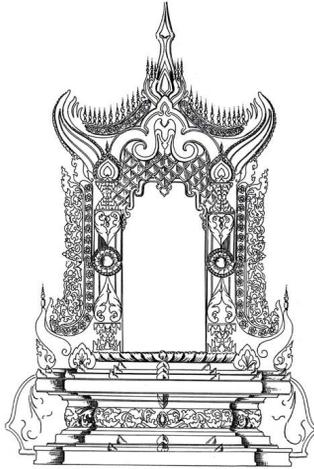


# *The Journal of Burma Studies*



*Volume 9  
2004*



*Special Issue*

*In Homage to  
U Pe Maung Tin*

*Featuring Articles by:*

*Anna Allott*

*Denise Bernot*

*Tilman Frasch*

*Patricia Herbert*

*Jacques Leider*

*Alan Saw U*

*U Tun Aung Chain*

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**U PE MAUNG TIN—  
RESEARCHER, SCHOLAR, PEDAGOGUE**  
His Contribution to Burmese Studies in France

**Denise Bernot\***

U Pe Maung Tin possessed, by nature, all of the qualities of an erudite researcher: he was always ready to learn more; constantly trying to deepen his understanding; frequently opening a new line of inquiry; and in his work, at once rigorous and bold. U Pe Maung Tin never allowed himself to become a prisoner of tradition, though he knew perfectly the traditions of his own country and masterfully assimilated those of Great Britain. Convention never obstructed him from stating a scientific truth or doing the morally right thing. For those reasons, he left behind a legacy of lasting valuable research.

When working in London with Liliás E. Armstrong on the first study of Burmese phonetics,<sup>1</sup> he boldly abandoned traditional transcription and adopted the new phonetic alphabet, defending his decision in the face of criticism, as he explains in his 1930 comment in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*:<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Reynolds . . . has judged the Phonetic Reader by the official system; he said, “and in any case, and whatever the convention of the phonetic symbols may be, the use of *sh* and *th* to represent to an English reader any sounds other than *shin* and *thin* must be an endless source of confusion, the more so when the sounds ordinarily represented in English by *sh* and *th* do occur in

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Burmese.” The endless source of confusion can only arise if one reads the official system into the phonetic symbols chosen, looking at them, so to speak, with the official eye.

At the time of writing this response, U Pe Maung Tin had not only established his reputation as a Pali scholar but was also starting to consider Burmese from a linguistic point of view, as is clear from his bibliography. The aim of *A Burmese Phonetic Reader* was not only to help students of Burmese but to “interest Burmans in the sounds and significant word-tones of their own language.” He gives useful hints on the various pronunciations of ျ (with or without friction), of ဝ (according to the end of the syllable), and many other points, which later lead to linguistic research on Burmese at Yangon University and abroad.

U Pe Maung Tin revealed his acute interest in phonetics even earlier in a 1922 article with the intriguing title “Phonetics in a Passport,” in which he described the Portuguese translation of a Burmese passport of 1783.<sup>3</sup> The Burmese names and titles are rendered phonetically as heard by the Portuguese ear:

For the Burmese စစ်ကဲတော်မင်း [sikkèdawmin],  
the Portuguese has *Chitkeydohming*;  
for the Burmese စာရေးတော်ကြီး [sayedawgyi],  
the Portuguese has *Cheredohgry*;  
for the Burmese သခင်ဘုရား [Thahkin Hpaya],  
the Portuguese has *Saquem Purah*;  
for the Burmese ဂုလံ သတ္တာ [Gulan Thatta],  
the Portuguese has *Gulam Sattar*.

The Portuguese *ch*, *s* thus correspond to စ, သ; ဝ would normally be pronounced by a Portuguese as the English *sh*. And there can be no question of the initial *s* being a sibilant. It would thus follow that စ, သ were pronounced *sh*, *s* in 1783 and not *s*, *th* as at present. But since this document is not a primer of phonetics, the

evidence it affords cannot be final. Everybody knows how strange one's native words appear in a foreign garb and how difficult it is for a foreigner to acquire certain sounds. In this case the Portuguese may have had a bad ear or his Burman friends had some slight infirmity of the vocal organs or peculiarity of pronunciation such as a lisp. Or it may even be that both the speaker and hearer were at fault. Even if the right sound was heard, the writer may not have had a corresponding sound in his own language. Let us see how far such disturbing factors can have influenced our document.

