

## The Tai Of The Shan State

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Although the Shan State is geographically in Burma, the Shans are different in their origin and language from the other groups in that country. For example, the Mons and the Burmans are ancient immigrant races from the Tibetan Plateau, whereas the Shans, like the Tais and Laotians, are descended from the *Tais*. These were people from the independent region of Yunnan Province in south-west China at a time when some of the provinces existed as a separate entity from mainland China.

When taking the whole of Burma into consideration, the Shans make up about 10-15 percent of Burma's population with the majority occupying the Shan Plateau, in the eastern part of Burma. In their own language the Shans call themselves *Tai* or Tai Long and their country *Mong Tai* instead of Shan State.

The origin of the name Shan is not very clear, but has been discussed by many scholars. One of the hypotheses concerning the origin of the name Shan is that Shan, Siam and Assam had been derived from the word "Sian" ([Hsian](#), [Sein](#)), which designates a group of mountainous people who migrated down for Yunnan in the 6<sup>th</sup>. century AD. Another says that the Shan people were named after the "Mighty Shan", the Great Mountain Ranges of China from where they had migrated. A third hypothesis suggests that Shan is a corrupt word of Syam, a name given to Kshatriya ([warriors](#)) on duty of the Khmer empire in the early period of the Tai history. In fact, all peoples of Mon-Khmer language family call the Tai "Shan", "Shen", "Sham", or "Syam". However, all hypotheses lead to the names Shan and *Tai* as being one and the same race.

### Migration of the *Tai Long*

5 million people inhabited the Shan State ([Mong Tai](#)), the majority being the Shan or *Tai*. The early history of the area is hazy, though it appears that the first entry of the Shans into Burma took place in the 1<sup>st</sup>. century BC, when rebellions in Central China drove many people from that area to seek their fortune elsewhere. These people moved south into Burma and founded such ancient Shan cities as, Ta Gong, Mongnai, Hsenwi and Hsipaw.

The second migration took place in the 6<sup>th</sup>. century AD, when a great wave of migration of *Tai* (or *Sein*?), a mountainous race, descended from the mountain of Yunnan. They followed the *Nam Mao* River, now called Shweli River, to the south and settled in the valleys and regions surrounding the river in Upper Burma. This valley and neighbouring regions became the centre of Shan political power while the wave of migration spread south-east, followed the path already traversed by earlier *Tai* and spread over the present Shan Plateau (State). From here, some continued west into Thailand. A second branch went north, following the Brahmaputra River into Northern Assam. This was period when the Yunnanese *Tai* were coming under the attack from the mainstream Chinese and many made attempts to assert their independence. When this failed they migrated south to escape form China rule. Thus, the three groups of migrants, Assam, Siam and Shan, came to regard themselves as "Free People".

In the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup>. century AD. The Shan history in Burma is obscure and it is not clear what important significance the Kingdom of Nanchao played. There seems to be two conflicting views: the majority of authors think that Nanchao is a unified state of the *Tai* in Southern Yunnan and that it dominated Upper and much of the Lowland Burma in the 8<sup>th</sup>. and 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The second group holds the view that the *Tai* or Shans and Nanchao were two different entities. D.K. Wyatt in his book, "Thailand-A short History" argues that Nanchao leaders were not *Tais*, as they followed a linkage system, when choosing their names. This is unknown among the *Tai*, but common among the Lolo and other Tibeto-Burma group. Furthermore, the lists of words mentioned by Fan Ch'o were untraceable in the *Tai* language. No Shan, or other chronicle, mentions Nanchao or any of its rulers, but nineteenth century chiefs in Central Yunnan traced their ancestry back to Nanchao. (Some chronicles state that Nanchao, in the early period was not called Nanchao but "Laanzao" which means Land of a million Princes! --- "The Upper Burma and the Shan States Gazetteer" also mentioned that in the Kingdom of Nanchao the ruling Shan-Chinese Chiefs spoke Chinese, but the mass of the population were *Tais*)

Nevertheless, Nanchao was a major power in Northern and South-east Asia until it made peace with China in the 9<sup>th</sup>. century AD and then confined its military and political strategies to its heartland in south-western China.

In the 10<sup>th</sup>. and 11<sup>th</sup>. century, there is little doubt that a powerful *Tai* kingdom, the *Nam Mao Long Kingdom*, had been founded in the northern region of *Nam Mao* (now called [Shwe Li River](#)). It is believed that this was a branch of the "Tai Mao Kao" Kingdom founded in the 7<sup>th</sup>. century by the *Tai* of Yunnan. *Sao Hom Hpa* of the *Nam Mao* line was the ruler of the *Tai Nam Mao Long Kingdom* in Burma for 80 years until he died in 1104. During that period the *Tais* were the main rivals of the Burmans and Mons, when the three groups were struggling for dominance in Burma.

The *Tai* of Yunnan were still moving south and in the 12<sup>th</sup>. and 14<sup>th</sup>. century AD they came down in massive numbers into Burma. This influx of *Tai* population into Burma enhanced the man power of the *Tais* of the *Nam Mao long Dynasty* making it not only a major power in Burma but in South-east Asia.

