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ROYAL BOATMEN IN THE REIGN OF KING BADON (1782-1819)

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Abstract

Myanmar Kings used to select sites for establishment of their Royal Cities on the left bank of the Ayeyarwady River in central Myanmar. They organized Crown boatmen groups and built naval stations along the Ayeyarwady and the Chindwin Rivers, to defend the kingdom. The study aims to investigate and evaluate the life of royal boatmen status groups, with special reference to those of King Badon's Reign (1782-1819). Their contributions to the country and society and their socio-economic conditions, based on evidences provided by contemporary records are discussed.

Aim

The Purpose of this study is to examine the socio-economic life of the royal boatmen groups in comparison to other social status groups existed side by side during the reign of King Badon.

Introduction

Konbaung society was a semi-feudal society. It consisted of five social classes, viz., (1) king and courtiers; (2) oligarchy consisting of local hereditary chiefs; (3) royal service-men groups; (4) tax-paying people; and (5) slaves. Of the royal service-men groups, the one related to waterway traffic played an important part in the society. It was known as the royal boatmen groups, who had to undertake the naval or military duty; transportation duty; commercial duty, etc. With such duties on their shoulder how they tried to earn their livelihood in the society will be discussed in accord with their contemporary records left behind.

The Royal Capital Cities of Myanmar had been established on the left side of the Ayeyarwady River below and above the confluence of the Chindwin to the former. In Myanmar there are four major rivers, the Ayeyarwady, the Chindwin, the Thanlwin and the Sittaung . They are very much useful in the country. They have existed as the natural routes for the country's transportation and communication. The vehicles of navigation played an essential role in the economy, social affairs and politics of the

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country as there are many rivers, creeks, and natural lakes. These means of navigation have successively been in service through monarchical periods since the Pyu kings down to King Thibaw. The waterway vehicles in ancient time were divided into four types: *Phaung* (Barge), *Hlaw-ka* or Scorpion-like Boat (It belonged to the second group of the water crafts of the monarchical days of Myanmar. This kind of large boat first came into existence in the reign of King Alaungsithu (1113-1163). It was constructed in the form of a scorpion swimming in water) (Zeyathinkhaya, 1960, 73-74), *Tham-ban* or Sampan (The term “*Tham-ban*” is Myanmar means “Combining; Joining”. The boat was made, not with the mending and application of *thit-se* (black varnish), but by joining the planks completely without a crack by means of wedges and spikes.) (Zeyathinkhaya, 1960, 76-77) and *Hle* (Boat).

The Konbaung Kings like their predecessors took measures to organize military status groups which consisted of soldiery, cavalry, elephantry and naval boatmen groups in order to gather forces quickly in time of war. While cavalry groups, groups of elephant and groups of gunmen were formed as land forces of the country, groups of royal boatmen were formed in towns and villages along the rivers. The royal boatmen served on board the royal navy consisting of boats, barges, *hlaw-ka* boats and sampans. Those in royal naval service were included in *Su-kyan* (strong labourers) (Tin, 1976, 248). In the hierarchy of royal military service, the position of *Thwe-thauk-su* (Group of Blood Bond Brotherhood) was the highest above others. Among the *Tha-nat-su* (group of fusiliers), *Su-the* (Small menial service groups), *Su-nu* (Artisians) and *Su-kyan* (strong and hard servicemen group) in the Konbaung social life, the last one was regarded as the lowest in social status (Maung Maung Tin, 2005, 292).

Although the formation of the royal navy was similar to that of the infantry or foot soldiery, there were sub-strata each of which had its own chiefs like *Yè-hle-wun* (officer of war boats), *Phaung-wun* (officer of barges), *Hle-thin-wun* (commander of war boats) and *Hle-thin-saye* (clerk to *Hle-thin-wun*), were appointed to charge the royal navy (Tin, 1976, 244). Some boat village chiefs were appointed as *Htaung-kè* (In-charge of one thousand men in royal service), or *Pè-nin* (Helmsman) of the *Hlaw-hle* (rowing boats), and *Khat-hle* (paddling boats). Officials in boat squadron and other military groups consisted of *Thwe-thauk-gyi* (Head or captain of fusiliers group) and *A-kyats* (corporal), served under them (Thaung, 1971,

6). It is also observed that the personnel in royal service who were trustworthy, loyal and honest were appointed as *Yè-hle-wun*.