This is how *o*, *∞* sounded to an English ear. Colonel Symes in his *Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava* made in 1795, i.e. twelve years after our document, renders *o* by *ch* in the following words: *Chekey* စစ်ကဲ [Sittke], *Chagaing* စကိုင်း [Sagaing], *Chenguza* စဉ့်ကူးစား [Singuzza], *Chilenza* စလင်းစား [Salinza], *Chobwa* စော်ဘွား [Sawbwa]. The difference in sound between *o* and its aspirate *∞* is negligible to an English ear for all practical purposes.

Here, U Pe Maung Tin raises the analysis to the level of phonemics, since he is pointing out that there is only one phoneme in English, as against two in Burmese. He continues:

... and so Symes has *ch* also for *∞* in *Monchaboo* မုဆိုးပု [Mos-hsobo], put *choo* ဗုဆိုး [pahso]. I need not ask English readers how they would pronounce *ch* in these words. Any doubt that might arise is dispelled by the rendering of ချဉ် as *chop* where Symes gives the phonetic value of *ch*, since the word ချဉ် is pronounced with *ch* as in *church*. He cannot possibly mean *sh* since he

has many examples of words with the proper *sh* sound, such as *Shoedagon* ရွှေတိဂုံ. He thus leaves no room for doubt that he heard *o* pronounced as *ch*. It is remarkable that both Symes and the Portuguese render စစ်ကဲ by *ch*: *chekey*, *chitkey*. This shows that even though the Portuguese would pronounce *ch* as *sh*, he probably meant the palatal *ch* sound in စစ်ကဲ, for how else would he have reproduced this sound which does not exist in his own language.

As regards *o*, Symes has *Cassay* ကသဲ [*Kathe*], *Persaim* ပုသိမ် [*Pathein*], *Tenasserem* တနင်္သာရီ [*taninthayi*], *Sandainguite* သီတင်းကျွတ် [*Thadingyut*], *Mahasee-soo-ra* မဟာသီသူရ [*Mahathithuya*], *Saloen* သံလွင် [*Thanlwin*], *piasath* ပြည်ထောင် [*pyatthad*], *Sigeamee* သိကြားမင်း [*Thagyamin*], *Sirriapmew* သရက်မြို့ [*Thayetmyo*], *sunneka* သနပ်ခါး [*thanahka*], etc. There is no possibility of Symes mistaking a *th* sound for *s*, since an Englishman knows the difference between these two sounds as well as a Burman, so that if there was the slightest tendency in the Burmese words to a *th* sound, Symes would not have failed to notice it . . . Symes thus confirms the Portuguese rendering of *o* by *s*. In his preface, Symes says, “In the orthography of Burman words I have endeavoured to express, by appropriate letters, the sounds as they struck my own ear.” There is thus no reason to doubt that *o*, *o* struck his ear as *ch*, *s*.

U Pe Maung Tin extends the comparison to the rendering of Burmese sounds by Sangermano:

An Italian, Father Sangermano, was in Burma for twenty-five years. . . 1783–1808. . . . Sangermano’s evidence therefore deserves attention. He has

many words with  $\infty$  represented by  $s$ , e.g. Sarekittra သရေခေတ္တရာ [Thayehkittaya], sua si သွားသည် [thwa thi], sabeit သမိတ် [thabeit] . . . On the other hand he generally gives  $\circ$  as  $ts$  (Italian  $s$ , i.e. a transition from the palatal to the sibilant, as in zicche စစ်ကဲ [sikke], zaun ဘေး [saung] . . . Sangermano thus gives the transitional pronunciation of  $\circ$  and the old pronunciation of  $\infty$ .

To the descriptive approach of *A Burmese Phonetic Reader* is added a comparative approach, and the synchronic study of the passport is part of a wider historical survey that begins by looking at the discrepancies between the Pali writing system and the sounds of Burmese. Here, U Pe Maung Tin's research covers three fields: phonetics and phonemics; linguistic comparison and history; and, breaking with tradition, new lines of inquiry still being pursued today.