The *Nam Mao Long Dynasty* reached its peak during the reign of *Hso Hkan Hpa*, one of twin brothers from *Hsenwi*. During his reign from 1220-1230, he more or less united all the *Tai* principalities and also marched to Kun-Ming to attack and defeat, the Chiense. Next, an army, led by his brother *Hkun Sam Hpa* alias *Hso Lung Hpa* was sent to attack and conquer Assam and, in 1229, founded the *Tai Ahom Dynasty*, one of the greatest achievements in the Shan history. *Hkun Sam Hpa* was later crowned King of *Mong Gong*. The *Mao Tais* continued to attack and bring under their control, neighbouring countries; Laos, Chieng Sen and Yonok country (Muang Joonok). In the same century the Mao King sent an expedition to raid the Burmese Pagan Empire and this coincided with the invasion of China by the Mongols under Kublai Khan. The first province to fall was the Province of Yunnan. Having established themselves in China, they invaded Burma in 1287 AD. This gave the *Tais* the opportunity to play a dominant role in Pagan. Three Shan brothers were in control of three chief towns round Kyaukse, an area irrigated for rice production, thus giving them a stranglehold over the city's food supply. From Yunnan the Mongols invaded Burma again in 1300 AD but from their fortifications at *Maensein* the three Shan brothers were able to resist all attacks. The last Mongol commander had accepted a bribe to lead his troops home, but was not accepted by his Chief in Yunnan and he was executed. The idea of holding Burma in subjection was

abandoned by the Mongols. This was a victory for the Shans and Pagan came under their rule: the Shans had become the dominant element in the social and political spheres of Pagan.

The *Mao Long Kingdom* maintained considerable power and prosperity until it was challenged by the Burmese King, Anawrahta, who regained much of the country, previously held by the *Mao Tais*. Some time later, the *Mao* power began to wane and no other Shan political power was great enough to take its place. In Upper Burma however, the Shan brothers, supported by the Mongols in Yunnan, still held considerable power. The youngest brother became the sole King of the area and he and his descendants ruled this part of Burma for about 250 years.

By the late 15<sup>th</sup>. century the Upper Irrawaddy valley was rapidly breaking up into small units. The successors of the Shan Brothers had adopted the culture and society of the people they ruled and had become more and more Burmanised by intermarrying with the old royal house of Pagan. They also adopted Burmese scripts and appointed Burmese Officers in their administration. They gradually became isolated from their kinsmen on the Shan Plateau. Nevertheless, Sagaing area, consisting of Singaling Hkamti and Hsawngsop, Wuntho and Kale, east of the Irrawaddy and Khamti Long, north of Myitkyina were autonomous and still retained *Sao Hpa* as their chiefs.

The *Tai Long* did not only establish their power in the lowland and upland of Burma Proper, but slowly, by following the rivers they infiltrated to all the river valleys of South-east Asia. Small groups, as well as setting amongst the Mons and Burmese, went as far as Cambodia and Vietnam. The majority made their homes in the Shan State and some went further west into Thailand and Laos. The *Tai* brought with them their centuries old civilisation, culture and socio-political organisation. Most of them were drawn to the lowlands, where they engaged in subsistence agriculture based on wet-rice cultivation. They reared domestic animals, such as poultry and pigs and used buffaloes and cattle for pulling simple ploughs to till the land. They hunted in the forest, fished in the stream and gathered mushrooms, shoots of bamboo and wild leafy vegetables from the woodlands. They traded with people from outside their own communities for salt, materials for clothing and metal tools.

Having settled in different geographical localities the *Tai* peoples have gone through different historical changes by adopting the cultures of those with whom they were permanently in contact. The *Tai Ahom*, by moving across the mountains to Assam and by gradually adopting the Indian culture of the region into which they had moved, are slowly losing their identity as *Tai*.

It was round about the 14<sup>th</sup>. century that the Siamese *Tai* properly established themselves on the great delta of the Menam River between Cambodia and the Mon country. Over the years they had interchanged some of their neighbouring countries. The seas surrounding the country also gave them the chance to trade, and come into contact, with various civilisations of the world. All these opportunities had contributed to the development of the present day Thais, making them ready to challenge and advance into the modern world.

In contrast, the *Tai Long* of the Shan State were only partially converted to the alien culture of the hill dwellers, and their neighbours, the Burmans and Mons. Also being inland, they had little opportunity to come in contact with the outside world, except for a few British Government officers, who would have had little to do with the ordinary people, and the Japanese during their brief occupation. Thus for the Shans their culture and political identity have changed very little from that of their ancestors.

