

COMINGS AND GOINGS OF FRENCH ADVENTURERS EXCEPT MISSIONARIES AND DIPLOMATS IN MYANMAR (1752-1885)

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Abstract

Generally the assessment of this paper is made to know more about the comings and goings of French adventurers except missionaries in Myanmar during the Konbaung period (1752-1885). The special study of this paper is made to know more about the comings and goings of French artillerymen and gunners, merchants, adventurers, mechanists and engineers who had served and done in Myanmar during the Konbaung period (1752-1885). The comings and goings of French adventurers, merchants, technicians and mercenaries had to play an important role in France-Myanmar relations in Konbaung period. Myanmar tried to establish her relations with France to defend the country against colonialism. However, France had established her relations with Myanmar with the intention to enjoy both economic and political benefits out of it. From 1752, when Alaungmintaya ascended the throne, to 1885, when Theebaw was deposed and taken away to exile, a great number of westerners including French adventurers, merchants, mercenaries and technicians arrived in Myanmar especially in Upper Myanmar. In the studying of this paper the available sources or reference books are received from the Universities Library, Yangon University Central Library, National Library and National Archive. As a results of this paper is to know about the history of the arrival of French except missionaries in Myanmar during the Konbaung period for the coming generations in future who are interesting in Franco-Myanmar relations during the Konbaung Period (1752-1885).

Keywords: Artillerymen and gunners, merchants, royal servicemen, and mechanists and engineers.

Introduction

The westerners arrived in Myanmar before the Konbaung period for trading purposes. During the 1600s, several efforts were made by the Portuguese, Dutch, the English East India Companies, and the French Compagne Royale des Indes Orientals to establish trading-factories at Thanlyin and elsewhere in the Delta. However, the Myanmar Kings usually monopolized the export trade in precious stones and metals, benzoin, lac, teak, Martaban jars and other goods.

After about 1680, both French and English Companies a Myanmar harbour in order to build and to repair ships. In the early 1700s both companies established repair dockyards at Thanlyin. However, the English East India Company found that teak ships could be made more cheaply and with better workmanship at Indian ports. Both the French and English dockyards were closed down by 1743 during the 1740-1758 Mon revolt. Binnya Dala conquered a great part of the country.

In the meantime, the French and English Companies in India had been fighting since 1740 for control over much of India. The naval advantages of Thanlyin again became obvious. Both Companies sent cannons and muskets to both sides (Myanmar and Mon) in order to curry favour with the eventual winner.²In October 1752, Mons abandoned all offensives from Innwa. In December 1753, Alaungmintaya besieged Innwa. Mons silently abandoned Innwa at night on 23 December 1753. In January 1754, the whole of Upper Myanmar was cleared of Mons and came under Alaungmintaya's control. In March 1754, the Binnya Dala sent his whole army against Alaungmintaya. Mons again captured Innwa on 24 April 1754 and destroyed the surrounding places. Alaungmintaya defeated the Mons who withdrew only because the rainy season had begun.³

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² Naw Naw Aye, *Westerners in Myanmar in the Late Konbaung Period (1819-1885)*, Ph. D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Yangon, January 2009, p. 56 (Hereafter cited as: *Naw Naw Aye, Westerners in Myanmar*)

³ Dr. Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar, 1752-1948*, First Edition, Yangon, Myonywe Sarpay Press, August 2010, pp. 4-5 (Hereafter cited as: *Than Tun, A Modern History of Burma*)

1. Annexations of Innwa and Dagon

Meanwhile, Maha Damaraza Dipati, Ex-King of Innwa, was put to death together with his family on 13 October 1755. As the news of this reached Alaungmintaya, he hastily prepared for the delta campaign. Before he marched Pyay rebelled but the Mons who fled from Innwa besieged the city and fortunately Alaungmintaya arrived before they surrendered. So on 4 February 1755, the Mons left Pyay. Soon after Alaungmintaya captured Lun-say in the Hinthada district and renamed it Myanaung. On 15 May, Dagon was taken and it was renamed Yangon. At that time in the port of Dagon, there were three small English ships belonging to the East India Company and two others belonging to two private Englishmen were also taken. Alaungmintaya took all the guns and cannons from these ships.¹

