

Propogue to Part A

A “Historical Accident” and Its Aftermath

In 1932, Hartcourt Butler who had served twice as Governor of Burma wrote in an article entitled "Burma and its Problems:"

Burma became a province of India by the accident of conquest and by the convenience of recruiting its first administrators from India. (Butler 1932: 647)

The following sections provide some information about both the "accident" and the "convenience" and their consequences that preceded the first series of general elections held between 1922 and 1936 in a great part of the country that is now Myanmar. The quote highlights the role of contingency and the "inexpectable" that is characteristic for Burma's first encounters with the world of "modern" politics.

1 Inglorious End of an Era

On Saturday, October 11, 1884, a mass meeting was held in Rangoon's Town Hall in which some 5.000 people wanted to participate (Rangoon Gazette 1884). Around 3.000 of them, it was reported, were not able to enter the fully packed largest hall in town to “beg our Government to interfere on behalf of the miserable victims of Theebaw’s misrule” as the Rangoon Gazette worded it some days later. The meeting composed of citizens from “all classes” living in the city. They had been eager to protest the recent massacres that had happened in Mandalay on September 21 in course of a prison revolt that – according the newspaper reports published by the British newspapers n Rangoon - caused the death of some 300 prisoners, among them women and children. The “horrible massacre” was seen as the last example of the “misery and distress” of the misgovernment under the king's rule. In the end, a resolution was passed unanimously that asked the British Government to annex Upper Burma or, if that was not possible, to make the remaining part of the former mighty Burmese kingdom a "protected state within the British Empire with a prince, other than the present ruler, on the throne." (Rangoon Gazette 1884: 34) One year later, in November 1885, British forces occupied Mandalay, deposed the king and sent him into exile in India.

At least partly therefore, it was a public vote that caused the downfall of the Burmese monarchy. The resolution of October 11 was adopted by acclamation without any vote against it. The arguments presented at the meeting focussed on morality, in today’s terminology on the issue of human rights. It took the British forces supported by some Christian Karens at least five years¹ to “pacify” the country and defeat the many rebellions motivated by the determination to preserve the old order that was as uncompromising as the attitude of the attendants of the meeting in Rangoon. The two attitudes point to the existence of a “clash of civilisations” that might have influenced Burmese politics until today – including the issue of voting.

This final act of the British annexation of Burma after Arakan and Tenasserim as well as Lower Burma had already been taken over in 1826 and 1852 made it unavoidable for the British administration to implement a completely new political, economic and social order for Burma. This task included to find a substitute for legitimate rule that had gone with the king's and his family's removal. In the eyes of the business community in Rangoon, the credit of royal rule had already been complete ruined by a previous massacre that had happened some months after the death of king Mindon in 1878. Shortly after the accession of the throne by one of Mindon's many sons, 19

1 Two different accounts of the suppression of the revolts exists. According to the British civil servant Charles Crosthwaite who served as Chief Commissioner of Burma between 1887 and 1890, the rebellion lasted from 1885 and 1890. (Crosthwaite 1911) The Burmese historian Ni Ni Myint extends the period of fighting the rebels until 1895. She includes the resistance of the “hill tribes” in the regions bordering the Burmese heartland. (Ni Ni Myint 1983).

year old Thibaw, who had studied Buddhism in a monastery before, some 50 to 80 relatives of the prince were imprisoned and later killed by order of the court clique who had chosen Thibaw to become king.

The executed members of the royal family were regarded as potential throne claimants and, thus, prospective rebels who might try to replace the young king and those who had put him on the throne. The cruel action was grounded in memory of many rebellions that had happened before in the history of Burmese dynasties and even during Mindon's reign. It was the lack of predefined strict rules regulating the succession of a king that had resulted in such power struggles (Koenig 1990: 183-187; 233; Fielding 1899: 48-58). Differently from earlier events, the number of people killed was very high and the killings happened before the ears and eyes of western observers who did business in Burma's last royal capital.



