

CHAPTER III

LIFE AND WORKS OF MIN LETWE NAWRATHA AND HIS YODAYAR NAING MAWGUN

In this chapter, the biography of Letwe Nawrahta and his work will mainly be dealt with. As he served under six successive kings of Nyaungyan and Konboun dynasties, his life under each king will duly be discussed. Then, accounts of the battles before 1767 will be provided to afford a bird's eye view of the wars from Tabin Shwe Hti's reign to King Naungdawgyi's.

3.1 Life of Letwe Nawrahta

Letwe Nawrahta was born in Monywa village, Monywa district, Sagaing Division in the year 1723 AD. He was named Myat Thar Nay and variously called U Myat Nay, U Myat Thar or U Nay. He first served under King Mahadharma Yazadipati (1733-1752), the last king of Nyaungyan period. He then served under five successive kings of Konboun dynasties namely Alaung-min-tayagyi, Dipeyin Min (Naungdawgyi), Hsinphyushin, Singumin and Bodawpaya. So far, we cannot trace back his genealogy and the names of his parents or wife. However, we have been informed of the fact that he had sons named "Chan Nyein Yar" and "Chan Nyein Thar", Brother "Myat Thar Wai" and Sister "Amae Phyu".

3.1.1 Mahadharma Yazadipati

He started his career at the age of twenty under King Mahadharma Yazadipati in 1743. He became a tutor to the eldest son, Thiri Mahathudharma Yazar of the king of Sagaing. He was conferred the title of "Yana Kyaw Thu" and given the Taung Twin village to govern. Sometime later, he received another title "Pyanchi Kyaw Htin".

He recorded an account of the exchange of emissaries between Ayutthaya and Innwa in 1746. Owing to a Mon uprising in Martaban and Tavoy, the Myanmar governors of these towns had to flee to Siam. Despite helping the Mons, King

Borommakot of Ayutthaya treated them well. In acknowledging the goodwill of the Siamese king, King Mahadharmayaza Dipati sent an embassy with the presents to the Ayutthaya court. King Borommakot, in return, "sent envoys to Innwa with gilded lacquer goblets, dishes and betel-boxes, velvets and silks of dragon pattern, a royal barge, and a letter on gold leaf: the letter was enclosed in caskets of ivory and crystal studded with rubies, wrapped in velvet and tied with gold cord, and it was borne on the back of an elephant."¹

Moreover, Letwe Nawrahta duly stated the plight of the people of Innwa during the reign of King Mahadharma Yazadipati in his *Alaung-min-tayagyi Ayedawbon Kyan*. Some details were not mentioned even in *Hmannan Yazawin* but he related every detail of the happenings of this critical moment in history.

At that unfortunate time, the situation of the country was going from bad to worse. Within the wall of the city and the surrounding areas, thieves, dacoits and robbers looted the properties of the people. Some influential monks even consumed intoxicants and no one dared to make complaints against them. One heretic monk preached that a person who accepted his teaching could become a Sotapanna². His adherents unduly boasted that they had reached the stage of Sotapanna and accordingly gave themselves titles unfitting to them.

The king countered these problems by applying both peaceful means and harsh methods but was unable to stop the general deterioration of the country. The country was so disorganized that even when the Mon army came to attack Innwa, they easily reached the outskirts of the capital without any serious defense put up by the Myanmar Army to halt them. When the capital was besieged, rare incidents unheard of in history took place. Because the Mon army blockaded the supply line from the Leidwin (9) districts, the

¹G.E. Harvey, **History of Burma**, (The Beginning of the English Conquest; Longmans, Green and Co. 39 Paternoster Row, London, E.C.4, New York, Toronto Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, 1967), Page. 214; see also **Hman-nan Yazawin-daw-gyi (The Glass Palace Chronicle)**. Vol.II Mandalay: Mandalay Pitaka Book Depot, 1941. (reprint). vol. III. (Mandalay: Rangoon, Mandalay Book Depot, 1955), Pages 378-384.

² "a type of deity who had embarked on the first of four stages to enlightenment: Stream-winner, once returner, never returner, arahat", C. Wyatt, (Thailand), Page 143.



granary of the country, the price of rice shot up exorbitantly. The king had to provide the people with the treasure from his coffer. When the coffer emptied, a great famine fell on the people. So great was their hunger that people even ate the flesh of the corpses floating in the lakes. The king finally surrendered himself to the Mons who later exercised a scorched earth policy in destroying the royal city and upper Myanmar. They took the king to their capital Hanthawaddy.

Due to this scorched earth policy, almost all important literary works of Innwa were destroyed or lost. Letwe Nawrahta collected as many of these documents as possible from various monasteries located in remote areas and made a list for posterity. When Innwa fell at the hands of the Mon, he went back to his native village with a heavy heart.

3.1.2 Alaungpaya (U Aung Zeya)

Mons became the rulers of the country for a short period. Many chieftains hastened to make submission to the new power and drank water of allegiance. The origin of this tradition can be traced back to the days of the Angkorian Empire.³ However, one man named Aung Zeya from Moksobo did not yield to Mons. He built a stockade made with palm logs encircling forty six villages and defied the authority of the Mons.

