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## **Economic Life of the Boatmen**

**Moe Moe Oo<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Economic life of the Boatmen is very rare record. Because we have only land mortgage deeds as primary source materials to be used to speak of their economic life. Indeed such data can never be available since the Myanmar traditional economic performances were intended only for self sufficiency alone. However, it is hope that one can find the Boatmen and their economic life in detail with the evidences provided by the documents.

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### **Introduction**

Myanmar's land and water asserts have blessed the country with a thriving amphibious environment. Along its coasts and rivers had grown up hydric civilizations such as the Rakhine kingdoms on the west coast, the Mons on the kingdoms on the delta and Taninthayi coast in the south, the Pyu, the Tagaung, the Bagan, the Sagaing, the Pyinya, the Inwa and the Konbaung kingdoms along the Ayeyarwaddy river, and the Taungoo kingdom on the Sittaung river. Each of them has its own acquaintic legend and tradition associated with its founding. The boatmen were settled and allotted lands in Mandalay Division and Sagaing Division. Let me mentions the economic condition taking place in the boat regions of Mandalay, Kyauk-se and Sagaing. In those regions some Kon-baung kings were so much concerned to build weirs, tanks, dams, canals and the like for irrigation and state agriculture. The basic form of economy of the people in the boat regions in the Kon-baung period was agriculture.

### **Land Grant**

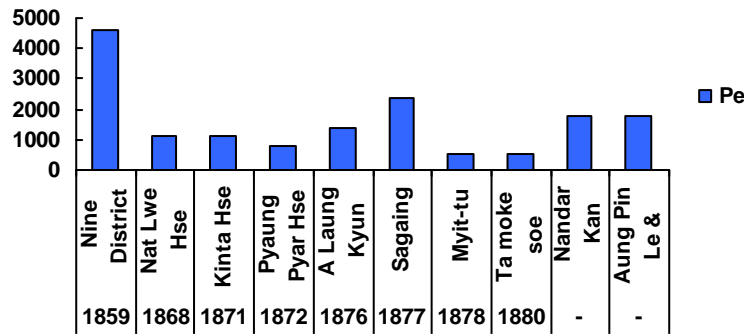
During the monarchial days, all of the crown servicemen were entitled to get land either for residence, or for cultivation or for

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maintenance<sup>2</sup>. The cavalry officials as well as their boatmen had cultivation lands for their earning. When they were free from duties, they used to engage themselves in agriculture.<sup>3</sup> They were cultivators, too. We can say that they were peasant proprietors in peaceful times. But when they were away from home on duty during the growing season, their family members worked on the land.

These lands were given outright. These granted lands were transferable. And outright alienation was also allowed. But the amount of land was not strictly fixed on that basis. We see the variation of land grants among the navy groups. It seemed to vary on the basis of geographical location where land was ample or scarce, fertile or unproductive, accessible to water or rain-fed. It is probably that the amount of land allotted to them in the irrigated areas, was enough for a person since there was no market-oriented agriculture ever existed in a feudal society. But, more land would be necessary in the areas where dry cultivation was more prevalent. Moreover, there were ample of reserved lands in vicinity of every village. In *Parabaik* evidences, we find that king Mindon and Thi-baw granted lands against the names of some navy officials and followers as follows:



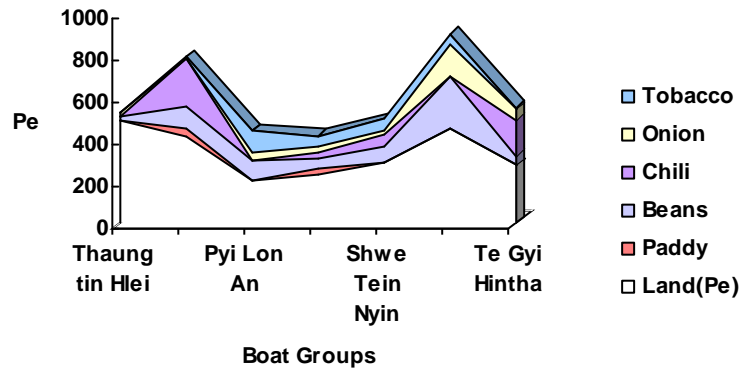
**Fig.1. Land Granted for Boatmen (1859-1880)**

