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The French Connection that Contributed to the Fall of a Kingdom

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La *French Connection* qui contribua à la chute d'un empire

Résumé

Vers la fin de 1885, beaucoup d'éléments ont contribué à la chute du royaume de Ava, au nord de la Birmanie. La France et l'Angleterre étaient les grandes forces impérialistes rivales de l'époque et une certaine « French connection » a joué un rôle important dans la décision des Anglais de coloniser ce royaume d'Ava. Mais une rivalité d'un autre ordre a préparé le terrain. A Mandalay, il y avait un triangle amoureux entre un Français, sa femme française et une birmane qui se croyait sa femme aussi. Cette rivalité a déclenché tout un mouvement de forces qui a conduit fatalement à la chute d'une dynastie qui a régné pendant 133 ans en Birmanie.

Mots-clés : la Birmanie, la France, le roi Thibaw

Abstract

In late 1885, although many factors coalesced to bring about the fall of Upper Burma, or the Kingdom of Ava as it was also known, it was the kingdom's 'French connection' that played the most significant role in Britain's decision to colonize the kingdom. This was a period of blatant imperialism, England and France were two of the most successful empire-builders of the time, and therefore rivalry between the two countries was inevitable. But the course of history is rarely determined by large players alone; it was another rivalry, of a totally different kind, played out in the capital of the Kingdom of Ava, in Mandalay—a love triangle of a Frenchman, his newly acquired French wife and Burmese woman who considered herself to be the Frenchman's wife—that is rumored to have precipitated the fall of the kingdom. But we need to go back a few years to be able to see the unfolding of the events that led to the deposition of a king and the end of a dynasty that had ruled Burma for 133 years.

Keywords: Burma, France, King Thibaw

No one expected Thibaw to become the king of the kingdom of Ava—Thibaw himself probably never felt he stood even a chance at it. He was the forty-first son (Desai, 1967 : 2) of King Mindon and an out-of-favour Shan Queen (who had been

dispatched to a nunnery for having been “*unpardonably intimate*” with a monk). A shy and reticent boy, he had not made much of an impression on his father until he passed with great distinction the Patamabyan examination (Shway Yoe, 1910 : 467-8) that followed three years of Buddhist studies. This greatly delighted his deeply devout father who wistfully imagined that his son might be the next Buddha (Mark, 1917: 224)!

Although very pleased with Thibaw, King Mindon never seriously considered him to be a possible heir to the throne.(Desai, 1967 : 2) But in September 1878, when the king became seriously ill with dysentery and lay dying, the most powerful of his sixty-three wives, Sinbyumashin, skillfully persuaded her husband’s chief minister, the Kinwun Mingyi, and other ministers to support her choice of Thibaw as the next king (Foucar, 1963 : 86; Desai, 1967 : 2).They supported her because they too saw Thibaw as Sinbyumashin and the rest of the palace saw him, a goodhearted, even-tempered young man easily influenced by those around him—in other words a puppet to be manipulated by them. (Fielding-Hall, 1899 : 38-9)Sinbyumashin was an ambitious woman and in Thibaw she saw the means to an end. As mother of three daughters and no sons, she knew she could never be the mother of a king. But she could be the king’s mother-in-law. Very importantly, she knew that Thibaw was enamoured with her daughter Supayalat, and that the two had been exchanging love-letters!. (Although Supayalat was Thibaw’s half sister, during this period the marriage of close blood relatives was encouraged to continue the purity of the Konbaung dynasty.)

King Mindon died on October 1, 1878, and on October 11, 1878 an “*oath of allegiance*” ceremony was held for Thibaw (Than Tun, 1989: 237-240), after which King Thibaw was known by a plethora of colorfully descriptive titles including

“...ruler of the sea and land, lord of the rising sun, ...king of all the umbrella bearing chiefs, lord of the mines of gold, silver, rubies, amber...master of many white elephants, the supporter of religion...the sun descended monarch, sovereign of the power of life and death...king of kings, possessor of boundless dominions and supreme wisdom, the arbiter of existence” (ShwayYoe, 1910 : 466).

