

Shan Polity in Burma: A Historical Prospective

Thongam Somola Devi

Research Associate, Centre for Myanmar Studies, Manipur University, India

Abstract

The present paper, which is exploratory in approach primarily, aims at studying Shan polity in Myanmar (Burma). The Shan were willingly or unwillingly migrated from their original homeland to different directions of mainland. Their migration was due to defeat in the war. Most of the Shan scatter inhabited in small endogamous village. They had development a long tradition of communal works. Shan political development was primarily concerned on pristine development through a different stage of human civilization and another development made by conquest or confederation.

The Shan princes strongly believed that their ancestors were linked with heavenly god. Their concept of divine origin was strengthened by the Buddhist idea of kingship.

KEYWORDS: Polity, Tai, Shan, Buddhist, Mong

The Tais are the largest and most widespread population in South East Asia. The extend of the distribution of the Tai race stretches from Brahmaputra valley in the west to Kwang –Tung province in China and from southern Yunnan in the north to Kara in Malay in South. It lies between the latitude 7 N to 26 N and longitude 94 E to 110 E. The Tai settlement is divided into western groups, Eastern groups, Southern groups, Central Mekong river groups and Central upland groups. The Tais are entitled to different names according to their various inhabited areas. The Tais are known as Laos in Laos, as Shan in Upper Burma, Yunnan Tai in the South China, Tribal Tai in northern Vietnam, Tais in Thailand, Ahom in Brahmaputra valley and Kabos in Manipur.

The geographical extend of the Shan States is 160,000square kilometers almost a quarter of the present Myanmar. The states are bordered by China and Tibet in the north Laos and Thailand to the east and Myanmar to the south and west. It extends approximately between latitude 20-24N and 9-10E longitude. During the olden days, the Shans settled an area covering what is now in Assam state of India, the southernpart of Yunnan, the Shan states of Burma and the northern part of Vietnam, in the area stretching for more than seven to eight thousand ‘li’ (mile) in length.

“Not only does the tradition assert that these Shans of Upper Burma are the oldest branch of the Tai family, but they are always spoken of by other branches as the Tai Long or Great Shans, while the other branches called themselves Tai Noi and Little Shan. “From the Nam Mao, the Shans spread south-east over the present Shan States, North into the present Hkamti region and west of the Irrawaddy River in all the country lying between it, the Chindwin and Assam”. In this region, many big and small of the Shan people settled and formed tribal union. From the Han Dynasties to the Tang and Song dynasties onward, the Shan-Tai ethnic group make close relation they also waged war for supremacy against the neighboring Funan and Zhenla of the

Mon-khmer language group, Annam of the Vietnamese language group. Their struggle continued upto the middle of the 18th Century AD.

According to E.R. Leach, the Shans are territorially scattered, but fairly uniform in culture. All Shan settlement area associated with rice cultivation. The Shan are scattered about in hill area at random. Settlement are always found associated with irrigated wet paddy land.

It is presumed that the Shans were either willingly or unwillingly migrated from their original homeland to different directions of mainland South East Asia and North East region of present India. Their migration were due to defeat in the war of supremacy amongst the different ethnic groups or defeat in the hands of superior powers, and search for anew areas where are found livelihood materials abundantly for expanding of their political frontier.

From time to time, the upland Tai muang (domain) would have essentially defended itself either militarily or diplomatically against neighbouring muang powers like rude hill people and China. They mainly fought to maintain law and order and to settle inter village conflict over the question of land or water right or cattle thefts. Soon after their advent in Shweli valley, the two brother like Hkun Lu and Hkun Lai quarreled the subject of precedence. Therefore, Hkun Lu left the country and he arrived after moving some miles at a place near the Uyu River a tributary of the Chindwin where he founded the city of Mong Kong Mong-Yawng. "Tradition and the statement of all the hitherto discovered chronicle assert that the Nam Mao or Shweli valley and its neighbourhood, Bhamo Mong Mit, Hsenwi were the first home of the Shans in Upper Burma'. In order to search virgin land, the Shans from the Nam Mao spread south east over the present Shan states, north into all the country between the Chindwin and Assam'.

There is a legendary account of the establishment of Western Shan States. That, the four brother namely Tho-Kaw-bwa, Thongan-bwa, Tho-kyan-bwa and Thohon-bwa founded their respective Bien or Ban (village). (Their mother was Chinese princes named Saw Hla and father was a white tiger found in the Shan region) The first son established Bein-Kawng and later this was changed to Mong Kawng-Mogaung. The second son founded Bein-Mit or Mongmit country. The third setup their respective countries like Bein-Yang and the fourth established Bein-Hso or Wyinghso or Wunho. Besides, different hordes of Shans also entered to the valley of Manipur in pre, proto and historical periods.