In spite of the geographical distribution the *Tai* peoples seem to have preserved in their folk tales and tradition a sense of common origin, which is clearly seen in their language and culture. The language is monosyllabic and tonal: the meaning of each word varies according to the tone, "dah" for instance has five tones, each tone meaning a different thing. Dah a straight tone means [eyes](#); dah, a low tone means [for](#); dah; mid level tone means [box](#); dah: high level tone means to [apply \(make-up\)](#); dah. Falling tone means to [hope or guess](#). The *Tai* peoples still have many words in common and, although changes in dialect and accents over the years have contributed to their divergence, there still is some degree of mutual understanding among speakers of Thai, Yuon, Lao, Shan and Dtai in Yunnan and Southern China. Even the Ahom *Tai*, in spite of their isolation from other groups, call rice "*kao*", and the spirit of the rice field "*Phii naah*" the same as the rest of the group. They also retained the method of cooking rice in the hollow segment of a bamboo stick and used banana leaves to cook certain dishes; practices common among the Shans and certainly among other *Tai* groups.

### **The influence of Buddhism**

From the 6<sup>th</sup>. century AD onwards as Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent to South-east Asia and China, several forms of Buddhism were introduced to the Shans. Over the years Theravada Buddhism had begun to have a great impact on not only the ruling class, but also the ordinary villagers. It became integrated into their everyday life and culture. It became their religion and was adopted as the religion of every *Mongs* in the Shan State. Like the Burmans, the Shans adopted the Mon scripts, but Pali became the Holy Scripture containing Buddhist teachings and ethics that became the moral force and conscience of every individual. The five basic precepts of morality being to abstain from: taking life, stealing, sensuous misconduct, lying and taking any intoxicants likely to impair the mind. Behind the respect for the moral rules lies the awareness of the law of Karma, which awards good deeds and punishes evildoing in this life and in the next. Enlightened self-interest, therefore, should prompt us to lead good lives.

Besides the above basic precepts, all Buddhists should live by certain code of practice written in the "Yareyassa Vinaye" or the "Noble Discipline". This applies to the relationship between: parents and children, teacher and pupil, husband and wife, friends, relatives and neighbours, employers and employees and the ruler and his subjects.

Parents should give good examples to their children and do their best for their physical and moral development; in return, children should respect and look after them in their old age.

A pupil must be obedient and treat his teacher with respect, while a teacher's duty is to provide his pupil with proper education and training.

A love between husband and wife is sacred, and both should be faithful, respectful and devoted to each other.

Friends, relatives and neighbors should be tolerant, generous and hospitable to one another. A master or employer has several obligations towards his servant or employee: he should be considerate, fair and just; the employee diligent, earnest and honest in his work.

Buddhism lays great stress on the spiritual and moral development of a society. For a country to be happy it must have a just government: the ruler's primary consideration should be that of his people, and should work in harmony with them. He should also be liberal, generous, charitable, tolerant and understanding. He must practise non-violence towards everybody and promote peace and prevent war.

Although the Shans continued to worship and pay respects to *Phii Sao Mong*, *Phii Naah* and such others they were not fanatic worshippers: the majority of them were staunch Buddhists and very loyal to their religion. The Christian missionaries who later came to the Shan State as they had other South-East Asian countries, were relatively successful in converting the hill ethnic groups to Christianity, but had failed to do so with the Shans.

### **Formation of *Waan and Mongs***

The Shan Plateau, which is more than 3,000 feet above sea-level, lies between the Irrawaddy and the Salween Rivers. It is an area of 57,816 square miles, a land of forests, rolling downs and mountain ranges with a temperate climate and an ideal rainfall. When the *Tai* arrived on the plateau, they found that they were not the only inhabitants in the country: there were other ethnic groups: the Was, Palaungs and Daungsu or Pa-O in Northern and Southern Shan States, Tai Neir, Lui, Lisu and Kaw in Kengtung and states along the Chinese border. Most of these were hill-dwellers by nature, who seemed to believe that they could not live in areas below the height of 5,000 feet, and so occupied the mountainous or hilly regions surrounding the Central Lowland. Having discovered that the lowland area was ideal for wet-rice cultivation, the *Tai* readily adopted it as their home.

On the Shan Plateau, groups of *Tai* families settled together forming a small community. The community grew into a village called *Waan* or *Baan*. Until recent times, villages surrounded by rice fields were to be found dotted along the river valleys. Several villages collectively became a principality or state.

Thus, steadily the *Tai* established an abundance of states, which they called *Mongs* in the Shan State. These varied in size and importance: the smallest *Namtok* measuring 14 square miles and inhabited by only a few hundred farmers scattered in a few villages and the largest *Mong* is Kengtung, which is 12,000 square miles. Temples and Pagodas or *Chaung Payaa* were built in towns and large villages, and gradually schools headed by monks came into existence. According to Buddha Gautama all monks should not only develop their own spiritual knowledge and intelligence, but also dedicate to the service of others. Thus, basic education for literacy and religious knowledge became one of the primary functions of the monks. They represented part of the institution in the lives of the people and were treated with great and respect.

The monasteries and pagodas in both the towns and villages were the centre of religious and social activities. Numerous ceremonies, including offerings to monks were performed as a thanks-giving to celebrate happy and memorable occasions. People and monks also gathered together in times of bereavement to say prayers for the dead.