When he heard the news of U Aung Zaya, Letwe Nawrahta decided to serve under him and set out on a journey to Moksobo in 1752. He was then about 28 years of age. He was taken by Min Khaung Nawrahta (Bo Ton) to King Alaungpaya in Moksobo. The king on first meeting him asked whether he could write a Yadu poem. He immediately composed a Yadu named “Zayatuthan”. Pleased, the King asked his name to which he replied as “Nga Nay” (master Sun). Being contented, the King proclaimed at the audience hall that to receive a man by the name of Sun is a good omen. When the sun comes, all other planets and stars have to move away. Likewise, because of his power and glory, all the enemies would surely disappear.

³ Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, Pages 193, 195-98.

In the task of unifying Myanmar, Alaungpaya had formed 68 Commanders (Comrades-in-Arms). When Alaungpaya became king, the tale of these sixty-eight men came to be the subject of a folk-ballad, the Ye-tin Linka. U Nay was added as number (69). Though he was included in the list, his main duty was not to take part in battles but to write records, poems, and other administrative works and be constantly with the king. He also had the privilege to follow the king's military campaigns both at home and abroad. As he knew about royal tradition, custom, and etiquette of the court of Nyaungyan dynasty, he rose to prominence rapidly in the new royal court.

It is interesting to note how U Aung Zeya received the title of "Alaungpaya" meaning "embryo Buddha". When U Aung Zeya made Shwebo a new capital and became king, a question arose to which title the new king should be held. Previously, he made a solemn wish that if his destiny was to become an embryo Buddha and a good king to upkeep and propagate the religion, all the battles be won quickly and otherwise, be defeated in a very short while. From that incident, he became known as Alaung Mintaya gyi.

In 1754, Alaungpaya ascended the throne in Yatana Theinka (Shwebo). U Nay designed the plan of the city and gave the propitious time according to the good position of the planets and stars. On that very day, he received the title of "Letwe Thondra". The king was of common blood who attained kingship by virtue of his own merit; and so he was unaccustomed to the royal traditions, custom and law and heavily dependent upon him.

In 1755, U Nay accompanied Alaungpaya's campaign to Hanthawaddy, Capital of the Mons. The king conquered the towns and villages leading to Hanthawaddy. While besieging the city, U Nay built a new town called "Zaytuwadi" for temporary station of the king. The Mon king gave his daughter in marriage to the king and other propitiatory tributes were sent. After the king's conquest of Hanthawaddy, he was awarded the title of "Letwe Nawrahta".

During King Alaungpaya's campaigns, many towns and villages were renamed from "Ye Pa Tan" to "Yan Aung kyun", "Bagan" to "San Yar kyun", "Pa Khan Nge" to

"Zaya kyun", "Karma Myo Thaung kyun" to "Aung Naing kyun", "Magwe" to "Yan Myo Nain", "Lon Gyi" to "Aung Pon kyun", "Lon Say" to "Myan Aung", and "Dagon" to "Yangon". All these names were given by him.⁴ These new names were somewhat related to the meaning of victory. The purpose of renaming these towns and villages was to boost the morale of Myanmar people who had to bear the suffering and were in a desperate state under the Mons for quite some time.

Another historical fact revealed by Letwe Nawrahta concerns the demise of the captive King Mahadharma Yazadipati. When he heard that over sixty people including the king and his three sons were drowned in the river by the Mons, King Alaungpaya was absolutely livid and said that the motif behind his struggle was not to crown himself but to reinstate the old king on the throne. Now his efforts were all in vain and he was so irritated by this incident that when he came down to attack the Mons, he acted violently and ruthlessly.

With the blessing of the king, Letwe Nawrahta made a donation of a religious building at his native Monywa village in 1758. He later built a Cedi in the reign of King Naungdawgyi and dedicated golden bells and stone inscription in Hsinphyushin's reign. These historical evidences are important for the historians to unmask the many details of Letwe Nawrahta's life. The name of his Cedi is called "Tilawka" and the religious building was named after the Kalyani inscription by Mon King Damazaydi.

From available sources, it can be assumed that he was left behind in Naypyitaw when Alaungpaya launched an offensive on Manipur, but he went along with the king's campaign to Ayutthaya in 1760.

As mentioned earlier, King Alaungpaya was not from the royal lineage and he knew very little about both religious and worldly matters, therefore, the King made quite a number of queries on various subjects. Letwe Nawrahta, on behalf of the King, as well as for himself, posed many erudite questions to the learned monks. Most of them were

⁴ Maung Kyauk Taing, "Thu-kha-mein U Nay i Say-pay gita thu-tay-thana," in **Min Letwe Nawrahta, 1085-1335**, (Yangon: Myan-sar Pyant, 1974), Pages 132-133

answered by famous monks in accordance with the Buddhist scriptures. His famous “Letwe Nawrahta Hlauk-htone” was completed in 1763.

