



The Trend of the Role of Ramañña Nikāya in the Next Decade in Mon State

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Abstract

This research article has three main objectives, namely: (1) to study the origin and the development of Rāmañña Nikāya in the Mon state, (2) to study the characteristics and the practices of Ramañña Nikāya Association, and (3) to analyze the trend of the roles of Ramañña Nikāya in the next decade in the Mon state. It has three study attempts to explain the main Mon Buddhism's role in Lower Burma through an in-depth analysis of the next decade in Mon state. This research contains five chapters: the first two are introductory chapters describing the history of Mon Buddhism and the origin and development of Ramañña Nikāya; the last two chapters examine the characteristics of the practices and interview the Role of Rāmañña Nikāya that of relating to the state, Sangha education and propagation of the religious title to the Sangha who is prompting in the next decade in Mon State. The last chapter contains the conclusion of this research: Rāmañña Nikāya's role in Mon society, Mon Sangha association and Mon people in Mon State. Ten scholars of Mon Buddhism were interviewed for the primary source in this dissertation.

The study has shown that through the assigned objective, Mon Buddhism began and developed before Pegan, during Pegan and after Pegan during conflicts of civil war. Based on the results of the analysis, the study presents possible solutions to the conflict. These periods involve various conditions based on the results of the analysis of a long history of Ramañña Nikāya. From analyzing the characteristics and practice of Mon Buddhism in Mon State, some characteristics and practices may differ due to the differences of the national culture of Mon in Burma. This is because the Burmese are influenced by the Mon culture. Mon Buddhist monks also play an important role and pay more respect to the Mon society in the Mon State. No research on Ramañña Nikāya Association in Burma has ever been done before.

Keywords: The Trend of the Role, Ramañña Nikāya, Mon Buddhism, Mon State

Introduction

Mon was one of the nations and a big Empire in Southeast Asia that laid a foundation of Buddhism, both Thai and Burmese, from the 6th to the late 11th century of Dvaravati Period.¹ Mon people were ultimately defeated by the Thais who absorbed much of their culture. And also, the first major group of immigrants to arrive in present-day Myanmar were the Mon who were originally from China and settled in what is now northern Burma around the third century B.C.² Also it is one of the areas in the Union of Myanmar, which have complicated political and religious problems with many ethnic groups and different kinds of cultural traditions.

But Mons and Ramañña Nikāya Buddhist Association remained a minority in the Lower Burma. Although Ramañña Nikāya was established a long time ago, Ministry of Myanmar religious affairs does not recognize Ramañña Nikāya. This is one of the challenges for Mon followers of Ramañña Nikāya to practice the Buddha's teaching. The case has also effected a decline in the number of the Ramañña Nikāya Buddhist Association in lower Burma because of the limitation of freedom. The aim of this Nikāya and its development is to gain independence or freedom for Mon people and Mon civilization from the military forces of Myanmar government.

Mon people suffer restrictions on freedom of literature because Ramañña Nikāya Buddhist Association uses their own language in examination of the Burmese Sangha Organization. Burmese Sangha Organization forced Mon monks to take examination in Burmese language; some of Mon monks from Dhammayutika Nikāya followed the requirement of Burmese Monk Organization to take examination in Pali literature in Burmese language. Without Mon literature, Ramañña Nikāya and lay people cannot survive in the present time. However, the reason to ban Mon language is to make the patriotism of the next generation weaker. The Ramañña Nikāya Sangha Dhamma held a Dhamma examination, both written and oral, although facing serious difficulties. In the summer, Mon Buddhist monks patiently tried to open and teach the Dhamma to the children in the monastery since 1988.³ It is a

¹Dr. Nai Pan Hla, **"A Short History Of The Mons"**, Part 1, The Original Homeland of the Mons (Migration), (Japan: Okinawa, Meio University, 2007)

²Jeffrey Hays, **Ancient Mon People**, (2004): Retrieved on 12 November 2017 http://factsand-details.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5a/entry-2997.html

³Marie Lall and Ashley South, **Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-state ethnic education regimes in Burma**, March 2012, p.11

difficult mission for Mon Buddhist monks to carry on the development of their own language under the military government until now based on the Ramañña Nikaya Association. As we can see from around the world, Buddhism have been flourishing for a long period time. However, at that time Myanmar was not called as it is today.

