

## BURMA-MYANMA(R) RESEARCH AND ITS FUTURE<sup>[1]</sup>

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This conference was perhaps the “biggest” international conference that has ever been held about Burma or “things” Burmese or Myanmar. From post-conference information provided by Dr Gustaaf Houtman, the main organiser of the conference, altogether 114 papers were presented at the conference including a few *in absentia*. Close to 200 persons, including keynote-speakers, paper presenters, panel chairs, panellists for various plenary sessions and other participants attended the conference. The conference was a success and most of the credit would go to Dr Houtman for his unstinting enthusiasm, careful and patient preparation and cooperation with paper presenters and participants from about 20 countries around the globe. Such coordination was done in the course of 18 months prior to the conference.

This report or “impressions” by its nature is selective. I would first discuss some of the plenary sessions. The first plenary session was on “Fifty Years of Burma Studies”. The panellists comprised of seasoned academics and Burma Studies specialists, most of whom have done research on Burma since about the mid-1950s, in a variety of fields. Their fields of study range from anthropology to politics to religion to economics to literature to linguistics. It was a lively session and was chaired by Dorothy Guyot whose husband Jim was also among the panellists.

This reporter/reviewer asked a question about monastic education which “triggered off” some more discussions on the topic. No Burmese were in the panel since – it should be said and acknowledged- that most (not all) researchers and scholars who have done academic research on Burma for close to 50 years are non-Burmese. In this regard one “youngish” (in that the person was not born when all of the panellists commenced study and research on various aspects of things Burmese) made the point to the effect– quoting and applying Edward Said’s thesis – that some of these scholars’ researches and findings might have shades of “Orientalism”. What he in effect meant was that due to the fact that all of the panellists were foreigners their scholarship is tainted with the designation of things Burmese as “the Other” and almost inherently-by the fact that they were “Westerners” their views cannot but have Orientalist biases and overtones.

The second plenary or key note session was on the themes of “Between Scholarship and Activism” and “Between Scholarship and Involvement”. The key note speeches were given by Dr Chao-Tzang Yawngghwe and Professor F- K Lehman. Again the issue of whether a Burma scholar can and should be an “activist” – in the political sense of the word- was made during the discussion period. The same person mentioned above made the point in effect that pretence of (political) detachment has been made by some scholars who are not activists in the political sense. Said’s “Orientalist” thesis was raised again and Professor Lehman (Burmese name U Chit Hlaing)<sup>[2]</sup> stated that he is not that “impressed” with some of the “postulates” of Said. The two key note speakers appear to agree with each other on the interstices of scholarship, involvement and activism though the “interventions from the floor” at times might have a

more jarring note.

The third plenary session was a Discussion panel, ‘Diplomacy: the Nature of Dialogue and Reconciliation’ which was coordinated by Professor David Steinberg (Georgetown University) and Dr Kyi May Kaung (Senior Research Associate, The Burma Fund, Washington DC). Apart from Professor Steinberg there was one other “foreigner” on the panel. The rest were Burmese at least by national origin. Most of the Burmese on the panel can be described as “activists” as well as scholars. Though the Discussion panel’s topic was specifically “Dialogue and Reconciliation” one speaker used the term “life and death struggle” – a phrase potentially replete with Leninist or “millennial” overtones- to describe the current situation in Burma. During intervention time I pointed out that perhaps the phrase life and death struggle may be a shade reflective of “all-or-nothing-thinking”. I also softly raised the issue of one panelist – a floor intervener in other sessions as discussed above and now on the dais for this panel discussion- openly castigating scholars who are both Burmese and foreigners. I expressed my view that the particular panelist’s castigation of persons who in his opinion are not actively toeing “the oppositionist lines” may not be appropriate. I stated that though there are some scholars who openly toed the “establishment’s line” there are also Burmese (by nationality or at least national origin) academics and scholars who are not supporters – at all- of the current Burmese or “Myanmar” government. For a variety of reasons they are not as (politically) active (in oppositional politics) as some on the panel. I even made the point of acknowledging –that almost all, though perhaps not all, of the Burmese panelists on the panel are more (politically) ‘activist’ than myself. I did state that I mentioned this fact not in ridicule but in respect. My sentiments – of specifically according “respect” to the political activists or oppositionists on the panel- were not reciprocated by that particular panelist. Indeed I think that I have unnecessarily perhaps over-praised that particular activist inasmuch as he is also on the panel an act which I now regret. He said in effect that I am “ranking” or favoring one form of scholarship over another (which is just not true; it may be a projection of what he is actually doing) he mentioned that those scholars who are not “activists” – apparently in the mold of him and his “activist” organization- are “moral animals”. Though I am not sure he might even have used the word “dogs” in denigrating “non-activists”. “Moral animals” he definitely used. I should state that both the co-chair of the Discussion panel – whom he criticized by name- and organizer of the conference chided him for his comments.

