

THE FOUNDING OF THE UNION OF BURMA THROUGH THE HILL PEOPLES EFFORTS

The Memoirs of Khun Kya Bu of Hsipaw

Signatory to the Panglong Agreement

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Foreword

This memoirs, originally in Burmese, took a period of two years to write. They were completed in 1978, when Khun Kya Bu was already 81 and nearing the end of his life. He died on May 31, 1980.

I had initially wanted to translate the whole work, but after re-reading it, I realized that it would be an enormous task, not least because of my deficiency both in English and Burmese. Nevertheless, I thought many things written in it ought to be told to the Shan People, and particularly to those who are interested in Shan affairs, both abroad and at home. I have therefore tried to present it in the form of a summary, which I hope will satisfy some and fire others with enthusiasm to learn more from this truly important work.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the late Khun Kya Bu for his invaluable parting of knowledge and experience, and to his sons, Khun Kya Oo and Khun Kya Nu, for their comments and encouragement.

Khuensai Jaiyen
1 March 1993

SUMMARY

Khun Kya Bu begins his memoirs with the words “Shanland is a separate entity from Burma. It has existed without being part of Burma. However, we became British slaves at the same time as the Burmese – while they fell under British sovereignty, the Shans fell under British suzerainty.

He goes on to say that through the British annexation, the Shans lost two-thirds of their territories to the Burmese, including Mawlake, Songsob, Wiangsurh (Wuntho), Kardsar (Katha), Banmaw (Bhamo), Mongyang (Monyin) and Mongkawng in the north, and an area to the east of the Sittaung named Salween Division which stretches as far as Martaban and Kyawknyat, Shwekyin, Pay (Prome) and Taikkyi on the Irrawaddy delta.

The British, and later the Japanese, knew well that the Shans were a separate entity. That was why under the British, Burma had become a colony and the Shan States a subordinate ally and protectorate, a fact supported by Hendershot in his History of the Shan States. The Japanese, especially Premier Tojo on January 28, 1943, on the occasion of granting independence to Burma, he said: “With regard to the territorial composition of the New State of Burma, it is to include the whole territory of Burma with the exception of Shan and Karenni areas.” However, the theatre commanders, bowing to the vigorous lobbying of the Burmese, went on to include the Shan States and the Karennis in Burmese territory, with the exception of Mongpan and Kengtung, which were transferred to the Thais for the duration of the War.

Several comments by foreign travelers concerning the Shans are also quoted:

“The Shan have no desire for worldly riches though they are rich in minerals.”

“Shan are the most peace-loving people, who trust everybody and envy nobody.”

Shan festivities were attended by youths with muskets and swords. Foreigners were struck by the fact that they were watched over by a mere handful of policemen, who were each, armed with only a whistle and a baton and yet managed to keep ugly incidents at bay.

The Shans were also mentioned as good fighters, especially under able commanders. One example was the successful repulse of the 1449 Chinese invasion at Banmaw (Bhamo) under the generalship of the Prince of Mongkawng.

According to Khun Kya Bu, the Shans were treated with esteem by the British. He mentions the invitation by Queen Victoria to Zao Khunseng, the Prince of Hsipaw, in 1898 to visit the court of England and how he was received with courtesy as befitted a ruler of an independent state. British officials in the Shan States also took care they remained only in an advisory role. “Although they had the upper hand, in order to win the Shans’ hearts, they never imposed their authority.”

The intra state motor roads completed in 1896, barely ten years after the annexation. “Most of the roads we are using today are handed down from that period,” he added with feeling.

The British had also honored the Shan written language. In their coins, paper currency, steamers and railway stations, Shan letters could be seen alongside those of English and Burmese. These were however omitted after independence. Still, the odd thing was Shan was not taught at government operated schools. Only English and Burmese were taught. The British were in a way helping the Burmese cause by trying to integrate, rather than segregate, as many believe, the Shan and the other non-Burmese into Burmese society. “Nevertheless, through the conscious efforts of the Shan monastic order, 65% of the local population was reported to have learned to read and write.”

He describes with relish how a Frontier resident, Mr. Franklin, was transferred immediately after the local people filed a complaint to his superiors that he forcefully pulled down the Shan national flag in the silver mining town of Namtu on 5 March 1947. (It was first raised on 7 February 1947.)

In this way, the British won the Shans’ admiration and loyalty. Many Shans went to fight alongside British soldiers during WW I in France, Egypt and then in Asia Minor – an area which nowadays includes most of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. However, he remembers only two of them: Captain Khun Oong and Sergeant Zampa.

During the British retreat from Burma, the Shan contingents had been given the toughest mission – to guard the rear. Their courage was proved in the battles of the Sittang crossing, Pyinzelok-Penwagon, and Oketwin Railway Station. The late Zao Htun Yin of Nawngmawn was decorated for his distinguished valor with Victoria Cross, the highest award in the British army.

He also quotes a newspaper report about anti-Japanese Shan Fighters, which is reproduced here:

MOVEMENT AGAINST FASCIST JAPAN IN SHAN STATES

(New Times of Burma, in its issue of 23 November 1946, published the following accounts of what Force 136 did.)

GUERRILLA WARFARE BEHIND JAPANESE LINES

Capt. J. R. Smallwood, in an address to the Royal Central Asian Society in London, on the 20th November 1946, spoke thus:

“They (Force 136) proved a real thorn in the side of the Japanese and the Siamese lines of communications in Northeast Burma. Rank and file was mainly made up of Shans and Kachins for whom the British officers in charge had the highest praise.

The levies as an organized force were no match against regular troops, but operating as guerrillas in the native jungle, there were no troops to touch them.

Although the armed levies, as they were called, with rifles or sub-machine guns, they were much happier with a dah of long-bladed knife, usually used for clearing the jungle, and it was with these weapons that they did most of the damage.”

