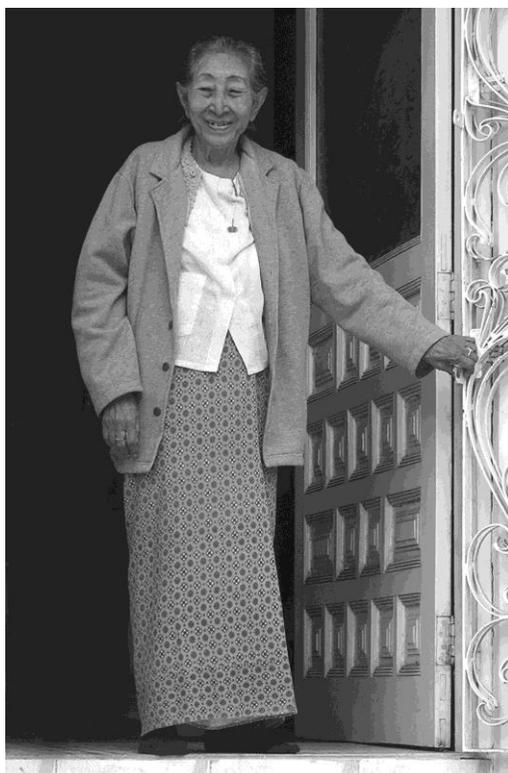


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***BULLETIN OF THE  
BURMA  
STUDIES GROUP***

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*Writer Ludu Daw Amar, Maymyo, 2004  
Photo from C. Raymond*

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## Next Issue

September 2008  
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## In the Long Run, the Short and the Middle

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The articles in this issue of the *Bulletin* present three quite different historical perspectives on matters Burmese. Patrick McCormick provides us reflections on the difficulties that arise when dealing with an esoteric but intriguing Mon text. Centuries-old, venerable but often barely intelligible—at least to people who lack Patrick's remarkable linguistic skills—the text poses a raft of interesting problems. Patrick shows us how much we can learn, or at least how many important questions we can raise, in light of those problems. Matthew Walton, another graduate student currently engaged in long-term research in Rangoon, presents us with something altogether more immediate: a diary of his experiences during the first two weeks following the cyclone that ravaged Lower Burma in May. Appropriately, Matt writes in a speedy, even breathless, style. The many sentence fragments in his contribution speak to the haste and urgency of his writing: the contrast with Pat's deliberate, considered ruminations is telling. Finally, Anna Allot has granted us permission to reprint an obituary she wrote for the very eminent, and much-loved, Ludu Daw Amar, who died at the age of ninety-two this past April. That long life, and as Anna makes clear it was a fully-lived one, provided her a perspective and wisdom that a great many people, both inside Burma and outside it, came to respect immensely. At a time when so much of what is happening in Burma speaks of tragedy and struggle, her steadfastness stands as an example to us all.—The Editor

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## What Can We Learn from a Mon Text?

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*Patrick McCormick, a graduate student in history at the University of Washington, has spent many years learning several languages of Southeast Asia and working with their texts. In the following article, he reveals some of the dilemmas that confront specialists dealing with a Mon text, one that we would usually, but somewhat carelessly, label a historical one. As Patrick makes clear in these fascinating ruminations on the project he is in the midst of, not only does the category of "historical" have to be put in question, so, in light of the surprising discoveries he has made in the course of his study, does the category of "texts." The task he has set himself clearly requires immense patience. But we can take heart knowing that he has the determination, and the scruples, to treat it with all the subtlety and care it deserves.—The Editor*

I think a lot of people would be surprised to learn that it's now easier than they think for foreign scholars to do interesting research in Burma. I have been in Yangon since October, 2006, looking at a collection of Mon-language historical texts. I think of my project as listening at two levels to the stories these texts tell us. There are the narratives themselves: what events the texts recount, who is in them, where people are and what they are doing. At the same time, there is the information embedded in the language and form of the text that tells about its transmission and compilation, as well as what languages – whether Mon, Burmese, or Thai – those parts of the text have been

transmitted in. It's a bit like reading a handwritten letter in order to learn not only what the author has written to us but also what the handwriting and spelling tell us about that person.

Mon scholars have called the collection of texts I am studying the *Rajavamsa Katha*, although SOAS's late Mon scholar, Harry Shorto, referred to them both as the "*Pak Lat Chronicles*" in English and as the - *Nidana Ramadhipati-katha* in Mon. (In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Siamese Mon monk, supposedly compiling earlier manuscripts (*hlapât* in Mon, the same as Burmese *peiza*), printed the *Rajavamsa Katha* in book form at Pak Lat, a Mon village near Bangkok.) These narratives are both history and literature, though local scholars in both Burma and Thailand, following the distinctions inherent in the modern understandings of these terms, are often uneasy with the un-history-like qualities of the texts.

Each of the texts is a historical narrative about a different period of Mon history, from the voyage of the Buddha to Lower Burma, to the founding of several early Mon polities, through Dammazeidi and Shin Saw Pu. Yet the best-known and longest text could be called *Rajadhiraj* for convenience's sake – this name refers to the Burmese and Thai-language versions of this story, considered classics of history and literature in both Burma and Thailand. In fact this section of the *Rajavamsa Katha* has two titles, *Galan Ktuw Bdah Tnow Dakow Sming Dung Hamsa* in Mon and *Uppanna Hamsavati Rajavamsa Katha* in Pali, both of which mean something like, "The Rise of the Lineage of the Kings of Hamsavati." While this section, taken as a stand-alone

text, is known in Burmese as *Yazadirit Āyèidawboun* and in Thai simply as *Rachathirat*, the Mon title does not contain "Rajadhiraj" at all. The practice of modern Mon scholars of giving it that name when they treat it as a stand-alone text is possibly anachronistic. The narrative recounts the rise of the lineage from which the warrior-king Rajadhiraj descends, before telling of his military exploits and conquests. These follow a fairly regular cycle of intrigue, alliances made and broken, surprise attacks, fighting and conquest, and territorial expansion, before ending with the (re-) establishment of peace—only for the whole cycle to start all over again.

While I have been reading all the texts of the *Rajavamsa Katha*, it is *Rajadhiraj* that is of particular interest and relevance because it exists in three major languages and traditions of the Mainland. Yet sorting out exactly how all three of these versions are connected has been difficult and may ultimately be irresolvable. Bañña Dala's Burmese-language version has been around since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while the Thai version was translated some time in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and published in book form in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. When I first approached this project, I thought that it was going to be a relatively straightforward matter of reading the Mon version of *Rajadhiraj*, which was presumably the "original." I planned on translating it into English and writing a thesis about the Mon history that the text relates. But as I've been reading over the past year and half, the questions that have come up have threatened to take the project in countless new directions.