The duty of the *Phaung-wun*, was to give maintenance and repair to the Royal Barge, the *Hlaw-ka-taw* Boat (Royal Scorpion Boat), the Royal Boat, the Royal Sampan and other Royal Boats. Moreover, he was responsible for supervising the *Phaung-saye* (Clerk of the Royal Barge) and the men in service of the royal barge under his administration. He was also responsible for settling the cases, light or serious, that took place among the men in service of the royal barge and boats (Maung Maung Tin, 2005, 192-193).

The Officer in charge of the *Hlaw-ka* Boats was the *Htaung-kè*. Originally there were one thousand boatmen organized under the *Htaung-ke`*. The *Htaung-ke`* was a hereditary chief come down in line by primogeniture. If there was no younger generation to inherit the position, *Let-yar U-ne* (Right Front Row) was appointed to the position of *Htaung-kè* (Than Tun, 1987, 680). A person was given permission if he could not continue to serve the position of *Htaung-kè*. During the reign of King Badon (1782-1819), *Hle-sus* (Boat groups) were organized in extended numbers in order to strengthen the Myanmar naval forces. The new boats under specific names were Byan-hlwa (Than Tun, 1988b, 348), Hmon-taing (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679), Kyauk-myet (Than Tun, 1986b, 1049), Kyaw-khaung (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679), Let-wè-wın-taung-lon (Than Tun, 1986a, 587), Let-ywe-gyi, Lin-zin (Tint, 1978, 73), Ma-ra-bin (Than Tun, 1987,747), Min-san (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679), Moe-zar, Moe-za-san-ywe (Thaung, 1971, 6), Mya-kon (Than Tun, 1987, 346), Nge-toe-shwe-laung (Thaung, 1971, 6), Ohn-ta-zi (Than Tun, 1986b, 765), Ôk-aw (Kyi Than, 1993, 36), Pyaing-taing-ya (Than Tun, 1987, 747), Pyi-lone-ant (Tint, 1978, 73), Rakhine (Than Tun, 1986b, 744), Sagaing-mya-pan (Thaung, 1971, 6), San-ywe (Tint, 1978, 73), San-tein-nyin (Than Tun, 1986b, 950), Sein-kone, Sein-pan, Shwe-lun-pyan (Thaung, 1971, 6), Shwe-pan-tan (Than Tun, 1986b, 1049), Shwe-ta-nga (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679), Taungg-hteik-pan (Than Tun, 1988a, 231), Taung-lone (Tint, 1978, 73), Taung-lone-hmaing (Than Tun, 1988b, 348), Thaung-tin (Tint, 1978, 73), Tha-yè-kyaw (Than Tun, 1987, 680), Tha-yè-tu-lut (Than Tun, 1987, 721), U-daung-shwe-ta-nga (Thaung, 1971, 6), Wun-po (Than Tun, 1986b, 1049), Yan-kin, Yan-lin (Than Tun, 1986b,678-679), Yan-lwint (Than Tun, 1986b, 1056), Ye-tha-min (Than Tun, 1986b, 660), Yè-mon-taung, Yin-kyaw (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679), Yin-pyan-gyi (Tint, 1978, 73), and Ywe-gyi

(Than Tun, 1986b, 819). It is very much interesting to study their nomenclature. For easy study we can put them into four groups: those after names of their station villages; those some-how related to a particular race; those with prospective names ; and those with astrological names. Moreover, groups of *Hlaw-ka* boats were also occasionally organized to recruit new men for the navy. Many new boat squadrons were formed consisting of such groups as Let-thit, Let-ywe-gyi (Than Tun, 1986b, 516), Pyi-lone-ant, Pyi-lone-kya-ngan, Pyi-lone-naing, Pyi-lone-sar, Pyi-lone-ya and Ywe-gyi *Hlaw-ka* (Kyi Than, 1993, 36). Besides, groups men employed on barges were organized under specific large types of boats under the name of *Hlaw-ka* or barge: the Ka-ra-weik Barge, the Zi-wa-zoe Barge and the Pyin-sa-ru-pa Barge (Than Tun, 1988a, 362).