2. French Artillerymen and Gunners

French people at Thanlyin sided with the Mons and the English remained strictly neutral. After restoring law and order in northern Myanmar, Alaungmintaya returned to the delta and attacked Thanlyin. The Mons got the help of French artillery and therefore Alaungmintaya suffered heavy losses. The French Company from Pondicherry sent three ships to help Captain Burno and his men at Thanlyin. But they came too late. At last Thanlyin was taken on 26 July 1756. The town was completely destroyed and Alaungmintaya built Yangon to take place of Thanlyin as the major seaport of Myanmar.²

Captain Bourno and his followers were taken prisoners. Alaungmintaya forced Bourno to write a letter to the captain of three ships and therefore he was able to capture easily the ships, except one which escaped. From this capture Alaungmintaya got thirty five twenty pounder cannons, five field guns, 1300 muskets and a large store of powder and shots. Bourno and his fellow officers were executed.³

But Alaungmintaya spared the lives of over two hundred French sailors. These French sailors served under Alaungmintaya as gunners. For instance one Chevalier Milard was made Captain of the Guard and served Alaungmintaya in his campaigns against Bago, Ayutthaya and Manipur. He was given the title of Thiriyazathu Kyaw Htin and made Myosa of Tabe in Sagaing District.⁴ Under the reign of Sinphyushin he also served as the Captain of guard and was given to establish an arsenal in which the modern weapons were produced. It led to the achievements of successful campaigns in Fourth Sino-Myanmar Wars broke out between 1765 and 1769 and Thailand campaign (1764-1767).⁵ He died in 1788. His tomb is still at Sagaing.⁶ Under the reign of King Alaungmintayagyi, a Frenchman Lavigne fired with artillery on English warship, namely, Shaftesbury in the battle of Heingyi Island.⁷

During the reign of King Badon, one of the rebellions was appeared led by pretender Nga Myat Pon on 4 October 1782. A pretender Nga Myat Pon arrested a Frenchman Carpel, the Captain of Artillery, and other his followers and ordered them to artillery fired to Palace. After the fall of

¹ Dr. Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar, 1752-1948*, First Edition, Yangon, Myonywe Sarpay Press, August 2010, pp. 4-5 (Hereafter cited as: Than Tun, *A Modern History of Burma*), pp. 5-6

² Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar*, p. 6

³ Ibid, p. 48

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dr. Khin Mya Kyu, *History of Franco-Myanmar Relation during the Konbaung Period*, Yangon, Everest Press, 1999, p. 51 (Hereafter cited as: Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*).

⁶ Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar*, p. 48

⁷ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 51

this rebels Carpel and other seven servicemen were executed due to the help for Nga Myat Pon.¹ In 1802, a Frenchman, namely, Desbrulais gave up his French citizenship and married a Myanmar woman and served as the Crown Prince's Guard.² The Frenchmen did not serve as the royal servicemen during the reigns of King Bagyidaw, Thayarwady, and Bagan.

In theory, the King had the right to the service of his subjects and thus all able-bodied males of the country must serve him as soldiers in times of emergency. In other word Myanmar could be regarded more or less as a nation of soldiers. Moreover, since the time of Alaungmintaya the Portuguese and French men were employed as artillerymen and the gunners of the war boats. According to the report by Symes, there were 500 war boats in operations order. Each boat has 50 to 60 men, so that the war-boat personnel was 2,500 Or 3,000 strong. There people were stationed at villages along the Ayeyawady River and were put under the control of Pe Nins. These artillerymen and the gunners of the war boats were mostly the descendants of the Portuguese and French royal service men.³