For example, the evidence suggests that the texts, especially *Rajadhiraj*, were transmitted at least in part through both Thai and Burmese before being recorded in Mon. How are we to make sense of this? In the first two narratives of the *Katha*, we find fairly standard Literary Mon of perhaps the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, marked by a few curious Pali, Middle, and even Old Mon usages, though this apparent markedness may simply reflect an overly rigid periodization of the language or perhaps the use of occasional archaisms to lend greater weight to the expression. While *Rajadhiraj* starts off unremarkably, we soon notice that large portions of the text are marked linguistically in unusual ways. Mon scholars such as Nai Pan Hla and Nai Maung Toe have published critical editions of the Mon *Rajadhiraj* section of the *Katha* as an equivalent to the Burmese and Thai versions of the story. When they have reached these sections of the text, found both in large blocks but also sporadically throughout the entirety of the narrative, the usual explanation for the obscurity of this language is to say either that, since the text is old it contains expressions no longer intelligible to modern speakers, or to say that Siamese Mon has preserved features of the Mon language that have died out in Burma.

To a certain degree, this latter point is true – Siamese Mon has, for example, preserved words in speech that have been relegated to literary Mon in Burma. Yet some of the regular sound changes of Siamese Mon make some ordinary words shared between the two countries seemingly exotic to Mon living in Burma, and since they cannot immediately understand such words, they assume that the Siamese Mon is somehow archaic. There aren't many outright Thai

loanwords in these passages, but the syntax and pragmatics (how people say things) have clear and strong affinities with Thai.

These phenomena, in fact, are what the literature on language contact suggests we should expect to find in a situation of extensive language contact, with widespread bilingualism (between Mon and Thai) and incipient language shift (from Mon to Thai). Many sections and sentences of *Rajadhiraj* do not make sense in Mon. If they are translated word-for-word into Thai, however, they turn into grammatical sentences and make good sense. Linguistic ideology aside, Mon and Thai are not particularly close structurally, whereas Mon has come to share many syntactic features with Burmese.<sup>1</sup>

So the fact that I could translate some of these obscure sentences from Mon into Thai and find them then perfectly clear made me suspect that whole sections of the text had in fact been translated from Thai. Looking at the published Thai version of the text, I could locate entire sentences, even paragraph divisions, corresponding to sections in the Mon version. But not always – as I have recently learned, there exist several Thai-language manuscripts of the story, and when Phrakhlang (Hon) recomposed these manuscripts for

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<sup>1</sup> Topics about which I hope to write in future follow from this point: 1) how Burmese and Mon form a sort of dyad in contradistinction to the dyad of Thai and Khmer, and what that might tell us about the history of contact between these languages and traditions; and 2) how particular understandings of history, together with nationalist ideology, can strongly (mis-) guide the conceptualization of relations between these peoples, and by extension, their languages.

publication of the *Rachathirat* story in Thai in the version most widely found and read today, he embellished the language and events to make it more interesting.<sup>2</sup> Thus there are sentences in the Mon version that have an unmistakable Thai flavor but do not have an exact equivalent in the published Thai text. Suffice it to say that the ways to make a “good” grammatical sentence in Thai and Mon can be rather different, and that when certain clause-connecting particles in Thai cannot be translated and are simply left out, the Mon version often becomes a string of clauses and short phrases whose relations to each one another become difficult to sort out.

Just when I thought I had begun to understand the situation more clearly, there was yet another surprise. In the last third of *Rajadhiraj*, the flavor of the Mon changes to become distinctly Burmese, with Burmese-like expressions and at times direct translations of Burmese syntax. Again, some of these sentences are exceedingly obscure, but reference to the Bañña Dala version often – but not always – reveals a correspondence with a Burmese sentence that is grammatical and intelligible.

What I’ve learned is that in fact here we are meeting two of the major pitfalls of translation. First, when translating from one language into another, it is easy to stick too closely to the original when rendering it in the target language. The translator understands the original and is often not aware that his or her rendering in the target language is not readily intelligible. We see

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Bussapa Praphatphong of the Thai Ministry of Education for sharing this observation, as well as much of her other research, with me.

this in Burma today in texts and advertisements that render English into Burmese and vice versa. A second pitfall is to translate expressions and idioms according to their meaning, not their use. Another homely example from Burma is the use of such expressions as “*mingala shi.thaw: nanetkhin: ba*” to say “good morning.” The point is not the content of “good morning,” as such, which is what the Burmese phrase expresses all too precisely, but rather that it is a greeting. The natural Burmese equivalents might be perhaps to ask where someone is going, whether they have eaten, or to simply say nothing at all. To render the English phrase into the unnatural Burmese sentence above obscures the *use* of the English. In the Mon of the *Rajadhiraj* section, for example, it may be very difficult to understand the point that a particular Mon sentence is making, but when read in light of the Burmese, it becomes understandable, or we can perhaps see where the sense of the original got derailed in translation.

The fact that large sections of the text have been translated into Mon has led me to make a certain methodological decision, one that many local scholars at least may not be happy with. It would be easy to say that parts of the Mon text are not correct and have been mistranslated. The scribes who worked on the *Rajadhiraj* section seem not always to have understood clearly what the supposed “original” Thai or Burmese text was trying to say. Or they have made an unfortunate Mon selection for one of the Thai or Burmese meanings. Nevertheless, this version of *Rajadhiraj* has been in circulation for about a century and has become a site of scholarly inquiry and production. As a result, Mon scholars have

tried to render these obscure passages meaningful, and their efforts have become part of what the text now “means.” Nor can we know exactly when these translations into Mon occurred, although the rendering of Burmese names in Mon provides some clues, due to the fact that there have been some rather dramatic sound changes in Burmese over the past 200-300 years. I have therefore decided to take the Mon version of the text seriously as it stands, and thus also take under consideration the exegetical efforts of various scholars in the last several decades.

While there appear to be a number of Thai and Burmese-language variants of the text, I think that a project to comb through all these versions and collate them with the Mon version to rid them of their corruptions and produce one authoritative text will not advance our understanding of how these texts have been transmitted. Nor do I believe the text can be rendered interpretable only when it is read in conjunction with the Thai and Burmese versions—even though this is what many local scholars, both in Thailand and Burma, would like me to do. Furthermore, as much as I wish my abilities in all three languages allowed me to simply read through the many variants, I have no desire to delay the completion of this project for another fifteen years.

What does it mean that large portions of this text have been translated from Burmese and Thai? An obvious conclusion is that there was no Mon version of the story or that the Mon manuscript was incomplete. Peter Koret, who has done extensive work on Tai, especially Lao, manuscripts, has told me that he has come across similar situations. When we find part of a text, or one in its entirety,

translated into Lao, it does not necessarily mean that there was no Lao version. Rather, for example, it may be the case that when the abbot told his pupils to copy a set of texts, the Lao versions were not handy, and so the pupils took something from another language and put it back into Lao.

This issue of the translated sections leads to a larger question: how much do we know about the process of transmission of historical and literary texts in Burma? Why do we assume that it was all a matter of written texts? In Burma studies especially, but in Mainland Southeast Asian historiography more generally, there is a strong text- or manuscript-based understanding of transmission. People think in terms of a scribe reading, copying, and recopying palm leaves. Understanding this process of recopying is indeed a crucial part of understanding transmission. Whenever texts are recopied, which may happen, for example, when a manuscript begins to decay or when Pali texts are copied out and donated as acts of merit, there is often a creative process at work. The scribe may make various “corrections” or “mistakes” to the spelling or contents.