I also asked the panelists what the (internal and external) opposition would do concretely and positively if – in the currently very, very unlikely event of the internal opposition being able to “share power” with the ruling generals. One (Burmese) panelist slightly chided me for the “crystal ball” (so to speak) nature of my question about “best-and-worst-case scenarios”. U Thet Tun, a former Burmese Ambassador to France – who is also in the Panel- in his discussion about Reconciliation said that our country has since just before British colonization up until now “missed the bus” at least “six times”. Yet in regards to the future and perhaps in response to my query about “future scenarios” the former Ambassador said almost resignedly “Que sera sera...”

Indeed U Thet Tun was the “surprise” speaker at the Conference. His surprise Lecture topic was (I do not recall the whole topic) “... How NOT to manage the economy”. It recounts, with personal anecdotes, how the economic policies and plans were formulated and (mis)implemented in the early to mid 1960s when he was working (at least indirectly) as a “consultant” with the then Revolutionary government. He did not touch upon – much less analyze- the economic policies or methods of the current government and hence U Thet Tun’s recipe about “how not to” is perhaps incomplete. His speech however, was lively and filled with snippets and anecdotes not only of the economic foibles of the early years of “Burmese Way to Socialism”<sup>[3]</sup> but also about a few of the personalities of that era.

One more “plenary session” could be mentioned here. It is the showing of a movie *Thu-Kyun-Ma- Khan-Byi “Never shall we be enslaved”* which was directed by Dr Myo Thant Tin who was present at the conference. The movie was three and a half hours long and even though it was occasionally fast-

forwarded the audience (conference participants) did not have the chance to see the end of the movie. The movie is based on the novel of the same name written by the late Tekkatho Phone Naing which was first published in 1959. It deals with and is based on aspects of the palace intrigues and the resistance – mainly feeble and ineffective- that was offered to the invading British troops just before the fall of Mandalay (and the entire Burmese kingdom) to the British in November 1885.

Snippets from two Thai movies were also briefly shown. The Thai movies portray the bravery of some Thai villagers who stoutly resisted the invading Burmese forces in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century just as the Burmese movie dealt in part about the invading British forces (“On the road to Mandalay”)<sup>[4]</sup> of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The anti-(British) imperialistic theme of *Never shall we be enslaved* pervades the entire movie. It is noteworthy though that just as there were murmurs or designations of “Orientalism” concerning foreign scholars’ research about Burma (by one Burmese “activist-scholar” as described above) there was also a comment by a (non-Burmese) participant – in one of the parallel sessions’ discussion period - that at least a few scenes in the Burmese movie showed “Occidentalist” assumptions or connotations.

This conference was perhaps the only Burma conference where there were parallel sessions for most of the paper presentations. More than one hundred papers were accepted for presentation at the conference. Even though the duration of the conference was nearly four and a half-days the sheer volume of the papers mandated that parallel sessions must be held if the conference were to conclude inside of a week. Hence sometimes the choices of which session to attend were hard and when one is giving a paper one “missed” hearing the presentations in the parallel session. There was a wide variety of topics in the parallel sessions. Non-traditional but in the light of the times inevitable topics would include those on “HIV and Aids”, “Health and Human Rights” and “Gender and Development”. I missed the presentation by Daw<sup>[5]</sup> Khin Mar Mar Kyi of the Australian National University on the topic of “Representation of Burmese women in literature, film and songs” as I was in the “19<sup>th</sup> century history” parallel session and (as I told the presenter) I regret that I missed the presentation of a “Burmese feminist” (the classification or designation of the presenter is by the presenter herself) on an interesting and thought-provoking topic.