1. The Origin of Ramañña Nikāya Buddhism in Mon State

The first major group of immigrants to arrive in present-day Myanmar was the Mons who were originally from China, Yangtze River Valley, and settled in what is now northern Myanmar around the third century B.C. They reached Dvāravatī (Old Siam) and Rāmaññadesa (Lower Burma), the old country of the Mon people.⁴ The Mon were highly cultured Buddhist people with a classical North Indian heritage who settled in Central Burma. Pegu (50 miles from Yangon) was established by the Mon in the 6th century, it was the capital of southern Burma in the 13th century when the Mons ruled the region. In 1757, it was sacked and almost completely destroyed by the Burmese monarch, King Alaungpay. The Mons were heavily influenced by Indian Hindu culture and Asoka Buddhist kingdom in India. They established the Dvaravati Kingdom (6th to 11th century A.D.) and several centers in mainland Southeast Asia. The Dvaravatis controlled the Menam Valley area in present-day Thailand from the 6th or 7th century to the 11th century. Mon belong to the Austroasiatic subfamily.

They were the old inhabitants of both Burma and Thailand who had contacts with India from very early times. Mons were known as a seafaring people. Significantly, the Mons had played a major role as the most prominent agent in spreading and propagating Indian civilization in Southeast Asia in the historic period. Historically, Mahanagara was the smallest and the last dynasty of the Mons in old Siam. The last king was known as King Yiba, whose country was invaded by the King Mangrai in 1292 A.D. After that, Mons had no further role to play in Thailand as rulers of an independent kingdom. They were ultimately defeated by the Thais who absorbed much of their culture.

The oldest records of the ethnic name of the Mons were found not in Burma or Thailand but in Khmer land. In Khmer inscriptions of 6th -7th century A.D. the term was

⁴Dr. Nai Pan Hla, “A Short History of The Mons” Part (1) The Original Homeland of the Mons (Migration), (Japan: Nago City, Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Meio University, 2007), p.12.

written as Ramañ⁵ and Rmmañ and in the 9th-10th century as Rāmanya. Next it was found in Java in 1021 A.D. as Rmen. In the 11th century Mon occurred in inscriptions of the Burmese King Kyanzittha as Rameñ. Later, in the 15th century, in Mon inscriptions and on a Mon copper plate now in the National Library of Bangkok, the spelling had changed to Rmañ. Such a name had never occurred in the earlier Mon epigraphs both in Thailand and Laos.

In the year 103 of the Maha Era, Siddhartha Gotama became an Omniscient Buddha. Forty nine days after his enlightenment, while he was residing near the Bodhi tree, the two of Mon Merchants called Tapaw and Tabaw, who came from Ukkalapa Emperor in Ramannadesa (Rangoon now), received eight hair relics from the Buddha and took refuge in the Buddha and Dhamma after offering some honey cakes. At the time Sangha did not exist yet. So, the Ramañ (Mon) is the first of all amongst the Buddhists who take refuge to the Triple Gems, for the two brothers had been taking only Couplet Gems that were the Buddha and Doctrine, and for the Bhikkhu order had not come into being yet. Ramañ were the first to offer alms to the Master amongst the Buddhists, Ramañ were the first devotees who had great dedication to Buddha among all Buddhists.

Ramañ merchants acquired eight sacred hair relics in the morning of Wednesday on the fifth day of commencement of the fourth Mon month in the year 103 of the Great Era. So, the Ramañ (Mon) are the first among the Buddhists who took refuge in the Triple Gems, for the two brothers had taken only the Couplet Gems as refuge, that were the Buddha and Doctrine, since the Bhikkhu order had not come into being yet. The hair relics offered by the Buddha were enshrined on the top of Singuttara hill in Rammadesa. So the real devotee who originally erected Kyaiklagon is of course the Mon Emperor Ukkalapa. This is the first time when the Buddha's teaching arrived and flourished in Rammnadesa Mon land. The area of Yamanya Province was very wide and extensive. For effective administration it was divided into three divisions: Pathein district, Dalla district, and Muttama district, each of which was composed of thirty-two towns. Totally, there were 96 cities. Suvarṇabhūmi was also known as the golden land because of its products of gold, ivory and honey.⁶ In addition to the overseas trade, it also had overland trade with the eastern countries by crossing over the Tanintharyi mountain ranges. The overseas trade between India and Suvarṇabhūmi was very good.