For that matter, the very nature of palm-leaf manuscripts makes them in a sense “ageless” because they can always be changed, updated, and rewritten each time they are recopied. When there are variations between versions, scholars tend to attribute them to scribal error or to the scribe making unnecessary interpolations. Yet we can see that even when a scribe does have an original in front of him, nobody makes a copy like a Xerox machine. I think we can see an extension of this process at work even today in contemporary Southeast Asia in

places like Burma or Malaysia, about which Amin Sweeney has written extensively. Many local scholars may take information from diverse sources, often without citation.<sup>3</sup> These physical aspects of textual transmission are fairly well known and have received a lot of attention, especially with reference to European practices of transmission.

Even if there were no manuscripts, the story would be changed every time it was told and retold. This is necessary in part to keep a story relevant and meaningful to contemporary audiences; otherwise it would not be transmitted. According to one line of argument, *Rajadhiraj* was first composed in Mon, then translated into Burmese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. So why is *Rajavamsa Katha* not written in Mon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, or of an even earlier time? What we find instead is more or less literary Mon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Incidentally, I would argue that, unless we can be sure of their dating, it is very risky to use manuscripts as straightforward historical documents, whether to corroborate or prove facts, precisely because it can be hard to determine what may be a later interpolation.

I do not believe copying is the only process involved in transmitting texts, and on a

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<sup>3</sup> I believe this kind of practice, rather than indicating insufficient training or experience, actually reflects a different epistemological orientation, one that Sweeney discusses at length in *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987). In societies with a strong oral-aural orientation, knowledge is public and can be shared--in fact, should be shared and repeated, because only through repetition can its transmission be ensured. Going into that for the Burmese context is a post-PhD project.

number of grounds we have to question the primacy that physical recopying holds in our understanding. Daniel Veidlinger,<sup>4</sup> working on the Lanna Thai Pali tradition, has argued that the use of manuscripts in the Lanna area started from the about the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and that before then Pali texts were exclusively memorized and transmitted orally. The memorization of Pali is still widely found throughout the Mainland. While literacy rates in many parts of pre-modern Southeast Asia may have been admirably high in comparison to other parts of the world, they still fell far short of today's widespread literacy. Nevertheless, literary and historical works seem to have been widely known. We find mention of readers (Burmese - *sadawbat*<sup>5</sup>) at the Burmese and Mon courts who read aloud and composed letters and possibly other kinds of written texts. In *Rajadhiraj*, for example, there is repeated mention of kings "hearing" letters and ordering them to be composed.

If we look across the region to South Asia and island Southeast Asia, we see that manuscripts are involved with, and often secondary to, a variety of oral performance traditions. This is not "oral history" in the sense of the narratives of non-literate societies. Rather, many narratives have a life of their own as performers tell and retell them before audiences. There are court dance dramas, shadow-puppet theater performances, popular plays, and songs. Manuscripts may be a jumping-off point for a performance. In Java, for instance, there

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<sup>4</sup> *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> That is, *sadaw* 'honorable written matter' plus *hpat* 'to read.'

was a tradition of reading letters aloud at court, and to this day there is still a tradition of reading manuscripts aloud. In Bali we find similar traditions, though the practitioners will retell parts of the story – written in Old Javanese or literary Balinese – in more modern language. There are in fact such traditions in and around Burma, both among the Shans and other Tai peoples, and they remain just barely alive in certain Mon areas. While Shans appear to perform aloud a variety of genres, the Mon tradition that I have come across deals with Jataka stories. That the focus of this tradition should be religious is not surprising given the concern for religious orthodoxy that marks many traditions of the Mons and Burmans of the last several centuries. I have heard repeatedly of such recitation traditions existing in Upper Burma, though I have yet to track any down. Taking into account these alternate modes complicates our understanding of transmission if that is taken to refer only to textual artifacts. As manuscripts are made or recopied, elements from other tellings of the stories may make their way into a text. I also think the oral aspects of transmission help explain the looseness of fit among the versions we have in Burmese, Mon, and Thai.

It may prove fruitless to try to find the original manuscript for texts like *Rajadhiraj*. I recently had an extended conversation with a Thai scholar who asked me whether I thought that Bañña Dala translated one Mon text into Burmese, or whether he had compiled several texts before translating the narrative into Burmese. After all, there are still some manuscripts around from that time period, so is it not possible that we could find these manuscripts of *Rajadhiraj*? Leaving aside the possibility of manuscripts

being lost through time, wars, or pests, or their disappearing into the antiquities trade, I think it is likely a mistake to think of this kind of literature as being composed on palm-leaves in the same way as the modern novel is on paper. It is much more likely, at least in the case of *Rajadhiraj*, but also perhaps in other kinds of historical narratives, that manuscripts simply record what had already been composed and performed orally. We cannot assume then that there was a *single* Mon palm-leaf manuscript that Bañña Dala took and translated into Burmese.

Returning again to the nature of the language in the *Katha*: there is still a lot I have to sort out, but a direction that I may take is to look at what the various non-Mon linguistic traces tell us about the nature of the contacts among Mon, Thai, and Burmese, both linguistically and, by extension, culturally. While I am fairly certain that large portions of the *Rajadhiraj* have been translated into Mon, in many other places in all the texts the traces, while still present, are more elusive. We find, for example, Pali words and expressions that are a regular part of the Thai and Khmer lexicon but are not part of the Burmese and Mon lexicon, or the same word is used with a very different meaning. An example of the former is the Thai-Pali expression *sukhaphap* (*sukhabhava*) meaning 'health,' which simply isn't used in Burma. For the second kind of example, the Pali word *anunyāta* is an obscure term in Burmese Buddhist discourse meaning a "non-entity," but is a commonly used word in Thai (*amuyat*) meaning 'permission.' This kind of example of differences in the use of Pali words returns to my earlier observation that the Mon speakers who recorded the text

were highly bilingual in Thai. One possible way to gauge the extent to which the Mon syntax in these texts is atypical is to compare it with roughly contemporaneous texts from inside Burma. But I have to be careful in establishing what a normative Mon baseline might be – in the linguistics literature on language convergence, there often seems to be an assumption of linguistic prototypes based on language families. Thus there are assumptions about Tibeto-Burman versus Mon-Khmer or Tai-Kadai ways of expressing ideas. I don't deny there may be some truth to these ideas, as they relate to parallel "drift" in which we find related developments across language families. But I'm arguing that in the case of these four languages – Mon, Burmese, Thai, and Khmer – we need to recognize the contingency of their modern forms. In other words, it is likely that the shape of the Mon language has come about through repeated contacts with Burmese and Thai (and possibly other languages) throughout the centuries, so that it is not a simple matter of a Mon "essence" coming into contact with another Thai "essence" to form a mixed language.

I think an ideology of history has generated a lot of preconceptions about the directionality of convergence and change in mainland Southeast Asian languages. Since the Mons and Khmers are considered some of the first inhabitants of the mainland, the assumption is that their respective languages have deeply affected Burmese, in the case of Mon, and Thai, in the case of Khmer. While that has at times been true, unidirectionality is far too simplistic a model to understand the exchanges and cross-fertilization that have happened among these languages, especially in more recent centuries. Mon,

particularly written Mon, is very reminiscent of Burmese and not like Khmer, which in turn has become very similar to Thai. Mon has changed a lot in the past two hundred years, with vast areas of high-level vocabulary falling out of use and styles of discourse disappearing. Increasingly, it has come to be used only as a spoken language, and not one for elevated discourse. There is much room for more research into these ideas.

