

## Research Note:

### The name problem: Myanmar - Burma

Annemarie Esche

Myanmar, nearly up to the end of the last century a kingdom in Southeast Asia, became known to the western world as a British colony under the name Burma, an English version of its real name Myanmar or - after the Union Jack had been drawn down - Pyidaungsu Myanma Nainggan (Union of Myanmar), the official name given to this country and state by its first elected Government in 1948.

But besides the official name 'Myanmar' the word 'Burma' was still in use, officially as well as unofficially. There was for instance the Union of Burma, the Government of the Union of Burma, there were the Burman or the Burmese, the literature was called Burmese Literature and Rangoon was the capital of Burma.

That is a fact, and this fact has to be the starting point when discussing the problem that came out when the 'Adaption of Expression Law' of 18.6.1989 was announced.<sup>1</sup> With this 'Adaption' the word 'Burma' was not any more an official name. So the English version Union of Burma was changed into Union of Myanmar, we have now a Myanmar language and literature and the capital of Myanmar is Yangon.

This changing caused - not so much in Myanmar itself - on the one side confusion, because foreign people did not understand the reason for this changing and the word Myanmar was not known and appeared extremely strange to them. On the other side there was and still is disapproval and rejection. Unfortunately this more or less scholarly dispute, that came out, has been mixed up with political positions, to make things more confused as they are in reality.

To get an answer to some of the most important points or questions of this problem we have to put specific questions. At first we should ask since when the word Burma (that includes Burman, Burmese etc.) has been in use and where it comes from. Secondly we should find out where and by which persons and in which position and connection the word Burma has been used. And thirdly we should ask, whether the use of the words Burma and/or Myanmar is a question of the Myanmar people or not.

Without trying to find out, what exact date this word Burma came into being, it is sure, that it has been coined during the colonial time and most probably by the British and is so to speak a British creation. There are no sources before the colonial time in which the word Burma can be found, in spite of the fact, that occasionally it appeared in publications of the 16th and 17th century as Berma or Birman.

To find out from where the word Burma might have come let us have a look into history. In 1988 Professor Than Tun wrote "A Mon inscription of 1101/02 mentions them (i.e. that people) as *Mirma*. The word *mranmā* occurred first in an inscription of 1190. The spelling changed to *Mraṁmāin* about 1332. *Mranmā* *prān*, which was of course *Tattadesa*, was first mentioned in 1235".<sup>2</sup>

The historian Michael Aung-Thwin (USA), who is principally in line with the opinion of Than Tun, showed in his contribution at the International Conference in Berlin in May 1993 about 'Tradition and Modernity in Myanmar', that "... the word Burma itself needs some clarification. 'Burma', as such, is actually an English word for the dominant ethno-linguistic and political group, the Mranmā, which, in spoken Burmese, is interchangeable with *bamā*." And he goes on to declare "Mranmā is an ancient, indigenous word that referred to a culture, an ethno-linguistic group, and the state or country established by that culture and group. The term is not new and has been used consistently to represent at least these three categories for nearly a millenia. If an ordinary person in pre-colonial or even post-colonial Burma were asked the name of his or her country, and this person did not speak English (as most did not), he or she would have answered *mranmā prān*, not "Burma".<sup>3</sup>

The well-known scholar Hugh Tinker, author of the book *The Union of Burma* (A Study of the First Years of Independence), deals in a contribution to 'Burma - the struggle for Independence', with the terms 'Burmese' and 'Burman' and writes as follows: "A problem which confronts any reader unfamiliar with the usages of Burma is to elucidate the meaning of 'Burmese' and 'Burman' in the text. The British in Burma applied the term Burmese to all those (the great majority) for whom the Burmese language was their mother tongue. The other peoples were identified according to the linguistic group to which their various languages belonged: Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin etc... There was no accepted term to embrace all the people of Burma, though we find that in communications originating in London the term 'Burman' is sometimes employed to signify any and every person who 'belongs' to Burma. In Burma the term *Burman* tended to be used synonymously with *Burmese*. The reader will find that whenever the minorities are identified they are described as Shans, Karens, etc., and the absence of any all-embracing term (comparable to 'Indian' to include all the peoples of India) must be accepted as part of the contemporary political reality."<sup>4</sup>

It seems that the problem has not been solved yet. Therefore let us look into the Myanmar language and try to find out in which way the British could have found or created the word Burma.

The old word Myanmar has all along been adjective as well as noun. This word undergoes - especially as a spoken word - a colloquial corruption into Bamar. That is quite normal in the Myanmar language and - as a proof - there are a lot of similar changes from m to b, for instance the town Myeik spelled with m is pronounced /byeik/. As the British in the beginning of their rule were not so confronted with the written, but more with the spoken language it is surely possible that they took over this word Bamar and spelled it Burma, as both words show a certain accord. So the word Burma would be nothing else than a foreign version of the word Bamar.

In the independence movement the Thakins called their organisation for its better mass-effectiveness Do Bama Asiayon but not Do Myanma Asiayon, which would also have been possible. In the Universities, however, the departments always have been called Myanmasa, never Bamasa. The Myanmar Language Commission has always been called Myanmar Sa Aphwe. Not only the dictionary



of the Myanmar Language Commission is called *Myan-ma abi-dan akyin-gyok* (1978-80), also the dictionary written by the Japanese scholars Harada M. and T. Ono is called *Myan-ma-Gyapan abi-dan* (Tokyo 1979).