I did hear the presentation (in the same session on Gender and Development) though of another female Burmese presenter on the topic of trafficking of Burmese women to work as “sex workers” mainly in the neighboring country of Thailand. The “confidential” presentation was made by a person whose professional position puts her at a good vantage point to report on and analyze the victimization of many Burmese women which blighted their lives. The statistics and figures were grim, the narration was touching and emotional –the presenter’s voice cracked and she choked back tears at one point and the efforts to minimize though – to be realistic- not to eradicate this abominable practice by the organization where the speaker works were laudable.

This reviewer gave a presentation in the “Language and Literature” sessions and also another in the “20<sup>th</sup> century history” session. I chaired the session on “Law and Constitution” where there were supposed to be about five speakers or paper presenters. Due to a variety of reasons only one of the scheduled presenters was able to come to the conference. At least two of the scheduled presenters were not able to come to the conference mainly due to (Swedish) visa problems. Hence Dr Gustaaf Houtman, the main organizer of the conference requested me to give an “impromptu” presentation at the conference since without my presentation there would have been only one speaker in that particular session. Apart from my impromptu presentation, I also summarized the paper by (Daw) Naw May Oo about “The Right to Health in International Law” especially as it relates to Burma. The other speaker in the session was Graeme Wiffen, a Senior Lecturer at the Division of Law at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, who spoke on “Heritage Law as it is Applicable to Burma”.

While discussing about the parallel sessions one observation even grouse can be made here. At least a few

of the speakers, - including perhaps in one session a Chairperson - did not adhere to the time limit allotted to them in the 45 minutes or so designated for each parallel session. And at least on some occasions the Chairs of the sessions could have been firmer in making the presenters adhere to the time limit. Though most – not all- who presented papers are academics, the “over-timers” did not seem to be aware or did not put into practice the fundamental fact that it is not the purpose of the presentation to read their entire papers which at least a few literally did or tried to do so. It should have been obvious that in the course of about 9 to about 15 minutes one could not possibly “read” or impart most or even some of the contents of one’s entire paper. The “oral” presentation of one’s paper is to highlight the main points in the limited time given. A few presenters stubbornly, almost cussedly persisted in reading their papers to the end notwithstanding the Chairperson’s handing out notes or verbally “intervening” once, twice, even three times to stop so as to give way to the fellow panelists or to commence the discussion. Thus valuable time for discussion from the floor was wasted by some of those panelists who greatly exceeded their time limit.

I am pleased though to state that in one session where I gave a presentation the Chair of the session was prepared and firm. At the same time he was tactful and persuasive in making the presenters adhere to their allotted time. Dr Julian Wheatley of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who chaired the “Language and Literature” session negotiated with us, a day before our presentations, concerning the time allotted to each presenter and “persuaded” us to adhere to our allotted time-limit. My topic in that session was “A Glimpse of Five Existential Burmese Poems”. In the course of about 10 minutes I had to show the five Burmese poems on the overhead projectors as well as their English translations. In addition, I also had to narrate my views and comments on each of the poems leaving me with less than three minutes for each poem. Partly because all of the presenters adhered to the time limit I enjoyed most of the presentations in this session. Julian’s presentation on “Burmese spoonerisms”<sup>[6]</sup> was witty, lively and remarkable and it stands out as one of the enjoyable and better presentations not only of that particular session but also of the other parallel sessions that I attended. I also enjoyed and learned from the presentation by U Saw Tun of Northern Illinois University on “The Status of Colloquial Burmese”.