3. Royal Servicemen

During the reign of King Mindon, the Frenchmen, English, and Italian were appointed as the military trainers and engineers.⁴ In order to achieve industrialization country, King Mindon made to build up over fifty factories and industries in Royal Capital and surrounding areas in which the experts of Myanmar nationals as well as foreigners were employed there. A Frenchman, namely, Fernand de Avera was appointed as in charge of Royal Industries.⁵ In 1864, Chanet, the excellence machinist, was served in the arsenal to cast the copper canon.⁶ Phyare, Chief Commissioner of Lower Myanmar recognized that the Rifles made in Royal Arsenal would be the best one.⁷

When a Myanmar mission led by Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung departed for England in 1872, a Frenchman Louis Morin, ex-commandant of French Navy, sailed the Royal steamer Setkya Yinpyan to England. Later, he advised to fight against the British forts stationed at Bago and Yangon and demanded to get more salary but it was rejected by King Mindon. In 1875, a French Captain Lucein Vossion served in Myanmar Royal Army.⁸

A Frenchman, namely, M. Bentabole was appointed as in charge of royal war-boats and he also made the military training on them.⁹ A Frenchman Henry de Paccio was also appointed as the military training master to train to Myanmar soldiers who would be studied modern military strategy.¹⁰ It can be suggested that King Mindon appointed the foreigners especially Frenchmen as the companies of Royal Army to be modernize army. However, it was not effective running because of the ignored by the Myanmar Royal Government.¹¹

¹ Maung Maung Tin, *The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty, Vol. I*, Yangon, Yarpyi Book House, 2004, pp. 388-390 (Hereafter cited as: Maung Maung Tin, *Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty, Vol.I*)

² Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 60

³ Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar*, pp. 112-114

⁴ Oliver B. Pollack, *Empires in Collision*, London, Green Wood Press, 1979, p. 120 (Hereafter cited as: Pollack, *Empires in Collision*)

⁵ Maung Maung Tin, *Dictionary of Golden Palace*, Third Edition, Yangon, Yarpyi Book House, 2005, pp. 182-183 (Hereafter cited as: Maung Maung Tin, *Dictionary of Golden Palace*)

⁶ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 103

⁷ Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma*, London, The Cresset Press, 1962, 175 (Hereafter cited as: Woodman, 1962)

⁸ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, pp. 115, 119-120, 157

⁹ Maung Maung Tin, *Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty*, p. 320

¹⁰ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 209

¹¹ U Min Naing, "The Italian Royal Servicemen during the late 19th Century", *University Research Journal, Vol. II, Part-1*, Yangon, Universities Press, 1980, p. 203 (Hereafter cited as: Min Naing, "The Intalian Royal Servicemen")

As the constructions of A Special Chamber of Maha Sekya Thiha Pagoda and Throne built by Myanmar architect, namely Naymyo Pyinnya Theindi, the Lord of Maung Daung, two Frenchmen named Bonvillain and Blin assisted to him to construct them. Another Frenchman named V. Revel served as the flower designer in royal Palace.¹

The Frenchmen served as the Royal servicemen with their best craftsmanship tactics. A Frenchman named Captain M. de Trevelec trained Myanmar soldiers with adornment European military uniforms to more play the military training. He also made to attempt to reform Myanmar Calvary like European Calvary but it was not achievement.²

Under the reign of King Theebaw, the foreigner servicemen also continued to serve as the royal servicemen. A Frenchman engineer Bonvillian made to construct the bridges and attempted to produce the modern weapons for Myanmar Army. Then, he also served as interpreter.³ He also constructed a watch tower of a palace. He and his assistant named Alphonse Blin constructed an iron refinery plant in Sagaing.

French commercial and political power was virtually ousted from India under the 1763 Treaty ending the Seven Years War. The English East India Company had little to fear from French “meddling” in Myanmar, and allowed diplomatic relations with Myanmar to lapse for over thirty years until the 1790’s when it responded to the renewed threat that the French would use Yangon as a naval base.⁴

4. Merchants

Of the economic activities of foreigners in Myanmar during the Konbaung period, those by the French were also significant as the British in that they caused great impacts on the economy and politics of Myanmar. Commercial relations between Myanmar and France also played an important role in Franco-Myanmar relations during the Konbaung period.⁵