### **The *Sao Hpas* and their *Mongs***

The *Tai's* social organization which was feudal, existed in the Shan State until 1958. A *Mong* was looked after by a hereditary chief, called *Sao Hpa*, meaning "Lord of the Sky" (Lord of Heaven). Around the 16<sup>th</sup>. century the Shan *Sao Hpas* lost their power in Central Burma, and the Chinese claimed supremacy over both Burma and the Shan States.

After the death of the Burmese King, Alaungpaya, in 1752 China and Burma were continually at war and the *Sao Hpas* and their *Mongs* in the Shan States were caught in the middle. After failing in its 4<sup>th</sup>. invasion, China sued for peace. They blamed the intrigues on the *Sao Hpas* of *Hsenwi*, *Mong Gong*, *Baan Mu* and *Mong Hung* and proposed that they, the *Sao Hpas* would have to yield to the Burmese in exchange for the release of their officers, whom the Burmese had captured during the wars. Thus, some of the *Sao Hpas* came under the protection of the Burmese. No chronicle clearly defines what power, if any the Burmans had over the *Sao Hpas*, but in spite of threat from the Chinese and pressure from the Burmese Kingdom, the *Sao Hpas* managed to retain their autonomy and a large degree of their sovereignty in the Shan States.

During this period Burma also declared war on Siam and thereafter were forever in conflict. Here, again, the Shan *Mongs*, Kengtung and those along the Shan States and Siam borders were caught in the middle-subjected to which ever was the stronger.

But during the late nineteenth century AD, the British and the French were rivals in controlling South-east Asia. Lower Burma or Burma Proper had already been conquered by the British, while the French held Laos. In between these two countries were the undeveloped and wild country, the Shan States. In order to have efficient control of this buffer zone between them and the French, the British extended their conquest over this area. They also wanted to have an accessible trade route to China as it had been reported by the East India Company that, from the Shan States, very profitable trade with China could be achieved.

During the British annexation of the Shan States, the French, British India and Imperial China of the Ching Dynasty signed a treaty. Britain proposed to limit her frontier to the Mekong by transferring Keng Hung and Mong Lem to China, and Keng Cheng (Chiang Khaang) with its capital, Mong Sing to Thailand. However, the French did not approve and, after many disputes which nearly brought the British and the French to the brink of war, Mong Sing was given to the French. In the Lao/Burma treaty in 1896, the British and the French agreed to leave the Mekong as the boundary between the two countries. They also acknowledged a defacto political constitution and legal distinction between the Kingdom of Burma, with its capital at Mandalay and all the "greater Shan States. Thus, the geographical boundaries of North-east Burma are one of the results of the 1896 agreement between the French and the British.

Burma Proper, also called Central Burma, where the majority of the populations were Burmans, was incorporated with British India, under the direct rule of the British. The Shan States together with other "Hill States" were under indirect rule.

In the pre-British days, the *Sao Hpas* and their *Mongs* stretched from Sipsaung Panna in Yunnan, covering the whole of the Shan Plateau, Northern Thailand and Lao, without the present international boundaries. There was no network of communications linking *Sao Hpas* and, although they were independent of one another, there was some kinship between them. This, perhaps was due to the fact that the princes and princesses of the *Sao Hpa* families inter-married. But, this did not mean that they had always lived in peace with one another: because there had been frequent conflicts and quarrels between the different *Mongs*, often encouraged

and fuelled by the Burmans. Nevertheless, they were united against any common foe on their border, as demonstrated in 1289 when the Mongols invaded Burma.

King Mangrai was a *Tai*, who in the 12<sup>th</sup>. century, united all the states in the east of the present Shan State: Chiang Tung (Kengtung), Chiang Suun, Chiang Hkam, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Chiang Saan ([Chieng Sein](#)) etc., and together with the Shan Brothers fend off their common enemy.

The political and geographical situation of the Shan States changed in 1886 when Burma became a British colony. The Shan States with other "Hill States" were allowed to remain autonomous, which meant that, in the Shan States, the *Sao Hpas* would still rule over their states or *Mongs*. The British Government respected and recognised authority of the Shan *Sao Hpas*; they were treated somewhat like the Rajahs of India. Very few changes were made, and none were forced on them: small states were absorbed into bigger ones, old states dismantled and new ones formed, making approximately 33 states. In 1922, these 33 states or *Mongs* were united to form one body, The Federated Shan States".

The British Government form its Central Office, a kind of mini White hall, in Taunggyi, the capital town of the Federated Shan States, appointed a British Commissioner and six Superintendents to assist him. Each Superintendent liaised between Central Office and the *Sao Hpa* of his region. Reporting to the Commissioner were officers in charge of forestry, agriculture, education, health, transport, the environment and police, and they too worked closely with the *Sao Hpas*. Members of the Central Government and the thirty-three *Sao Hpa* formed a governing body for the whole of the Shan State – the Shan State Council.

Each *Sao Hpa* administered his own state or *Mong* with the aid of a prime minister, departmental ministers, a state judge and other departmental officers. A *Sao Hpa's* salary was dependent on a fixed fraction of the state revenue. Thus, a *Sao Hpa* with a bigger and more prosperous state earned a salary higher than one with a smaller and less prosperous one. About thirty-five per cent of the revenue was contributed to the Central Government and the rest was used for state administration.