3.1.3 Naungdawgyi (Dipeyin Min)

On the death of King Alaungpaya, Naungdawgyi (big brother) Min ascended the throne. Letwe Nawrahta was given the title of “Sithu Kyaw Htin”. He completed “Tha yo ga dipani”, a treatise on grammar, and “Sithu Kyaw Htin Hlyauk Htone”, a compilation of questions and answers, during this reign. Thanks to the bell inscription inscribed by the Monywa abbot, we now know that he received another title of “Nanda Thura Kyaw Htin”.

Letwe Nawrahta was said to have written over two hundred Yadu poems second only to Pyi Nawaday Gyi who recorded Yadu writings with more than three hundred. Unfortunately, we have so far found only eleven sets of yadu poems written by Letwe Nawrahta. Yadu is a popular kind of poem which normally consists of three stanzas. The subject matter may concern the giving of advice or in the praise of the king but the main feature of it was one’s feeling of sadness and longing arising out of separation from one’s lover or being away from the place that one loves and so on.⁵

Being a great Yadu writer himself, he compiled and edited Yadu poems of Pyi Nawadaygyi and Natshinnaung and made an anthology of Yadu written by sixty seven poets of Nyaungyan period. As stated before, the last forty years of the Naungyan period were years of turmoil in the history of Myanmar. Due to his relentless efforts, posterity has easy access to those works of great laureates.

Among the Pyos written by Letwe Nawrahta, “Razaniti Pyo” is the best. Pyo differs from Yadu and Mawgun. Pyo are verse renderings of Buddhist stories and teachings which transferred the Pali originals to a Burmese setting and made them more

⁵ U Hla Pe, **Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life and Buddhism**, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang, (Singapore 0511, © Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), Page 11.

vivid by adding small imaginative details and homilies.⁶ The following is an example extracted from the Ko-gan Pyo written by Shin Maha Rahta Thara in AD 1526;

*"Birth after birth, over and again, with dirt and besmirching, oppression and evil, fading and withering, longing and craving, crying and groaning, clutching and clinging, panting and grasping, sobbing and weeping, toil and weariness, all pervading, round and round like a spinning reel."*⁷

(Translated by J. Okell)

The Lawkathara Pyo composed in the years between AD 1333-1343 by a Rakhine poet Thu Mratt can be considered as the forerunner of Pyo verses in Myanmar literature at large.⁸ It has usually about 200-300 stanzas in the entire poem. In his Razaniti pyo, Letwe Nawrahta urged the king to emulate the specific characteristics of Lion, Bird, Chicken, Crows, Dogs and Mules. It was completed in 1763.

3.1.4 Hsinphyushin (Myedumin)

When Hsinphyushin was the reigning king, Letwe Nawrahta was appointed as Atwin Wun* and received three titles; Naymyo Thiri Zaya Kyaw Htin, Naymyo Maha Kyaw Htin and Naymyo Maha Thinkayar Kyaw Htin. He posed erudite questions to the Nyaung Kan Abbot from 1765 to 1771. Those questions and answers were recorded in his book of "Naymyo Thiri Zaya Kyaw Htin Hlyauk Htone".

During the reign of Hsinphyushin, another court bard Letwe Thondra, whose works had been later mixed up with those of Letwe Nawrahta, was banished from the capital to the far-flung areas of Meza region in Katha district in 1763. Since this Letwe Thondra was a great poet whose Yadu poem "Meza Taung Che (at the foot of the Meza

⁶ U Hla Pe, **Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life and Buddhism**, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang, (Singapore 0511, © Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), Page 6.

⁷ Ko-gan Pyo in Buddha's birth story No. 509 (Mandalay, 1923), Page 24.

⁸ U Shwe Zan, **The Golden Mrauk-U; An ancient capital of Rakhine**, U Shwe Zan, Patron, (Rakhine Thahaya Association, Yangon. Second Edition 1997), Page 152.

* junior councilor in the privy council

hill)” got high marks of literary merit in the history of Myanmar literature, I would like to make a brief account of his tragic life in Hsinphyushin’s reign;

Soon after Hsinphyushin succeeded the throne, the secret love affairs of Nga Aung Htwe, a courtier of the Prince Amyint Min, and court lady Mi Maik was uncovered. In anger, King Hsinphyushin demanded Prince Amyintmin to give him the possession of Nga Aung Htwe. When the king’s request was denied by the prince who was also the third son of King Alaungpaya, a royal order was sent to expel Letwe Thondra, tutor to Amyintmin, to the remote area of Meza place. This incident is like a Myanmar proverb saying “because one cannot drive away mice, one sets the whole barn on fire”. All ministers and courtiers of the palace were inexpressibly shocked by the king’s attitude.