A French party consisting of a leader, Comte de Pron de la Maison Forte, and two companions, M. Roche and M. Chivelle, arrived at the capital on 22 July 1839. There were rumours that the French government had sent this mission to contract an alliance with Myanmar, but actually, the three Frenchmen were private individuals, and had come to do business in exportation of rice, and at the same time sell fire-arms to the King.⁶

They soon came into favor with King Thayarwady, and it was commonly talked that they would manufacture mines and lay them at the mouth of the Ayeyarwady River, so as to prevent British warships from entering the River. M. Chivelle offered to make thirty gunboats for the King, and began constructing three or four of them. The adventurers also desired to establish a communication between the King and the Government of Chandernagore with the object, probably, of importing arms, ammunition, and French military trainers into the country.⁷

5. French Adventures

These French adventurers remained in great esteem at the capital till November 1839, when they fell into disfavor, the King’s mind having been poisoned against them by Staig. They were

¹ Min Naing, “*The Italian Royal Servicemen*”, p. 204

² (a) Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 142

(b) Min Naing, “*The Italian Royal Servicemen*”, pp. 206, 213

³ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, pp. 142, 159, 278

⁴ D. G. E. Hall, *Europe and Burma*, London, Oxford University Press, 1945, pp. 100-105 (Hereafter cited as: Hall, *Europe and Burma*)

⁵ Naw Naw Aye, *Westerners in Myanmar*, p. 66

⁶ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 71

⁷ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 72

summarily ordered to leave the capital, and they arrived in Yangon on 10 December 1839.¹ Staig was a British merchant who residing in Yangon at that time. He had fled from his creditors in Calcutta and established himself as a trader in Yangon. He had also announced his British nationality and put himself under the protection of the Myanmar Government. He was a hot tempered man and was called “*Kula Zo*” (Bad Westerner) by Myanmar.²

Yangon was the major Myanmar seaport and contact point with the outside world. The European vessels including Chinese vessels stopped regularly there to obtain teakwood, catechu, stick-lac, beeswax, elephant’s teeth, raw cotton, orpiment, gold, silver, rubies and horses. The Europeans at Yangon were not outcasts of Europe, but they were without the restraints of European society, and they frequently compromised their sense of equity for the sake of greater profits. They were accorded little respect by the Myanmar administration. The merchants trafficked in piece goods, local products, and teak, which fostered a thriving shipbuilding industry. The most lucrative trade was the illicit export of bullion.³ Throughout the 1840s the European community in Yangon worked to bring Yangon into the orbit of the British Empire.⁴

During the reign of King Thayarwady there were adventurers like French who reached to Myanmar in 1840. Frenchman named Comte de Pron de la Maison was welcomed by King Thayarwady. He was placed to reside at Pathein.⁵ Another Frenchman was a Henry Sicre, who arrived at the Court by a recommendation letter from Hell. Sicre was a rich man who held the title of Colon de Bourbon. Despite his aim to make business in Myanmar, he was permitted to proceed to Amarapura, the capital, having no opportunity to carry out business; he was cordially welcomed by the Myanmar. Moreover, the King fixed an official seal on Hell’s recommendation, increasing the value of the original letter. Sicre was also granted a Myanmar official uniform and a horse with ornamental golden embroidered saddle as a means of transport. He offered the Myanmar King to let a French arsenal in Yangon and to conclude an agreement on political and economic affairs. Before his departure from Myanmar the King presented him with precious jewels as a parting gift.⁶

King Bagan was deposed on February 1853 and King Mindon ascended the throne. During the reign of King Mindon relations with the British and other European countries revived. One of the outstanding characters of foreign relation during the reign of King Mindon was the struggle between the British and French to attain King’s favour. At that time, one of the main characters was D’ Organi, a French adventurer who had settled in India and was summoned by an American to settle in Myanmar.⁷

D’ Organi arrived at Yangon in May 1852 and decided to serve in the Royal Army in Second Anglo-Myanmar War. In the war, Myanmar was defeated again. When King Mindon became a King in 1852 he continued to serve in Royal Government. He suggested Myanmar officials to French spies to watch the strength of the British Army and Navy.⁸