Source: *Parabaik MSS*, nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, TTLIC; 51, 68, KABL; 325868, UCL; 1409, 1037, 1233, 1277, 1367, NLC and Than Tun, 1988, 956

<sup>2</sup> U Tin , 1976, 32-33

<sup>3</sup> Dr.Than Tun, 1988, 805

Thus two objectives could have been simultaneously realized: availability of ever-ready servicemen for the crown and the exploitation of agricultural wealth of the kingdom. Agriculture was the main occupation of the inhabitants of boatmen. Here I would like to tabulate cultivation lands under different crops in the above regions during the later part of king Mindon reign.



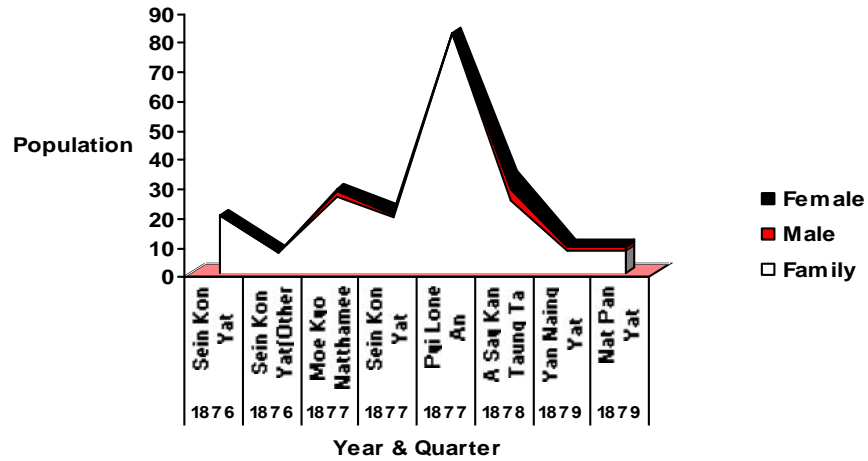
**Fig.2. Cultivation List of Boat Groups**

Source: *Parabaik MS*, no.51, KABL

This table showed that the six kinds of crops are mentioned in this table. There are 2349 *pe* (4157.73 acres)(1 *pe*-1.77 acres) total lands in boatmen area, of which 286 *pe* (506.22 acres) of tobacco, 626 *pe* (1108.02 acres) of beans, 497 *pe* (879.69 acres)of chili, 290 *pe* (513.3 acres)of onion and 70 *pe* (123.9acres)of land were under paddy cultivation. It seemed to be customary that local officials had to submit to the king their assessment of outturn of paddy-rice per *pe* before harvest.

### Lack of Taxation

As the boatmen were serving for the defense of the country. In 1874, during king Mindon’s reign, the crown provided the boatmen of Tegyi Hintha Boat Squadron with impress funds. Additionally, it can be learnt that the boatmen of Natpan and Yannaing Boat Squadron were exempted from taxation in 1879. We can study the household list of lack of taxation families. They are as follows;



**Fig.3. Non-taxation of Boatmen**

Source: *Parabaik MSS*, nos. 56, 403, 440, 460, 572 and 764, KABL

Of the list of Tattoo marks of Natpan and Yannaing Boat Squadrons who were exempted from *Thathameda* tax, those did not serve diligently and those who were not no caulking duty were made to signed a pledge that they would pay *Thathameda* taxes as a punishment. Similarly, in 1879, in the reign of king Thibaw, the twenty-five boatmen of A Say Khan Taunglon Boat were exempted from *Thathameda* tax.<sup>4</sup> (*Parabaik MS*, No. 56, KABL)