A *Mong* or state had a town or towns called *Weing* and a number of villages called *Waan*; the main town or *Weing* in each state carrying the same name as the *Mong*. Each village was overseen by a *Heing*, a Village Headman appointed, by the *Sao Hpa*. Smaller villages, instead of a *Heing* had a *Ching Kang*. A *Ching Kang* could also act as an aid to a *Heing*. In large villages many elders, *Bu Hoe Wann* or *Khone Long Waan* would also be appointed by villagers to act as their representative or member of a village council.

The *Sao Hpa's* system of government might have appeared feudalistic to some foreigners, but the *Sao Hpa* were just leaders of their own people and, like the leaders of many other countries, were not above the laws of the land: a corrupt *Sao Hpa*, who accepted bribes or mishandled state money would have his title and power striped from him and, would have faced imprisonment.

## **Law and Order**

Prior to the British Administration in the Shan States each *Sao Hpa* built up his own administration for tax revenues and setting legal complaints, and he and his ministers upheld

the law of his state. Each state had its own laws, which were based on the moral concept and ethics of Buddhism.

During the British Administration, the Civil, Criminal and Revenue administration of every state were the responsibility of the Central Government. But, the law to be administered in each state was the customary law of that state provided that it was just and practised with a clear conscience and was not contradictory to the laws of British India. The powers of a High Court for the Shan State except those concerning European British subjects, was transferred in part to the Commissioner.

As the Shans believed in Karma, the *Sao Hpa* and their descendants were regarded as having been born into a privileged position in society and were treated as royalty. The *Sao Hpa* was loved and revered by his people and expected to guide and advise them. His wife, the *Mahadevi* or *Sao Nang Mong* was regarded as the matriarch of the land and his sons and daughters as princes and princesses. The *Sao Hpa* and his subjects, the Shan people and the ethnic hill dwellers, had great respect and trust for one another. For this reason, they were able to create a stable, united and peaceful society that had endured for decades. This system of political organisation was not as one-sided as it may seem. The relationship was advantageous to both the *Sao Hpa* and the people: the *Sao Hpa* relied on the people for manpower and their loyalty and the people in return for his protection and leadership. Under the *Sao Hpas*, the Shan peoples enjoyed considerable freedom: they had the right to own properties and lands, and to choose their own religion and place to live.

The *Sao Hpa* had the power to select his officers as he pleased. Traditionally, the *Sao Hpa* would declare the eldest son as his heir or *Kemmong* to succeed him as a ruler. After his education and training he would be given a position in the office to allow him to gain experience in administration and personal relationship with the people, upon whom depended the stability of the state.

As the older generations of *Sao Hpa* practised polygamy, the line of succession was not always straight forward. The eldest son of the chief or *Mahadevi*, was considered superior to a son of any other wife, but there were instances, in which the son of a lesser wife was declared heir, because the natural successor was incompetent or his conduct was unsuitable. In such circumstances, conflicts and jealousy would have arisen between brothers. The brother who was a natural successor, would try to remove his stepbrother, and sometimes by resorting to criminal acts.

Adopted sons would not have the right to title of succession unless they were connected to the ruling family. Shan public opinion was strongly in favour of the ruler being member of the ruling family.

Traditionally, rulers of states were strictly male, but in 1905, when the ruler of Chieng Hkam died leaving a minor, Princess Tiptila, the mother of the boy, administered the state until her son was old enough to rule. Being a woman of great force and character, she ruled successfully. Unfortunately, the son was later deposed for gross misconduct.

In some states, hereditary nobles existed in families, whose ancestors had received lands as grants from the *Sao Hpa* for services rendered or for other reasons. The position of a *Sao Hpa* his people was absolute; rank and consideration depended upon his judgement.



## **Jobs, Land and Property**

Among the Shans there was an enormous gap in wealth and education between the elite and the ordinary people. There were only a few of the latter who were educated enough to be employed as teachers, nurses, engineers and other professions. Cottage industries in weaving silk materials for skirts and bags, potteries, jewellery, silver and lacquerwares and Shan paper existed but only on a small scale and most were poorly organised. The Shans of the past were reputed to have been good traders, travelling to Lower Burma and Northern Siam with goods such as, agricultural produces as well as semiprecious stones.

In the villages the majority of the population depended on the land for their livelihood. Until after World War II land was plentiful for everyone, subject to the claimant being able to farm it. It was often communal and held on, what were in effect, squatter's right. Later, as population grew, when land was required for building or farming purposes the citizens had to apply for permission directly or through their *Heing* to the State Office. Permission was still granted without much difficulty as vacant land was still in good supply.

In the Shan State, part of the land was used for fixed agriculture, often including plants of temperate latitude, such as fruits like oranges, pineapples, soya, sesame, groundnuts and sugarcane, and market gardening. Tea and coffee were cultivated on the hill slopes and Tung trees along the Chinese border.