King Thibaw on his way into exile (Wikipedia)

One year after the big meeting in Rangoon, on October 22, 1885, the British authorities in Rangoon issued an ultimatum to the Burmese court to comply with their demands in a dispute with a British company after the government in London had given the green light to annex Upper Burma if the demands were not met. British troops, already mobilised three days before the ultimatum, started the invasion on November 9 after having received a negative answer from Mandalay. The capital fell just 20 days later after a campaign that met almost no Burmese resistance (Cady 1965: 119-121).

The decision to annex Upper Burma as suggested already by the meeting of October 1884 had been taken before. The alternative to put another prince on the throne to accommodate "nationalist-minded Upper Burma" was dismissed. Few other candidates were left who had escaped to the British and therefore did not qualify to be accepted by the Burmese people as representatives of a constitutional monarchy. A complete break with the political past happened.

2 Rebellion

As a result of the abolition of the Burmese monarchy, the British Queen Victoria became the nominal head of the new British colony of Burma as a part of the British Indian Empire on January 1, 1886. Lord Randolph Churchill as Secretary for India ordered the annexation of Burma that was proclaimed by a short declaration. Churchill allegedly called the act as a fitting New Year present to the queen.²

Differently from the takeover of parts of the Burmese territory in 1836 and 1852 after the first two campaigns of British troops against Burmese armies under royal command, the surrender of King Thibaw and the takeover by the British of his capital Mandalay was followed by armed revolts. It

² In the biography of his father, Winston Churchill wrote: "Lord Randolph arranged that the proclamation should be made on January 1, 1886, as 'a New Year's present to the Queen.' On the last day in December he was staying with Fitz Gibbon for his Christmas party; and as the clock struck midnight he lifted his glass and announced, with due solemnity, 'Howth annexes Burma to the British Empire.' The next morning the Viceregal proclamation was published. It is one of the shortest documents of the kind on historical record: *By command of the Queen-Empress, it is hereby notified that the territories formerly governed by King Theebaw will no longer be under his rule, but have become part of Her Majesty's dominions, and will during Her Majesty's pleasure be administered by such officers as the Viceroy and Governor-General of India may from time to time appoint.* (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42817/42817-h/42817-h.htm#CHAPTER_XI; accessed 14.4.2020).

took the British troops five years to suppress the many revolts that were characterised by a kind of warfare that was described by the British chronicler of the events this way:

The [king's] army [...] refused the order to surrender that had come from Mandalay. Before General Prendergast [the British commander] could land his men³ they dispersed over the country in different directions with their arms, and as the British had no cavalry to pursue them they got away to a man. At first under various leaders, few of them showed any military talent, they waged a guerilla warfare against the invaders, and afterwards, when their greater divisions had been defeated and broken u, they succeed in creating a State of anarchy and brigandage ruinous to the peasantry and infinitely harassing to the British. (Crosthwaite 1912: 3)

The “anarchist” way of the resistance resembles what happened in Myanmar after the military cancelled the results of the 2020 elections and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading members of her party. A number of groups called People’s Defence Forces sprung up in different fight under a joint command but were united just by their denial of the legitimacy of the army’s leadership’s action.⁴

According to the British perception, it took five years to make an end to this anarchy. The Burmese historian Ni Ni Myint and last wife of the country’s long time strongman Ne Win adds five more years until 1895. (Ni Ni Myint 1983)

Both sides highlighted different aspects of the conquest and the resistance. The Burmese historian portrays the resistance as a

struggle which threw up a great many heroes but it was, in essence, a struggle of the common man fighting for what he felt to be his national identity. /Ni Ni Myint 1983: 156-7)

Here, the common spirit of all ethnic groups that were to called the “national races” later is emphasised. In contrast, the British fro the beginning stressed the differences between the people in “Ministerial Burma” ,(colloquially called “Burma prope”r) the Buddhist heartland and the bordering hilly regions partly inhabited by “wild” and “savage” tribes. The British administration ‘s first aim was to care for a “civilized government” to replace a state “of extreme disorder throughout the whole kingdom as a result of the “rapacity and greed of the Court.” (Crosthwaite 1912: 6). To achieve this goal, the people living on the hills surrounding the plains had to be brought under control and accept the Queen as their overlord. This had to be done with as few military campaigns and administrative expenditure as possible.