Other sessions which I had enjoyed – and learned from- include “Buddhism and the Nats”<sup>[7]</sup> which was spread over two sessions and the papers discussed in the session include those about Buddhist cosmogony, the Thamanya Sayadaw’s (a famed ascetic Burmese Buddhist monk) Birthday and a presentation on or about the concept of DAGO (which can very roughly be translated as Buddhist or the Buddha’s and his monk-disciples’ “power” in contrast with AR-NAR which is “worldly”, “secular” or raw, “brute” power.

At the discussion time I raised a query from the floor as to whether the concept of power as espoused by the late Michel Foucault would have or should have any bearing or relevance in analyzing the traditional and indigenous Burman (“Bamar”) concept or varieties of power of “popular” Buddhism. My query was met by a segment of the audience with “oh no ... (not Foucault)” sort of reaction. Perhaps I was being too “western” (or is it “post-modern”?) in my views whether they deal with anthropology or politics or literature. Most of the paper presenters in the sessions that dealt with Buddhism and *Nats* (“Burmese spirits”) were given by able, competent young (foreign) scholars. One young (non-Burmese) scholar lightly chided me when I said that I was impressed with another scholar’s anthropological and sociological writings on Burmese Buddhist practices. That scholar – whose works I mentioned to the young paper presenter - was not present at the conference and is now in his eighties. The young presenter who does not look a day over thirty responded to my comment by stating that I am very “Westernized”. She had, like her elder scholar in the field done anthropological research, by living in a Burmese village for some time though the gap between the research periods of these two scholars were more than thirty years. Except for a brief sojourn in a “summer camp” – which is nearby but not quite in a Burmese village - I have not lived, even for a single day, in a Burmese village. Can the differences of anthropological opinion among the young and elder (and elderly) scholars be attributed to their differences in age and gender? Or am I being too “Westernized” in attributing these “variables” as reasons for the scholarly differences of opinions?

Space constraints require me to be selective and eclectic and- I should say just a tad apologetically- “personalized” in my reportage and commentary about the conference. Before I conclude I must mention that an encouraging, positive feature of the conference was that an unprecedented number of Burmese scholars, graduate students and interested persons were among those who presented papers at the conference. Some, indeed most, were very competent and impressive in their presentations. Apart from those already mentioned above I also attended the presentations by Dr Alice Khin Saw Win (a medical doctor) of the University of Alberta, Canada on the issue of Health and Human Rights and by Dr Koung Nyunt (an architect) of the University of Auckland, New Zealand on the architectural – with its cultural, historical and political connotations- differences and significances of the cities of Rangoon and Mandalay. These stand out in my memory as being fine, interesting presentations.

A few of the young Burmese presenters’ style and mode of presentation – and let’s not beat about the bush - their command of English can be improved. The Gothenburg conference afforded them an opportunity to make a good start. (I should add that the less-than-perfect English skills of a few of the young Burmese presenters are no reflection on their personal abilities. They grew up in a system where the medium of instruction was entirely or almost entirely in Burmese in most subjects and where – at least in the nineteen sixties, seventies and early nineteen eighties- the teaching and learning of English was not encouraged. It is to their credit that they have tried to overcome these difficulties to make a head-start at the conference.). Most (if not all) of the graduate students or potential Burmese scholars were sponsored in that most if not all of their travel and accommodation expenses were subsidized. Gustaaf Houtman, the main organizer of the conference also worked hard and pulled all strings to subsidize these Burmese students or researchers to enable them to attend and gave presentations at the conference. For his outstanding role and tireless efforts in bringing about the Gothenburg conference Gustaaf deserved a great deal of credit and accolade. As a small token of appreciation for his role and contributions to the conference Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi arranged for a huge thank you card to be signed by most of the participants at the conference and she gave it to Gustaaf on the last day of the conference.