⁵JSS, **The Journal of the Siam Society**, Bangkok, Thailand Volume 79, Part 1, Amarin Printing Group Co., Ltd., 1991, p.15.

⁶**The Teachings of the Buddha**, (Higher Level) Volume II, (Yangoon: Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, A.D. 2001), p. 251.

One major change after the Burmese seizure of Pegu in 1538 was the total disappearance of the Mon myth underpinning. Only after the capture of Pegu, the Mon capital became gradually populated by Burmese. Burmese absorbed major Mon sites, such as the Shwedagon and Kyaik-hti-yo.⁷ This is the third time when the Buddha's teaching flourished in Rammadesa. According to Mon Buddhist history, Mon Ramañña Nikāya appeared and were recognized in Rammadesa for the third time during the reign of king Asoka, the great king of India. He sent the elder monks Sona and Uttara to Suvarṇabhūmi after the third Buddhist Council in India. The name of Suvarṇabhūmi⁸ is a combination of two Pali words. *Suvarṇ* means golden and *bhūmi* means land. So it is called the golden land. Golden land is so wide in Southeast Asia because Mon settled in this area before Burmese and Thai influence. Therefore, it can be concluded that Ramañña Nikāya appeared after the third Buddhist Council in year 236 of the Buddhist Era. When the King Siridhammasoka (Asoka) sent nine missions to nine countries, a mission led by Venerable Soṇa and Uttara came to Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Rāmañña Province.)⁹ At that time it was ruled by King Siridhammasoka. Before that time, an ogress of the sea used to be in the habit of eating a young born child everyday. When the Theras arrived there it coincided with the birth of a prince in the city. As soon as the people saw the Theras coming to the city, they thought the ogress came from the sea again. Fortunately, while Sona and Uttara were explaining to the people that they were Buddhist monks, the ogress came out of the sea with her retinues. Then the two Theras created Manussa Siha, a creature with a lion head and a human body, to drove the ogress away.

Then the Theras also expounded the Brahmajāla Sutta¹⁰ to people who has assembled there. Sixty thousand people became Ariyas and three thousand five hundred men and one thousand five hundred women entered the Order. Buddhism became a strong faith in that period. We can see that an island in the sea surrounding the village is called now the ogress of the island in Mon State. To prevent the ogress from coming out of the sea and eating a young child in the city, the two Theras created an image of a Manussa Siha, which had a lion head and human body. Thus, this image still can be found on the entrances of houses and

⁷Don Stadtnr, **Burmese and Mon Foundation Myths**, p. 6-13.

⁸World fellowship of Buddhists Held, **Buddhism in Thailand**, (Bangkok: WFBH, 2523), p.5.

⁹**The Teaching of the Buddha**, (Higher Level) VolumeII, (Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sāsana, A.D. 2001), p. 270.

¹⁰Presentation on 51st **Anniversary, Mon National Day**, (USA: 1998), p. 4-5.

temples. This was the first time when the Rāmañña Nikāya Sangha Organization appeared in the history of Mon.

2. Ramañña Nikāya Before Pagan Occupation

In the reign of King Okkalapa he led his people to build many pagodas. Well-known is Kyaik lagon (Shwedagon pagoda) among Kyaik Dayaie (Botataung now) and Kyaik Athoke (Sule pagoda now). Kyaik Dayaeik (Botataung) became known at that time as the spot where Mon King Okkalapa welcomed the king's one thousand soldiers guarded the brothers back from India and where the hair relics intended for the Shwedagon.¹¹ Buddhism was not strong enough and did not spread to the whole country because the third refuge did not exist yet at that time.¹² The original stupa is said to be 27 meter high in his reign. In his reign, there were only two refuges: the refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the Dhamma.

The chronicles of Mon and Myanmar firmly maintain that Buddhaghosa was of Mon origin and a native of Thaton. They state that his return from Sri Lanka, with the Pali scriptures, the commentaries, and grammatical works, gave a fresh impetus to the religion. However, modern historians do not accept that Buddhaghosa was from Thaton while some even doubt his existence.¹³ According to the Mon chronicles written by Thera Uppalitta, in year 900 of the Buddhist Era (450 A.D.), a thought occurred in Buddhaghosa's mind that he needs to translate the scriptures from Sinhalese to Magadhese for the well-beings of mankind to Jambudipa. Therefore, Buddhaghosa crossed over to Ceylon and entered the monastery of Anurādhapura.¹⁴

¹¹ Donald M. Stadtner, **Bulletin of Burma Research**, (Berkeley, University of California, 2008), p. 63.