When I was doing my own linguistic research among the Marma (Arakanese who fled from Arakan to the Chittagong Hill Tracts sometime in the eighteenth century), "daughter" သမီး was pronounced by them [samwi:], "son" သား [sa:], etc. And "eat" စား with the palatal here was rendered [c] [ca:] by the northern Marma, who reached the Chittagong Hill Tracts earlier, while the southern Marma pronounced  $\circ$  as an affricate sibilant [ts] as in စား [tsa:], the "transitional" pronunciation of Sangermano, which is in complete agreement with the analysis by U Pe Maung Tin.

His later paper, "Some Features of the Burmese Language," departs from the traditional approach to syntax by pointing out not merely some features but almost all those which are still puzzling linguists today. One example is the ambiguous status of words like ကြီး and ကောင်း, which function as verbs at the end of a sentence but seem to be adjectives when following a noun.<sup>4</sup> U Pe Maung Tin points out that:

Features of Burmese which may be noted are the predominance of the verb, the suppression of the subject, the omission of personal pronouns. It is a language characterised by purposeful activity where the doer does not always appear. Let us take just one more example:

ဂဝယ် ဂဏန်းကောင် လက်မ ထောင်ဟူ၍ ယခုအခါ သူငယ်တန်းဖတ်စာများ၌ တွေ့ရသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ဂဏန်းဆိုလျှင် လက်မ ပါသော သတ္တဝါမှန်း သိကြလေသည်။ ငါးကဲ့သို့ ရေထဲတွင်နေသော သတ္တဝါ ဖြစ်၏။ သို့သော် ငါးများကဲ့သို့ ရေထဲ၌ အစဉ်မနေပေ။ ရေစပ်များတွင် နှမ်းများ ချောင်းဘေးများ၌ တရွရွနှင့် သွားလာနေတတ်သည်။

*“C stands for crab with the uplifted thumb’ - (one) finds this now in infant readers. Therefore (people) know that the crab is a creature with thumbs. It is a creature living in water like fish. But (it) does not live all the time in water as the fishes do. (It) habitually creeps along banks and creek sides at water edges.”*

There is no mention of the subject either as noun or pronoun in any of the five sentences in this passage. There is no need to mention the subject in the first sentence because every reader finds it so. The plural particle ကြ of the verb in the second sentence shows that “people” is the suppressed subject. Since we are reading about the crab, we know that the subject of the third sentence is the crab which continues to be understood in the fourth and fifth sentences.

Perhaps some of you are wondering what a vague language Burmese must be. You will be disappointed if you look for a subject in every sentence and personal pronouns everywhere. But you will find it quite intelligible and picturesque once you get used to the impersonal way in which Burmans express themselves.

As a historian and linguist, U Pe Maung Tin knew that a study of dialects could contribute to our knowledge of the history of the Burmese language. He also realized, as an epigrapher, that subscript  $\infty$  had disappeared in most contexts other than stone inscriptions and in the spoken Tavoy dialect:<sup>5</sup>

It is abundantly clear that there is language relationship between Pagan and Tavoy. The remarkable thing is that  $\infty$ , the 'l' sound, and the original value of some of the vowel sounds should persist to the present day. . . . Let us see if the language relationship is supported by historical evidence. Some of the original transcriptions of Pagan mention Tenasserim and Tavoy. Tenasserim is mentioned in two inscriptions of 1276 A.D. and in one of 1292 A.D. Tavoy is mentioned in four or five inscriptions, the earliest in date being 1265. This earliest dated inscription speaks in two places of (ထဝယ်ကူးသူ တရားလေးကျိပ်) "140 persons who crossed over from Tavoy" being dedicated as slaves to the pagoda. Several plaques have also been discovered at Tavoy with Mon writing. (Unfortunately they are not dated but some of them mention "*Samben* Anantajeyyabhikran who holds Daway, subject to King Sri Tribovan adityadhammarac.") This style fits Kyanzittha, Sithu the second and Nandaungmya. Thus there is reason to believe that Tavoy was subject to Pagan.

These remarks were the seeds of theses written on Burmese dialects at Yangon University during the 1960s; once again U Pe Maung Tin had opened up a new line of research into his own language.