### *How I Came to This Project*

In recent issues of the *Bulletin*, some of our *hsayas* and *hsayamas* have been answering the question, "why Burmese?" Although I'm no one's *hsaya* yet, I do get asked "why Mon?" I'm not sure I can answer that, but I can say something on *how* I came to study Mon. My interest began the summer I started studying Burmese at SEASSI in Madison in 1995. I was reading Hall's condensed history of Burma, and kept coming across the name "Mon." As an undergraduate, I had taken a few courses on Southeast Asian history and so remembered the idea that the Mons were one of the earliest peoples in mainland Southeast Asia. A certain idea took hold: that if I could learn both Mon and Burmese, I would be able to look at the history of the country from two distinct perspectives. One would be a northern, Burmese-speaking perspective; the other would be a southern, Mon-speaking perspective connected with what is now Thailand. It was also around that time that I became aware of Mon music from both Burma and Thailand, which I am still very interested in.

Several years of graduate seminars have forced me to reexamine and rethink my

earlier, romantic ideas about history and the Mons, though I still think there is a lot to be gained from closely reading some of the many, many texts that have not been properly studied yet. Michael Aung-Thwin has argued that the evidence for so much of what we think we know about Burmese history is far less certain than how it is usually presented. I argue that whereas in other regions – not least in Europe, but even as close as in Indonesia – scholars have kept digging and reinvestigating the findings of earlier scholarship, in Burma studies very little of this has happened. So many primary texts have yet to be properly read and annotated, let alone translated. This is not to mention the work in other fields, such as archaeology, that still has to be done.

I came to the Mon version of *Rajadhiraj* when I was studying Burmese under Saya U Saw Tun at Northern Illinois University. Knowing of my interest in the Mons, he chose Bañña Dala's Burmese *Yazadirit yèidawboun* for me to read in class. When I had trouble understanding certain passages, Saya pointed out what usages simply reflected the literary language of the time, and which turns of phrases were indeed a bit unnatural, thus suggesting translation from another language. This made me want to read the Mon "original." When I came to Burma to study Mon on a Blakemore fellowship in 2003-2004, I eventually decided to read the *Rajadhiraj* section of the *Katha* with my Mon teacher. It was only after that, however, that I began to see how much this collection of texts might tell us. So soon after my return to the University of Washington, I decided to make the *Katha* the focus of my dissertation project. I first planned on doing a translation of the Mon text, but I have decided to postpone that

until after the completion of my PhD. Professor Shorto did in fact do a complete translation, but he never published it. I only hope that the professor who now holds the manuscripts will acknowledge my requests and allow me to see them before I finish this project.

Like Nance Cunningham, I've also thought about making a dictionary. Along the way, I've taken a lot of notes and have had to make use of various dictionaries. Halliday's Mon-English dictionary has been quite useful, since he is strong on literary Mon and usages from Siam, and his dictionary also includes many of the words found in the *Katha*. Originally published almost one hundred years ago, at this point it needs to be updated. Shorto's dictionary of spoken Mon is useful, too, especially since he includes many examples of modern usage, while his dictionary of the inscriptions is valuable for looking up archaic terms and tracing how certain forms and their use have changed over time. So far, however, there is no work that unites the language from all these different places and periods. Given the radical changes in spelling and pronunciation between Old and Modern Mon, it can be hard to find a precedent for a Modern Mon form. For some of the usages from modern Thailand, there are at least two (Siamese) Mon-Thai dictionaries, but these are more like wordlists than full dictionaries. Sakamoto republished his (Siamese) Mon-Japanese dictionary in 1996 with copious example sentences, including such interesting examples as, "Our culture does not allow women to walk in front of their husbands," and "Hold his head down under water so that he drowns," which made me wonder which language the Mon examples were elicited in. None of these dictionaries

is as strong as they could be on identifying loanwords between Thai, Mon, and Burmese.

If I were to do my own dictionary based on my notes, I would not do it alone but rather with at least several other committed people. Ideally, I would like to include both literary and spoken varieties while providing reasonable amounts of etymological and cognate information. Mon cannot be isolated out of the larger context in which Burmese is spoken, and a dictionary would thus have to take into account the Burmese that is common in the spoken language. For example, while some Mon scholars may create words for new ideas and technology, inside Burma there is a strong tendency simply to incorporate the relevant Burmese or English word into the sentence. Another major challenge is deciding on the dictionary order for Mon entries. Because of the many sound changes in recent centuries, Mon spelling is often highly variable. There can also be a marked contrast in pronunciation of a word between the colloquial and literary styles, something of which many Mons themselves may not be wholly aware. Many words are “sesquisyllabic,” meaning that they are made of a full syllable preceded by a half syllable. While most of these presyllables get reduced down to ha-, a-, or ka- in colloquial pronunciation, the spellings – some conservative, others fanciful – come in a confusing variety of forms. There is no easy solution to the question of how to arrange all this variation into a dictionary. Does the compiler simply include all variant spellings, arbitrarily decide on just one or two forms, or take a more radical course of action, as Sakamoto has done, and list all words by their second syllable or, in the case

of consonant clusters, the second element of the cluster? Thus both *klang* and *palang*, are all listed under “rang” in the Pali word order generally used in reference works from Burma.

When I think about my dissertation project, I’m rather surprised how a harmless idea--to read a historical text from Burma, though not written in Burmese--has forced me to ask so many questions, for many of which I will probably not get a satisfactory answer. I hadn’t expected that I would have to look so closely at the transmission of texts on the mainland, nor that I would engage the question of language and cultural contact between some of the main literary languages and traditions of the mainland. I only hope that my research may be of some benefit in the future, and not prove to be a self-indulgent exercise in an excessively arcane topic!

Patrick McCormick

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### After the Storm

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*Shortly after Cyclone Nargis struck Burma, I asked Patrick McCormick if he might relate some of his experiences in Rangoon following the storm. He responded that someone else, a fellow graduate student from the University of Washington, was already writing up just such a report and passed along part of what appears below. Its author, Matt Walton, is a graduate student in political science. His research focuses on comparative political theory, specifically on the relations between Buddhism and democracy. He has been in*

*Rangoon since December, 2007, studying Burmese on a Blakemore-Freeman Fellowship. Much of what he writes here reads all the more disturbingly in light of what we know has transpired since. But this account of those first couple of weeks is vivid and irreplaceable.—The Editor*

Saturday, May 3

The storm hit last night. We got warnings from the embassy to stockpile food but we brushed them off, thinking they were over-reacting. Some Burmese people said they got storm warnings from CNN; the local paper had a small announcement in the weather section predicting an “80% chance of thunderstorms.” We didn’t sleep at all during the storm, at about 3am heard glass breaking all around the neighborhood. Kept getting up to check on our own windows, only one small one ended up breaking. It was hard to see outside but from 5am to 6am it seemed the worst. Trees down everywhere, roofs coming off, satellite dishes flying around. The rain seemed to be coming from the West, but it was blowing around so much that often the drops looked like they were coming horizontally.