¹² Roger, Bischoff, **Buddhism in Myanmar a Short History**, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, 1995), p.18.

¹³ Smith, **Asoka's alleged mission to Pegu**, (1905), p.185-86.

¹⁴ James Gray, **The Historical Romance of the Rise and Career of Buddhaghosa**, (New deli: Madras, 1008), p.13.

He heard the Atthakathas and the discourse of the old Theras expounded by Sanghapāla the Mahāthera, and having first of all composed the Visuddhaimagga, he translated all the atthakathas into Māgadhesse. Buddhaghosa carried the religion to Sudhammavati (Thaton). The whole of Rāmaññadesa was in a state of great ferment and excitement at his arrival, and went forth to meet him with offerings and festivities, and escorted him as if he were the omniscient Buddha himself.

In year 930 B.E., Buddhaghosa, a priest of Thaton, crossed over to Ceylon, where, having devoted himself to the study of the Sinhalese language, he copied the whole of the three portions of the Pitakas with their commentaries, and brought them over to his native place. From this circumstance, Thaton, which had been known as Suvannabhumi (the “Land of Gold” was now called Sudhammavati (the “land of the True Law”). The return of the ships of Buddhaghosa from Ceylon with the sacred cargo on board is said to have been celebrated with great pomp and splendor. The king, attended by all the members of royalty and the nobility, and followed by a large retinue of attendants, went down to.

However, modern historians do not accept that Buddhaghosa was from Mon while some even doubt his existence. According to the Burmese tradition, Buddhaghosa was a native of Thaton and returned thither from Sri Lanka merits more attention than it has received. It can easily be explained away as patriotic fancy. On the other hand, if Buddhaghosa’s object was to invigorate Theravāda in India the result of his really stupendous labors was singularly small, for in India his name is connected with no religious movement. But if we suppose that he went to Sri Lanka by way of the holy places in Magadha (now Bihar) and returned from the Coromandal coast (Madras) to Burma where Theravāda afterwards flourished, we have at least a coherent narrative.¹⁵

The Sinhalese chronicles, especially the *Mahāvamsa*, place Buddhaghosa in the first half of the fifth century. Although he spent most of his active working life in Sri Lanka, he is also credited with imbuing new life into Theravāda Buddhism in South India, and developing such important centers as Kancipura and Uragapuram that were closely connected with Prome and Thaton. Proof of this connection can be found in archaeological finds in the environs of Prome, which include Pali literature inscribed in the Kadambe script on gold and stone plates. This script was used in the fifth and sixth century in Southern

¹⁵ Roger Bischoff, **Buddhism in Myanmar A Short History**, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publicaiton, 1995), p.37.

India. There is imagining for a moment, early Mon and Mainland Southeast Asian history without the Mon influence's Buddhism. What would it look like? There would be no Sona and Uttara nor Buddhaghosa bringing the most orthodox version of the Tipitakas to lower Burma Rāmaññadesa in Thaton there.¹⁶ The religion of Buddha became a firmly established faith in Thaton under the king Dhammapāla and Mi Arakka Devi princess and lasted long from the beginning of the 236. Both oral teaching and practical teaching of the Buddha was perfected at that time. Thus, Buddhism developed such as shine and glory.

3. Rāmañña Nikāya during the Pagan Period (1362 C.E.)

Pagan is believed to be founded in the years 849-850 A.D. by the Anawratha, who was born in a family of rice growers in the region around Kyauksai near Mandalay. Anawratha began to unite the region by subjugating one chieftain after another and was successful in giving the Myanmar a sense of belonging to a larger community, a nation. The crucial event in the history of Myanmar is not so much the founding of the city of Pagan and the building of its walls and moat, but more Pagan's acceptance of Theravada Buddhism in the eleventh century. The religion was brought to the Myanmar by a Mon bhikkhu named Shin Arahan. At that time, the beginning of the eleventh century, the Buddhist religion in Suvannabhumi. Rāmaññadesa was on the decline as robbers and raiders disturbed people, by plagues, and by adversaries of the religion.¹⁷ These most probably came from the Hindu Khmer kingdom in Cambodia and the north of Thailand. The Khmer were endeavoring to add Thaton and the other Mon kingdoms of the south to their expanding empire. Buddhism was under attack in other places as well. The great Mon city, Davravati, a Theravada center in Southern Thailand, fell to the Khmer, the masters of the whole of Thailand. On the other hand, King Manohari in Thaton became very weak. This happened in the 1600th year that had elapsed since the attainment of Parinibbāna by the Enlightened One.