King Mindon was so pleased with his efforts that he was conferred the title of Naymyo Thiri Zeya. D’ Organi returned to France in early 1854 and he reported the situation of Myanmar to Napoleon III. Napoleon III was so pleased with his report and appointed him as the “Speaker of

¹ W.S. Desai, *History of the British Residency in Burma, 1826-40*, Yangon, University Press, 1939, p. 443 (Hereafter cited as: Desai, *British Residency in Burma*)

² Naw Naw Aye, *Westerners in Myanmar*, p. 64

³ Naw Naw Aye, pp. 67-68

⁴ Pollak, *Empires in Collision*, p. 52

⁵ Khin Mya Kyu, *Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 52.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 71-72

⁷ *Khin Mya Kyu, Franco-Myanmar Relation*, p. 50

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 60

French Government for Myanmar.”¹ While his staying in France D’ Organi made contact with the Naval officers and the colonial officers and offered the exchange of 20,000 rifles, and machineries of French and 1000,000 ton of teak logs from Myanmar.²

A large high grade iron deposit was discovered by the French, who claimed, it was capable of making steel as good as that in England. Mr. Balyse, who had been D’ Organi’s secretary, also discovered gold and offered to work the mines for the King at 20 percent of the profits if the King would pay the expenses, alternatively, for 50 percent of gold, Balyse would finance the project. The plan was deserved still born.³

Another French adventurer Fernand d’ Avera who arrived Mandalay and made an agreement with King Mindon to issue bank notes for Myanmar government in 1862. In return for this agreement D’ Avera was granted royal permission to extract timber on Lao-Myanmar frontier for three years. Yet, when Phayre arrived to Mandalay in November 1862, he knew about the D’ Avera and made a protest against him. Therefore, the agreement between King Mindon had not vanished.⁴

6. State Scholarship Scheme

In later years of Konbaung dynasty Myanmar had been invaded by the British who annexed some parts of her territory. After annexation of Bago Province by the British by Second Anglo-Myanmar War both sides ceased to carry on fighting without any peace agreement or treaty which should have brought to end the war. At any moment either idea may initiate the war. In the effort to preserve her sovereignty and territorial integrity Myanmar entered into friendly relations with France, a rival power of Britain, Myanmar on one hand tried to strengthen herself by equipping the army which arms and tried to industrialize the country. On the other hand Kanaung Prince, a Crown Prince of Myanmar led industrialization of the country during the reign of King Mindon. To acquire the technical know-how he tried to send Myanmar youth abroad to get training. Thereby Myanmar youth got a chance to go to France for further study.⁵

French missionary under the leadership of Bignadet extended their helpful hands to send State Scholar particularly to France under the industrialization of the country plan of Prince Kanaung. Those who had studied in France could manage to establish more than fifty factories when they got back to Myanmar. They also started to reform their army to be a modernized army. Yet some of the foreigners had been employed to run the factories and modernization of the army due to inadequacy of Myanmar experts. Mindon Min and Prince Kanaung aimed to foster native experts who could be achieved by sending state scholars with the help of French missionary under the leadership of Bignadet to certain extent within a decade.⁶

7. French Mechanists and Engineers

Foreign mechanists and engineers had to be called in for the construction of mills and factories at the Royal capital. There were contracts signed with foreign companies. Some

¹ Khin Mya Kyu, p. 61

² D. G. E. Hall, *Burma, London, Hutchinson’s University Library, 1950*, p. 158 (Hereafter cited as: Hall, *Burma*)

³ Pollack, *Empires in Collision*, p. 125

⁴ Daw Kyan,, “*Factories at Yandanapon*”, *Literature and Social Science Journal, Vol. I, No. 1*, 1968, p. 147 (Hereafter cited as: Kyan, “Factories in Yandanapon”)

⁵ Dr. Myo Thant Tin, “*Practice for Compass by U Shwe Bin*”, *The Veteran Msagazine, No. 53*, 1983, p. 94 (Hereafter cited as: Myo Thant Tin, “Practice for Compass by U Shwe Bin”)

