

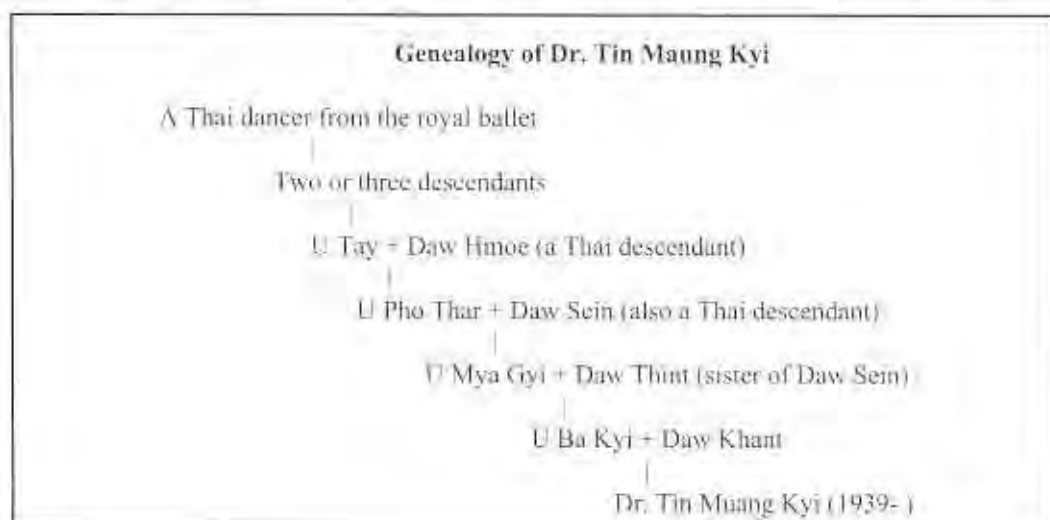
Thai Descendants in Burma: A Thai Court Dancer's Family

U Mya Gyi (1875–1957) was my grandfather who instilled and aroused the Thai instinct in my blood. I saw him quite often before he died and used to ask him about our Thai ancestry. Since that time I have fitted all various pieces of information he gave me into a "picture".

He told me of his grandfather and could remember his name. It was a Burmese name, U Tay and his wife was Daw Hmo, a Thai descendant. U Tay was a ballet dancer at the court, as

his forefathers, the Thai dancers, had been before him.

Before U Tay, no names could be remembered of our Thai ancestors. First of my Thai ancestors was a member of the Thai royal ballet. He served the role of Phra Lak. Probably he was a young man when he was taken to Burma. One thing I am certain is that he wanted to go home and that very strong and intense desire to return to his homeland made him ill until his last breath.



His great grandson was U Tay. This was a Burmese name. After his father died, he, having already been trained in Thai dance, served in the role his father had played. His family still spoke Thai among their relatives but with Burmese friends, they used Burmese. He was very fond of horses. He learned the art of horse raising and racing. They transferred their home to Amarapura and then to Mandalay, as the Burmese kings they served changed their capitals from one place to another. One day he came back from his rounds. His family was horrified to learn that he had been bitten by a rabid dog. He died soon after.

The Thai community in Aya, supposedly the first to settle and serve the Burmese court, cannot be traced. However, new facts might surface with further research. The other Thais brought to Burma were dispersed into groups and posted to distant localities all over the country.¹

Areas where the Thai people settled at Amarapura after the capital was transferred, now have names suggesting a Thai origin, such as Phya Thon Su (Three Pagodas), Yodaya Zay (Ayuthaya Market), Lin Zin (Lan Chang = Laos) and Lin Zin Gon cemetery. In Burma, Lan Chang groups were close to the Thai quarters.

Thais always tried to hide their homesickness by creating an environment similar to their motherland. In the center of the old capital of Ayuthaya, there is still a temple unit with three pagodas (Wat Si Sanphet).

So the Thai settlers in Burma built three pagodas in or near their communities. Formerly a Thai name would have been given to the three pagodas but later, with more Burmanization, the pagodas were commonly called Phya Thon Su. Thai settlers were supposed to be business-oriented, and Thai names attached to the markets betrayed their interests in business. Examples are Yodaya Zay (in Amarapura and Mandalay) and Rahine Zay (in Mandalay).

When the capital was transferred to Mandalay in 1859, the Thai descendants were happy, because they could mix with the Thai settlers already there from Ayuthaya. These Thais had built their villages along a pleasant *khlong* known in Burmese as Shwe Ta Chaung (Golden Creek). However, it seems that they could not even accept this beautiful 'alien' name. They named it "Nam Kuso".