Furthermore, royal orders were issued to ensure that the land allotted to boatmen would not be confiscated. On 24 February 1879, the king issued an edit to the following effect<sup>5</sup> (Than Tun, 1989, 455). Thus, the king attached much importance to the land granted to boatmen. On 17 June 1895, however, the king issued an order to revoke the decision to exempt the crews of Letywegyi, Letthit and Pylon An from paying dues collected at *seit* (ports), *ti* (seasonal fairs), *kin* (toll stations) and *kado* (ferries)<sup>6</sup> (Than Tun, 1986, 542). We can study the Tegyi and Hintha boatmen's taxation rates are as follows:

**Table-1 Tegyi and Hintha Boatmen Taxation Rates (1874-1875)**

<sup>4</sup> *Parabaik MS*, No. 56, Yangon, KABL

<sup>5</sup> Dr.Than Tun, 1989, 455

<sup>6</sup> Dr.Than Tun, 1986, 542

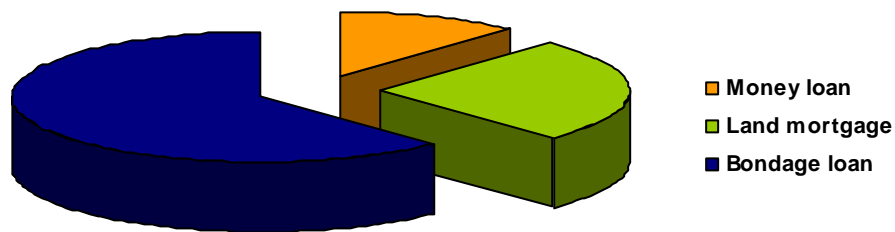
Year	Tax (Silver Coin)	Tax (Silver Weight)	Used Money(Silver Weight)
1874	23380	-	2949
1875	228441	1578	7259

Source: *Parabaik MSS*, nos. 152, 280, 405 and 584, KABL

It can be assumed that the fluctuations in prices in the above table depended on Konbaung economy. Konbaung economy was subsistence economy. The outbreak of the Second Anglo-Myanmar war destabilized the country's economy and the people suffered much hardship. Hence, many people had to mortgage or sell their possessions including paddy fields and farm lands. A list of the *thetkayits* (contracted agreements) that have been discovered is given here. Early Konbaung data was very rare record.

### Money Lender

One can find the Maha Min Htin Yaza's mortgagees showed that the 17 of money loans, 37 of land mortgages and 89 of bondage loans.



**Fig.4. Maha Min Htin Yaza's mortgagees**

Source: *Parabaik MS*, no. 1268, NLC

There are (143) *thetkayits* collected from various part of the township to study the socio-economic life of the people who dwelt in various regions. As describe above money lender is only one Maha Min Htin Yaza. We can

approximate the feudal economy. Some of the money-lenders were from this region. Among them were money men like officials. It is, therefore, often seen the mention of boatmen of a boat regions in contemporary record. Some of the boat groups of the money-lenders were from this region.

**Table-2 Money Lenders and Debtors of Boatmen**

Year	Money-lender	Debtor	Money Loan(kyat/weight)
25 July 1826	Puthein two Myowun's wife	Maung Tha (Head of the Boat)	10 Kyat
1838	Maung Htaw, Hlei Oat (Head of the Boat)	Maung Myat Hla	15 Kyat
1840	Maha Min Htin Min Kyaw, Than Taw Sint (Mission)	Pyan Chi Yaza Kyaw Htin(Ex-headmen)	10 Silver Weight
13 June 1840	Maha Min Htin Min Kyaw, Than Taw Sint (Mission)	KamaKaw Htaung Ke (Head of the Boat)	150 Kyat
30 November 1843	Min Nay Myo Thurein Kyaw(Head of Mission)	Ko Shwei Oat (Thugyi)	2 Silver weight
20 October 1844	Min Nay Myo Thurein Kyaw(Head of Mission)	Ko Shwei Ei (Thugyi)	10 Silver weight