The radical transition initiated by the colonial power shaped the contours of the independent modern Burmese state. One central feature was the mapping of the new province the borders of which were almost identical with those of present Myanmar. Within these boundaries, the British administrators drew a clear line with the centre that had been under the control of the Burmese king and the periphery where a number of ethnic groups lived the leaders of which had been partly tributary to the kings for a shorter or longer period of time and partly not.⁵ Besides the great diversity of people and their ways of being governed, “Burma” proper was by no means a homogenous entity. Besides the ethnic Burmese, there were the Mon that had been defeated by the founder of the last Burmese dynasty in the late 18th century⁶ and the kingdom of Arakan (Rakhine) had been integrated into the Burmese realm only n 1885, thirty years before the first Anglo-Burmese war. On the other hand, the Shan States forming a large part of the “frontier areas” were by ruled royal lords called *saophas* or *sawbwaws* in Shan and Burmese..

3 The British army had used ships to carry the soldiers on the Ayeyarwady to the capital.

4 Another parallel is the situation after Burma’s independence in 1948 when a number of rebel groups fought more or less separately against U Nu’s government after the people’s hero Aung San had been assassinated.

5 For details see Scott 2010.

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The British dealings with this manifold diversity and what had been happened before were later very differently assessed by representatives of the different groups living on the soil on what was later to become the state of Burma. Ni Ni Myint's highlighting of the common resistance of the "common man" in all parts of what should develop into the state of Burma became the leading narrative among the ethnic Burmese, particularly after the military had taken over the government after 1862.

All in all, the integration of a manifoldly segmented new province into the Indian Empire opened up the opportunity for future complex scenarios of political alliances as well as conflicts.

3 A Twofold Splitting Controversy on Buddhism

After crushing the various rebellions in Upper Burma and the resistance of the "hill tribes", Burma was declared to be "pacified". Charles Crosthwaite who served as Chief Commissioner in Burma for some years at the end of his book on the military campaigns to achieve this goal published in 1912 quoted an English anthropologist about the effects of the annexation:

Immediately after the annexation, began the era of improvement. Twenty-four years have passed since then. The British peace officers have retired, or are retiring, but they leave behind them a prosperous and peaceful people. (Crosthwaite 1912: 341)

The so called "shoe question" starting after the turn of the century illustrates that this might have been true with respect to restoration of law and order and safe communication within the province upheld by the British-Indian troops, but not for the minds of the people.

Superficially, the conflict was about the issue of if or if not westerners had to take off their shoes when entering a pagoda that could be regarded as a matter of etiquette. Burmese people were used to take off their shoes but at many pagodas signs were erected informing the visitors that foreigners were not obliged to follow the local custom. The controversy began in 1901 when an Irish-born Buddhist monk demanded an off-duty Indian police officer on the platform at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon to remove his shoes. This caused a scandal, but the incident was soon forgotten.

The issue was taken up again in 1916 when a member of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), a lawyer educated at Cambridge University, started a campaign to remove the signs permitting westerners to keep their shoes on for reasons of hygiene or convenience in Prome (Pyay). The issue aroused public attention again when a visit of the Viceroy to the town was

cancelled because the local pagoda trustees insisted that even the prominent visitor had to enter the famous pagoda barefoot (Turner 2014: 128).



Cartoon drawn by Ba Kalay and published by the Thuriya newspaper in 1918 (Bechert/Gombrich 1985)

The YMBA had been founded in 1906 as a means to strengthen Burmese-Buddhist values. The founders were well and often British educated. The association could be regarded as unpolitical in the beginning. The proceedings of conferences held at the beginning of the war contain prayers for the well-being of the King and Queen. The action in Prome that could be regarded as a victory over the foreign power of the Burmese way of

enforcing the observance of a Buddhist practice in the country for people of other beliefs as well. This way, the Buddhist law was claimed to apply to everybody because it was universal in contrast to the British liberal concept that in a secular state the government just had to care for religious freedom for everybody.

In practice, the British administration tried a compromise by letting the respective pagoda trustees decide about what regulation should apply to single pagodas. As a result, "no-footwear" trustees were elected all over the country (Turner 2014: 134-135).

