

## INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
SHWEDAGON PAGODA	
THE SINGU MIN BELL	15
KING THARYARWADY'S BELL	33
SULE PAGODA	
THE BELLS OF SULE PAGODA	53
KODATKYI PAGODA	
THE TWO BELLS OF KODATKYI	69
NGADATKYI PAGODA	
THE NGADATKYI BELL	81
KYAIKKASAN PAGODA	
THE KYAIKKASAN BELLS	89
KYAIKWAING PAGODA	
THE KYAIKWAING BELLS	101
KYAIKKALO PAGODA	
THE KYAIKKALO BELL	113
GLOSSARY	121
Biography of Author	

Among several votive objects which Myanmar Buddhists dedicate to religion, bells are the most common offertories found at monuments and shrines throughout the country. Pious devotees donate to the Buddha statues and the pagodas flowers, perfume and incense for fragrance, lamps and candles for light and brightness, water for coolness and cleansing, paper flags, festoons and streamers for praying, and gold foil for beauty and brilliancy. Bells represent sound for they produce it. Sound in Pali is *sadda* and it is believed that *sadda dana*, or the giving of sound to religion, is an act of merit by which the giver will acquire a good voice in his or her next existence. According to the Jatakas, cranes and *karaweits* (mythical birds) are supposed to have a melodious cry. So it is customary for the donor of a bell to pray for the good voice of these birds in his next life.

Besides the sheer act of religious giving, bells have a religious function. Myanmar Buddhists feel religiously inclined to share out their deed of religious merit amongst all sentient beings. Performing the ceremony of pouring lustral water on to the ground to call upon the Earth God to stand witness to the religious deed which has just been done, verbal utterance by the donor of the word *a-hmya* (share my merit) three times, and immediate response by the audience present on the occasion by saying *sadhu* (well done) three times are activities which usually conclude any religious deed. But they are not the final acts. The religious deed must be announced to the four cardinal directions, even to the whole Universe. The donor strikes the nearby bell three times or more, announcing that he or she has done a religious deed and calling upon all sentient beings in the three planes-human, deva and *brahma*--upon hearing the sound of the bell to get their share of his or her merit.

There are two types of bells. One are those bells hung in the precincts of pagodas, monasteries and shrines, the other the little bells which are hung on the hti (umbrella) or spire of pagodas. The former are called *khaunglaungs* and the latter *seles*. *Khaunglaungs*, on being struck, produce a loud ringing sound while *seles* tinkle sweetly when swung by the breeze, producing a very pleasant sound, especially in the stillness of the

night. The bells described in this book are *khaunglaungs* or bell hung in the precincts of pagodas and not *seles*, the little bells hung on the *hti*.

My curiosity in bells has been aroused since my child-hood. My grandmother, who was a pious Buddhist and a generous donor, used to take me with her whenever she visited religious places, and she would ask me to strike the bell to announce the religious deed she had performed. As a child I liked striking the bell with a deer's horn as many times as I fancied. Grandma often told me that the letters inscribed on the bells were legends of the pagoda and a record of the donor's religious deeds. But I was not interested in reading them. I only enjoyed striking the bells and admiring the statuettes and figurines which adorned the hook and crown of the bells.

It was Mr. G.H.Luce, Professor Emeritus of Oriental Studies in Yangon University, who drew my attention to the historical importance of the inscription found so abundantly throughout the country. In the B.A. Honours class he lectured on some stone inscriptions of ancient Bagan, giving his interpretation and assessment. His lectures reminded me of the bell inscriptions I had seen in my childhood. I began casually reading a few lines on the bell whenever I visited a famous pagoda. But as my specialization was not ancient history, bells remained outside my field of study.

My contact with bells came again when in 1978 the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Culture produced an opera-like play presenting the story of the renowned Singu Min Bell hung in the northwest corner of the Shwedagon Pagoda platform. 1978 was an auspicious year marking the bicentenary of the Bell. I was then Director General of the Fine Arts Department, and, before the play was produced, I had to make a thorough study of the Bell, its inscription and its history. When the play was staged on Union Day, 12 February 1978, it made a great hit. But more rewarding than its operatic success was the birth of my enduring interest in bells.

During my professorship at the Department of History, University of Mandalay, in the period 1982-1987, I encouraged my M.A. students to write their theses on bell inscriptions. But unfortunately none of them could progress further than making copies of the inscriptions. Since 1978 I have

been writing off and on, in Myanmar and English, articles on bell inscriptions which were published in the dailies. During the years 1987-1989, while serving as Director General of the Archaeological Department, I compiled, with the assistance of epigraphists, copies of bell inscriptions from Mandalay, Bagan, Shwetaung, Pyay and Bago townships. But there are many bells in other towns, villages and ancient capitals which still remain unstudied. Like stone inscriptions, bell inscriptions are a primary source material of Myanmar history as they contain data on economic, social, political and cultural conditions of the time. They provide a virgin field of study for prospective scholars.

The present book contains my articles on the bells of Yangon which have appeared in the English language news-papers, *The Working People's Daily* and *The New Light of Myanmar*. The bells described are those in the precincts of the Shwedagon, the Sule, the Ngadatgyi and the Kodatgyi pagodas in downtown Yangon, and the Kyaikkasan, the Kyaikwaing and the Kyaikkalo pagodas in the outskirts. I have left out of consideration bells without inscriptions. Moreover, of the 28 bells on the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda, all of which bear inscriptions, I have dealt with only the two historic ones, the Singu Min Bell and King Tharyarwady's Bell, in this book. The remaining 26 are reserved for a separate treatment.

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