While in Meza, Letwe Thondra composed a famous Yadu poem expressing his grief and loneliness. Relenting on hearing the Yadu, the king immediately recalled him from banishment and reinstated in his post. However, it is said that the poet was greatly disappointed and discouraged by the incident that his desire to compose poems dwindled in his later years.⁹

The influence of Maza Taung Che Yadu poem was so great that with this poem alone, the poet’s status is equally raised to the level of Pyi Nawadaygyi and Natshinnaung, both were kings of Yadu poems by the learned scholars. The following is the third verse of the Meza Taung Che Yadu to understand the tone of misery expressed by the poet;

*"At the Nyaung-ye festival
Meza people, all devout
Duly fall in prayer and pour
Water on the banyan-tree
From the valley, see, the shrine
Rises even to the sky
Meza! Thy pagoda old*

⁹ Nan Nyunt Swe. "Letwe Nawhta's Gon Myrauk sarpay mya," in **Min Letwe Nawrahta, 1085-1335**, (Yangon: Myan-sar Pyant, 1974), Page 26.

*Of the Golden Cave is there
 Fair to look on evermore
 Dimly glimmering o'er the mount
 Dusky floor to shadowy head
 Steady hang night's vapours yet
 Soon, as a billowing net, are stirred
 Surging fretful as a flood
 Huddle upward, tower, and crowd
 Then in cloudy streamers free
 Stretched across the sea of dawn
 Darkling wreath the heights around
 Lost and drowned. The raveled mist
 Shredded now by twisting winds
 Patters – listen! – to the ground
 Drip – drop – the sound is loud
 Like the rounded clear refrain
 Of the rain, though none there be
 See! The chariot of the sun
 Peeps o'er Mount Yugandhara
 Stooping under vapours wan
 Numbed, the noon I fondly wait
 Counting on my fingers chill
 Hours and minutes, till the rays
 Spreading fill the world with warmth."¹⁰*

Letwe Nawrahta worked together with this great poet under the same kings. They received the same title of “Letwe Thondra” and his works were not only confused with but also overshadowed by Letwe Thondra’s. Thanks to the writings of the Monywa abbot on the bell donated by Letwe Nawrahta and the efforts of our historians and archeologists, we now solved this problem through Letwe Nawrahta’s Cedi, golden bells

¹⁰ G.E. Harvey, **History of Burma**, The Beginning of the English Conquest; Longmans, Green and Co. 39 Paternoster Row, (London, E.C.4 , New York, Toronto Bombay, Calcutta and Madars , 1967), Pages 249-250.

and a stone inscription. Letwe Nawrahta started writing Alaung Mintaya Ayedawbon during this period. Among the three different texts of Alaung Mintaya Gyi Ayedawbon, Letwe Nawrahta's two versions were more detailed and comprehensive than that of U Htun Nyo. It is about how Alaungpaya rose to power, his conquest of Hanthawaddy and the reunification of the country, and how he tried to expand his sphere of influence over neighboring countries.

When Myanmar conquered Ayutthaya in the year 1767, he composed "Yodayar Naing Mawgun". He later wrote a yadu poem about a pair of big guns brought from Ayutthaya in the same year.

In the advent of guns and cannons introduced by the Europeans in the sixteenth century, it is worth remembering the reaction of King Min Gaung of Innwa when he first witnessed the destructive power of a cannon. He sadly wept and lamented that from thence onwards, man would not be able to show his personal prowess of military affairs in warfare to fight each other in a manly exercise.

If we traced back the whereabouts of twin cannons from Ayutthaya, one bronze cannon was dug out from old Innwa by an excavator. Written on it was "ME 1128, taken from Dwarawati". This cannon is said to be one of two sister cannons. It is indeed one of the two thousand five hundred and fifty cannons taken from Ayutthaya during the reign of Hsinphyushin. It is now displayed in the Defense Historical Museum.¹¹

There also exist other cannons bearing similar inscriptions. In the Ayutthaya period, a variety of cannons beautifully designed with mythical beasts were made in Siam as well as imported annually from China. In King Narai's reign, Siamese cannons including a pair of cannon were sent to King of France as gifts and they were used in the siege of the Bastille during the French revolution. Thus, it should be noted that many pair of cannons had been manufactured in Siam during the Ayutthaya era.

¹¹ Daw Kyan, *Thamaing shar pon taw hnint a char sar tan myar (A journey to search out history and other papers)*, (Kyauktadar Yangon: Myanmar Yadanar sarpay, 2002), Page 100- 107.

When the British occupied Myanmar in 1885, over one thousand and eight hundred cannons were captured as war booty. By the order of the Viceroy of India, General Sir Harry Prendergast destroyed many of them. To commemorate the victory over Burma and to keep them as souvenirs, sixty five beautifully decorated cannons were sent to the Queen of England and other nobilities. Among them, eight cannons which can be of Siamese origin were sent to the Queen, Prince of Wales, Duke of Edinburgh, Viceroy of India, Rangoon Volunteer Army and Commander of Madras.¹²

According to General Prendergast's report, six cannons bear inscriptions and the other two were molded in a similar design with the one sent to the queen. It is found that General Prendergast mistook Dwaravati for Dhanyawadi. His remark in the list was "taken from Sandaway (capital of Rakhine)".¹³ Due to this fatal mistake, many historians lost their way in finding the whereabouts of these cannons, especially a pair of big guns. Further study or research is still needed to discover their final destination.