The "victory" of the Buddhist view had two practical effects. After 1920, the members of the British community in Burma stopped to visiting pagodas. This behaviour illustrates that the conflict touched a fundamental issue that could not be compromised. It was further related to another "shoe question" going back to the last years of the Burmese monarchy. Foreigners who wanted to get an audience with the king were obliged to remove their footwear before entering the audience hall. During the last years of King Mindon's reign in the 1870s, the British Indian government ordered its resident in Mandalay to refuse to take off his footwear when attending royal audiences. As a consequence, no direct conversations between the British envoys and the king took place any more. Such behaviour contributed to the tensions that led to the third Anglo-Burmese War. Two empires who had developed contradictory codes of conduct based on their religious-cultural traditions collided.

Such cardinal differences contributed to a split of the YMBA caused by the drastic means used by Burmese propagators of the "no footwear" campaign. It is illustrated by a famous cartoon published in a Burmese newspaper established by a co-founder of the YMBA. It that ridiculed both British visitors and alleged subservient Burmese pagoda trustees. Such propaganda were seen as grossly inappropriate by some of the members of the YMBA with close ties to British friends who had been convinced that other means of dealing with the British attempts to modernise Burma than such confrontation were advisable.

4 The Delayed Implementation of Political Reforms in Burma

The debated around the shoe question overlapped with the formation of the Government of Burma Act (Mitra 1921: 3-136) that was enacted in December 1919 that – according to the royal proclamation published together with the king's assent to the bill - "will take its place among the great historic measures passed by the Parliament of this Realm for the Government of India and the greater contentment of her people." (Mitra 1921: ii) It extended the participation of the population in government as a step on the way to full responsible self-government. One core element was the introduction of a system called Dyarchy or Dual Government to be practised. In all of provinces, elections were to be held for parliaments called Legislative Councils. Two of the elected members were to be chosen by the respective governor from among the elected parliamentarians as ministers responsible for particular subjects of administration, called "transferred" subjects whereas "reserved" subjects were to be administered by councillors. appointed by the British representative of the Crown in the respective province.

The Act however was not implemented in Burma at the same time as in the other seven Indian provinces. A British Committee reviewing the scheme stated in 1918:

Burma is not India. Its people belong to another race in another stage of political development, and its problems are altogether different. (Cady 1965: 201)

According to a statement of the Viceroy in Delhi to the Secretary of State in London on the inclusions of Burma in the reform scheme submitted in March 1920, the "difference" between India and Burma was described in negative terms.

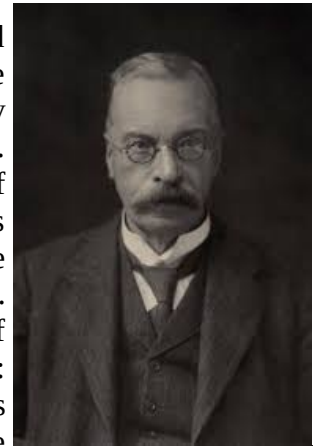
In political development Burma is at least a generation behind India. Broadly speaking, the people of Burma have had no electoral experience whatever. (...) In other spheres of national life the

backwardness of the Burmans is no less marked. In commerce and in administration all the prominent positions are filled by Europeans and Indians. The total number of Burman graduates has not yet reached 400; not a single Burman has passed the examination for the Indian Civil Service.

The idea however to separate Burma from India was rejected because

Burma is linked to India at present by many ties, foreign, military and commercial which cannot be severed in the immediate future or till the conditions which make for union or separation are clearer than they are now. (Mitra 1921: 277)

The delay was resented by the faction of the YMBA that had promoted the shoe issue. The same applied to their attitude towards the scheme proposed by Reginald Craddock who took over as governor in early 1918 and was assigned to formulate a policy suitable for Burma. Craddock was born in India in 1864 and had had served as a member of the Indian Civil Service in number of capacities, from 1907 to 1912 as Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces. His proposals were founded on the conviction that "the men of the various Burman races... should justify before the Empire that the Burman can make as good of the opportunity given him as any of the Indian races." (Craddock 1924: 27) Craddock's proposals were critically received for different reasons both in Burma, India and Britain (Cady 1965: 201-212) and it took some time until Dyarchy was finally implemented in Burma on January 1, 1923.