Born on January 1, 1859, Thibaw was under twenty when he became the bearer of all these titles and the king of Ava. His transition from monk to king had happened almost overnight, and he knew absolutely nothing about affairs of state. He had no training or experience in governing, and was completely dependent on the advice of those around him (Fielding-Hall, 1899: 39). This suited Sinbyumashin and the ministers who had put Thibaw on the throne just fine.

There were many princesses, including numerous half sisters of King Thibaw, who were eligible to become one of his four senior queens. But Supayalat used her charm and force of personality to ensure that he married just her and her older sister, and she saw to it that her sister was soon cast aside. King Thibaw, therefore, was the only Konbaung king in history not to have a multitude of queens. This greatly bothered the ministers of the kingdom. One of the ministers (the Taingda Mingyi) advised King Thibaw that kingly pride should compel him to immediately take eight wives (a long held tradition - each point and halfway point of the compass was symbolically represented by a queen²). This could be followed, at a later date, by the many more wives he was entitled to. The Kinwun Mingyi advised the same, for he was acutely aware that multiple wives would necessarily divert and divide the king's attention, which was so disconcertingly focused on just one woman—awoman the Kinwun Mingyi increasingly distrusted (Jesse, 1981 : 157).

By the end of the first year of King Thibaw's reign, Queen Supayalat's mother and the ministers who had helped make him king were ably elbowed out of the way by Queen Supayalat, and although the king presided over the Hluttaw (council of state or royal council—today the term is used to refer to the parliament of Burma), although he ceremoniously met visitors and held audiences, it was common knowledge that it was Queen Supayalat who was the power behind the throne. Her control and authority was described as *dah-htet-te* or "*as sharp as a razor*" (Blackburn, 2000 : 83).

Upper Burma was not an easy kingdom to rule. All Konbaung rulers concentrated their attention and energy on governing their capital. People in villages and of the countryside were the primary responsibility of local hereditary chiefs. Various factors including the loss in two Anglo-Burmese wars (in 1824-6 and 1852-3), had led to an erosion of power of the monarchy. There was mounting turmoil and rebellion. Gangs of bandits had taken over many regions of the kingdom, and there was a general break down of law and order leading droves of people to flee the kingdom to British-occupied Lower Burma. Adding to the instability was increasing revolt by Shan chiefs. It had been the custom in the past for the king to take daughters of Shan chiefs as his junior queens thereby cementing ties between the king and the Shan states. With Queen Supayalat dictating that King Thibaw could not take any more wives, this system had to be abandoned (Thant Myint-U, 2001 : 171-6). All this made the kingdom politically unstable, and many felt that King Thibaw ruled only in name outside Mandalay (Foucar, 1963 : 122).

Revenues were also a constant source of concern. Many hereditary chiefs took advantage of the political turmoil during King Thibaw's reign and paid less and less into the royal coffers. The tax base of the kingdom had also greatly diminished

after much of country had been lost as a result of the two Anglo-Burmese wars. Compounding the problem was the fact that the kingdom now had to, on and off, increasingly import some staple goods including rice. This was because British-occupied Lower Burma contained the Irrawaddy delta, which was the rice-growing bowl of the region, and the kingdom had had years of bad rainfall. Rice prices kept rising due to increased international demand and this had an inflationary effect on the whole economy, as rice is the staple diet (Thant Myint-U, 2001 : 171, 107, 29, 121, 142-144) or more picturesquely, “*wun-sa, food for the womb*” (Mi Mi Khaing, 1996 : 86) of the Burmese. To increase revenues, various methods were tried. Royal monopolies and concessions were sold, taxes and various duties were restructured, lotteries were experimented with, and loans were resorted to. But corruption and nepotism was rife and none of these efforts worked to provide a stable, prosperous economy and kingdom.