¹⁶Michael A. Aung-Thwin, **The Mists of Rāmaññadesa, The Legend that lower Burma**, (United States of America: Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p.299.

To Cin Khui, **The Kalyani Inscriptions, erected by King Dhammaceti at Pegu In 1476 A.D.**, (Rangoon: Text and Translation, 1892), p. 49.

¹⁷Bimala Churn Law, M.A., B.L., Ph.D. (Cal.), D.Litt. (Lucknow), Hony. D.Litt. (Allahabad), **The History Of The Buddha's Religion (Sāsanavamsa)**, (London: Baptist Mission Press, 1952), p.44.

However, the power of Rāmaññadesa declined, because civil dissensions arose and the extensive country was broken up into separate principalities, because the people suffered from famine and pestilence, and because, to the detriment of the propagation of the excellent Religion, the Owing to these calamities, the priests, residing in Ramaññadesa, were unable to devote themselves, in peace and comfort, to the acquisition of scriptural knowledge, or to the observance of the precepts and the Religion also declined. According to history of Buddha's Religion, there were three causes for Buddhism to decline in Rāmaññadesa, which are fear from village-plundering thieves, fear from a kind of burning fever and fear from the adversaries of the religion. From Anawrahta reign (1077) until Narapatisithu (1174-1211), Mon people lost their Kingdom and became the slaves of Burmese civilization for about 400 years.

4. Ramañña Nikāya After Pagan (Thaton Kingdom)

From the 5th century until the conquest of lower Burma by Pagan in 11th century A.D., there is a continuous record of Buddhism flourishing in the Mon and Pyu kingdom. The Mon kingdoms are mentioned in travel reports of several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and also in the annals of the Chinese court. In the 5th century, Tathon and Pegu are mentioned in the Buddhist commentarial literature for the first time.¹⁸ The Pagan Period (A.D. 1044-1287) was the heyday of Buddhism in Burma, when it spread more or less to every corner of the country. Though the Ari Monks were powerful in Upper Burma before the accession of Anawrahta. In short, what we know about the Arañ of the pre-Pagan period so far is that they wore black robes, and that they were connected with nāga-worship and were practicing the custom of deflowering brides prevalent in Southeast Asia and they were not regarded as Buddhist by the chroniclers even though they were reciting the paritta. The practice of Arañ monk is never mentioned in connection with the Pagan-period monks in the chronicles. Arañ Monk practiced as follows:

They set all monastic rules at naught, were great drinkers, and had a weakness for the other sex; they kept their hair about two inches long, wore a kind of cylindrical hat and robe of a color nor orthox; they dabbled in a alchemy and popular medicine, and were reciters, for a consideration, of mantras; they sold amulets and recipes for the attainment of magical power; and they bred, rode and sold horse and exercised themselves

¹⁸Roger Bischoff, **Buddhism in Myanmar A Short History**, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, 1995), p.10.

in the use of arms. Their decline and final disappearance is placed at the end of the XIX century.¹⁹ Thera Arahan arrived in the vicinity of Pagan and was discovered in his forest dwelling by a hunter. The hunter, who had never before seen such a strange creature with a shaven head and a yellow robe, though he was some kind of spirit and took him to the king Anawratha. Thera Arahan naturally sat down on the throne, as it was the highest seat, and the king thought: “This man is peaceful, in this man there is the essential thing. He is sitting down on the best seat, surely he must be the best being”. The king asked the visitor to tell him where he came from and was told that he came from the place where the Order lived and that the Buddha was his teacher. Then Shin Arahan gave the king the teaching on mindfulness (appamada), teaching him the same doctrine Nigrodha had given Emperor Asoka when he was converted. Shin Arahan then told the monarch that the Buddha had passed into Mahāparinibbāna, but that his teaching, the Dhamma, enshrined in the Tipitaka, and the twofold Sangha consisting of those who possessed absolute knowledge and those who possessed conventional knowledge, remained.