Some names of the villages near the river were called after the names of the boat which were put in royal service, while other boats were named after the village where they lived. So, though no record has yet been discovered about the boat village, some villages and quarters that carried the name of the royal boats could be boat villages. For example, in Sagaing Township, Min-ga-lar-min-san Quarter, Shwe-khè Quarter, Shwe-tone Quarter, Lin-zin Quarter, Ohn-ta-si Quarter; in Aungmyetharzan Township, Mandalay, the Shwe-laung-nyunt Quarter, and Shwe-hle-su Quarter; in Maha Aung-mye Township, Sein-pan Quarter; in Amarapura Township, Shwe-laung Quarter and Ywe-gyi Quarter. These quarters and villages bearing the names of royal boats are still extant (6.9.2009 (Field Survey), 3.1.2010 (Field Survey)).

Michael Symes, a British Envoy, who came to Myanmar during the reign of King Badon observes Myanmar military strength and potentiality including war boats and makes a remark on them as follows.

By far the most respectable part of the Birman (Myanmar) military force is their establishment of war boats. Every town of not, in the vicinity of the river, is obliged to furnish a certain number of men, and one or more boats, in proportion to the magnitude of the place. I was informed that the king can command, at a very short notice, 500 of these vessels: they are constructed out of the solid trunk of the teak tree, which is excavated partly by fire, and partly by cutting; the largest are from eighty to one hundred feet long, but the breadth seldom exceeds eight feet, and even this space is produced by artificially extending the sides after the trunk has been hollowed. They carry from

fifty to sixty rowers, who use short oars that work on a spindle, the prow is solid, and has a flat surface, in which, when they go to war, a piece of ordnance is mounted, a six, a nine, or even a twelve pounder; the gun carriage is secured by lashings to strong bolts on each side, and swivels are frequently fixed on the curvature of the stern (Symes, 1800, 320).

Boatmen in royal service were to be always on alert for military service in times of war. This can be observed in a royal order issued by King Badon; it says that the groups of boatmen had to join the army in military operations (Than Than Kyu, 1992, 99-100).

In the early Konbaung Period, there was a difference in organizing the groups of war boats and the groups of the *Hlaw-ka* boats. In the former, a group of boats consisted of 30 to 60 men, and two or four boats were put under a charge (Kyi Than, 1993, 36). During King Badon's reign, the *Hlaw-ka* boat group consisted of the exact number of boatmen as indicated in the royal order dated 30 April 1810:

Name the new *Hlaw-ka* boats: Pyi-lon-naing (of length 18 lan/ 72 taung), Pyi-lon ya (of length 15 lan/60 taung). Get 120 men for Thon-lu-pu-zaw *Hlaw-ka*, 120 men for Pyi-lon-kya-ngan *Hlaw-ka*, 100 men for Pyi-lon-naing *Hlaw-ka* and 100 men for Pyi-lon ya *Hlaw-ka*; submit the register of these men together with the names of their leaders who go by the designations of *Htaung-ke'*, *Pe'-nin*, *Sachi* (? Clerk) and *U Ne* (Prow man) (Than Tun, 1987, 732)

Thus, the records show that a *Hlaw-ka* boat with a certain number of boatmen in service on board was precisely fixed and mentioned. The servicemen on *Hlaw-ka* outnumbered that of royal boatmen. A *Myin-wun* who was a Cavalry Officer or commander was assigned to charge the royal boatmen on *Hlaw-ka* in order to make sure that the boatmen were to serve their duties. Concerning this, a royal order was issued on 26 May 1795 (Than Tun, 1986b, 516). Similarly, in order to supervise the royal boats, other ministers were also appointed. In one royal order dated 14 December 1806, it was announced that the *Than-chet-wun* (Officer of foundry) Shwetaung Hla Sithu was to be in-charge of royal boats: the Shwe-pann-tan and the Min-san; and an *A-myauk-wun* (Officer of cannons) Shwetaung Thiri Kyaw, to be in-charge of other royal boats: the Kyauk-myet and the Wun-po (Than Tun, 1986b, 1049). Kyauk-myet and Wun-po are the villages located on the right bank of the Chindwin where boatmen were organized and settled. Those ministers had to submit the list of nominees of

helmsman and *U-ne* (Prow Man), whom the king appointed as proposed (Than Tun, 1986b, 444). It was a hereditary office mostly succeeded by means of primogeniture (Than Tun, 1987, 599).