Shan weaknesses were not glossed over either. He quotes Zao Saimong Mangrai:

“Shans are ready and willing to accept a powerful arbitration from outside, but would perish rather than submit to their own kind, even for the sake of unity.”

“Shans lack cohesion. Their intense individuality has prevented the formation of a strong Tai state.”

In their relationships with the Burmese, he has credited the Shans as being loyal friends, willing to fight and die for the Burmese using their own resources. History proves, he says, that the Burmese managed to lose their kingdoms through their own traitors despite Shan willingness and readiness to help.

It was the Shans who had successfully broken down the defenses of Siamese capital of Ayutthaya (1767), which were passed over to the Burmese troops. The Shans were just glad that it was over and they would be back home with their families soon.

It was the Shans again who had, after the election of the new Federated Shan States Council, which in effect became the Shan Parallel Government, called for the Panglong Conference on their own initiative and paid for its expenses. This fact is often overlooked by people who benefited from it.

It was also the Shans with their Levies, and with their Foreign minister, Zao Khun Khio, who came to the rescue of the Burmese Government besieged in Rangoon by their own rebellious people in 1949.

However, the history of Burma – “full of legends and lies,” according to a foreign historian – failed to appreciate this (the Shans’ role). In fact, the downward turn of the history of the Shans began with their admission of Brahmas (i.e. the Burmese) from India.

In 1881, the Burmese set up their garrisons in Lashio, Mongpai, Mongnai and Kengtung to oversee the Zao-fahs. Every commodity was taxed, and requisitions for the military supplies had to be fulfilled. Porters of both sexes were continually demanded. Also to satisfy their greed, gambling had been encouraged. (Commentator’s Note: This practice is still continuing today.)

It seems difficult, if not impossible, for the Burmese and especially the Shans to regard each other as fellow nationals. Khun Kya Bu tells us of his reading of Thakin Kodawhmaing’s biography, which tells of how he was invited by the Prince of Yawngnwe to become his Chief Minister. The Thakin, still one of the most revered among the Burmese, however declined the offer because he was determined not to serve under foreign rule.

During WW II, many Chinese civilians in lower Burma had fled to the north in anticipation of the Japanese thrust from Thailand. There were many incidents of their being robbed, raped and murdered on the way by the lawless Burmese. When the Chinese troops marched down, they took their revenge on the Burmese populace. People were stopped on the way and questioned as to their nationalities. All the “Pai-yis” (Shans) were allowed to move on, but the “Lao Mien (Burmese) were summarily executed. The only magic charm against these mishaps seemed to be the word “Pai-yi”, and Khun Kya Bu, with little concealed glee, tells us how the Burmese populace memorized these words in order to extricate themselves from their predicament.

If 19 July 1947 is the blackest day for the both Burmese and Shans alike, the next day was no less blacker. Zao

Zarm Htun, Prince of Mongpaw, who was among the wounded during the assassination of Aung San was taken with the others to the General Hospital in Rangoon. His Karen personal assistant personally carried him there. Apart from being unable to speak, because of the bullet wound in his chin, he was conscious and in good spirits when last seen. "But no one was allowed to see him. They just told me he was all right, that there was nothing to worry about him. Then the next day, it was announced that he died from his wounds."

Khun Kya Bu is really bitter here. He does not reveal the Karen P.A.'s name for obvious reasons, because he was submitting his memoirs to the Burma Socialist Program Party. Nor does he disclose what is on his mind, when he tells us about this incident, also for obvious reasons, but all the implications are there for us to see. He recalls that the situation in the post-Independence days was so bad that one non-Burmese colonel came down to Rangoon in anger and told a meeting:

"I suggest that to get things right, each of the nationalities do only what they are good at. Let the Chins, Karens, and Kachins, who are good at fighting, handle defense matters. Let the Shan and Karennis, who are honest rulers, handle administrative affairs. As for you Burmese, as you are good at fine arts, you should just be responsible for that. Everything will then be straightened out and returned to normal."

The above may be too much for some Burmese. However, Khun Kya Bu has reserved his wholehearted praise for one Burmese - Aung San. He tells us how Aung San, on his arrival in Taunggyi, after his return from London, admitted to the Shans gathered at the town soccer field his fault in not including Shan representatives in his delegation. Khun Kya Bu gives full marks to Aung San for his courage. (The Federated Shan State Council had sent a telegram to London that the Burmese delegation did not represent Shan interests, which almost jeopardized Aung San's negotiation with the H.M. Government.)

Aung San, he says, was an advocate for Federalism. At the AFPFL Conference in May 1947, prior to the convening of the Constituent Assembly, Aung San told the Conference he was opposed to the unitary system of Government. Khun Kya Bu then gives us a copy of Aung San's full speech when he laid down the Seven Objectives for the drafting of the Constitution. At one point, he definitely said it should not be a "unitary constitution."

Khun Kya Bu also mourns the death of Brigadier Tin Htut, Commander of the Hill People's Force, who was killed by a bomb blast during the turbulent post independence rebellions. Apart from Aung San, he was the only Burmese who won the Shans' trust. Referring to the Burmese, Khun Kya Bu states: "This is what happens when people who have never gotten hold of money, power, weapons and positions acquire them."

Towards the end of the narrative, he lectures his Burmese readers: "You have to be responsible for your actions and their outcome. One ought not to pass the blame onto others."

He then concludes with a moving Greek poem probably composed during the resistance against the Turkish invasion.

The mountains looked on to me
And I myself looked upon the plains
And musing there an hour alone
I dreamed that we might still be free
For standing on the aggressor's grave
I could not deem myself a slave

Credit:

This article was taken from <http://www.shanland.org/oldversion/index-3146.htm>