was constituted as the medical treatment for royal court. It was not important for the public health care. However, Baleba Sayagi's treatment on bone and vein made advantageous to the public health.

During the reign of King Mindon, taking care of the aged persons well undertaken. It is known that there were 10 buildings at the royal city of Yadanabon in 1863 for the residence of the aged persons. There were five brick buildings for aged persons and five brick buildings for unhealthy persons. The aged persons who came to live in the home were provided fully with clothes. They were well given foods with persons of charges. The unhealthy persons were given medical treatment and physicians were on duty permanently. There were three Bei-thit-za Vi-du Para-gu Physicians and masseuses were kept ready. Moreover, when the aged persons died, expense for funeral was granted out of the royal treasury (U Maung Maung Tin, 2004). In the homes for the aged during the Konbaung period, western doctors and indigenous physicians were kept in joint. At the Yadanabon Home for the Aged, Dr. Calimo, Dr. Hazeltine, and Dr. Marfets were appointed and salary was granted sufficiently to them (*Myanmar Than-daw-sint Newspaper*, 25 June 1874). Both indigenous physicians and western doctors provided for extraordinary healthcare service to the Home for the aged.

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During the Konbaung period, it is difficult to estimate the life span of the people as there was no

Sittans concerning public health. An extraordinary factor in the Konbaung period was that royal sons and daughters of King Badon and King Mindon died in their childhood and depending on this factor, healthcare condition can be estimated for the people in the Konbaung period.

During King Mindon's reign, there were 50 royal sons and 56 royal daughters, of whom 34 children died at their childhood. So the infant mortality rate was 32.07 percent. Therefore, during King Mindon's reign, infant mortality rate declined and it could be attributed to the arrival of European medicine with some western doctors who came to serve under King Mindon. Although nutritious foods and good medical treatment were available in the royal court, the healthcare works of people in rural areas are assumed worse. (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004).

During the Konbaung period, due to the lack of health knowledge, child marriage had prevailed in rural areas. At that time, it was custom to make the child marriage at the age of adolescence. It was because they had no health knowledge, and there was no limitation of age for marriage by law as the present time. It was not an extraordinary thing for the children to get married at the young age. Moreover, in the presentation of daughter to the Myanmar kings, daughters at the age of 13 to 16 were to be presented. So there were many girls who got married before they were ten years old. In the 1782 list of married children from Salingyi village, it is found that Mi Kway was 15 years old while her son was six years old. Her married age was nine years and so it can be deduced that her adolescence time was at the age of nine years. Thus she might have suffered serious mental and physical effects as she became pregnant at the adolescence age. Therefore, the life span of women was short when they came of age in the Konbaung period as they were lack of health knowledge (Dr. Toe Hla, 2004).

During the reigns of Myanmar kings, as there was no standing army, villages were formed into royal service groups. The villages where the horsemen were allocated were designated as "Myin Su Ywa" (Cavalry village) and the villages where musketeers were allotted came to be called "Musketeer villages". In order to administer these villages, *Myingaug* (Leader of horsemen) or *Thwethauk* (Leader of Blood bond Brotherhood) were appointed. The crown servicemen were marked on their body with tattoos. At that time, the head of the villages had to gather "Sittans" for collection of tax, or census. Some of these *Sittans* serve as evidences for the study of health condition of the rural people under Myanmar kings (J.S. Furnivall, 1957).

## Conclusion

The people during the Konbaung period had to depend only on indigenous medicine for their health. It is known that indigenous medicine had been prevailed in Myanmar since the ancient time. During the reign of King Alaungmintaya who founded the

Third Myanmar empire, when military expeditions were made, physicians were taken together with the military columns to cure when the men were not well. Although indigenous medicine had developed in the reign of Mindon, prevention of disease and medical treatment were still weak. The extraordinary thing in the Konbaung period was the opening of Home for the aged and health care and social welfare were carried out. In the Konbaung period, during the reigns of King Badon and King Mindon, there were royal orders to take care of the aged persons. Myanmar administration prior to the Konbaung period did not take responsibility for the public health. When people were unhealthy, there was no hospital and dispensaries. As the people lacked health knowledge, children in the rural areas had got married in their early age.

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