There were royal boat-builders who had to build *Thar Hle* (Boat with a beast figure), *Nget-hle* (Boat with a bird figure) and iron war boats, as well as *Khat Hle-taw* (Royal Paddling Boat), *Hlaw Hle-taw* (Royal Rowing Boat), and *Hlaw-ka-taw* (Maung Maung Tin, 2005, 254). The duty of *Tharapat* (or) *Parapat* was to mend the royal barges and the royal boats with *Ohn-zan* (coconut fibre) and caulk material consisting of *Ye-nan-gyee* (oil dregs) and *Pwet-lyet* (dammer bee wax) for water-tightness (Maung Maung Tin, 2005, 254).

The boatmen in royal service were given training of the course of 37 methods of paddling and rowing in training boats (*Let-thin Hle*), before they served in a boat or on board a barge. It is said that only after they had completed their naval training were they assigned to a boat squadron (Zeya Thinkhaya, 1960,76).

King Badon issued a royal order dated 16 October 1818, in which the royal boatmen were placed under the charge of *Let-ywe-gyi-hmu* (Chief of Big selected Group) (Than Tun, 1987, 603). So while the boatmen were to join the forces in marching to war, they were to join the king's retinue on His royal progress.

Moreover, while the boatmen were not engaged in military affairs, the King assigned them other such duties as to catching the royal elephant (Than Tun, 1986b, 992) and to carrying rocks and stones for building a pagoda (Than Tun, 1986b, 1009). The *Hle-thin A-sus* (Groups of boatmen) were assigned duties for the peace and security of the local areas (Than Tun, 1987, 487). Thus, the boatmen in service were not always to serve the royal boats, but to obey the orders and summons of their respective headmen and chiefs in times of war crisis (Than Tun, 1987, 488). Some royal boatmen, although enlisted as personnel in service, did not perform their royal duties very well, but returned to their own residences. So they were summoned to return to the Royal Capital and were assigned duties (Than Tun, 1987, 506).

In order to display His might, King Badon took measures to build gigantic structures, including the Pahtotawgyi Pagoda. To construct such as gigantic brickwork the king had to employ thousands of men power in making bricks, rocks, plasters, etc. In order to overcome the difficulties, the

Let-ywe-gyi boatmen and the Rakhine boatmen were assigned duties to make bricks (Than Tun, 1987, 539).

In such works royal boatmen were employed in digging a canal on the island adjacent to Mingun for shipment his great bronze bell to the bank (Than Tun, 1988a, 177). Moreover they had also to carry rocks and stones to the Mingun construction site (Than Tun, 1988b,187). They were rewarded by the king for their service rendered in the construction of the Mingun Pagoda. They were conferred upon titles prefixed or suffixed with such words as *Zala*(in Pali) for water and *Ginga* for river (Tun Myint, 2004, 68), whereas the Myanmar word “*Myit*” (river) has a Pali equivalent, “*Ginga*” (Tun Myint, 2004, 38). Naturally, the king usually bestowed on the *Htaung-kè*, *Pè-nin* and *U-ne*, boatmen plying in royal service related to “water” and “river”, with the titles either prefixed or suffixed by “*Zala*” and “*Ginga*” (Zeya Thinkhaya, 1960,244).