Most of the Thai newcomers served the Burmese king. They established their community near Yodaya Zay. The market was in an area now bounded by 81st and 82nd streets and 29th and 30th streets. It was not far from the other Thai settlers along the Nam Kuso. The block is now largely occupied by a police station but people believe that the Yodaya Zay once stood there. An old woman questioned in February 2000 said the market was on the western side of the block, close to where the police station stands. The market site is now occupied by houses.

It was in this block in new Mandalay where my great grandfather settled, along with his Thai friends. His name was U Pho Tha. It was a Burmese name and by this time, the family spoke in Burmese. A few Thai words were still used, especially for numbers. They ran a shop in the Yodaya market close to where Thai descendants communicated in Thai among themselves while doing business. He followed his father's footsteps, playing the role of Phra Lak.

His son Maung (later U) Mya was my grandfather with whom I talked often. Maung Mya or Maung Mya Gyi was given lessons in Thai dances. Of course he was interested in and proud of his ancestral heritage. He could also play the xylophone. Friends and music-lovers came to him to sing and play. He was taken often to the inner court to become acquainted with its people and places. He saw his father play Phra Lak and tried to learn every movement and all the musical accompaniment. It was the role he would have to play one day. But he told me he was fascinated by *Dasagiri's dance*, with a posture of open chest, bent knees, and spread legs. This demonic mask expressed a sardonic smile.

He said that Queen Suphrajit often sent the Thai dancers *thazin orchids* (*Bulbophyllum auricomum*). These flowers were reserved for royalty. Ordinary people were not supposed have them because they were used at court. So *thazin* from the queen was a gift honoring the Thai dancers.

The theater in the court was close to the inner royal apartment and not far from the watchtower. (The watchtower has been rebuilt). In the evenings, King Thibaw and the queen, as

they were shut up in a little cosmos of their own, used to climb up and enjoy a glimpse of the beautiful surroundings to which they were denied access. Their guards were near at the ready with swords and canes. Grandfather remembered an incident when a woman member (*Sui Go Ma Lay*) of their dancing troupe forgot to kneel at the sight of the royal couple. Grandfather and the whole party sheepishly waited to see what would happen. The queen waved away the guards approaching the absent-minded dancer. They all thanked the queen for her kindness in pardoning her.

Grandfather used to admire the white elephant being taken in state to the river²:

It was a majestic sight to see the procession pass by. Mauriya was escorted to the river Irrawady every morning for a bath. It was like a king, followed by many attendants, with paraphernalia, and under a canopy of several white umbrellas. An officer assigned to care for Mauriya walked along with an arm embracing its long tusk and reciting a poem in a pleasant tone of the glories of the noble beast.

Mauriya wore a necklace (actually it was a big gold chain weighing about seven and a half *yasa* [about 12.27 kg.]). The white umbrellas (*parasols*) were a symbol of royalty. According to tradition, no one was allowed to use a white umbrella, except the king and of course his white elephant of the first class. Umbrellas of red and gold were allowed for officers including the crown prince.

Grandfather told me that Mauriya had to hold its head majestically high in a regal demeanor because otherwise its unusually long tusks would stick in the ground.

Grandfather hoped to become a first class dancer in the royal ballet at the Burmese court. He tried his best to achieve the artistry that his forefathers had handed down from the time of Ayutthaya. His talents were so wonderful and promising that his father, U Pho Tha, intended to retire early. The father intended to put his son into full time training under tutors for a few years. Before doing so, his father decided that Grandfather should spend some time as a Buddhist novice. Astrologer fixed an auspicious time by using meticulous calculations. Formal

invitations were sent to friends and relatives. Monks were invited to preside over the occasion. Food was cooked. Thai cakes and sweets were also prepared. A decorated shelter was built in front of the house to receive the guests. Thai drummers and dancers were there to provide entertainment. Everyone was busy preparing for the occasion. It was so great and grand that grandfather was sure he would never forget it.

When the day arrived, no guests or monks came. Nor did the drummers and dancers appear. The place was deserted. The food had to be distributed among the neighbors. It was a great disappointment to him. It transpired that the auspicious time set by the astrologer came on the day when the Burmese king was taken away by the British. Grandfather often wondered how it could have been set as an auspicious day when the whole country became a slave state. And all his hopes vanished like smoke in the air.

