

THAI WORDS IN THE BURMESE LANGUAGE

by

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It is not unusual for words of one language to be adopted into another. This is especially true of neighboring countries such as Thailand and Burma which, despite periods of rivalry and war, have had close cultural, social and commercial ties. During the time of the Burmese monarchs, especially in the last Konbaung period*, a number of talented Thais, including master craftsmen, artists and musicians, lived in Burma favorably regarded and well treated. Having a similar religious background, the Thai immigrants were able to participate in the various cultural rites, and their contributions were appreciated by rulers and common folk alike. Some aspects of the Thai style of dress and ways of preparing food were easily accepted in Burma. Styles in painting and sculpture, as well as music and costumes of the dance were assimilated into the local traditional culture. There is today even a classical form of Burmese music and dance which has developed over time with various innovations, but which originally sprang from the Thai style and bears the distinct title of Yodaya, a corrupt term for Ayudhya.

It is fascinating to trace, in Burmese art nomenclature, Thai names and terms of particular objects which have been absorbed with little phonetic variation. Unfortunately, this has not always been recognized by scholars who mistakenly trace such words to other Burmese or Pali root words. An example is the word *kanote* (ကန်တီ), a well-known floral design in tapering form with tendrils of cordate leaves and frequently employed in decorative art and sculpture. *Kanote* is derived from the Thai word with the same meaning, กระหนก or กะหนก or หนก. It corresponds to the Pali word *kanaka* which means "gold". Some Burmese scholars, without discerning the Thai origin of the word *kanote*, are inclined to trace it to the Pali word *kokanada* meaning "red lotus", but it is obvious that the latter has no connection with the tapering design of *kanote*.

In a certain Burmese classical composition there is a popular tune called "*Kapi*" (ကပီ) referring to the scene of Hanuman, the well-known monkey king in the *Ramayana*. *Kapi* is certainly derived from the Thai word meaning monkey. The Thai term for the tune is ลิลลาคะปี่. In Burmese decorative art the word *kapi* also appears for a curve resembling the dorsal outline of a sitting monkey. However, this latter use of *kapi* goes back to Pali origin, since there is no similar Thai word for any artistic design.

Another term in Burmese classical music is *karong* (ကရဝံ), a tune played in the scene of Dasagiri, a demon-king in the *Ramayana*, or for any other traditional scenes in Burmese puppetry pertaining to male or female ogres. This tune is punctuated *inter alia* with bold striking in a fixed frequency on a horizontally-laid drum. Either such striking alone, or the whole tune itself is called *karong*, which derives from the Thai word กลอง meaning drum.

There is a typical Burmese tune known as "*Choot*" (ชูတ်) which has a very slow beat with perceptible intervals, and is usually played in the dramatic scene illustrating the approach

* A.D. 1752 - 1885.

of a robber to a well-guarded place. The beat is synchronized with the stealthy and cautious steps of the villain. *Choot* in Burmese is identical with the Thai word of the same pronunciation written จูต.

It would not be far-fetched to identify popular titles of Thai-style songs in Burmese such as "*Chu-e-chai*" (ဇူး ဧ ဇိုက်) and "*Choot-chan*" (ဇူတ် ဇိုန်) with the Thai words ชูญชัย and ชူးချာ. However, without access to reliable written references in those days, the Burmese pronunciation of Thai words may have diverged considerably over time, and furthermore Burmese orthography based on varied pronunciations may have led to further divergence from the original. Therefore, some of the words, the origins of which can generally be assured as Thai as they are transcriptions of wordings of Thai songs, can no longer be traced back to their original identities and thus remain uninterpreted.

There is the word *mahothee* (မဟိုဇီး) referring to Thai-style songs in Burmese. In fact, there are several other similar titles which cannot be specifically identified, but it can be assumed that they are of Thai origin. The word *mahothee* can be reconciled with the Thai word มะโหठी which refers to a performing group consisting of string, wind and percussion instruments.

In addition to words in art and music, the Burmese have also adopted some Thai terms for utensils and food. For example, in times gone by and especially in remote villages people used *palone* (ပလုံး) , a medium-sized basket woven of split bamboo, to wash and drain rice before cooking, and also for storing cooked rice or vegetables. This type of basket, when coated with dammar and fixed with an arched handle, is also used for carrying water from a well. It corresponds exactly with the Thai โพล่.

In the days of the Burmese kings a company of Burmese soldiers would usually carry with them to the battle front a wooden tray called *raba* (ရာဘ) which was used to serve the community meal. In Thai this word can be identified with กระบะ or กะบะ.

Among favorite Burmese delicacies are two popular sweetmeats, namely *mong-lote-saung* (မုန့်လှော်စား) and *na-noom-kin* (နာနွမ်ခင်း) or colloquially *sa-non-makin* (ဆာနွမ်မုန့်). The first consists of lumps of steamed rice paste eaten together with sweetened coconut milk and sometimes dressed with sesamum seed. It is none other than ลอดช่อง in Thai, plus the Burmese prefix *mong* which means edible. The second is a kind of sweet dainty made of semolina, sugar, eggs and coconut milk baked in a flat pan and sprinkled with poppy seed. This is the Thai specialty มันทม or มันทก. These sweetmeats might have been introduced long ago by Thai immigrants and have since become popular in Burma.

It thus appears that the Burmese accepted not only Thai things but also their names without claiming them as native to Burma. These words among others not mentioned are conspicuous evidence of a certain fraternity and friendship over time between the Thais and the Burmese.