By 10am it had calmed down a bit. One of our friends had come over in the middle of the storm. He lived on the top floor of an apartment building and his roof came off and windows blew out. Luckily he was able to salvage most of his things and he didn’t have much furniture. We went around town checking on friends and taking pictures.

Rangoon was unrecognizable. Trees and billboards were down everywhere, blocking streets, crushing roofs. There was a huge

tree down in the street just north of Scott Market, over the train tracks. Another one was blocking York Rd. and Nawaday Rd. was blocked at both ends by huge fallen trees. We kept seeing buildings that we didn’t recognize and eventually we realized it was because they had been completely blocked by trees before. Cars were driving any way they wanted to, and there were no policemen out directing things. In fact, the first few days, all we saw were one single group of firemen who were moving a billboard in front of Traders.

Although our phone worked (apparently one of the few in Rangoon still working at that point), we were only hearing rumors. Throughout the first day everyone thought that Chaungtha Beach had been completely destroyed. (In Burmese, the phrase “ma shi daw bu” means “not there anymore.” I can’t count the number of times I heard that phrase used in reference to a town, a village, or even a group of people. We thought people might be exaggerating but it turned out that in some cases, “ma shi daw bu” was the right thing to say.) There were also rumors that afternoon that another big storm would hit later that night. It turned out not to be true, but the intermittent rain storms that have hit almost daily since the cyclone have only made life more miserable for the people whose homes were destroyed.

For the first few days it was mostly local neighborhood residents out clearing branches and chopping away at trees with axes, machetes; one guy was out on his third floor balcony using a butcher knife to hack away at the branches of a tree that had fallen across the road and come to rest outside his apartment. By late afternoon people were already out trying to repair their roofs. Saw

a neighbor sitting on his roof taking a break from repairing it by playing guitar. Some tea shops even reopened by the evening. Where trees had been cleared in the road people were playing football and one group was using a median fence as a makeshift chit lom net. We heard that the government had cut off the electricity but were still a little nervous to see people using saws to cut through electric wires that were tangled up in trees.

At this point we had no reports from the Delta yet and were only really thinking about what the effects might be in Rangoon. Although the people here are used to electricity outages, they don't seem prepared for an extended period without power. Almost everyone uses a pump to get water from the lines into their tanks, so even if they restored water, people might not be able to get it. We were also worried that no one else seemed too concerned, as if this was sure to be only a temporary inconvenience.

Sunday, May 4

The morning street market in our neighborhood was partially open, so we bought some veggies. Met a woman who spent the storm with other mediators at Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha (a big local meditation center). She heard through her contacts that the NGOs were meeting with the government but not sure of the outcome of the meeting. Hear from a few friends who have intact satellite dishes that CNN is reporting that absolutely no news is getting out.

Hearing from more people that in some neighborhoods people who lost everything

are hysterical. Taxis rides are expensive and can take hours to get around fallen trees. Some buses are running but a trip that should cost a few hundred kyat is now 2500. The price of roofing materials has more than doubled, from 4000K to 10000K. Also hearing reports of people stealing roofing material from other houses. Looked out over the city from the roof of a friend's house. Roof of Myanmar Times building almost completely gone. The old Ministers Building is even more of a wreck than it was before: roof panels off, trees down everywhere, grounds flooded, walls broken.

Rumor going around that Insein Prison was destroyed by the storm and all the prisoners escaped, turned out not to be true. Stopped by Traders to see if their internet was up. Not yet but it's like another world, since they have power and running water. Tourists being turned away from airport, not sure when it will reopen. New reports from friends with family in Chaungtha, the storm mostly missed that area, hit harder in the Southern Delta. Inya Road (lots of rich people live there) used to be well covered with trees, now it looks desolate; the entire landscape of Rangoon has changed now that most of the trees are gone. A friend walked downtown from Inya (couldn't get a taxi up there) and on his way found 3 guys sitting in what remained of their small roadside restaurant. They were getting drunk on what they said was their only possession remaining: a bottle of whiskey. People using generators for power and to pump water. Some places inexplicably running their generators most of the night (a barber shop, a golf trophy store??—makes you wonder what other goods or services they sell that makes it worth the generator). Official

report on the radio that evening from the info ministry said 240 dead.

Monday, May 5

Casualty figures quickly rising; now hearing at least 1000 dead in Patheingyi alone. The place where we get purified drinking water had run out (the guys who work there had been sitting at the tea shop across the street since yesterday evening laughing at the people who came up with empty bottles) Found another place nearby that was getting a delivery and braved the mob of people to get a 5 gallon bottle. Gas prices are going up since everyone needs it for generators. From 5000K/gallon yesterday to 10000K today. Workers at a friend's school came in looking for a place to stay. Told stories of 6 or 7 people being killed at a time by falling trees in their villages, just outside of Rangoon. Guards at a building around the corner tell us their homes were also destroyed, they're hoping to be able to stay where they work for awhile. Seeing more official people out but since they don't have much equipment most are just standing around watching. Heard reports/rumors of looting, also that police were deployed to protect Dagon Center, a nice shopping mall.

Drove around with a friend to some outlying areas, people mobbing areas on the street where they are selling or giving out water. Bought a news journal with pics of the storm. Area around Kandawgyi is completely devastated. Still difficult to drive around, some roads are completely blocked by trees and debris. People are already using water from Inya Lake. The problem is, some are taking it to use, and some are washing right in the lake with the same water. We hear that this is how cholera starts. Clearly

not everyone is as worried: Saw a guy jump out of a pickup at a stoplight. Poured out the remaining (clean) water from his water bottle and ran to a nearby store to fill up the bottle with draft beer.

People in our neighborhood are carrying buckets of clean water, most likely getting it from a local park, directly from the water lines. Met a local Indian Catholic woman heading down to stay at the church. A few months ago, the church spent loads of money on this huge domed pavilion, a decision that was apparently opposed by the entire congregation. But the bishop went through with it and this structure was completely destroyed in the storm. Word among the Catholics is that it's retribution for the bishop's hubris; they make a point to note that Shwedagon Paya wasn't destroyed. The church was also turning away people who came there because their homes had been destroyed; wouldn't even let them eat a meal there. Local Catholics not happy. Shwedagon and Sule were both closed for a few days, although we heard later that it was because many of the gems that were part of the *hti* (umbrellas at the top of pagodas) had been scattered and needed to be collected.

Some friends found a generator to pump water but now the person in their complex who controls the well wants another 14000K to pump water for a half hour. This is in addition to paying for the fuel. Also heard that someone (not clear whether it was government or private person) came to our neighborhood and said they'd chop down and clear away one of the big trees blocking the market for 600000K(!). Some more rain that evening, apparently when it started people were screaming and running for the first available shelter. Caught a report on

CNN about the government accepting foreign aid, also that there would be dry weather in the region for a while (turned out not to be the case).