Another debatable issue is whether Letwe Nawrahta went along with one of the campaigns to Ayutthaya. My personal view on that is the Mawgun could not be an eye witness account. My argument is based on three points.

First, since the career of Letwe Nawrahta did not belong to the military profession though he was appointed as Tat Ye* at one time, it is unlikely that he participated in one of those campaigns to Ayutthaya from the very start.

Secondly, the king did not lead any expedition to march on Ayutthaya. He launched a campaign only to Manipur in 1764 and from 1765 to 1769, he was busy defending the country from the four massive Chinese invasions against Myanmar. For this reason, Letwe Nawrahta would not have chanced to be in Ayutthaya.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

* Adjutant Officer

The third reason is simply a lack of evidence to prove in the documents. I would like to quote some lines from "Aspect of Myanmar History and Culture" by U Thaw Kaung, a famous historian of Myanmar;

"It was probably in December 1766, about six years after the great King's death that LN started writing this important eye-witness account of Alaungpaya's rise to power. At the time LN was in ill-health and resting from court duties for a while."¹⁴

If that be true, Letwe Nawrahta could not be an eye-witness to the war since the fall of Ayutthaya took place in April, 1767. It is very tempting to assume that Yodayar Naing Mawgun is an eye-witness account because Letwe Nawrahta vividly described every detail of a series of battles from the very beginning to the end. However, the values of the Mawgun do not rest on his being present or absent in the battles.

Letwe Nawrahta had a nimble wit and discernment to compose poems on the spot. He spontaneously composed "Zayathu Yan", "Pyu Kan Mawgun", "Zina Aung Char Shwe Bontha Mawgun" under time pressure.

He was included in a select band of Thwe-thout*, blood brothers formed during Hsinphyushin's reign. He also wrote quite a number of songs and musical compositions from 1763 to 1770.

3.1.5 Singumin

Letwe Nawrahta did not mention much about his service under Singumin though he received the title of "Mingyi Kyaw Htin". He completed "Letwe Nawrahta's Than Daw U Tin Pon Sar Htan" during this period. Singumin was notorious, fun loving and carefree and so his reign was short. There is little literature produced in the reign and Letwe Nawrahta's literary work in this era was relatively small when compared to those in other reigns.

¹⁴ U Thaw Kaung, "Letwe Nawrahta (1723-1791), Recorder of Myanmar History," in **Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture**, (Loka Ahlinn Publishing House, No. 167/173, Room D4, Seikkantha Yeikmon, Seikkantha Street, Kyauktada Township, Yangon, First Edition, March 2010), Page 81.

* Men contract brotherhood by drinking each other's blood mixed up in a bowl.

3.1.6 Bodawpaya

During the regnal years of king Bodawpaya, Letwe Nawrahta became a governor of Amarapura city (the immortal city) and received the highest title of “Maha Thiha Thura”. Questions posed by the king and answers by the Maung Daung abbot was treated as Ameidaw Phyay Kyan by him.

Towards the end of his life, he wrote Hsinphyushin Mintayagyi Ayedawbon. It includes the events of the first five years of King Bodaw's reign because the author died after nine years of the king's accession. In Myanmar history, despite almost all the kings possessing white elephants, only King Bayainnaung of Toungoo period and Myedumin of Konboun era were widely known as Hsinphyushins. Confusion arose when he wrote about the struggle of King Bodawpaya as Hsinphyushin Ayedawbon.

He was in the company of the Crown Prince Thado Minsaw's campaign to Rakhine which ended the long lines of Rakhine kings starting from King Kanrajagyi. We have seen only five invasions to Rakhine occurred from the time of Anawrahta to King Bodaw whereas numerous invasions to lower Myanmar, Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya took place. From that time henceforth, Rakhine was permanently incorporated into Myanmar as one of its states. He wrote an eye-witness account of “Dhanyawadi Naing Mawgun”.

On his return journey, Letwe Nawrahta undertook the onerous task to bring the Maha Muni Buddha Image to Amarapura in 1785. He recorded in his "Dhanyawadi Naing Mawgun or Min Khan Sardan Taw Gyi" a difficult journey in transporting the huge image through the passes of over one hundred and thirty mountain ranges and by water routes on rafts. It is said that this image was cast in the exact likeness of Lord Buddha during Rakhine King Canda Thuriya's rule in 554 BC. In a fifteenth century Eigyin by Adu Min Nyo the casting of the image is described thus:

"By the help of Visukarma

The divine creative genius

It was wrought

The present Mahamuni,

When it could not be done
With his hollow of the hand
The Master gave
Exactly seven times
The precious metals,
"With the warmth of His bosom"
And behold The likeness of
The Master appeared
To be revered by
Brahma, Devas and men
The gift of the purest
Of all hearts"¹⁵.

In Bagan period, the attempts of King Anawrahta and King Alaung Sithu to bring this ponderous image to Bagan were met with failure.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to mention the history of anthropomorphic representation of Lord Buddha. For 500 years after his demise, the Lord Buddha was represented only through Buddhist symbolism. It was believed that he was too divine to be represented in human form.