As a scholar, U Pe Maung Tin is known universally through his writings and his editions and translations of rare or difficult texts. His bibliography reveals him to be a scholar of Pali, old and modern Burmese, and old and classical Mon; a historian, including of Burmese literature; an epigraphist; a linguist who knows the language about which he is speaking (which is not always the case); and an intellectual capable of reading the scientific literature in many Occidental countries. His rendering of certain Burmese vowels in “A Phonetic Arrangement of the Burmese Vowel Sounds” by French equivalents is perfectly accurate.<sup>6</sup>

This broad knowledge not only benefited his research endeavors, but also enhanced his status as a pedagogue who constantly challenged his students to emulate and surpass him. He is remembered by many as an extraordinary and inspiring teacher. Again, his bibliography reveals the extensive range of his interests: from Buddhist philosophy (linked to his teaching of Pali); through the history of Burmese literature, grammar, and syntax; and to the simplest primary school readers. All of his writings are clear and easy to read, which means pedagogically effective, for he was a true scholar, not the type who thinks, “*Pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué?*” He was a master who wished to transmit his knowledge as widely and as well as possible.

U Pe Maung Tin’s contribution to Burmese studies in France was multifaceted. In the *Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary Volume* (1948) of the School of Oriental Languages in Paris, a *cours libre* (free course) of Burmese by E. Pe Maung Tin is referenced with the date 1933–39. I could not find any mention of this in the biography by Ma Lay Lon but there is discussion of a charming episode in 1920 (vol.1, p.345).<sup>7</sup> U Pe Maung Tin recounts that he was traveling by train from Marseille to Calais when the train stopped for mechanical reasons just outside of Calais. Most of the passengers descended from the train to have a drink at a small coffee stand. When the girl in charge of the stand saw him standing there without anything to drink, she ran with a cup of coffee for him and they exchanged smiles.

The next narrated episode is his visit, in 1921, to a Parisian salon (vol.1, p.374) held by an American woman living in Paris. She was president of an association of foreign students in Paris and had invited him to come from Oxford. Upon arrival, he was asked numerous questions about his country by the other guests, and everyone listened to him fascinated, hanging on his every word. There is further mention that he was invited by the University of Paris in 1936 to lecture on Asian literatures. From that point until the Second World War, he does not seem to have had the opportunity to travel abroad.

In 1960, U Pe Maung Tin made an outstanding contribution to Burmese studies in France by sending his daughter Brenda to study there. Thanks to her presence, modern spoken Burmese was regularly taught in Paris, while I was striving to rid myself of my Arakanese pronunciation and vocabulary.

When we later met in Yangon, we discussed the Tavoy dialect and his fear that it may be absorbed into modern Burmese. This discussion stimulated further research into Tavoy and other dialects, as well as ethnographic questions concerning the Intha. He was one of the Burmese scholars whose writings convinced me—as a teacher—that a basic knowledge of Pali was necessary for a full understanding of Burmese vocabulary. And, in 1991, a Ph.D. thesis on Burmese *nissaya* texts was submitted at our School of Oriental Languages.<sup>8</sup>

Allow me to say in conclusion that our debt to this pioneer is enormous, that the treasure left by him will continue to benefit future generations, and that only a tiny part of this treasure has been discussed in the present article.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> *A Burmese Phonetic Reader: with English Translations* (London: University of London Press, 1925). This publication corresponds to no. 95 in Herbert's bibliography, this volume.

<sup>2</sup> "A Burmese Phonetic Reader," *JBR* 20, no.1 (1930): 20–21. [Reply to Reynolds]. See no. 120 in Herbert's bibliography, this volume.

<sup>3</sup> *JBR* 12, no. 3 (1922): 127–32. See no. 88 in Herbert's bibliography, this volume.

<sup>4</sup> *JBR* 39, no. 2 (1956): 193–202. See no. 171 in Herbert’s bibliography, this volume.

<sup>5</sup> “The Dialect of Tavoy,” *JBR* 23, no. 1 (1933): 31–46. See no. 139 in Herbert’s bibliography, this volume.

<sup>6</sup> *JBR* 20, no. 2 (1930): 76–80. See no. 121 in Herbert’s bibliography, this volume.

<sup>7</sup> မေမာင်တင် သို့မဟုတ် ဘသက်ရှည် 2 vols. (Yangon: Hsway Tin Nu, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> William Pruitt, *Etude linguistique de nissaya birmanes Traduction commentée de textes bouddhiques*. Paris: PEFEO Monographies 174. 287 p.