King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat were not oblivious to the problems facing them and their kingdom. They knew that many of the same problems had existed since King Mindon’s time, and that problems in various forms had existed since their forefather Alaungpaya had founded the dynasty in 1752. Many attempts were made by King Thibaw to improve the situation. According to Dr. Thant Myint-U (a Burmese scholar and fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge 1995-98) although the reign of King Thibaw is judged poorly vis-à-vis that of his father, “*his policies were only an intensification, if anything, of the reform process begun under his father.*” However, external forces and circumstances were rapidly changing (Thant Myint-U, 2001 : 163) and neither King Thibaw nor Queen Supayalat had the political dexterity or astuteness of some of their forefathers, including that of their father King Mindon. This was compounded by their inexperience, insularity, and their very limited education. King Thibaw had excelled in his religious studies; even as king, according to Dr. Michael Charney (Reader, South East Asian and Imperial History, SOAS, University of London), “*he remained focused on Pali learning*” and there is nothing to indicate that he had any desire for Western knowledge (Charney, 2006 : 251).

In spite of the fact that she had no love for foreigners, Queen Supayalat’s window to the outside world was a group of kalamas or foreign women—Europeans, Armenians and Eurasians—residing in Mandalay. This group included Mattie Calogreedy, her Burmese-Greek maid of honour and close confidante; Hosannah Manook, an Armenian, who was also one of her maids of honour; and some French Catholic nuns including Sister Teresa and Sister Sophia. Most of these women were politically ignorant and like the ministers had vested interests, and were therefore not the ideal group to rely on for information and advice. In return for information,

Queen Supayalat gave them expensive gifts; in order to remain in favour, they told the queen what she wanted to hear. Foreigners and foreign companies wanting commercial or political favours in Mandalay realized that often the best approach would be through a kalama. The kalamas' influence in Mandalay was as a result considerable (Keeton, 1974 :109).

The process of colonization of Burma began seemingly innocuously enough with Britain's interest in trade with the country. Britain, the first industrialized nation in the world, had a large manufacturing base and her markets were countries around the world. Whenever Britain felt her commercial interests were threatened, she had the strength and influence to resort to military and political intervention, and she often did. Large tracts of Burma had already been lost to the British in two earlier wars, including all access to the sea, and the British viewed the rest of the kingdom as not only a potential market for her goods but also as a source for valuable natural resources (Bennett, 1971: 57). Additionally, the kingdom's proximity to a new and very important trading partner, China, and to the jewel in its crown, India, made Britain regard the kingdom of Ava as a defense zone that no foreign power could be allowed to infiltrate (Lyll, 1905(?) : 397-8).

King Mindon understood well the strength of the British, and had concentrated his energies on improving his relationship with them—to the extent that when the Indian First War of Independence took place in 1857, and Britain's attention and manpower was diverted, he made no attempts to recapture parts of Burma lost in the two previous wars but is said to have opined, "*We do not strike a friend when he is in distress.*" He had sincerely hoped to regain lost territory through diplomacy (Stewart, 2003: 46). What he was able to achieve was the retention of what was left of his kingdom. Although King Thibaw was unable to maintain a healthy relationship with the British, and in fact played into their hands, it was still really just a matter of time before the creeping tide of colonialism would have washed away any king in the kingdom of Ava. If Britain had not colonized the kingdom, France with its presence in Indo-China probably would have.

From the time King Thibaw became king, in order to promote their own commercial interests, the British business community in British-occupied Rangoon began a systematic long-term campaign to discredit and vilify King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat, hoping that this would convince the powers that be in Britain to annex the kingdom (Thant Myint-U, 2001 : 163-4). Even missionaries in Lower Burma had, for evangelical reasons, been pushing for war. They had been doing this ever since the time of an earlier Konbaung ruler, King Tharrawaddy (1837-1846), as they believed that war leading to the colonization of all of Burma was "*the best, if not the only means of eventually introducing the humanizing influences*

of the Christian religion” (Maung Htin Aung, 1965 : 39-40). The missionaries truly believed that Buddhism was “*an absurd, backward system of belief*” that hindered the Burmese from learning and progressing (Charney, 2006 : 181-2). And in British political circles, many felt what Cecil Rhodes - businessman and statesman and a well-known colonizer after whom Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was named - so memorably said “*We happen to be the best people in the world, with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for humanity*” (Porter, 1996 : 136) The sentiments of a very prominent French statesman and colonizer, Jules Ferry, were distinctly similar, “*It must be stated openly that, in effect, superior races have rights over inferior races... They have the duty to civilize inferior races...*”³