At the end of first century AD, Buddha images started to emerge from two Buddhist centres in Gandhara, a north west province in Pakistan and in Mathura, in central northern India. The art of Gandhara benefited from centuries of interaction with Greek culture since the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BC and the subsequent establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdoms.¹⁶ The art of Mathura is based on a strong Indian tradition, exemplified by the anthropomorphic representation of divinities. According to archeological evidences, Gandhara school of sculpture is said to have

¹⁵ U Shwe Zan, **The Golden Mrauk-U; An ancient capital of Rakhine**, U Shwe Zan, Patron, Rakhine Thahaya Association, (Yangon. Second Edition 1997), Page 155.

¹⁶ Internet

contributed the drapery covering both shoulders whereas the Mathura school contributed clothes covering the left shoulder.

In Myanmar, the main features of Buddha images in the first Innwa period were the large protruding ears, exaggerated eye brows and thin lips. During the Konboun period, a new style of Buddha images emerged which remains popular to this day. In this style, Buddha faces are more natural with normal eyebrows and thicker lips. Another form of art is Shan style in which Buddha is depicted with angular features, a large pointed nose and a small and thin mouth.¹⁷

The last Mawgun composed by Letwe Nawrahta was “Mingyon Pa Hto Taw Gyi” in 1792. After serving six kings with the time span of 50 years, Letwe Nawrahta passed away at the age of sixty eight in the same year.

3.2 His work

Letwe Nawrahta was the most qualified writer of his time. He was not only a recorder of events but also preserver of Myanmar literature.

He wrote two Ayedawbon kyans namely Alaung mintaya gyi Ayedawbon Kyan and Hsinphyushin Mintayagyi Phaya Ayedawbon Thamaingdaw. As stated before, there are three versions of Alaung mintaya gyi Ayedawbon; two different texts by Letwe Nawrahta and the other by Twin Thin Taik Won Maha Sithu. This Ayedawbon includes many interesting events such as Alaungpaya's military campaigns, ritual of court ceremonies, state obsequies, welcoming ceremonies of foreign envoys and so on. He also wrote Hsinphyushin Mintayagyi Phaya Ayedawbon Thamaingdaw which also has another title "Min Khan Sardan daw gyi." It gives an account of early reign of King Bodaw. As he died 5 years after King Bodaw's accession, his work covers only from the period of the founding of Amarapura to the conquest of Rakhine in 1785.

We have so far identified eight mawguns written by Letwe Nawrahta. Out of these works, 4 Mawguns are still missing: Maha Wizaya Yan Thi Sigondaw Mawgun

¹⁷ Ibid



(1784), Mingun Cedi Mawgun, Pyi-gyi-lar Mawgun (1765), and Zina Aung-cha Shwebontha Mawgun.¹⁸ The two war victory Mawguns are Dhanyawadi Naing Mawgun (1785) and Yodayar Naing Mawgun (1767). Pyu Kan Bwe Mawgun is about Hsinphyushin's visit to Pyu Lake in 1771 and Muddar Beiktheik Mawgun is on the two coronations and other royal ceremonies of King Bodawpaya.

He composed this Mawgun in honor of King Bodaw's coronation. In the olden days of Myanmar, there were 14 different bhiseka or abhiseka¹⁹ and that the Muddar Beiktheik is the most important of all. In one of his edicts, King Bodawpaya claimed that

*"We the Lord king of kings ----- of great glory, have taken the Muda Abisekha twice, while lesser kings have dared not attempt it even once; have observed the ten kingly precepts, the 7 Appariyati precepts, the 3 Thingaha precepts and also have observed the 3 Saryiyati precepts enjoined in all Boddhistvas, and by virtue of all these have become a kshatriya (prince ruling the land)."*²⁰

His work also consists of 4 Hlyauk htones and one Ameidaw Phyay Kyans; Letwe Nawrahta Hlyauk htone answered by Taungdwin abbot Khin Gyi Phyaw, Letwe Nawrahta Hlaik htone by Paline abbot phyay, Sithu Kyaw Htin Hlyauk htone by Ashin

¹⁸ Thaw Kaung, U, **Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture**, Loka Ahlinn Publishing House, No. 167/173, Room D4, Seikkantha Yeikmon, Seikkantha Street, Kyauktadar Township, Yangon, First Edition (March 2010), Page 73.

¹⁹ Yi Yi observes that the Burmese had more than one kind of bhisek. For instance there were the

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| a) muddhabhiseka | anointing of the head |
| b) mahesibhiseka | the coronation of the Chief Queen |
| c) uparajabhiseka | the installation of the Crown Prince |
| d) jeyyabhiseka | in order to win victories |
| e) mangala bhiseka | held to celebrate the possession of white elephants |
| f) siriyabhiseka | to renew one's glory |
| g) ayudigha bhiseka | consecration to gain long life |
| h) maha bhiseka | celebrated to increase prosperity |
| i) sakalabhiseka | held to ensure peace in the Empire |

Of these, the rajabhiseka, which may be synonymous with maddhabhisik, was to be held 5 years after accession, mahabhiseka 7 years after accession, jeyyabhiseka 9 years after accession, sakalabhiseka 12 years after accession, while siriyabhiseka and ayudighabhiseka were to be celebrated from time to time." Sunait Chutintaranond, **Cakravartin: The Ideology of Traditional Warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605**, Ph.D. Thesis, (Cornell University, 1990), footnotes, Page 206.