When the king named Anuruddha in the town of Arimaddana in Pagan had conquered the city of Sudhamma with its king and had brought them to ruin, then the Rāmañña country was without a king. In the town of Muttima in the Rāmañña country there existed six schools, separated from each other, and belonging to various communions and various groups. In the year 1601 B.E, the king named Anuruddha of the town of Arimaddana brought an Order of monks from there together with the Pitakas. After that, in the year 1709 B.E., the great king of Ceylon called Sirisamghabodhi-Parakkamabahu to purify the religion in the island of Lanka. Six years later, a group of Mon bhikkhus led by Uttarajiva from Rāmaññadesa came for a pilgrimage. He became famous in the religion. He was the pupil of the Elder Ariyavamsa, a resident of the Rāmañña country.²⁰

a. The Characteristic of Ramañña Nikāya

Ramañña Nikāya Organization states that all Mon monks have to observe the monastic discipline in its purest form and reform Mon Buddhist literature and culture as long as Ramañña Nikāya exists. Regarding this statement, every single Mon monk believes in the

¹⁹ Win Than Tun, **Myanmar Buddhism of The Pagan Period** (AD 1000-1300), A thesis Submitted for The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy southeast Asian Studies Programme, (National University of Singapore, 2002), p. 35.

²⁰ Bimala Churn Law, M.A., B.L., Ph.D. (Cal.), D.Litt. (Lucknow), Hon. D.Litt. (Allahabad), **The History of Buddha Religion**, (Sāsanavamsa), (India: Baptist Mission Press, 1952), p. 44.

Tipitaka; for those who are living in the Mon Sangha Ramañña Nikāya Organization must pass highest examination and should expound the Dhamma to the laypeople. Mon should strictly follow moral precepts in order to get respect by lay devotees who are supporting them with four requisites to carry on the teaching of the Buddha. Every Mon monk should study Mon Buddhist literature first before he studies another language. These principles become the main characteristic of Ramañña Nikāya Organization. Ramañña Nikāya's emphasis on learning by heart created the foundation for a strong tradition of deep remembrance practice, which led to the establishment of the Mon tradition. A striking characteristic of Mon society is its acceptance of the Buddhism. These ideas are represented architecturally in the structure of the Pagoda, which has been strongly influenced by Buddhism. For example, the pagoda in a monastery is usually a conical central tower, which represents Mount Meru.²¹ People are removing their shoes before entering a monastery and are offering food to monks on their morning rounds in the village. Rural people, who always go to the monastery, wash their feet at the bottom of the stairs to the entrance of the monastery before going up.

When seeing a monk on the way, men pay respect by sitting and when sitting on the floor, men often cross their legs. Women tuck their legs to the side. When entering a monastery, women should wear clothing that covers their arms and legs. It is a tradition to bow three times to the Buddha first before meeting to the head of the temple in the monastery. Although the country lives under a single governor, the Myanmar population consists of different ethnic groups, which have difference characteristics and practice according to their traditional beliefs.

b. Practices of Ramañña Nikāya

Traditionally, there are many forms of ceremonies, which are believed to shower blessings on those who perform them and also on those in whose honor or on whose accounts they are perform. They are commonly called the "Twelve secular beatitudes of blessing." Each ceremony is performed on a specified occasion at a particular time. However, Mon Buddhists believed that the initiation ceremony is of paramount importance. It is more or less compulsory. Though, there is no prescribed rule in any of the Buddha's teaching that the Theravada Buddhist must perform the initiation ceremony. However, this duty is compulsorily for every Mon Buddhist. It is regarded to initiate a son of the family in the highest form of duty.

²¹ Peter McKenzie-Brown, **Thai, Culture and Customs**, <https://languageinstinct.blogspot.com/2006/10/thai-culture-and-customs.html>

The Uposatha or Sabbath ceremony is one of the most sacred and significant ceremonies of the Mon Theravāda Buddhism. According to the teaching of the Buddha, Uposatha was introduced at the instance of King Bimbisara. During the Buddhas' lifetime, such ceremonies were convened by the non-Buddhist societies like ascetics and heretics. Having realized the importance of such congregation, King Bimbisara recommended setting up such a religious assembly. The Uposatha day is an essential day in Mon lay people's life because they can obtain eight precepts to practice when they have free time in the rainy season. We can say that observing the Uposatha day is a concession to public opinion made by the Buddha. It is one of the numberless concessions by the brotherhood to the religious and moral activities of human beings. In Mon society, generally the Uposatha is a day of rest. It is not proper to do any business activities; hunting and fishing is forbidden²². The lay devotees must celebrate the day with clean garments and clean minds, and it is meritorious for them to keep the eight precepts. Preaching and hearing the sermon is a common feature of each Uposatha day. Uposatha had a great moral impact on the laypeople. It infuses them with a religious favour and unification of the Mon laypeople community.