In 1873, Burma signed a treaty of friendship and commerce with France. This upset the British, who suspected that the treaty contained secret clauses of a political nature. King Mindon's intention was not to pit France and England against each other, but to demonstrate that Burma was an independent sovereign nation, and not a feudatory state as were so many of the princely states of British India at that time. The reason he felt the need to do this was that Burma had not been permitted to have a diplomatic mission in London; all communication between the two governments had to be routed through Calcutta, which was the capital of British India. This greatly irked King Mindon particularly since the kingdom of Siam had been permitted direct diplomatic contact with London. However, when a French envoy was sent to Burma to ratify the 1873 treaty, King Mindon did not ratify it possibly because he did not wish to further antagonize the British (Maung Htin Aung, 1965 : 62-5).

In 1882, during King Thibaw's reign, proposed commercial and friendship treaties between the kingdom and Britain, which, amongst other things, would have given the kingdom access to arms from British territory and the British a Resident in Mandalay, fell through. It is said that Queen Supayalat had been influenced against the treaties by the kalamas, who did not want the British Resident reinstated, as that would significantly erode their own power in the kingdom. A treaty with the British also went against the interests of Italian and French arm dealers and manufacturers who were supplying antiquated weapons to the palace, and so they too strongly advised against signing the treaties. Now, Mandalay turned increasingly towards France for arms and assistance, and in August 1883, King Thibaw sent some of his representatives to France. This mission stayed in France for almost two years. During this period, to the increasing suspicion and irritation of the British Government, discussions were held both with the French government (including with Jules Ferry who at the time was following a policy of aggressive colonial expansion in Indo-China) and private businesses (Keeton, 1974 :103-129).

In February 1885 word reached the British government that the kingdom had signed a treaty with France giving it special privileges. Lord Dufferin, viceroy and governor general of India at that time, under whose jurisdiction Burma came, reacted that if “...*the French proceedings should eventuate in any serious attempt to forestall us in Upper Burmah, I should not hesitate to annex the country...*” (Lyall, 1905 : 397-8). Proof of the kingdom’s various agreements (with France and with French companies and individuals), was supposedly provided to the British Government in June/July 1885 thanks to none other than Queen Supayalat’s long time favorite, her Burmese-Greek maid of honor and close confidante, Mattie Calogreedy. Mattie had become intimately involved with a Mandalay-based Frenchman, P.H. Bonvillian, who, largely due to Mattie’s influence with the queen, had been granted a contract for the Royal Ruby Mines. Mattie always thought of herself as Bonvillian’s wife and as per Burmese custom her marriage was not an invalid one (during this period there was no need for a formal wedding ceremony in Burma—a man and woman were considered married once they had eaten “*rice and curry out of the same dish*”(Marks, 1917 : 136) and had started living together). But in May 1885, when Bonvillian returned to Mandalay after a long absence in France, he brought back with him a newly acquired young French bride (Jesse, 1981: 261, 281-284, 294- 295).

After pulling herself together, Mattie plotted her revenge. Having been privy to so many political discussions, she knew of the unease with which Britain viewed the kingdom’s growing closeness to France. She hoped that if the British had tangible proof of the agreements between the two countries, they would intervene. And if they intervened she concluded the French, and with them Bonvillian, who had hoped to make his fortune off the ruby mines, would be routed from the kingdom. The possible consequence of her very personal revenge on the kingdom, on Queen Supayalat who had showered nothing but kindness on her, and even on herself whose life now lay solely within the palace walls, did not deter her from the single-mindedness of her purpose. To obtain copies of these critical agreements, Mattie seduced one of the Kinwun Mingyi’s secretaries. She then took the documents she obtained from him to Andreino, the Italian Consul General (Jesse, 1981 : 299-300). More importantly Andreino was also an agent representing the interests of a couple British companies in the kingdom. One of these companies was the Bombay-Burma Trading Company.

The Bombay-Burma Trading Company held licenses for logging and exporting timber from specified forests in the kingdom. The company had been accused of underpaying royalty on timber exported from the king’s Ningyan forest, and a large and potentially ruinous settlement had been asked for. The company had appealed.