²⁰ _____, **Cakravartin: The Ideology of Traditional Warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605**, Ph.D. Thesis (Cornell University, 1990) footnotes, Page 207.

Nanda Mala, Naymyo Thiri Zeya Kyaw Htin Hlayauk htone by First Nyaung gan abbot and Ameidaw phyay kyan by First Maung Daung abbot.

In these treatises, Letwe Nawrahta posed all or some questions and numerous others are by the king and court ministers. Most questions are answered by famous abbots of the day in accordance with scriptures both in Pali and in Sanskrit. The queries varied from religious matters to secular and worldly affairs.

To differentiate between Hlyauk htone and Ameidaw Phyay Kyan, Hlyauk htone is a compilation of learned discourses, or memorable sayings presented to the king by scholars, or ministers. On the other hand, Ameidaw phyay kyan, or Ameidaw bon is a compilation of questions and problems posed by the king, or learned ministers, and comprehensive answers were given by venerable monks, or eminent scholars.²¹

The orthographic work of Letwe Nawrahta is "Myanmar Than Yaw Ga Dipani" which concerns the application of Myanmar spelling *Pin-yit*. His other work on the explanation of concluding parts of pyo poems is Pyo Ni gone su A phyay kyan.²² He wrote approximately 200-400 Yadu poems. His contribution to Myanmar songs and musical composition is also immense.²³

3.3 Battles before 1767

There are numerous descriptions in old chronicles of the conquest of King Anawrahta over Siam, Lan Xang, Malay peninsula and even part of Cambodia. There is also mentioning of confrontation between Chiang Mai and Myanmar armies during the reign of Mingyi Swasawkei in the early Innwa period in Myanmar chronicles.

²¹ U Thaw Kaung, "Letwe Nawrahta (1723-1791), Recorder of Myanmar History," in **Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture**. (Loka Ahlinn Publishing House, No. 167/173, Room D4, Seikkantha Yeikmon, Seikkantha Street, Kyauktadar Township, Yangon, First Edition, March 2010). Page 93.

²² _____. "Letwe Nawrahta (1723-1791), Recorder of Myanmar History," in **Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture**, (Loka Ahlinn Publishing House, No. 167/173, Room D4, Seikkantha Yeikmon, Seikkantha Street, Kyauktadar Township, Yangon, First Edition, March 2010), Page 78.

²³ For more information concerning Letwe Nawrahta's work, see **Aspect of Myanmar History and Culture** by U Thaw Kaung.

The intense rivalry between the two powerful countries in the mainland Southeast Asia began during King Tabinshwehti's reign. The 1548 war waged by Tabinshwehti was one of the greatest military operations in the history of Southeast Asia which set the precedence for the successive Myanmar kings of latter periods.²⁴ During Tabinshwehti's wars in Siam, a brave Queen Suriyothai of King Mahacakkraphat was made a martyr when she rushed to interpose herself between her husband and the sword of the ruler of Pyi (Prome) in an elephant ridden combat.

The successor of Tabinshwehti, King Bayintnaung invested Chiang Mai in 1558 and in 1564. The former war was simply the extended military operation after subduing the Shan states in Myanmar territories and the latter was the punitive expedition for the attitude of the King of Chiang Mai who did not render assistance during the siege of Ayutthaya in 1563. Since then, Chiang Mai fell under Myanmar's rule for more than 200 years. It is also worthy of attention that King Mekut of Chiang Mai became one of the 37 nats (spirits) traditionally worshipped by Myanmar people. He was taken to Pegu and died of dysentery in Myanmar.

King Bayintnaung conquered Ayutthaya twice in 1563 and in 1569. He was called "the Emperor without empire" because he ruled his empire through vassal kings without imposing effective administration. The great marches of Myanmar armies and the beautiful scenes of Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya abound in Myanmar literature. Some contemporary Yadda writers of the time revealed the fact that as the time went by; soldiers from the Myanmar army grew homesick and longed for their loved ones in Hanthawaddy. Dismay clutched them when they found out that the king was totally enchanted by the beauty and the pleasantness of these cities, not wishing to go back to Hanthawaddy any time soon. Therefore, they composed poems to counsel the king of the magnificence of the capital of Myanmar and the beauty of his queens.

²⁴ Dr. Sunait Chutintaranond, "Suriyothai in the Context of Thai-Myanmar History and Historical perception", **From Fact to Fiction; History of Thai-Myanmar Relations in Cultural Context**, (Chulalongkorn University, 2001), Page 31.