c. The Role of Rāmañña Nikāya Buddhism in Mon State

The Rāmañña Nikāya Sangha committee has already established over (729) monasteries with 6965 monks and novices. According to the census, 90% of the Mon population defined themselves as Buddhist, all belonging to the Mon laypeople community. 9% of the Mon population was Christian belonging to the Christian community. Rāmañña Nikāya Buddhist monasteries were established by Mon laypeople. All Rāmañña Nikāya monasteries are named in Mon language. At the top of the gate entrance of the monastery the name is written in two languages, Mon and Burmese, with a symbol of the Hongsa bird.

New Rāmañña Rattha Buddhist University, situated in Mon State and established by venerable Silasara on April 26, 2012, is proposed to open in the near future.²³ Rāmañña Nikāya Buddhism has been providing Buddhist education for young Mon novices and monks since 1915. Until now, in Mon Rāmañña Nikāya three kinds of monasteries can be established according to the Mon Sangha Committee rules and regulations. The highest kind

²²Mark Inkey for BNI, **Traditional Mon Religious Festivals to be Regulated**, Retrieved on 25 January 2018, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-state/item/613-traditional-mon-religious-festivals-to-be-regulated.html>.

²³Min Htit, **Mon State's new University offers Diploma in Buddhism**, (2016): Retrieved on 22 December 2017, <http://monnews.org./2016/06/11/ramonnyarattha.html>.

of monasteries praised by the laypeople is Pariyatti monastery, which is struggling to develop and promote the teaching of the Buddha. In spite of limited manpower and resources, Mon monks have been playing a role of immense significance to spread Buddhism throughout the Mon State and upper Burma, especially in Rangoon. After National League Democratic Party (NLD) reform in 2010 until the present day, Myanmar authorities follow the same rule regarding the control over the Sangha order. Mon Sangha is still being oppressed by the Democratic Party (NLD), as in the case of promotion of Buddhist Summer School Teaching in the Monastery. Rāmañña Nikāya Buddhism has struggled to teach to the Mon laypeople and to live harmony with Mon monk community with humble mental and psychical attitude. Looking back on the history of Mon based on the teaching of the Buddha, one can see clearly the role of the Mon monks in Mon society. To preserve Mon language and culture for the next generations is an essential and important role for the monk to carry out. To promote the Mon Buddhist monk's traditional role of propagation of Buddhism and social welfare, the Mon Buddhist Rāmañña Nikāya Organization has set up the rules for the Mon laypeople. According to the traditional Mon custom of taking the five precepts, Mon traditional customs give the sample of the following starting from the meaning of the Yodoso, not to mix with Burmese language based on the Dhamma such as:

The pañca-sīla (five precepts):

- (1) To abstain from killing
- (2) To abstain from stealing
- (3) To abstain from sexual misconduct
- (4) To abstain from false speech
- (5) To abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness.

Apart from the precepts, the following three factors are important for a monk to teach: (1) Mons must learn Mon language (2) Mons must wear Mon traditional uniform when performing some ceremonies, (3) Mons must follow Mon culture and traditions.²⁴ One of the most important things in the Mon community is to understand and to write in Mon language. Mon ethnics cannot survive without Mon literature. So a Mon village must have a monastery in order to teach and promote Mon literature for Mon community in each village. The people of Mon community should strictly follow the five precepts at least

²⁴ Interview with The most venerable Bhadanta, silācāra, Aggamahāpaṇḍita, (Second leader of Ramañña Nikāya Organization), November 10, 2017.

one day a week when they come to the monastery apart from their activities at home and social work. The five precepts are of course linked to the ideas of kusala (good deed) and akusala (bad deed). Mon laypeople obtain the precepts side by side to maintain harmony in the society.