It is clearly mentioned in the Tai chronicles that the Tai commonly practiced the send of expedition and colonization to different far flung and neighbouring regions. However, in order to make fulfill his aim, he organized the men of his muang and send to make a military expedition under the leadership of one of his sons or brother. The conquered areas were brought under the control of the princes. Characteristically, sons might thus be sent out in order of their seniority, leaving the youngest son to succeed the kingdom of his father.

During the kingship of Sao Hso Hkan Hpa, Mao Shan Empire expanded widely. King sent his brother Sao Hsam Long Hpa to conquer more territory. He was able to set up number of the tributary states. Probably more Shan migration took place. King Hkun Lai was sure to send forth his descendents to administer the

neighbouring Kingdoms. These of the countries ruled by his descendents are given below.

- (1) Ai Hkun Luwang was the king of Lung Kung or Tuguang
- (2) Hkun Hpa was the king of Mong Yang (Mohnyin) He paid a tribute of ten lakhs horses.
- (3) Hkun Ngu or Khunju was the king of Lamung –Tai i.e. La Bong was Cheingmei. He paid a yearly tribute of three hundred.
- (4) Hkun Kawt Hpa was the king of Yon Long or Mong Yang. He paid yearly tribute a quantity of gold.
- (5) Hkun La was the king of Mong Kala or Kale. He paid water of the Chindwin river as tribute.
- (6) Hkun Hsa was the king of Ava and paid tribute yearly 2(two) viss rubies
- (7) Hkun Su was the king of Mong Yawn’.

Shukapha with some of followers including 8(eight) nobles and 9000 men, women and children left his mother country. He migrated westward and entered the present Assam where he defeated aboriginal tribes like Morans and Boharins. Thus, Shukapha established Ahom kingdom in 1228 A.D. usually, a large number of upland low-lying Tai agriculturist in northern fringe of the Khmer Empire during the 11th and 12th centuries. Of course, they were successful to set up smaller principalities namely Lannatai, Cheingsaen, Ngoengang, Puyao, Rad, Bangyang and Luwang Prabang. later on in 18th century AD. The combine forces of prince Khun Bang Klang Tao of Bang Yang and Khun Pa Mung of Rad defeated khemercommander at Sukhathai. Tyhus the first Tai kingdom of Sukhothai was founded under the kingship of Sri Indradit.

In a nut shell, the pattern of Shan political development was primarily concerned on the following line. One is pristine development through a different stages of human civilisation and another is secondary way development made by conquest or confederation. Since, the time immemorial, the Shans mostly dwelt scatterly in the sub-tropical river basins and plains of the Shan Plateau, which is drained by the Salween River. With the passage of time, the big and small Shan community or tribe came into exist. “According to the Shan chronicle, the heaven sent rulers and their descendents to organize the construction of towns and village, established boundaries between principalities and appointed honourable men as ministers and officials”.

Since the Shan society was more patrilineal connection than matrenial, father was regarded as the sole head of the family (Pu or paw Kruna). Usually, in a Shan society life involved around the family. The number of scatter Shan families were bound together (ban or been or waan). The establishment of the village led to exist the head of the village (Paw Ban or Pu Ge or Pu Gang) On the other, different Shan rulers were responsible to establish Shan villages. According to DK. Wyitt, “family was the base line of both socio- and political unit of the Thai”.

Generally, most of the Shan scatter inhabited in small endogamous village. They had development a long tradition of communal works. In Southern China and Indo-China peninsula, some groups of the Thai people still practiced their traditional custom of communal ownership of land. In the primitive stage of settlement, a single family enjoy a free holdership of land in which the group it belonged to occupy a certain common territorial and a number (a single family) was permitted to cultivate it

freely within the occupied territory, depending upon his labour ability. In due course, such system had developed into a commune ownership of the property (the land) and cooperative labour among the entire member”.

In the olden days, on the Shan plateau areas group of Shan families settled together. These definitely formed a tiny community. However, the community tended to grow into either hamlet or bigger village due to mainly increase of population. It was during the pre-Buddhist period that villagers, meeting attended compulsorily by every household was held at the premises of an elder to select village head (Paw Bean or Pu Gang). But such meeting was held either monastery or the house of the elders after adopting the Buddhism as state religion.