When Nanda Bayin became king, he made five inroads into Siam but all failed. In one expedition, the Myanmar crown prince fell dead in a single combat with king Naresuan. Min Ye Naya wrote in one remarkable Eigyin the following description of a failed campaign of Nanda Bayin;²⁵

When the Myanmar army retreated, the whole city of Ayutthaya marched out and gave chase from both land and water routes. The Myanmar army was totally routed and some fled to forests, some drowned in rivers dripping with blood. Notwithstanding to fight back, they were too exhausted to mutter even a word.

It was about this time another controversial and legendary figure Princess Supankalayar, elder sister of King Naresuan, was said to have lived. Since the time of the collapse of Hanthawaddy by the unholy alliance of Taungoo and Rakhine, king Naresuan invaded Myanmar no less than five times.

Throughout the Nyaungyang period, Ayutthaya was free from the danger on the north and only Chiang Mai was occasionally invested. It was King Alaungpaya who reclaimed the overlordship of Ayutthaya. His campaign was nearly met with disaster as he took the unprecedented and risky route in marching to Ayutthaya. Soon after he reached Ayutthaya, he fell ill and died on his retreat to Innwa. During the short reign of King Naungdawgyi, a rebellion in Chiang Mai was suppressed and his successor Hsinphyushin conquered Chiang Mai (Lanna), Lan Xang (Laos) and Ayutthaya (Siam).

As wars with Siam continued from 16th to 18th century, many poems about Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya could be found in Eigyins, Yadus and Igyins. Igyin was a kind of folk song as opposed to literary poems written by courtiers such as Eigyins and Yadus.²⁶ Many Igyins have no recognized names as they were composed by rural people. One Igyin says as follows; when the royal order came to conscript the army to invest Siam, many villagers who were afraid of hardships, ran into forests and mountains to evade the

²⁵ Saw Lu, "Yun Ayutthaya in Myanmar Literature (1548-1614)", **Myanmar Historical Research Journal**, no. 8. Yangon. (June 2001). Page 100.

²⁶ U Hla Pe, **Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life and Buddhism**. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang, Singapore 0511, © (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), Page 14.

king's decree. But some youths were exceptionally eager and overzealous to take part in the war. The lovers of these youths had doubts on whether their partners wanted to meet with the fair and lovely maidens residing in Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya. So the girls demanded the motive behind their lovers' enthusiasm to serve in the royal army. In responding to these questions, the youths simply put all the blame on the King's decree.²⁷

The year 1767 was a watershed in the history of Myanmar-Thai relations. Prior to that war, Thai people did not seriously take Myanmar as a formidable enemy but after the conquest of Ayutthaya, Myanmar became a sworn enemy of Thailand and destroyer of Buddhism. I will be discussing this development in Thailand in latter chapters.

3.4 Conclusion

Though Letwe Nawrahta lived in Myanmar over two centuries ago, Myanmar people owe a great deal of gratitude to him for his tireless efforts in saving and preserving invaluable literary works for posterity during the most turbulent and chaotic years in Myanmar history. Through his writings, he bridged the missing gap of 40 years between the Nyaung Yan and Konboun periods in the history of Myanmar.

Letwe Nawrahta's contributions to Myanmar literature as well as history were varied and enormous. His works of Alaungmintayagyi Ayedawbon kyan, Letwe Nawrahta hlaung Htone, Yodayar Naing Mawgun, and Dhanyawadi Naing Mawgun became classics in Myanmar literature. We are grateful for his collection and edition of Yadu poems by Natshinaung and 1st Nawadaygyi and an anthology of literati from Nyaung Yan period. Otherwise, most of them would have perished or been lost. He made a lot of contributions to Myanmar songs and musical composition. He did many of these things on his own account, not because of any outside influence from others.

He was skillful at recording historical events. Although he was a good composer of poems and yadus, his works were first confused with Letwe Thondra's and later

²⁷ Saw Lu, "Yun Ayutthaya in Myanmar Literature (1548-1614)", *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, no. 8. (Yangon: June 2001). Page 107.

overshadowed by the works of Wetmasutt Nawaday and U Pon Nya. According to U Thaw Kaung, confusion had started during King Thibaw's reign. In an important discussion on orthography held at the royal palace on 6th December 1878, the assembled scholars misattributed Letwe Nawrahta's "Myanmar Than-yaw-ga Dipani" to Letwe Thondra.²⁸

If we compare and contrast the two Mawguns under the same title by U Pon Nya and Letwe Nawrahta, the former embellished the accounts with invented scenes, metaphors, similes and ironies but Letwe Nawrahta wrote each episode vividly and went everything into detail. We can conclude that his Mawgun is less panegyric and more comprehensible than that of U Pon Nya.

Though many writers on history assume that Yodayar Naing Mawgun was an eye witness account, there is a lack of evidence of his being present in Ayutthaya at that time. Even when the king sent mandarins to bring a pair of cannons from Htar Raik (three pagodas pass), he might not have been included in the sent party or team. He composed a yadu poem about these guns only when they arrived at the capital. Further research on this question is still needed to uncover the truth.

²⁸ For more information, see U Thaw Kaung, *Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture*, (Yangon, 2010) Page 91.