The outermost area of the Shan Plateau is occupied by mountains, where a few Shans lived with ethnic races. Here, slash-and-burn farming was practised, until just before World War II when this was discouraged by the Central and *Sao Hpa* governments. Opium was legally grown east of the Salween on mountain slopes or in small stream valleys well above 3000ft. Part of the crop was bought up by the Government at certain rates, which varied from year to year. During the Burmese Military regime the production of opium went out of control causing world-wide problems and sullyng the reputation of the Shan people.

Dry-rice cultivation called *Hai*, was practised on terraces along the hill slopes or at the foot of mountain ranges. Here potato-tubers were also cultivated under mounds of mud. However, most of the central lowland areas were used for wet rice cultivation, which was, as in other *Tai* areas, an integral part of Shan culture. Following migration, the Shans had lived within the vicinity of the river basins, rich in alluvial soil and watered by brooks and rivers. They had converted virgin soil into productive and usable farm lands.

Walled in by mountain ranges, the Nam Khong or Salween River rises at the foot of Himalayas and, in the Shan State, rushes down from north to south the whole length of the country. Unlike in any other countries, here in the Shan State, the Nam Khong receives many tributaries some of which were as long as 300 miles: the main ones being the Nam Pang, Nam Ping, Nam Teng, Nam Pawn, Nam Lwe and Nam Kha. Besides these, the tributaries of the Irrawaddy the Nam Tu and Zawgyi rise in the hill swamp east of Hsenwi and flow through Hsipaw valleys. These tributaries of the Nam Khong and Irrawaddy fed the basin of the alleys especially those of the "Rice Bowl" in Central Shan State. Unlike the Irrawaddy, the Salween and its tributaries cannot be used for navigation, because of the swift currents and rapids. However, many of them, if properly planned, could easily be used to produce hydroelectric power or a useful and intensive irrigation system. The Salween is to the Shan State as the Nile is to Egypt: humans and animals depend on it for their existence. The terrain of the Shan State had enormous scope for both agriculture and population development.

There has been nobody who has undertaken a scientific study on the irrigation of the paddy fields in the Shan State. According to my knowledge there has been no intensive or controlled irrigation system. The wet-rice farmers took advantage of the natural flow of the rivers and their tributaries. Several streams combined to give a powerful flow of water, often carrying with it calcareous tufa, which formed natural dams. Later, the streams would break the dams and the water would take a different course, resulting in the formation of small streams and brooks. The rainfall and the river tributaries provided sufficient water to irrigate the paddy fields. The farmers used the knowledge, passed down to them by their forefathers to build temporary weirs and dams with wooden shutters to regulate the flow of incoming or the draining of excess water. On slightly-sloped areas, the streams were diverted into little channels to flood the fields to a depth of a foot. The water and the soil were retained in each small plot of field by turf walls containing holes to let water in. These were blocked, when the plot had been filled to the required depth.

The paddy fields or *Naahs*, were made up of rectangular plots of land, approximately a quarter of an acre, called *lock*. An average family owned a *Tung* which is equal to 10 *Locks*. Not all farmer owned *Naahs*, but rented them from landlords with an agreement to share a certain percentage of the harvest, which was usually 50 percent.

Beside the rivers and their tributaries there were also small streams formed by natural springs. In most houses there were no convenient running water systems so the inhabitants used this stream for bathing, swimming, washing clothes and other domestic purposes. For uses in the home, the women would fetch water from the same stream in large pots balanced on their heads. Drinking water was carried from wells, normally situated in the monastery compounds. Larger quantities were fetched in barrels on bullock carts driven by the men folks or lads.

There was no law to govern the usage of water, but had a dispute arisen it would have been settled, as were all the others, by the *Heing* and his Village Council, elected wise men or village-elders.

## **Division of Labour**

The Shans had a long tradition of voluntary communal work. Planting and harvesting were communally-organised among small holders, sometimes with additional hired hands. They would meet and organise the various jobs. There was no strict division of labour between the sexes, but the male usually did the more strenuous jobs like ploughing and harrowing the fields, while transplanting of rice shoots from the nurseries to the fields was left mostly to the women. In transplanting the women would work from morning till dusk with a lunch break in between. Once a field was completed they would move on to the next and so on, until all the fields were completed. Transplanting was a backbreaking job in rather unpleasant circumstances: in slippery, muddy fields with so many crabs and leeches, but those who were familiar with the job seemed to enjoy themselves, laughing and singing as they planted. Harvesting and thrashing were a combined job of both sexes. In other quarters, as in farming the men did the more strenuous outdoor jobs, cutting wood, fencing or driving bullock carts and, the women household domestic chores.

As wet-rice farming was insufficient subsistence for their livelihood, during the lax period both men and women had to seek part-time jobs elsewhere. Some of the young men and women would travel to the towns or *Weings* or to the markets to sell fruit and vegetables from

their small market gardening. A few women would try to earn money by making cakes and other food stuffs to sell or some would weave bags, material for skirts, baskets and mats. A market took place every five days in *Weing* and large *Waans* on a rotation basis.