Decidedly, the Shan practice wet-rice cultivation in their permanent fields as their major occupation. Animal husbandry was adopted as secondary to agriculture. Besides the Shan villagers engaged various types of occupation such as weaving, carpentry, pottery, tool making, mining, paper making, silversmith, fishing etc. Normally, the average rice villages consisted of from 200-500 individual. Villages were located in river valleys or in pockets of level lands in the hills, always near water and frequently in the midst of a bamboo grove.

Probably, every villager was rightly counted as the subject of prince. The cultivators were liable to pay tribute to the muang or domain according to the number of rice fields and buffalo they possessed. It is possible to do that some village were subject to provide labour for the cultivable fields of the ruler while the other village were ready to supply household member consisting mhouts to look after the elephants, gardeners for the palace gardens and women to weave, embroider and maintain royal clothes. On the other hand, some privileged families were given hereditary rights to contribute their sons as palace guards.

Muang or Mong (Domain)

With the passage of time several big and small villages collectively emerged as muang or mong. A mong was governed by a hereditary chief named Sawbwa or Sao-hpa. It is recorded that as many as fifty muang were established in different parts of Shan state region. The rise of these muang varied from one state to another state. The smallest muang was Namtok measuring 14 square miles while the largest muang was Kentung which was 12,000 square miles. According to Susan Conway, “in a geographical sense muong means a territorial unit centered in a river valley. A muang ruler came primarily from a prominent local family who acceptable claims to sovereignty. In general a muang had one main city where the ruler lived possibly some smaller towns if it was a large muang and many great and small village society based on mutually beneficial relationships with people coming together for water management agricultural labour and trade, for defense and social interection”. In such a way primary or pristine Shan state emerged to the Upper Burma or Southern Yunnan in many years back.

‘There were many grades of native officials appointed by the princes of more powerful muang to collect tribute. These officials were liable to report to the princes at least once a year. Some are locally styled “Sao-hpa by the people although they have no right to the title. When this is the case, their ancestors were probably ruling chiefs, who in formed times were conquered, remaining subject to more powerful princes, but permitted to govern their districts on payments of yearly tribute’. Official

representative was appointed to watch over spirit guardians to protect and care important spirit shrines and get ready for seasonal festivals.

The Shan princes strongly believed that their ancestors were linked with heavenly gods. Their concept of divine origin was strengthened by the Buddhist idea of kingship. Probably, a Shan prince was customary to perform monkhood for a certain period before ascending to the throne. Since the adoption of Buddhism, the Shan princes paid more attention to the pious deeds relating to Buddhism in order to earn more prestigious or loyalty from the subjects. The word Chaofa or Saohpa (lord of the sky or heavenly lord of the sunset) was addressed to senior Shan prince. Usually, a prince who governed a small principality was frequently referred to as Chao or Saohpa was the final over his subject; but in a specific case, his clemency from senior Buddhist monks. Though, the law of primogeniture was maintained in Shan society the succession was often disputed as polygamy was practiced by the princes. With the occupation of Shan region by the Burmese, myosa (eaten of the town) who looked after the town area was appointed and they were authorized to collect taxes local affairs.

References:

Barua,. Gulap Chandra. 1985. Ahom Buranji From the earliest time to the end of Ahom Rule (Translated,ed). Spectrum Publication, Guwahat.

Collis, Maurice. (1996) Lords of the Sunset: A Tour in the Shan States. AVA Publishing House, Bangkok.

Conway, Susan. (2006) The Shan Culture, Art and Crafts. River Book Press Dist AC, Bangkok.

Lebar, F. M., Gerald C. and John K. Musgrave. (1964) Ethnic Group of Mainland South Asia. Human Relation Area Files, New Haven.

Leach, Edmund Ronald. (2008) Political system of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin Social Structure. ACLS Humanities E-Book, London.

Lufan, Chen. (1989) Whence came the Thai Race? An Enquiry.

Milne, Marry Lewis Haper., Mrs. Leslie Milne and Wilbur Cochrane. (1910) Shans at Home. John Murray, London.

Scott, J.George. and John Percy Hardiman. (2010) Gazetteer of upper Burma and Shan States in Five Volume Part I-Vol I. Kessinger Publishing, Rangoon.

Syamanda, Rong. (1981) History of Thailand. Bangkok.

Tilly, Harry L. 1903. Wood Carving of Burma. Superintendent of Government Printing and Stationary, Rangoon.

Wood W.A.R.(1933) History of Siam. T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London.

Wyatt, David K. (1984) Thailand: A Short History. Yale University, New Haven.

Yumio, Sakurai. (1987) Formation of Vietnam Village. Tokayo