Source: *Parabaik MSS*, nos. 6, Cultural Museum Collection; 21, Daw Thet Thet Oo Collection (henceforth TTO); 26, Daw Toe Toe Win Collection; Taung kwin Collection (henceforth Taung kwin)

The boat officials of the region played an important role in dealing with social, judicial and administrative affairs. Some officials help to mediate the social disputes among the boatmen. They also obtained the judicial fees. They were influential in society because they had the administrative powers and earned good income. Some headmen are probably that the borrowers or mortgagors used to express their difficulties in taking loan from the money-lender.

Debtors were mostly poor villagers. But there were some who were to some extent high in social status and better off, like various officers. Among the indebted persons there consisted of---

- Bearer of foot ware
- Bearer of insignia
- Ex- town officer of Mingalardon
- Maung Kyaw (ex-proffer betel to the king)

Nay Nyo Min Hla Thaman Tara (warden of a palace)  
 Pu Khan Prince's daughter  
 Shwei Kyin's ex-minister U Myat Kyaw (corps of shield  
 bearing minister)  
 Taung Twin Prince and  
 U Win (ex-minister of royal treasury).

General speaking as rural society was a closed type. Rural economy rested mainly on agriculture; people were agriculturists. They grew crops for self-sufficiency. Land mortgaging and money lending which were a sign of economic hardship, were very common in the society. Money lenders accepted the interest rates either in cash or in crop. People were indebted for a variety of reasons. The debtors were mostly peasant farmers. In the region, the socio-economic condition did not develop during the reigns of later Konbaung kings.

### Cases

The two Anglo-Myanmar Wars also caused a great economic hardship. Owing to this causes it effects of crimes and sin. Criminal cases with was also boatmen groups. I would like to present the land disputes from *Parabaik* evidences.

**Table-3 Land Disputes and Cases**

Year	Argue	Punish	Case Area	Remark
22 July 1853	Bagan' thugyi	Taung Hmaing (Boatmen)	Lone Taung Palu Kyun	(Boatmen)/ win
10 July 1854	Thiri Welukar (Boss)	Sein Kone (Head men)	Hlei Inn Pyawt Kyo Lan	(Boss)/win
28 August 1854	Nga Shwe Nu (Elephant head)	Sein Pan (Boatmen)	Hlei Nyaung Pintha Ywa	Sein Pan Hlei (Boatmen)/ win
26 September 1858	Guard	Boatmen	Tamoke-soe	Boatmen/ win
1858	-	U Daung Shwei Ta Nga Taw (Boatmen)	Po wa le	?



1868	(Boat Head)	U Daung Hlei	2000 <i>Pwe</i> (Formation)
		Oat Min (Head)	
8 May	Elephant	Kho Taung	(Boatmen)/ win
1879	Servicemen	Shwei Khe	
		(Boatmen)	

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Source: *Parabaik MSS*, nos. 21 TTO; Taung kwin; Than Tun, 1986, 518,979; U Thaug (Ye-U) 4.5.1970; Taw Sein Kho, 1978, 97-99, 303

All of them do not constitute the total number of *Thetkayits* available in the township. It presents only a few documents collected from some villages located in the region under study. The data always need to be corrected and updated by supplementing, them with new findings of the researchers and scholars.

### Conclusion

I explained the economic life of the boatmen. By studying the records, we can get the several items and the roles of land grants, taxation, money-lenders, debtors and cases of the era. To be frank, the evidence is sketchy; we can however, guess their economic conditions by tackling such questionnaires. What were the major occupations of the people in the region under study? How and why did they become indebted? What type of money did they use in buying and selling? What type of property did they mortgage for want of money? What were the term agree upon? Who were the winners and losers? By trickling these questionnaires, the author tries to deal with the economic life of the people in boatmen regions. So it can be said that these documents are very much useful important and reliable for historians.

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