Related to the wet-rice farming was the cattle breeding. Buffaloes and bullocks were used as draught animals, buffaloes for ploughing the fields and bullocks for drawing carts. Taking care of the cattle was usually the responsibility of the young lads, who would in the mornings take them to graze on the rice fields during the non-rice growing season, thus naturally fertilising the soil. In the evening the cattle would be driven home again.

The Shans had the right to own land and property and were able to enjoy a household or trade houses or land with one another.

The Shan women, although they did not have full equal rights with men, enjoyed relatively high social standing and the opinions, which they were free to voice, were valued. The young people were given the freedom to choose their own marital partners, but it was considered undignified for a young girl to be too forward. It was the boy who should do the chasing by gentle and artful courting. Customarily, the boy's parents would present their future daughter-in-law with gifts of money and jewellery.

By tradition the Shan women do not have the same rights of inheritance of land and property as men, but there were no strict written rules, and daughters and sons, increasingly in modern times, have received equal shares.

### **The *Tai* Society**

In a Shan society, life revolved around the family, the Buddhist festivals and the rhythm of the season. At least twice a year people from the town and nearby villages gathered together in prayers, celebrations and fun. Like other Buddhists, the Shan celebrated the Buddhist New Year in April in the form of water festival. The significance of it was to use water to wash away the old together with its bad luck and sadness and anoint the New Year.

The young people, mostly maidens in suitable clothing, each carrying a pot of water, well balance on their heads, went round the town, stopping firstly at the *Sao Hpa's* Palace. The *Sao Hpa* and his *Mahadevi* would move to the veranda where the girls would anoint them with perfumed water. In return the *Sao Hpa* and his wife would thank them and wish them luck and prosperity in the New Year. This was the point, at which the real fun started for the young people: in the yard every body would joined in, throwing and splashing water until completely drenched.

The next morning before the full moon, the *Sao Hpa*, his family and the people would gather at a chosen monastery and say prayers in front of Buddhist monks. This was usually followed by feasting.

Another important celebration in the Buddhist calendar is the "Light festival" which takes place in October to celebrate the return of Buddha Gautama to earth after visiting "Deva". According to legend, as he descended his route had been so brightly illuminated that it flooded the whole universe. Since that time the tradition is for lights of all kinds to be set alight in places of worship and houses to commemorate that occasion. The *Sao Hpa* and his

family, the whole town and nearby villages would then gather at the pagoda or monastery to say prayers. On the eve of the prayer meeting there would be great rejoicing. A long carnival led by young girls and women in their brightly-coloured costumes, carrying lighted candles paraded the town. The boys and men would follow with lanterns. There were floats of young people singing and dancing, followed by the animals: the horses, the yaks, the monkeys and the elephants. There were also Shan sword dancers, accompanied by gongs and cymbals.

Besides religious celebrations a pwe of festival was held in each of five chosen villages at different times of the year. The festival usually lasted for ten days, during which the *Sao Hpa* with his family honoured the villagers with their presence and his house and his time were made available to those, who wished to call and discuss village or personal matters. This developed better relationship and communication between the ruler and his subjects. At the same time, town folks and villagers gathered together to enjoy themselves and to be entertained by actors and actresses, who performed dances, songs, concerts and plays. This was funded by gambling licensees, who were mostly Chinese.

At other times of the year the *Sao Hpa's* Residence would also serve as the centre for the gathering of all the Village Headmen, when they came to pay their respects to their ruler and discuss village affairs with him.

## **World War II and After (1943 – present)**

In 1943, the Shan States like all South-east Asian countries came under Japanese rule. It was a common knowledge that the Japanese had promised some Burmese politicians that Burma would be given independence, when Japan won the war. They were also to be given the Shan States, apart from Kengtung and states east of the Salween River, which had already been promised to Thailand. This did not happen: Burma gained independence in name only and the Shan States was allowed to remain autonomous, with the *Sao Hpas* still in power. The Burmese desire to rule over the Shan States had therefore, failed to materialise.

In 1947, after the British returned to Burma, Bogyoke Aungsan, a prominent Burman political leader persuaded the Shan *Sao Hpas* and other "Hill State leaders to unite their countries with Burma Proper also known as Central Burma to form the Union of Burma. Once united, he claimed, they would have a better chance of gaining independence from the British Government.

For the first time in the history of the Shan State, the *Sao Hpas* had come into direct contact with Burmese politicians and were faced with the most important decision of their lives. The *Sao Hpas* were naïve or even ignorant in the game of mainstream politics. During the past sixty years or more, although they had enjoyed the privileges of autonomy, the present generation of *Sao Hpas* had also received protection and advice from the British government. Even the Japanese, in spite of their peculiar system of government, had respected the *Sao Hpas* and had refrained from making changes.

Before World War II, the Shan had been content to be ruled by the *Sao Hpas* and the *Sao Hpas* by the British. After the war things had changed. The *Sao Hpas* found themselves having to deal with activists in their own states, some were anti- *Sao Hpas* and others anti-British. Their demonstration though not violent, were beginning to put pressure on the *Sao*

*Hpas* and, most probably, this was one, if not the main, reason why the *Sao Hpas* had decided that times were changing and they had to follow the wishes of the people. Perhaps it really was time for the Shan States to be totally independent of the British.