In our long and frequent discussions, he said that all Burmese suffered immensely when their king was taken away. He sensed how the Thais had felt when their kings were taken as captives to Burma.

The royal ballet ceased to exist because its patron the king was gone. The new British rulers did not support the ballet. However, members of the royal ballet did not suffer much as they ran other businesses. They had their own lands granted by the king. However, the masks, the musical instruments and other paraphernalia of the ballet were put under the custody of Grandfather's father. The masks were displayed in rows on a long table in the upper story of the house and daily offerings of flowers and foods were made for them.

There was a shrine near Grandfather's house where the masks from the *Ramayana* were exhibited on a table. The Thai descendants used to present offerings and pay homage to them. Rama Nat Shin or Shrine of Rama was just west of Phya Thon Su, the Three Pagodas.

The Three Pagodas, another replica of the Ayutthayan Wat Phra Si Sanphet, was built by the Thais in memory of their homeland. It demonstrated how much they were attached to the Three Pagodas tradition; a similar one was built by the Thai community in Amarapura. When they came to live in Mandalay, they created the same environment.

Grandfather passed away in 1957. He was a remarkable man. While on his death bed, he bade me a last farewell, saying that he was going away. He reminded me never to forget all he had told me. It was he who instilled into me a sense of my Thai blood and heritage, of which I am proud.

U Ba Kyi (1903–1975)

My father had none of the grand expectations of my grandfather. But he still showed a certain interest in instilling a sense of my Thai background because he used to bring me pictures or postcards showing something Thai. So I became interested in my Thai background as a child.

My father told me that during his childhood he was afraid to go upstairs where the masks from the Thai *Ramayana* were put on a high table. His brothers as well as other youngsters of the family felt the same. Actually they did not know the value of their ancient heritage. The younger generation just looked at them as obsolete objects of the past. At the insistence of the family and because of my grandfather's reluctance to carry on daily offerings, he decided to set them adrift into the Irrawady River. Before doing this, he made a final offering to the masks. It was still a great loss when I learned that a brass *parabaik* (book of palm leaf manuscripts) of the court version of *Ramayana*, presumably an Ayuthaya version, was also set adrift. Whether it was written in Burmese or Thai is not known.

The Yoday Zat Kyee "The Thai Dancer Troupe"

As mentioned in a book by U Maung Maung Tin, there were 91 members in the Thai dance troupe during the time of last king. They were all descendants of Thai captives from Ayuthaya.

Jom, *Khara* and *Pon Taung* (Circus) Groups

There was another Thai group in the royal service. They were not widely known as they did not perform regularly. They performed on special occasions, such as religious or public holidays. This group, known as *Jom*, could be called a circus. *Jom* generally were supposed to

be Thais, but they seemed to be descendants of Cambodians who had lived in Thailand. They earned their living by doing somersaults. The Burmese called the act *jom* as they had no word of their own for it.

Khara means bugle, whistle or trumpet. A *pon taung* was a long drum. These instruments made a suitable musical accompaniment for a circus. *Pon taung* was said to be a later addition and its name betrays a Burmese origin. There were 84 Thais in this circus group and each was granted a plot of land.¹

U Maung Maung Tin (1866–1945)

He was a famous authority of the history of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885). His three-volume history is highly regarded among scholars in Burma.

His genealogy reveals he was a descendant of a Thai king, both from his paternal and maternal lines. He served as a civil officer under the British before retiring in 1922. He wrote many articles and nine books on Burmese culture and history, of which the three-volume history was his most brilliant contribution. His vast collection of 4,000 folded books plus palm leaf manuscripts were destroyed in a fire set by Chinese Nationalist soldiers during the Second World War.

During the war he decided to seek refuge in the land of his ancestors but while he was making his way to the border he contracted dysentery and died. His body was cremated in Taunggyi, now the capital of Shan State, and his ashes laid in peace in a grand tomb in Maymyo.

Dr. Zaw Win, M.B. & B.S., F.R.C.S. (1935–1998)

He suffered from 'alopecia' which results in the loss of patches of hair. This ailment so distressed him that he might have paid anything for a remedy. When all his efforts and medical knowledge failed to cure him, he wrote a humble letter to his elderly mother in Mandalay asking if she could help.

His mother wrote back that as a Thai descendant from the royal ballet, he should make an offering at Mandalay's *Rama Nat Shin*, the Shrine of Rama, where masks from *Ramayana*