To say it in other words: If one would pronounce the word for broom with m as it is written, people would not understand or would laugh, because you would use for such a profane thing a high-level language. And if you used the term Pyidaungsu Bamar Nainggan (Union of Banmar) people would say that you have no understanding for this people and no feeling for their language, as you use a colloquial corruption of the word Myanmar for the official name of this country and state. And a moment later they might say: Sure, we are Myanmar, and we live in the Union of Myanmar. But we also like to call each other Bamar when we speak in our colloquial language.

That is the point to give answer to our second question: by which persons and in which connection the word Burma has been used. Principally we can say that not only before, but also after Independence in 1948 the word Burma for the newly established state continued to be in use. The English language had been the basic language in High Schools during the colonial time. English has been and nowadays still is the language of certain circles: diplomatic ones, groups of educated people, foreigners who live in Myanmar and so on. This word was used in international treaties. There were and are still various publications in the English language - newspapers, books, as well as the news on Myanmar radio and television.

This word was taken over even into the language of scholars and sometimes was used in a way, that - in a historical sense - cannot be accepted. Maung Htin Aung for instance writes in his book *The stricken Peacock*: "The age of Pagan was a great age of translation from Pali to Burmese" and "... Pagan became ... the capital of the first united kingdom of Burma."<sup>5</sup> Even Dr. Maung Maung writes in his book *Burma in the Family of Nations*: "Anawratha unified the small principalities that constituted Burma into a relatively united state".<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the word Burma was mostly used instead of the word Myanmar whenever the English language was made use of as means of communication. No wonder, the official English version of the official name Pyidaungsu Myanmar Nainggan was Union of Burma. But it is also true that the majority of the peoples of Myanmar does not master the English language and does not use the word Burma. For them their country is Myanmar or Bamar. And if they say 'Bamar' it is in no way to be considered as a colloquial corruption of the word 'Burma'. These remarks should be the starting point to approach the answer to my third question.

When I stayed for some months in Myanmar in this and also in the last year I discussed this question with a lot of people, with scholars as well as with the man from the street, with housewives and with businessmen, with people who are in line with the Government, i.e. the SLORC and with those who are against SLORC. But I learned that firstly only a few English speaking people would prefer the name Burma, secondly that even those who dislike the SLORC - as they say - use the word Myanmar. In the third place I experienced that very often I was kindly corrected by my Myanmar friends whenever I used - as a kind of soft

provocation - the words Burma and Burmese. Last not least nearly all those who were asked by me confirmed the correctness of the usage of the word Myanmar, only a few tried to explain that it would be better to say Burma.

In connection with Michael Aung-Thwin's statement concerning the answer of a person who was asked the name of his or her country today one could say more and more of those who speak English would also give the same answer: 'Myanmar', because it is a word of their language, used for nearly a millenia. This we should take into consideration, as I was told by a friend, and he asked me, not to put so much weight on the English version of the name of the state that was created in 1948. We should better look at the correct name of this state how it is written in the mother tongue. It is Pyidaungsu Myanmar Nainggan. As one does not say anymore Rhodesia, but Simbabwe, not Ceylon, but Sri Lanka, the diplomatic correspondence nowadays refers to the Myanmar state homogenously as to the Union of Myanmar.

Foreign teachers have associated themselves in the 'Myanmar Language Teachers Association'. That means they are teaching Myanmar language (*myanma sa*), the national language and lingua franca of Myanmar. This Myanmar language comprises mainly the dialects Bamar, Rakhine, Intha, Dawei, Danu, Myeik and Yaw in their standardized written form. Dialects, however, also exist in their spoken version. Every foreigner who knows the crux between written and spoken language form in Myanmar language, is confronted with this problem. One cannot speak, if one only has learned to read, and one cannot read, if one only has learned to speak.

But how shall we call the peoples? If they are Shan, Chin, Kachin etc. one can easily call them by their ethnic names. Regarding the citizenship one surely can find examples in the world where different peoples live together as citizens of a state and also bear the name of this state. And in the 'Union of Burma'? Was it not - from 1948 onwards - beyond all question to call the Shan, the Chin and all the others citizens of the 'Union of Burma'. Now, we think, that all the evidence points to the fact that they are nowadays citizens of the Union of Myanmar.

## Literature:

- 1) **Südostasien aktuell**, July 1989.
- 2) Than Tun, **Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma**. Kiscadale Publications 1988.
- 3) Michael Aung-Thwin, "Principles and Patterns of the Precolonial Burmese State", in: **Tradition and Modernity in Myanmar**. **Berliner Asien-Afrika-Studien**. Vol. 3/1, 1993, p. 17/18.
- 4) **Burma - The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948**. Vol. 1, ed. by Hugh Tinker, London 1983; Preface, p. XIII.
- 5) Maung Htin Aung, **The Stricken Peacock**. The Hague 1965; p. 8 f.
- 6) Maung Maung, **Burma in the Family of Nations**. 1958; p. 11.