Thus, at Panglong, a village near the capital town of the Shan States, the *Sao Hpas* held a conference and met with Bogyoke Aungmye and his colleagues. It was there, in February, 1947 that they signed the "Panglong Agreement":

"The Shan States would become part of the Union of Burma

The Union of Burma was to be one country of several states, each state with its own system of autonomous government and, with its representative to the Constituent Assembly of Burma, according to the principles of democracy".

The Agreement writes (Article 7): "Citizens of the Frontier Areas shall enjoy rights and privileges which are regarded as fundamental in democratic countries. The Association with Burma should have been on Federal basis with equal rights and status, full internal autonomy of the Shan States. The present *Sao Hpas* would be life members of parliament, but their descendants would have to be elected by the people to become members.

"The Panglong Agreement was binding for ten years. After these ten years, if leaders of the Shans felt that the Union had failed the Shan State would be free to secede".

Five months after the "Panglong Agreement", Bogyoke Aungmye and six of his colleagues were assassinated by a rival political party. However, the amalgamation of states went ahead and an election was held. The Burmese AFPFL, with U Nu as its leader was elected to govern the country. The Union of Burma gained its independence from the British in January, 1948.

The *Sao Hpas* as promised in the "Panglong Agreement" had become members of parliament. For the first few years of independence, working with the U Nu Government, things went quite smoothly for them: they were treated with diplomacy and Sao Shwe Thaik, the *Sao Hpa* of Yawnghe was made the first President of the Union of Burma.

After sometime, although U Nu was in control, he was having trouble with other Burmese political parties, led by communists. In 1956 and 1957 there was more serious problem for the U Nu Government. The Chiang Kai Shek's KMT forces, who had been driven out of Communist China, were trying to make their way into Northern Shan State from Yunnan. There were rumours, that fearing foreign invasion, U Nu was willing to let the military take over power for an interim period. Military rule was not what the *Sao Hpas* had agreed to and, probably for the first time, they seriously considered leaving the Union. By 1957 the Shan State had been in the Union for ten years and, according to the agreement, they were able to secede.

In 1958 the military led by General Ne Win, one of the world's worst tyrants took over power. One in power, the main aim of General Ne Win and his dictator colleagues was to prevent the secession of the Shan State. The *Sao Hpas* could not be given this choice if the Shan State was to be kept under Burmese (Burmans) domination. They had to be removed, if the population was to be swayed in favour of staying in the Union. In 1958 the *Sao Hpas* acceded to the "demand" of the military dictators. They had to relinquish their power and hereditary rights. This was the turning point, when Burma became a land without parliamentary democracy, where the rule of force had to be obeyed.

The soldiers ransacked every household in the Shan State and confiscated every weapon. No mercy was shown to anyone, who offered any resistance or who spoke against the regime.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1962, the army stormed the Government Building, where parliament was in session and, at gun point, arrested and put in prison the President, the Prime Minister and his cabinet, the *Sao Hpas* and many of their relatives. Some of the prisoners died in prison under suspicious circumstances some disappeared and those *Sao Hpas* who were released in 1968 were not allowed to return to their own states and people. Their homes and properties had been confiscated or destroyed.

Under this tyrannical military regime, whose policy is to eliminate minority races, atrocities abound. Young girls are gang-raped and then shot or beheaded. Others, men and women alike, are subjected to other forms of violence: extrajudicial killings, torture and looting until they are driven to flee. Unfortunately, they do not find welcome or solace in these neighboring countries: they are either forcibly made to return or allowed to remain as cheap labour or prostitutes.

Since, 1962, the military has priority over supplies of rice, cooking oil, salt and other essential commodities. As a result, more than 80 per cent of Shan people are facing destitute and malnutrition. Land has been confiscated: during the last few years 300,000 Shan peasants from hundreds of villages, who had always gained their livelihood from the land were forced at gun point to relocate from their fertile land to strategic sites, which could be closely watched in case they should give assistance to freedom fighters.

After forty years of suffering, the life of the majority of the Shans (*Tai*) is reduced to a struggle to survive, sometimes, with not even a shelter over their heads. In the former Shan States (*Mong Tai*), unlike other underdeveloped countries, they had never been famine. Since the Burmese army illegally overran the country many are suffering from malnutrition, and the children of this hitherto-proud people, are begging by the roadside.

The future of the Shan people, especially the peasants is very grim. They are confronted with confusion, fear and a feeling of great loss: they were without leaders, and many of them have lost fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, other relatives and friends. Lastly, but not least, they have lost their beloved land and thus, have no means to earn a livelihood. Their traditional heritage and way of life is completely destroyed.

The Shan State has now been under the military rule for nearly half a century and there is no sign of them ever relinquishing their power. The people continue to suffer from horrific human right violations and the countryside is facing complete destruction. It will be a very long time, if ever, before peace and dignity return to the Shan people and their beloved land.

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