Reginald Craddock
(Source: Wikipedia)

5 Burmese Opposition in the Governor's Council

Before the complicated system of Dyarchy could be installed, administrative and political issues were discussed in the Council of the Lieutenant-Governor of Burma – as it was called officially. It served as a body that discussed and voted on bills introduced by the British administration. It can be termed a preliminary unelected parliament without real powers that legitimised the decisions of the British administration. Almost all members were nominated by the governor, only the chambers of commerce existing in the capital elected delegates. In August 1920, more than half of the seats in the Council were occupied by British members. Representatives of various ethnicities were also chosen, among them a Shan prince, but only two were Burmese. One of them was a co-founder of the YMBA who had left the association in course of the shoe-controversy and worked now as an official in the administration of the government.

In early August 1920, the governor appointed six more Burmese members. After they had sworn in, Craddock expressed his confidence "that they will, as their brethren have always done, meet the Government in Council with friendly co-operation and prove themselves an acquisition in any way." (Craddock 1924: 256)

Shortly after this increase, and Craddock's paternalistic remarks, the "University of Rangoon Bill" was introduced by the governor on 28 August 1920 as the "most important" of all laws discussed in the Council up to then. The discussion on the bill gives some insight in the way of co-operation that existed before the reforms were implemented.

The bill drafted by a special committee had been handed out to the Council's members before the meeting. A number of amendments had been submitted by the Burmese members who had just recently joined the Council. One of them called for a postponement of the Act until the Dyarchy reform scheme had been implemented in Burma. According to the Government of India Act 1919, educational matters usually belonged to the "transferred" matters for which elected members of the legislature were responsible. The Burmese side further argued that a centralised and residential university as envisaged would only benefit wealthy people. Therefore, the Act should contain

provisions to create affiliated colleges in the country because "to make progress towards self-government there must be a wide diffusion of general education." (Proceedings GC: 735) Another argument brought forward against the bill was its unpopularity among "the people". The proposed amendment of the bill was rejected by the Council's majority on the grounds that it was unrealistic and contrary to the experiences made in India. A number of other amendments were not accepted or withdrawn. Only two of them that concerned cosmetic changes were adopted.

The attitude behind this rejection by the British members and their local supporters from other ethnic groups is illustrated by the final statement of the principal of Rangoon College who had introduced the bill.

In answer to the criticism that the Council has not considered the wishes of the people in regard to the Bill, I would say that if the masses of the people be meant, the people cannot have any views at all on such a matter as University organisation. If, however, by people a section of the people be intended – the section whose views have been expressed in the press and on public platforms – the views of that section have been carefully considered, but have been held to be based on misconceptions of the scheme and of its probable effects on Burma. (Proceedings GC: 744)

After the discussion and before the vote on the bill, Governor Craddock made some remarks on the debate (Craddock 1924: 279-283) After giving thanks to those who had prepared it and talking about the advanced situation of education in India compared to Burma, he expressed his conviction that all members of the Council were

all one in our objectives and in our dreams, namely that a student in Burma shall be fully qualified to hold his own and [...] that the Burman shall not fall back in the race among other races in this land. (Craddock 1924: 282).

He closed his address thus:

I feel sure, gentlemen of this Council, even though some of them seemed to be disposed to criticize the Bill in the beginning of this meeting, that we all recognize that we all have the same objects in view, and trust that when I put the motion to pass the Bill, it will be passed unanimously. (Craddock 1924: 283)

The Bill was then passed, but – just like the with regards to the rejection of the amendments – the number of members for or against the Act was not recorded in the minutes that were later published. It therefore cannot be ascertained if the expectation of the governor that the bill would be passed unanimously was met. It is however quite clear that the objections of the Burmese members of the Council some of them having been selected to join it shortly before, were just dismissed. A mock debate was ended by a vote the result of which had been predetermined.

The rhetoric of the governor suggested that the educational reform was without any alternative and that the critics had been finally fully convinced of what had been presented. It was assumed that the opinion of the "masses" were not relevant and that the opinion of the educated Burmese were not yet meeting the standards of the administration's wisdom for the time being.