Many of the conference participants had the chance to renew contact with old friends, colleagues, c and acquaintances and also to make new friends during the conference. Apart from the conference tea-breaks, lunches, dinners and receptions the chance to socialize one final time at the Gothenburg conference occurred on its last day when Gustaaf invited all of us – who were still there in Gothenburg- to his temporary apartment for drinks. For me, one of the highlights of the conference was to witness two Professors of Linguistics from Russia conversing with a Japanese historian. It would not have been THAT remarkable had it not been for the fact that they were conversing among themselves in Burmese! The Japanese Professor lapsed for a few short seconds by speaking in English but soon he corrected himself saying in Burmese “I will now speak only in Burmese” and continued to do so. (At the parallel session on “Relationships with China” Professor Li Mou of Beijing University read his paper entirely in Burmese and also the discussions on his paper were done in Burmese. At some person’s request I translated the gist of my queries to Professor Li Mou into English. This was the first time I have heard a paper presented in the Burmese language at an international conference -albeit the conference was on Burma.

The Gothenburg conference on *Burma/Myanmar: Implications for Researchers and Policy Makers* was undoubtedly a successful and good one. As pointed out by Gustaaf in his pre-conference announcements and post-conference (e-mail) “postings”, due to a variety of reasons Burma studies has – until recently- been a (relatively) an arcane area of study, not been “popular” as (say) Thai or Vietnamese studies as areas of or foci for scholarly or policy-oriented research. The Gothenburg conference has definitely broken new grounds in this regard. It has also expanded horizontally and vertically the ambit and gamut of Burma studies. Thanks are due to all of the sponsors and organizers of the conference for their efforts and role in facilitating such a significant milestone in the area of Burma Studies.

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[1] 1st Collaborative International Conference of the Burma Studies Group (BSG) in conjunction with the Centre for Asian Studies (CEAS), Gothenburg University.

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[2] Some non-Burmese (by birth or “race”) foreigners take Burmese names. Professor Lehman, a United States citizen attached with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign since September 1952 has also a Burmese name (U Chit Hlaing). U (pronounced “Oo” is an honorific which formally precedes any adult Burmese name) and roughly means “Uncle”. In e mail correspondence with this reporter Professor Lehman will invariably sign his name as “Chit Hlaing” (eschewing the honorific “U”.)

[3] The Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma which has taken over power on 2 March 1962 from the democratically-elected government of the late Prime Minister U Nu (1907-1995) announced “Burmese Way to Socialism” (BWS) on 30 April 1962. Among others, it rejected the notion and practice that “socialism” could be achieved through the “bourgeoisie” Parliamentary democracy methods. Soon after the announcement of BWS as a policy document, the then Revolutionary government embarked on socialist economic actions which, among others, included the large scale nationalization of even retail shops. The English translation of text of the “Burmese Way to Socialism” can be read on line at [http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/The\\_Burmese\\_Way\\_to\\_Socialism.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/The_Burmese_Way_to_Socialism.htm) (accessed 13 February 2003) For this reporter’s brief narration of BWS and its policies see Myint Zan “Of Consummation, Matrimonial Promises, Faults and Parallel Wives: The Role of Original Texts, Interpretation, Ideology and Policy in Pre-and Post- 1962 Burmese case law” (2000) 14 *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 153, 180-2 (especially at foot note 105).

[4] Mandalay was the last capital of the Burmese kingdom before its fall to the British on 28 November 1885. On 1 January 1886 the British announced the annexation of the entire (former) Burmese kingdom and its incorporation as a province of the British Indian Empire. “On the road to Mandalay” is part of the poem/song written by the British poet Rudyard Kipling. In November 1885 the British troops were “On the Road to Mandalay” mainly by military steam boats up the Irrawaddy river.

[5] As “U” is a Burmese honorific for adult Burmese men roughly meaning “Mr”, Daw is an honorific for adult Burmese women roughly translatable as “Madam”.

[6] For the definition of spoonerisms in general see [http://www.fun-with-words.com/spoon\\_explain.html](http://www.fun-with-words.com/spoon_explain.html) (accessed 13 February 2003). Dr Wheatley’s paper on Burmese spoonerisms is currently not available online.

[7] For a brief exposition about Burmese “Nats” see [www.circatrade.com/Nats.htm](http://www.circatrade.com/Nats.htm) (accessed 13 February 2003)