Andreino, as the agent for the Bombay-Burma Trading Company in the kingdom, was the man on the spot. He had lived and worked in Mandalay for most of his life. He earned a considerable income as Bombay-Burma Trading Company's agent, and he was desperate for the matter to be resolved in its favor (Keeton, 1974 : 173).

Mattie, with the copies of French agreements, could not have approached Andreino at a more opportune time. When she first approached him, on the mail boat, he was rather condescending. Word had spread about Bonvillian's French wife, and perhaps he thought she was casting a net around for a new man. However, when she told him about the papers she held, his attitude changed dramatically. He realized these papers could bring intervention by the British government, and that could be his salvation. But before handing the papers over an anxious Mattie asked: "*If you could send all (these papers) to Rangoon, what would happen to the French?*" Andreino assured her that they would bring the British into the kingdom, and the French would be out. This was enough for Mattie; she slipped the papers into Andreino's eager hands, requesting only that he not disclose how he had got them (Jesse, 1981: 303-5). Andreino passed the documents on to the British government in Rangoon. (Some historians believe that the papers the Kinwun Mingyi's secretary gave Mattie were of no particular significance; that Andreino forged more meaningful agreements, with the objective of galvanizing the British into action (Maung Htin Aung, 1965 : 82)).

In August 1885 the Hluttaw rejected the company's appeal and indicated that a large payment was due from the Bombay-Burma Trading Company. The British government asked that an arbitrator, selected by Lord Dufferin, be appointed to settle the matter fairly. The kingdom refused this request mainly because it felt that formally accepting the arbitration would imply that the Hluttaw's decision had not been a fair one. Besides, how fair would an arbitrator selected by Lord Dufferin be to Burmese interest? However, the kingdom sent many verbal indicators and feelers to the Bombay-Burma Trading Company and British government implying that a mutually acceptable solution could be worked out. In fact a Burmese minister directly approached the Bombay-Burma Trading Company stating that requesting King Thibaw for a royal review could quickly settle the matter for a relatively small amount. But the British government realized that a mutually acceptable solution was not what they now wanted. The refusal for arbitration had, very providentially, provided them with a readymade excuse to send an ultimatum to King Thibaw, an ultimatum that, most importantly, would end French influence in the kingdom once and for all (Keeton, 1974 : 217-224).

The British Government sent King Thibaw an ultimatum dated October 22nd, 1885.⁴ King Thibaw was told that it had been

“decided to place...the throne of Burma in the position of a feudatory of British India. He and his successors according to national custom will be allowed to remain on the throne so long as they loyally adhere to the position of, and faithfully discharge the duties and responsibilities of a feudatory of British India.”(Desai, 1967 : 112)

The five main points contained in the ultimatum were: a special envoy would be sent to settle the Bombay-Burma Trading Company dispute and he should not be submitted to *“any humiliating ceremony”* (i.e. removing his shoes); no action should be taken against the Bombay-Burma Trading Company until the envoy had decided on the case; a permanent British Resident must be accepted in Mandalay, and he must be permitted proper defense in the form of armed guards and an armed steamer (and he must be received with his shoes on); all future relations between the kingdom and any foreign country (i.e. France) had to have government of India (i.e. British) approval; and proper facilities had to be given to permit British trade with China through the kingdom (Maung Htin Aung, 1965 : 87). King Thibaw was not given much of a choice—it was indicated that these were *“the only terms”* under which the British Government would *“allow Upper Burma to continue as a separate State”*. King Thibaw was also, very pointedly, referred to as His Highness the Prince of Upper Burma, and not as His Majesty the King of Upper Burma, as he had always earlier been referred to (Desai, 1967 : 115, 7-8). (His Highness was also the British nomenclature for the feudatory Indian princes in British India.)

The British Government made it clear that if it did not receive a written acceptance of the ultimatum by November 10, it would feel free to exercise whatever option it wished. To impress upon Mandalay the option it had in mind, and the seriousness of its intention, a large number of British troops had been positioned ready for action in Thayetmyo, a small town down river from Mandalay, near the border that divided Upper and Lower Burma.