6 The Emergence of a Countrywide National Spirit

About three months after the University Act had been passed in the Governor's Council and two days before it was to be officially enacted, a student strike took place affecting Rangoon and neighbouring Judson College, the latter administered by the Baptist Church, in protest against the bill. They were the only colleges up to then offering higher education. Students who wanted to enter a university, had to go to Calcutta or London. The new act aimed at merging the two colleges and opened the way to affiliate new colleges in the country. The boycott became famous as the first expression of countrywide nationalist sentiments in Burma.

The decision was taken on the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon's most sacred building on December 3, 1920 by eleven students two days before the boycott started. After a lengthy

discussion the participants of the meeting decided that the colleges should be boycotted "in order to save the honor of mother Burma" and "made a vow to stand by one another and to rise and fall together" (Aye Kyaw 1993: 21). Two day later, the boycott begun together with the submission of a "memorial" to the Chancellor in which 15 grievances were listed in an annexure. Point 16 of the paper read:

Your momorialists submit that they will bot rejoin classes unless the various grievances expressed in the memorial are considered and satisfactorily redressed. (Aye Kyaw 1963: 101)

A grievance mentioned more than once was the emphasis on the command of English. Furthermore, the strictness of some rules and regulations was questioned and a more democratic administration of the university claimed. The students did not receive any response to their memorial. The principal who had introduced the University Act at the meeting of the Council however visited the striker together wit two Burmese teachers at a Buddhist monastery where they had been welcomed to stay by the monks and novices and asked them to return to the classes. The answer was that "we do not boycott our teachers and Principal whom we love and respect very much but only the University Act." (Aye Kyaw 1993: 24)

The authorities issued an ultimatum to return to the colleges latest on December 23 or being expelled. One day before the of the student leaders answered with an emphatic speech that began with the words:

The 23rd of December will show the world what staff we, the students of Burma are made of. That fateful day will decide whether we will be the boast of Burma or her curse. (Ayo Kyaw 1963: 102)

The speech ended thus:

Now, brothers, let us unite, body and soul, and stand together till the day when Burma can lift up her head proudly, possessing such sons and daughters as are endowed with self-respect, love of liberty, and self-lessness. (Aye Kyaw 1963: 107)

These words as well as the vow taken on the platform of the great pagoda show that the strike was characterised by the desire to restore the pride of Burma and the adherence to the Buddhist virtue of unselfishness. The emphatic words contrast the rather modest demands.

Notably, as in the case of the shoe question, a westerner encouraged the boycotters. Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, a liberal British parliamentarian with a great interest in India and Burma visited the students after having been in Calcutta before. His taking off his shoes before visiting the Shwedagon Pagoda was appreciated by the students. In a letter to a British newspaper sent from Calcutta in early December, he had expressed his wish got get the Indian "slave mentality" characterised by the attitude to beg for favours to be changed.⁷ In Burma, he said, two kinds of education had be established, an English as a code for "master" and Anglo-Vernacular as a code for "slave". He was quoted as having said that it "was better to die than to be a 'slave' of another nation." (Aye Kyaw 1993: 27)

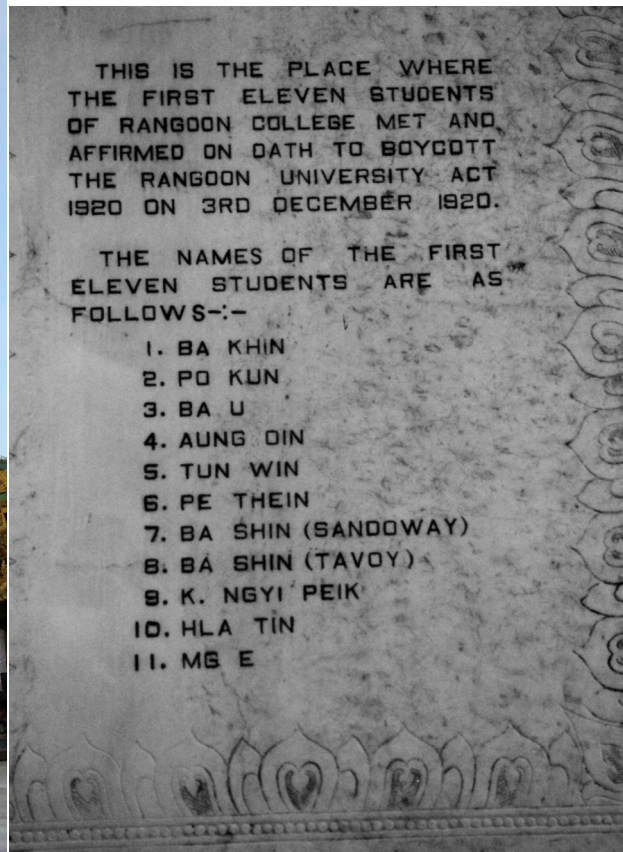
The news of the strike spread very quickly and resulted in boycotting schools countrywide. The strikers were supported by the public ion Rangoon as wall as in many other placed and a