The royal order issued on 15 November 1810 mentions that the helmsman of the Shwe-pann-tan Royal Boat Nga Nat Pay, son of Nga Taw Su, was bestowed with the position of town headman of Hinthada (Than Tun, 1987, 798). The *A-su-a-hmu-htans* (servicemen in royal status groups) were bestowed with the right to *Loke-mye* (land for cultivation) and *Ne-mye* (land for residence). In peaceful times when they were free from the duty at the royal capital city, they were permitted to return to their *Ne-mye* and *Loke-mye* to live and work peacefully (Toe Hla, 2008, 162). King Badon allowed the *Ne-mye* for residence and the *Loke-mye* for cultivation for the boatmen in royal service. In giving permits to the plots of lands, the Town Officers and Headmen had taken possession of the lands of the commoners and transferred the right of ownership to others (Than Tun, 1986b, 660-661). The duty of assigning the task of giving permits for the *Loke-mye* and the *Ne-mye* was given to the respective town headmen and the *Mye-taing A-mats* (Officer of land tracts or officer of land surveyor) were responsible for surveying the lands and identifying the type of land (Than Tun, 1986b, 678-679). It is observed that the king willingly granted permission for the sake of the social welfare of the boatmen in royal service.

During King Badon's reign, the system of providing provisions to the personnel in royal service was practised. In the royal order issued on 13 May 1795, those personnel in royal service who were granted provisions were not permitted to take out paddy, but only the millet from the royal granary (Than Tun, 1986b, 502). Concerning the fact that some boatmen in

royal service were identified as being entitled to provisions, the royal order issued on 31 March 1810 announces that 10 Indian boatmen and 10 carpenters in service of group were notified as personnel entitled to provisions and that sufficient supply of provisions was to be provided for one year consumption.

When the royal boatmen in service were in financial difficulties, they had but to take loans from money lenders. It is observed that, during King Badon's reign, Maung Kaung, the helmsman of the New-pan Royal Boat, being in need of money, borrowed 60 *kyats*, at the interest rate of 2 *mats* per month on 10 *kyats* from *Za-yat* (Public Rest House) Donor Ma Me Ei from the duration of 5 months Loan (Tun Yee, 1999, 5). It is observed that borrowing the loan was done in terms of promise. From cases were those of the wife of the helmsman who mortgaged the paddy land. The wife of the helmsman of Hsinphyu Kyun Village, Shin Maw mortgaged her own paddy land on 24 May 1809 (Tun Yee, 1999, 64). If the debtor failed to settle the loan at the appointed day, and the case was submitted to the court of Justice, the debtor had to pay the charges. when a case took place among the royal boatmen, the *Htaung-kè* and *Htaung Sar-chi* (Royal accountant of a thousand troops serving in the Myanmar monarch's warships) were responsible for settling the case and if any complaint could occur, the appeal could be submitted to the office of *Nan-daw-win Yone* (Royal Palace Court). Should there breakout a theft, a fire or a criminal case, the case was submitted to the *Htaung-hmu* (Chief of One Thousand) and the *Htaung Sar-chi* (Kyi Than, 1993,156).

It is observed that the majority of the boatmen in service were the Bahmar living by the river bank or by the water front. Moreover, among the boatmen were included the *Kathè* (Cassay) (Than Tun, 1987, 747), the *Kular* (Indians) (Than Tun, 1986b, 704), the Rakhine (Than Tun, 1987, 539), and the *Yodaya* (Siamese) (Than Tun, 1987, 698). The boatmen in group service were responsible not only for serving the military service, but also for performing other tasks such as carrying earthwork, making bricks, carrying rocks and stones, and digging canals in the King's construction work, so they did not seem to enjoy their service. It is observed, therefore, that there were cases of the in service boatmen making a flight to their native town or villages. Among these who had made such a flight were included the Rakhine boatmen (Tint, 1978, 78).

There were the social customs in the boatmen in group service during Konbaung Period. Since they served the king, they were first to get permission from the king if they were going to enter novice hood. King Badon prohibited the men in royal service from entering monkhood. Concerning this, the royal order dated 30 March 1810 reads as follows:

It has been a rule that no one in the king's service shall become a monk and religious texts also supported it by saying that any council of monks who knowingly accepted a man in the service of the king to become a monk is punishable (Than Tun, 1987, 702).