More news that at least 5 boats have sunk in Rangoon harbor. The jetties down along the water are completely destroyed, word is they'll have to be rebuilt, can't be repaired. Also, heard from a guy who drove down from Mandalay that much of the countryside just north of Rangoon is completely destroyed. Getting reports that people whose homes have been destroyed are gathering in monasteries. The monks were out doing their alms rounds in my neighborhood, but it's pretty well off here. How will they be able to feed hundreds of extra people in poor neighborhoods?

Tuesday, May 6

You can tell that people are starting to get worried about a possible water shortage. The *ye nway gyan* (weak Chinese tea) has come off the tables at tea shops. Usually when you order Burmese tea or coffee, you get a bottomless pitcher of *ye nway gyan*. Now tea shops are charging for this tea—that's serious. Last night there was someone driving around the neighborhood with a loudspeaker. They were telling people not to worry; water and power would be restored soon. We're not so optimistic. Initially thought it might be a few days, now it's looking like at least a month. How will they clear all the trees, let alone get the electricity and phone wires back up?

Heard from a neighbor that part of Theingyi market (downtown) collapsed. The friend trying to pump water was told that the price for using his neighbor's well increased to

90000K for 45 minutes. As we left, the neighbors were getting ready to confront him about this extortion.

Went to an emergency meeting at US Embassy. They suggested we all leave the country, reports of looting; they're worried about political/social unrest. Surreal scene, with people asking about rescheduling of SAT tests for their kids at international schools. Favorite American-centric quote from Sheri Villarosa: "I pray to God there were no Americans in the Delta area." Report of a taxi with a sign on the back: "A hungry man is an angry man." Asked what kinds of volunteer opportunities there would be for those of us who decide to stay, they didn't have much info.

Thai Air adding new flights but a big rush by foreigners to get out. Stopped at IDE (NGO that works in Delta making water pumps) to offer our services. They have teams out but are only now getting an idea of the absolute destruction in the Delta. Started a frustrating pattern over the next few days in which we couldn't seem to find any opportunities to help out at NGOs. Everyone seemed to be in assessment mode and only wanting to work with their own people. [The situation continues now, there are lots of foreigners here wanting to help but since they can't get outside of Rangoon to deliver supplies, there's not much they can do if they're not already working with an NGO].

Local newspapers and journals publishing again, mostly articles about ministers donating various goods, pictures of soldiers clearing debris. Water coming back in some neighborhoods but you still need a generator to pump it. Lines for gas are ridiculously

long, one extends from Aung San Stadium all the way downtown along Sule Pagoda Rd, two cars deep. Another goes from New University Road and Kabay Aye Pagoda Road all the way south to Shwe Gone Dain. But if people have gas they aren't hesitating to run their generators. Some run most of the night in our neighborhood.

Wednesday, May 7

Things seem to be settling into a strange sense of normalcy, at least in the downtown area, which is strange and unsettling, since we're now starting to get a picture of how bad things are out in the Delta. Also, no one is really sure how secure the food/water/fuel situation is. Heard a new concern that if cholera breaks out, anyone trying to leave the country could be quarantined. Not sure about this, so we call US Embassy. Of course, their lines aren't working. Hearing reports of water coming back in more areas. One friend went to UNDP to try to volunteer as a translator. He was told to look on the announcement board—it's been knocked over by a tree.

Running into more tourists around town, out taking pictures. Also lots of Burmese taking pictures. Gas price had been up to 15000K/gallon, now settling in at 10000K. Prices of street food snacks (a good gauge of how people are eating if they don't have power or water) are also stabilizing and many more restaurants open, although they are more expensive. Apparently some places downtown with underground electricity wires have electricity back. Metal from fallen billboards being scavenged by people but not sure where all the trees and branches being collected by soldiers are being taken. Momentary scare in our neighborhood when

a generator on a roof started smoking. The new concern is that people using candles at night might start fires.

Thursday, May 8

Tensions are running high, heard a big fight between some neighbors in the stairway this morning. A friend brought over some paratha, since her family's tea shop was destroyed, they have to sell their snacks on the street, making just enough to keep buying food. People are worried about commodities prices and also about finding roofing materials (if you didn't buy things the first day, prices have shot up). The price of a bag of rice is up to 40000K (I think it was about 26000 before).

Started working with students from a local school, providing relief to families housed in monasteries and an Indian temple, over 4000 people (this number would grow as they expanded to several new neighborhoods over the next few days). Heard from a guy at one NGO that only 95 people were left alive in Bogale (a Delta town), all the rice areas underwater, at least 23 villages still submerged, human and animal bodies floating everywhere, people can't bury dead and don't want to waste fuel burning them, just rowing out into deep water and dumping them.

Checked in at a local women's orphanage. The director there had a bad feeling on Friday before the storm and went out and got 1 month supply of rice, water, and fuel. She also had the girls at the orphanage go out and chop down branches and small trees. Not sure why she did this but it saved them from lots of damage. They need repairs but

want \$ and supplies to be directed to the people in the Delta who need it most.

Friday, May 9

Heard they're not letting American or European aid workers in, only Chinese and Indian. Trying to help out as much as we can with relief efforts through the school. Heard of one local man who took \$50,000 of his own money to outfit a boat with supplies and head directly down to the Delta. Making connections between NGOs and small, local, ad hoc relief efforts. Right now not much danger of overlap since so many people need help, but these networks and connections don't exist even under normal circumstances, so it's even more difficult, also since phone are still down and cell phones are only starting to come back. Reports from Kunkyangone (south of Rangoon) are bad, no food, water, or shelter.

Still gridlock at the airport for aid, although some seems to be getting through. Heard from one NGO that their assessment teams in the Delta can't even get out of their cars, the smell is so bad from dead bodies. Getting lots of medical info in from friends in Thailand (internet is back up but only in a few places like Traders Hotel) but not sure what, if any, has been translated into Burmese. Still really difficult getting coordinating info from NGOs.

Saturday, May 10

Power came back in our neighborhood this morning (of course it doesn't make much of a difference for us since our water pump was broken *before* the storm). But neighbors seem in much higher spirits. It seems like they're doing everything they can to get

Rangoon back to something resembling normal ASAP.

Still working on making connections between Burmese people we know who want to help out and groups we know need volunteers. That and helping with organization and record keeping seem to be the best we can do. Hearing that an information hub/organizing group for non-UN efforts is being set up by Save the Children. We go over there and tell them about the places where the groups we're working with are currently operating. They are planning to extend their relief work out next week into more townships. Not much worry about overlap yet, the need is still so great. They said they sometimes get blocked by local authorities but just keep going back and usually get through eventually.

Spend the day working on writing up and translating assessment forms and also sheets about disease concerns and prevention. (It's kind of counterintuitive that there's no actual epidemic risk from the presence of lots of corpses in an area. Of course, it's ideal to get rid of them as soon as possible but the first priority should be to help the survivors.)

US Embassy wives are organizing independent trips (hoping not to get hassled because of their diplomatic plates). Loading up vehicles and just driving out as far as they can get. Good intentions but we're trying to hook them into some kind of system, just to make sure the places they visit get consistent aid.

Sunday, May 11

Another thing we've found to do is to translate the students' diaries in which they are writing about their experiences during the storm and in distributing aid. We've also asked them to give pen and paper to the refugees they are visiting to let them record their own experiences.