movement started that aimed at the establishment of a national college and national schools funded by donations given by the public. The university was founded but did not exist very long due to financial and organisational problems. Many schools however sprung up and boycotters worked there as teachers. Later, a number of schools received financial government aid. They become important training centres for nationalist activities. It was reported that in the early days of the movement 90 national schools existed in which 60% of students at that time were enrolled. The number however decreased in the following years

⁷ *Englishman's Overland Mail* 16.12.1020: 13.



The monument built in 1970 remembering the strike. (Photo: H.-B. Zöllner)



The English text; on the other sides, the inscription is written in Burmese, French and Russian (Photo: H.-B. Zöllner)

A Council of national education was set up

to evolve a system of education comparable with those of the leading countries of the world and so turn out men of sound judgement and strong character capable of rendering useful service to the country in every walk of life. (Aye Kyaw 1003: 36)

Another remarkable result of the strike was the establishment of National Day that was declared to be celebrated by a Boycotters Conference in April 1921. The resolution was endorsed at a meeting of the General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) the successor of the YMBA later that year. Besides the beginning of the student strike, the day of dethronement of King Thibaw and the imprisonment of the nationalist monk Ottama were proposed as candidates for a day to be celebrated regularly as a symbol of the cherished aim of independence. The student strike won the competition because it was regarded as a victory, not a defeat (Aye Kyaw 1993: 48-49). In 1937, Ba Maw made the day a public holiday.⁸

In 1970, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the strike, a monument was constructed to commemorate the actions of the eleven students. Both the Burma Socialist Programme Party and General Ne Win participated in the celebration (Aye Kyaw 1993: 49-50).

Another major effect of the strike of 1920 was the recognition of students as the vanguard of national liberation due to their readiness of sacrificing their career for serving the country. An often quoted citation of governor Craddock helped to recall the anti-British sentiments of the early struggle for independence when it seemed appropriate.

⁸ Working People's Daily 29.10.1079.

In a talk before the Rangoon Trade Association on February 5, 1921 Governor Craddock qualified the Burmese attitude towards politics and the students strike thus:

The people are so forward that they call for the latest things in political reforms, but they are so backward that an improves University is too advanced for them. Liberty and democratic ideals are their confessed objections, but the citizen who honestly from them can only exercise his liberty under pain of social persecution. [...] To those who never heard of the origin of the word "boycott", there will be every excuse for supposing that it was a kind of game played by boys. Boys have boycotted the Boys' Schools, and I would suppose that it would be correct to say that girls have girlcotted the Girls' Schools. (Craddock 1924: 298)⁹

6 Summary and outlook

The events around the "shoe question" and the students' strike of 1920 show that it had been an illusion when the British administration had assumed, the country was pacified some years after the conquest. Law and order had been restored but the minds of the Burmese people were by no means peaceful. In retrospect, it cannot wonder that trouble lay ahead in the last British acquisition added to their Indian Empire.

Different from the resistance to British rule in India that was to a good extent by the political philosophy ba Gandhi, the Burmese opposition to British rule could be called predominantly "emotional" as a result of the humiliation of national pride caused by the loss of independence and the deportation of the King Thibaw to India. The British administration was somewhat aware of a problem caused by these acts. After Thibaw had died in 1916, they did not allow him to be buried in Burma. His Queen Supalayay was allowed to return, yet not to Mandalay. She and her entourage were given a residence in Churchill Rd. named after the man who had ordered the annexation of Burma. This could be regarded as a next humiliation. At least, this place allowed her to see the Shwedagon Pagoda.