Despite this, since some boatmen in service had entered as member of a religious order, the royal order was issued to make them return to laymen (Khwa Nyo, 1998, 89) It is assumed that with the excuse of entering monkhood, the men in service would shun their duties, which would lead to the decrease of men in royal service, and so the king may have issued such an order to prevent the decrease of personnel in service. The personnel in royal service were to wear only the garments and embellishments officially permitted according to their positions, and were prohibited by the king from wearing undue garments and embellishments (Than Tun, 1986b, 992). Thus, it is observed that the men in group service were permitted to wear only the officially permitted garments in the monarchial period.

The men in group service had own restrictions according to their positions, high and low. There were also restrictions on marriage. Especially, the men in group service had to marry women of the families of the same position, and not women of the families of higher or lower positions. The offsprings who were born of parents who had belonged to different positions were subjected to the lower status. Parents of the same status had children, and their son was to live with the father's relations, while their daughter had to live with the mother's side, as had been the custom (Kyi Than, 1993, 142-143).

King Badon seemed have had anxiety over the marriage of husband and wife of two different statuses, as stated in the royal order issued by the king, dated 3 January 1785. The extract from this order reads as follows:

There should be no intergroup marriages, except among certain groups where mixed marriages are allowed (Than Tun, 1986a, 406).

Therefore, the king wished the marriage of the same status. Concerning the marriage of the in service boatmen, according to the 1783

Sit-tan (Report of Interrogations made by an officer sent from Central Administration) of the Pwè-taing-kyaw Boat squadron, when a woman of the squadron marries a man of a different service group, two lengths of cotton cloth, two coconuts and a packet of tea must be presented to the chief writer of the (left) side. The captains of the squadron receive the same while the writer of the left side receives one length of cotton cloth, one coconut and 50 *kyats* weight of tea. No present have to be given to the authorities when a marriage occurs within the squadron (Frank and William, 1979, 393). Moreover, burrial rituals concerning the servicemen if the people serving in the position of *Taw* (First series of seat in the audience hall) and *Du* (Second series of seat in the audience hall) passed away, the remains was to be buried according to the customs dictated by the king (Uzana, 2001, 420). When a *Htaung-kè* passed away, he was buried after being given permission. The procedure of applying for permission was as follows: the *Win-hmu* (officer of palace guard) submitted a report that a *Htaung-kè* passed away at a so-and-so age, that when a so-and-so *Htaung-kè* passed away, a particular custom was followed, and that the permission was asked for to bury the *Htaung-kè* according to the already mentioned custom (Uzana, 2001, 422). Thus, the social customs of boatmen in group service have been observed.

Conclusion

The Myanmar Kings formed social status groups in the society. They were engaged in royal services, higher in social status than average folks. Of the officials and royal servicemen military service groups were higher and more regarded to be the most important personnel. They were so organized in order to get military service in times of urgency. While other personnel in service had been appointed, the boatmen in group service were also appointed, based on the towns and villages along the river for the sake of navigation defense. The boatmen in group service were responsible not only for joining the military service, but also for making labour contributions in construction work. The boatmen in royal service who had been loyal to the king and served their obligations dutifully were bestowed rewards, embellishments, titles and the revenues of town or village according to their outstanding performance. Although the boatmen in service were granted cultivated lands, their harvest depended on the weather conditions. Despite having cultivated lands, therefore, they found it hard to

survive in their livelihood, and naturally, had to borrow money loans over their mortgaged lands. When they could not settle the debt on the appointed day, they finally had to sell their properties. While some boatmen in service had to mortgage or sell their properties, there existed some officers in service of the royal boats who were included among the creditors. The study of the social customs of the boatmen in service reveals that the marriage of man and woman of two different status or groups was prohibited. Men in royal service were prohibited to enter monkhood for fear that they would shun their duties with the excuse of the Buddhist *S san* . While the men in royal service were allowed to wear their costumes and embellishments due to their status, they were prohibited from wearing undue garments and embellishments by the royal order issued by the king. It has also been observed that when a boatman in service passed away, he was buried according to the prescribed customs and rituals. Therefore, it is observed that royal boatmen in service were under the strict rules during the Myanmar Kings. As the boatmen in group service performed their sundry duties of military affairs and construction work dutifully, they must have existed as the kings' reliable forces throughout Konbaung Period in Myanmar History.

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