Other Burmese friends of ours tell us they're trying to help but they're having trouble actually finding places where people need assistance (since most places in Rangoon are getting better). In one neighborhood a friend drove all around, asking locals where the refugees are; they weren't able to tell her since they had all been taking care of the damage to their own houses, etc. Very little communication since phone lines is still not back up; cell phones also not working for the most part. Power is back but keeps going out and coming back on. It's also raining on and off throughout the day.

Some refugee camps now asking for bamboo and tarps to start building temporary shelters. We translated a document on building sanitary latrines but were stunned when the students explained to us that the refugees were all gathered on the side of the road because all of the land next to the road was still completely flooded. You can't dig holes for toilets in flooded land.

One Burmese friend was absolutely livid. She was talking with the wife of a doctor, trying to get them to volunteer. The doctor's wife just kept talking about how helpless she felt and that at least she could take comfort in the fact that, for all those people in the Delta to have experienced all of this trauma

and suffering, they must have done really bad things in their past lives. (Just to clarify, Buddhism *does* teach that the circumstances of one's current existence are strongly conditioned by past actions. But in no way does this absolve an observer from doing everything they can to help someone else when they are suffering. In fact, ignoring the suffering of others when one can do something to help them could be considered a negative act in itself.)

Five medical students show up at the school to volunteer. Just in time, as we have been getting more and more reports of injuries and illness that the other students can't really treat themselves. One of the groups reports that there's at least one HIV positive person/family in one of the camps. Trying to pass the information to HIV/AIDS Alliance so they can visit there.

Monday, May 12

I'm still stuck waiting at home this morning for a guy to come and fix our water pump (he didn't show up). Afternoon meeting with some local groups. One just returned from Khunyangone, they had lots of disturbing pictures. Said that some trucks passing through villages had signs on the side, indicating that relatives from that village were coming soon behind. Whether this was true or just a way to keep from being mobbed by hungry people, we're not sure. One delta trip had to deliver supplies only at night to make sure things weren't stolen.

The head of one local organization used his contacts to get permission for foreigners to go along on some relief trips, but it seems like our presence only makes people uncomfortable and potentially endangers aid

distribution. It's too bad because there are so many foreigners here who are looking to help. But we just have to stay patient and assist when and where we can. Two monks from a Rangoon suburb showed up at one of these organizations. They had lists of all the families in their area and what their immediate needs were—pretty well organized. They also had a signed document from local authorities saying that they would be allowed to distribute aid. Since we weren't working in their township we sent someone to take them to Save the Children, who assured us they would take care of them.

Went to check up on a friend of a friend who lives nearby. His family is also trying to send out groups to help. The people who work in their house are Karen and their families are in the Delta. A few days after the storm, some relatives arrived at their house, with tragic stories of dead or missing family members. Of course they immediately bought some emergency supplies and made their way back down to the Delta, but when they got there, there were no more boats to rent. They were all either hired already, requisitioned by the government, or destroyed in the storm. This was also the case with trucks in Rangoon. The school we were working with had been using three trucks on a daily basis. This afternoon they tried to get a fourth and were told it would cost 400,000K for only one day!

Apparently a few months back, some popular Sayadaw made a prediction before he passed away. It was "Mandalay a pile of ashes. Yangon a pile of trash. Naypyidaw a pile of bones." There was a big market fire in Mandalay a few months ago, and Yangon

has certainly looked like a pile of trash recently (even more so than usual), so the prediction has people talking....

Tuesday, May 13

The man finally arrived to fix the water pump. Of course, the moment he reinstalled it, the power went off, so we couldn't check to make sure it was working until the next day. [Whenever something like this happens, Burmese people always smile and say "Da Bama pyi beh." meaning, "That's Burma."] Before the storm we used to have a private line. But apparently our landlord had some disagreement with the owner of that line and it was shut off, leaving us to depend on the much less reliable and much more yellow colored city water. Since the times that you could pump the city water were determined every day based on when certain areas have electricity, I had to go down to a park a few blocks away every morning to check the water time. One result of the storm is that our water now comes at the same time every day, saving me a trip to the park each morning but also making it difficult to arrange your schedule so you're home during that time.

A friend came by, said he went to the Myanmar Red Cross to see about volunteering. They actually have several Western volunteers there, basically just unloading boxes from trucks and stacking them inside. It's unfortunate because they have a ton of supplies but only a limited number of teams going out, so there are piles and piles of exactly the type of supplies we need to distribute, which are getting harder to find. It's the same with some of the bigger aid organizations. They can get supplies in but can't send teams out, while

all of these local groups are getting small amounts of supplies out but are having trouble getting materials. Apparently a US plane landed to drop off aid yesterday but no aid workers were allowed in; still only a regional team from Southeast Asia as far as I know.

Some of the sites our groups had been visiting seem to be stabilizing, meaning the population is generally secure and provided for, or, since they've at least been given tarps, they have gone home. We're trying to keep our groups focused on a certain area but it's tough because as more bad news comes in from areas further out, they want to put together teams and go to help. It's wonderful that they feel that way but we're also trying to make sure we don't over-reach and that we can keep supplying basic necessities to the people we're already helping.

Wednesday, May 14

Finding more doctors who are going out independently and also willing to come along with our teams. Every day meeting more ad hoc groups of Burmese who are putting together teams and also small NGOs looking to help out with funds, supplies, or volunteers. Everybody is looking for cheap sources to buy things like rice, water, tarps, etc. Talked with one NGO who said when they initially visited a Delta area, local bigwigs took it. The NGO called them up through their local partners and said that if they didn't release the supplies there would be no more shipments for anyone down there. That seemed to work. So aid is getting out and the ways that people are finding to distribute it are fascinating.

It's amazing how quickly Rangoon has been cleaned up. Some neighborhoods still look ravaged since all their tree cover is gone. (Rangoon University looks particularly bare and shabby now that it's not enclosed by trees.) But most roads are completely clear of debris. It's still unclear where the military has actually taken all of the trees they have been collecting. But it's still very impressive, even though I'd rather see that effort focused on the Delta.

I'm concerned about the journalists who are coming in. First, we hear they're offering lots of money (\$1,000-2,000) to Burmese people to help smuggle them past the checkpoints. I'm certain they don't realize the difficult situation and the very real danger they're putting these Burmese people in. [Later read a TIME magazine article where the writer talks about how her driver was screamed at by a military official and told that he would be reported.] Also, I'm unsure how to feel about reporting on these small ad hoc efforts. On the one hand, I know it gets more funds, and these are really inspirational stories. On the other, I think one of the reasons why the big NGOs are being blocked is because that's the primary story in the media and it only makes the guys in charge more nervous and defensive. These small efforts are working because they're locally organized and negotiated and they're not making the government look bad.

Thursday, May 15

Met with a team of 4 Israeli disaster relief specialists today. They can't get outside of Rangoon so they've been doing short trainings for any small groups that will have them. [They must be important because two

weeks later one of them showed up in the footage of the donor conference hosted by the UN.] The school I'm working with is also trying to set up some programs for children, giving those crayons and paper to draw when the relief team visits. Not only does it give them something to do while the supplies are being distributed, the pictures that they draw are amazing. Some are heartbreakingly vivid, of family members being swept away by waves, while some are hopeful, showing the people working together in the camps and receiving help from their fellow Burmese.