d. Trend of the Role in the Next Decade

Over seven decades now, the Mons are facing oppression, which many consider a ‘cultural’ genocide as well. The objective is to dilute their ethnicity and convert them to Burmese. Mon language is forbidden in schools, and a number of Myanmar Army troops are actively encouraged to marry local Mon women. Schools are all in Burmese and Mon people are not even allowed to teach Buddhist and other literature in Mon language as a subject. Only in some areas controlled by the Mon New State Party (MNSP) schools can be open for local children. The regime is trying to kill the Mon language and culture. The majority and minority populations are separated from each other, and Mon feel weak and unsafe because Mon Rāmañña Nikāya Sangha is not recognized.

e. The Impact of the Trend of Roles in Rāmañña Nikāya In Mon State

Buddhism was introduced to the two Mon merchants from Ukkala²⁵ since the time of the Buddha when he came out of seven weeks of meditation after his awakening. Shwedagon Pagoda is a significant symbol for Mon people. Since gaining independence from the British rule, Mon Buddhism in lower Myanmar has not developed much, even though the constitution (2008) of the Myanmar military government was affected at the present time. Mon Buddhist monks teach Mon people to have gentle mind and be respectful to the Sangha in order to preserve their culture and literature with dignity. Not to have ethnic and religious discrimination is essential to improve life in the society based on the federal system reform from the military junta.

Language and cultural considerations were particularly important for Mon ethnic communities. The impact of the literacy campaign has in part been due to its association with the prestigious Mon Sangha. “No matter how strong the external forces pushing for the decline of the Mon language are, it is the internal forces within the community – Its spirit and determination – that is crucial for stemming the decline.” Local people are

²⁵Roger Bischoff, **Buddhism in Myanmar A Short History**, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1996), p. 18.

involved with the preservation and propagation of their language and culture. Since 1995, groups such as the Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC) and the Association for Summer Mon Literature and Buddhist Teaching Training have been at the forefront of a drive to expand and consolidate the Mon language skills, and thereby the cultural and historical awareness, of the Mon community in Burma. Since the mid-90s: by 2001, the NMSP Education Department was running 148 National Schools and teaching some 51,000 children by 917 teachers.²⁶

Mon National Day has been celebrated since 1990s by exiles in North American and Australia. Mon National Day is still an occasion for the display of Mon strength and unity, and a stimulus to linguistic and cultural revival. Traditionally Mon have celebrated the founding of Mon Nation on the first Waning of Mide, a Mon lunar date, which happens to fall this year on 12th February. Mon National day commemorates the inception of the Mon kingdom, Hongsawadie, founded in 825 A.D. by two brothers, Samala and Vimala, in what is now called Pegu, in Lower Burma. On this auspicious day, may all Mon people be blessed with physical and mental health. Mon Buddhism is still severely oppressed under the ruling of dictatorship, SPDC, and had been deprived of our fundamental rights, the rights of self-determination. On the another hand, now Mon people have limited land and small population. In 1974, general Ne Win shared a small land to recognize Mon State as for majority of Mon people residence in Mon State.²⁷

Conclusion

This research has examined the history of Mon Theravāda Buddhism in three periods: before Pagan, during Pagan and after Pagan. Strong evidence of the first historical events of Mon Buddhism in Myanmar can be found on the stone scriptures of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Later on Ramañña Nikāya was introduced and appeared in Mon Buddhism history since the third century B.C, when Sona and Uttara Theras preached Brahmajala Sutta in Thaton. Symbol created by Sona and Uttara Theras is the Manussasiha, the man-lion mythical creature.

²⁶ Mr Ashley South, **Mon Nationalism and civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake**, (U.S.A., Routledge, 2013). p. 37

²⁷ Interview with The Most Venerable Bhadanta, silācāra, (Aggamahāpaṇḍita), (Second level of Ramañña Nikāya Organization), Auk Pegu monastery, Mon State, November 10, 2017.

Over seven decades of internal conflict under the military regime, Mon Buddhist monks could not produce many scholars. Mon monks and novices hardly studied in the monasteries and abroad. Buddhism survives living with fear of freedom and without development under the military government through the country to reform in 2011. Under the New Mon State Party (NMSP), monks and lay people recovered Mon original Buddhism again in all Mon societies. But the military government still holds authority and limits the propagation of Buddhist literature in Mon language. Ramañña Nikāya Organization still cooperates and relies on the support of Mon Buddhist organization until the present day. Ramañña Nikāya Organization is establishing new buildings and a new Ramañña Rattha Buddhist University.

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