The administration however did not understand the impact of the void caused by their actions in and after 1886. They were preoccupied with their vision and mission to install a new rational order in Burma replacing the tyranny they had witnessed under royal rule. The debate in the Governor's Council and the founding of National Schools after the strike shows that on the Burmese side an alternative vision existed. It was based on the desire to regain the control over the affairs of the country.

Religion was suitable as a starting point for such an undertaking. To be Burmese was almost identical with being a Buddhist. This self-evident identity was endangered after an administration of non-Buddhists had taken over over. The YMBA and many other associations were founded to fight the imminent threat and so implied a "national" meaning before the term "nationalism" became popular in Burma as its logo shows.¹⁰ The words above the Swastika as the symbol of Buddhism denote "race, lineage; language, custom; (Buddhist) teaching; knowledge, education". The symbol thus carried a very broad meaning that could be interpreted in various ways. The British authorities were only moderately concerned at



The YMBA Button

9 End of 1921, the Burmese author Lun (today known as Thakin Kodaw Hmine) published a text about the strike in which he explained the origin of the word "boycott". For details see the next chapter, section 9.

10 Today, the YMBA still exists with a number of branches in Myanmar as a pure religious associations. It is often regarded as an institution propagating Buddhist nationalism and supporting the military leadership after the coup of 1 February 2023 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/young-mens-buddhist-association-bestows-title-on-myanmar-military-chief.html>; <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/is-the-yмба-planning-a-return-to-politics>; accessed 13.1.2024)./

first because they had reasons to believe that the association was a "purely" religious aiming at uplifting the citizen's morality as its model, the YMCA.

As the emblem illustrates, "education" as well as "language" were inextricably linked with religion in the logo and – differently from the liberal western view – it was not necessary to add "Buddhist". In post-royal Burma, religion and Buddhism were identical. This special significance was overlooked by even a "friend of Burma" like Josiah Wedgwood who was quoted to having said in a talk before the "Burma Society" in Calcutta shortly before travelling to the neighbouring province:

Buddhism the religion of Burma, was not a religion of narrow dogma and creed; it was a world wide religion and embraced all mankind. Western civilization meant climbing on the backs of other people, and using them for the benefit of a few. Western civilisation was one great desire for the accumulation of wealth, thereby creating parasites or dependents. The Burmese religion did not teach this great evil; for on the death of a Buddhist his property was divided equally among all.¹¹

For the Burmese and the British, education was crucial for their purpose to develop the country. The British wanted a "modern" system compatible with the institutions in other parts of the British dominated world because they needed local people to do efficient work in administration and business. The founding of the university modelled after Cambridge, served this aim. The Burmese on the other side stressed the "Burmeseness" of education as the supreme factor and therefore voted for many colleges to be created serving the people of the country first and not the foreign "masters". Consequently, Burmese language had to be used first and English as a "second language" just as a technical tool necessary to become "compatible with the leading countries in the world".

Hence, the crucial and controversial issue was about ownership, the exclusive rights and control over the educational and other institutions. Concerning this question, the Burmese side had gained the upper hand in course of the shoe question. Both the conservative British administrators like Reginald Craddock nor a liberal like Josiah Wedgwood did understand the "soul of the Burmese people" that unexpectedly made an end to the Pax Britannica in Burma in the student strikes of 1920. The Burmese kings had been regarded as the protector - and the purifier - of Buddhist religion. After the end of monarchical rule, both functions were taken over by "the people".

Both in Britain and in Burma, a plurality of opinions about the country's situation existed. The big difference was, that in Britain a shared a code of conduct of dealing with political conflicts existed. Both government and opposition pledged loyalty to the Crown. In Burma, such a common sense did not exist. As a consequence, the reforms to be introduced in Burma in 1923 had to be only be implemented on a rather shaky ground.

11 *Englishman's Overland Mail* 9.12.1920: 13.