Now that we're moving way from emergency supplies in some places, the requests are getting more complicated and we're realizing that we'll soon have to make a transition to more long term reconstruction efforts. Hoping to partner with one or more NGOs to work on things like sanitation infrastructure, rebuilding livelihoods, and conducting psychological evaluations. The prices of some supplies are also going up. A roll of tarp has gone from about 90,000K to 130,000K, making it more difficult to supply.

Alongside the pirated movies, DVDs of the storm and its aftermath have started appearing on the streets of downtown Rangoon. Kids also sell them walking from car to car at big intersections. Some of these must be pirated from NGOs or government videos because they're taken from helicopters. But many are just amateur people going around to document the damage and do interviews with people. The one I bought is a succession of interviews with refugees in a monastery (not sure of the location). Survivors recount how high the water rose, how many family members they

lost, and how many people are left from their villages. Some of the most jarring injuries are long, raw, blistered areas along peoples' forearms. They were the lucky ones, who were able to wrap their arms around trees and hold on while the water swept everyone else away. While it does seem insensitive for people to be selling these DVDs so soon after the storm, they may also be a valuable reminder to the citizens of Rangoon. Many areas in the former capital have quickly returned to normal, but for the refugees still in the Delta, the nightmare is far from over.

Matthew Walton

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**Ludu Daw Amar, writer and activist:  
born November 29, 1915;  
died April 7, 2008**

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*Anna Allott wrote the following obituary for the English newspaper, the Guardian, which we reprint here (slightly revised) with the kind permission of the author and the publishers.—The Editor*

Every year, in the days leading up to November 9, writers, journalists, and artists from all over Burma have long gone to Mandalay, the country's cultural heartland, for a gathering in a monastery compound. There they have celebrated the birthday of a writer, publisher, and activist, Ludu Daw Amar, who has now died aged 92. For many, attendance in the compound has been a way of demonstrating opposition to Burma's military regime. (Unhappily, it has also provided an opportunity for military intelligence to note dissident names and faces.) Since her days as a student leader at

Rangoon University fighting British colonial rule in the mid-1930s, Amar never ceased to write or to fight. From 1962, when General Ne Win led the coup which has subjected Burma to almost half a century of military dictatorship, Amar provided opposition. She and her family have paid a heavy price.

Amar was the fourth amongst twelve siblings of an upper class family whose fortune was made in the tobacco trade. Educated at Mandalay's American Baptist School and the national high school, she read science at Mandalay Intermediate College and at Rangoon University. There, in 1936, she was a leader of the student strike. She also began to get published. In 1938 she translated the British civil servant Maurice Collis's critical assessment, *Trials in Burma*. In 1939 she married the journalist U Hla, who in 1938 had established the leftist *Ludu Kyi-bwa-yay* (*Progress*) Magazine and Press in Mandalay. In 1942 British rule collapsed, Burma fell to the Japanese and the couple moved north of Mandalay while continuing publication of *Ludu Kyi-bwa-yay*. Daw Amar translated Hino Ashihei's bellicose Japanese best-seller *Wheat and Soldiers*, but also became involved in the resistance movement. By the spring of 1945 the Japanese were being driven from Burma and that July U Hla launched the *Ludu (People) Journal*, with Amar serving as assistant editor. A daily, *Ludu Thadin-sa*, followed in 1946. "Ludu" became incorporated in the couple's names as the country moved towards independence from Britain in 1948.

But soon after independence, the army, hostile to the couple's radicalism, reduced their press to rubble. Their family narrowly escaped with their lives. In 1953, Daw Amar

attended a Soviet-backed peace congress in Copenhagen and a youth conference in Romania. Meanwhile her husband, convicted of involvement in the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)-inspired student protests, was sentenced to three years for sedition. Amar, with five young children to raise, continued to publish *Ludu Thadin-sa* until U Hla's release in 1957. But two years later the government shut the paper down for fourteen months. In 1967, five years after the coup, the régime closed *Ludu Thadin-sa*. Daw Amar switched from writing about politics to culture and history, focusing on prewar Burmese singers and actors.

With military rule many students, including her two eldest sons, had become student activists. The eldest, Soe Win, headed for the mountain jungles. There, in 1968, he was murdered in a CPB internal purge as China's cultural revolution washed over the party. Her second son, Than Joung, was also a student activist; he was detained from 1966 to 1972. On the point of being rearrested in 1978, he fled to join the CPB and later went into exile in Yunnan. A leading CPB member, he would never see his mother again. In the wake of Than Joung's escape, the military intelligence detained U Hla, Daw Amar and their youngest son for thirteen months. They came out in 1979.

The publishing house took on jobbing printing while Daw Amar wrote for Burma's privately-owned monthlies, refusing to write for state publications. An astute business woman, she published her many articles in book form. In 1982, U Hla died. Daw Amar continued to run the publishing house. But in 1984, during the dry season, fire consumed central Mandalay, reducing to

ashes the printing press, the book production department and the paper store of the Kyi-bwa-yay Press. Happily, her home, private library and newspaper archive survived.

Five years later Daw Amar's 38-year-old son, the youngest, was sentenced to ten years in prison. He was imprisoned in Thayet, a two-day journey for Daw Amar, his wife and their three children.

In the 1990s, as part of its drive to "beautify" towns for tourists, the régime began relocating cemeteries far outside Mandalay. So in 1998 Daw Amar set up Byamazo Luthmuyay Athin, a mutual aid association to help those who, amidst the collapsing Burmese economy, were too poor to bury their dead. Now the charity often covers hospital medical costs, provides minibuses, and carries out free funerals. Initially Mandalay's military boss resented and hindered its operations. Later came tolerance--the operation clearly fulfilled a desperate need--and other towns copied the scheme.

In 2003 Daw Amar had a small building erected just behind the Kyi-bwa-yay Press. There was put her lifetime's book collection; this was the first public library open for all to use in Mandalay in the last half-century.

Into her 90's Amar contributed monthly articles to journals and magazines and published at least one small book annually. She became both the voice of traditional Burma, calling for adherence to Buddhist values, and a symbol of opposition to the régime, leading the struggle for a more democratic, more humane society, and for the possibility to write freely and truthfully. The last words she spoke to me were "We

simply wish to be treated like human beings."

Daw Amar is survived by two sons, two daughters and six grandchildren.

Anna Allott

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**8<sup>th</sup> International Burma Studies Conference**  
**October 3-5, 2008**  
**Northern Illinois University**  
**DeKalb, Illinois**

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The Board of Trustees of the Burma Studies Foundation, the Burma Studies Group and the Center for Burma Studies cordially invite you to participate in the 8th International Burma Studies Conference, at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois from October 3-5, 2008.

Papers will be presented on all aspects of Burma Studies, including, anthropology, art history, environment, health, history, literature, linguistics, music, political science, popular culture, religions, and area studies. Panels and papers would be devoted primarily to new research, including recent events in Burma.

For more information about the conference or if you're planning on attending register at our website: [www.grad.niu.edu/burma](http://www.grad.niu.edu/burma)  
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