⁶ Mawnikar, “*The Education Activities of Roman Catholic Missionaries in Myanmar, From the middle of 16th century to 1885*”, M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Yangon University, 1992, p. 878 (Hereafter cited as: Mawnikar, *The Education Activities of Roman Catholic Missionaries*)

foreigners came up to join the royal service on their own accord. Those recruited included English, French, Italian, Armenian, and Indian nationals.¹

The construction of mills and factories were supervised by Prince Kanaung, MyattaungWungyi, and Banmaw Atwin Wun. To modernize the defence system of the country the royal government had attempted to purchase such modern weapons as Enfield Rifles, Schneider Rifles and Canons and ammunition manufacturing equipment and machinery between 1867 and 1871. However, the attempts met with the British Government's ban on sale of modern weapons to Myanmar. These hindrances had pushed the royal government to build arsenals of its own. Therefore, four arsenals were built at the royal capital Yandanapon, two in the palace grounds, one in northern suburb of Shwetachaung, and one on the western part on the bank of Thingaza creek. In 1864, copper canons were cast at the arsenal, under the Frenchman Clarnet.²

Myanmar was a country 57 percent covered with forests in which grew, valuable hardwoods such as Teak (Kyun), Pyinkadoe, Padauk, Ingyin, Pinyin, In and Kanyin, etc. Among them, teak in particular was so valuable that it had earned the name "Royal Tree" and recognized as royal timber during the reign of King Alaungintaya in 1752.³ Between 1826-1854, timber merchants from Lower Myanmar procured licence for timber extraction by paying duties to the Myanmar government. In January 1843, Mode Rantenny, a Frenchman from Bourbon made an offer for Franco-Myanmar trade through Mr. Sarkies in Myanmar.⁴

With the help of Europeans, in particular the French and the Italians, textile and silk factories were set up in the Royal Capital in competition with the British. Mindon's textile factory was able to produce a vast amount of clothing. As the production of textile increased, the import of textile from Lower Myanmar decreased markedly. The Royal capital and surrounding places like Amarapura thrived in Mindon's textile and silk industries.⁵

Conclusion

Franco-Myanmar relations in Konbaung dynasty especially in later Konbaung Dynasty were mainly based on the arrival of French citizens including merchants, adventurers, and missionaries. The main intention of these Frenchmen was to exploit economic benefit out of relation with Myanmar, while Myanmar's interest was to acquire arms and ammunitions, and modern technology for the maintenance of her territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The Myanmar Kings especially in later Konbaung Period, they had expected by establishing friendly relationship with France, a rival power of the British, who would restrain her expansionist policy against Myanmar. Hence, priority had been given by Myanmar to France to be friendly nation and to be partner of trade. In addition, special privileges were given to French missionaries in Myanmar to enable to be alliance of France.

Myanmar on their part tried to establish her relations with France to defend the country against colonialism. However, France had established her relations with Myanmar with the intention to enjoy both economic and political benefits out of it. Thus the relations between the two countries can be considered to be mainly based on an economic and political as well.

¹ Kyan, "Factories in Yandanpon", pp. 145-146

² Kyan, "Factories in Yadanapon," pp. 148-149.

³ "A Brief History of Myanmar Economy", Department of Economic, Yangon University, Yangon, no. date, 47-48 (Hereafter cited as: Myanmar Economy)

⁴ Khin Mya Kyu, "Franco-Myanmar Relation", p. 72

⁵ Daw Myint Myint Than, "The Conditions of Administration and Economic under the Reign of King Mindon", *The Literature and Social Journal, Union of Burma, Vol. II, No. 3, September 1969*, p. 83.

The comings and goings of French adventurers including artillerymen, gunners, merchants, royal servicemen, mechanists and engineers except missionaries and diplomats in Myanmar during the Konbaung Period showed that Myanmar would become a strong nation in one day. The English East India Company had little to fear from French “meddling” in Myanmar. That invited an English interference.

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