After much deliberation in the Hluttaw, the king indicated that while the other not so important points could be conditionally accepted, the all-important clause in which the kingdom had been asked to put all its foreign affairs under British supervision was to be clearly rejected. The Kinwun Mingyi was asked to prepare a reply to the ultimatum. Although the Kinwun Mingyi carefully and cleverly drafted his reply, and left room for further negotiations, the British were in no mood to negotiate. When Bernard (the Chief Commissioner of Lower Burma) received the reply on November 8th, he considered the reply a rejection of the ultimatum (Keeton, 1974 : 261-4). On November 11, Lord Dufferin issued the order for war.⁵ Now there was no turning back.

On November 14, 1885 Major General Prendergast and his men, the British Burma Expeditionary Force, comprising a flotilla that extended almost five miles, left Thayetmyo and began travelling up the Irrawaddy River with the clear objective of capturing Mandalay and overthrowing King Thibaw. The Third Anglo-Burmese war leading to the deposition of King Thibaw, and to the end of the Konbaung dynasty's 133-year rule over the kingdom of Ava, ended almost before it had begun. General Prendergast's force took only two weeks to ascend the Irrawaddy River and to win the war. The Times irreverentially wondered whether history would even accord this war the title of a war.

The British arrived in Mandalay on the morning of November 28th, 1885. On November 29th, 1885 King Thibaw formally surrendered to General Prendergast. Extending his hand towards that of the surprised king for a formal handshake, General Prendergast unwittingly became the first person in history to ever to shake hands with a Burmese monarch (Keeton, 1974 : 288)! The royal family was now taken to a steamer, which departed at daybreak on its five-day journey downriver to Rangoon.

Well aware that the citizens of Burma treated their kings as demi-gods, and wary of holding King Thibaw captive in the country he and his forefathers had ruled for well over a century, the British was anxious that he be removed from its soil as expeditiously as possible.⁶ It had been decided to exile him to India, and Lord Dufferin had made it amply clear that he did not want King Thibaw to be sent to a town of any importance.⁷ Various locations were suggested and dismissed - Bangalore (an important centre), Ranipett (too close to Pondicherry,⁸ the town occupied by the king's old ally, France). Ratnagiri (on the western coast of India about 350 kilometers south of Bombay) was put forward as it was well off the beaten track. It lacked any railway connection and this, it was felt, would discourage all but the most intrepid of visitors.⁹ Unfortunately, the suitability of Ratnagiri from the point of view of the king and his family was not of much consequence to the government, and does not seem to have been deliberated.

On the evening of December 10th, the Canning¹⁰, the ship carrying the royal family to India, sailed downriver in the descending darkness and entered the Gulf of Mottama. It is difficult to guess what the king and queen thought and felt as they were carried away from the shores of their homeland. Perhaps the sound of the lamentation uttered by the crowds on the streets of Mandalay during their departure ricocheted in their minds. Did they, as staunch Buddhists and believers in karma, dredge through sins of the past to try and determine which ones had landed them in this miserable predicament? Did they regret not signing the 1882 treaty with the British, and instead signing a subsequent treaty with the French?

They must have realized that their French ‘connection’ had played a pivotal role in their downfall.

The king was never permitted to return his homeland again; he died thirty-one years later, on December 16, 1916, in exile in a town he never considered home--the remote and culturally alien town of Ratnagiri. It is here that his remains still lie. The queen was allowed to return to British Burma after the king’s death. It is said that she never got to know that it was her confidante Mattie who had betrayed the kingdom (U Than Swe, 2003 : Chapter 6) and perhaps it is better that way; surely it would have tormented her no end to know that her kingdom had been ‘sold’ to avenge a Frenchman!

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Notes

1. U Than Swe. Letter to Sudha Shah dated 12 May 2007

2. Dr. Michael Charney. Email to Sudha Shah dated 9 Nov. 2010

3. <http://www.global-workforce.globalization101.org/jules-ferry-speech-before-the-french-national-assembly-1883/>

4. FD 1886 Secret E Pros Aug 1886 Nos 528-552, No 531 (National Archives of India, New Delhi.)

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