From Rangoon College to University of Yangon – 1876 to 1920

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Introduction

2020 marks the centenary of the foundation of Yangon University. It is expected to be celebrated in grand style, as much or more than the 50th and 75th anniversaries in 1970 and 1995. For the 50th anniversary a huge 3-volume Memorial edition of memories and reminiscences by former teachers and students was published, and the Diamond Jubilee in 1995 was marked with the construction of Diamond Jubilee Hall in the University campus (Yen Saning, 2013). The university has a turbulent history, not only because of many years' closure under the military government and strictly limited access to the premises, but because the very month of its foundation provoked conflicts in the shape of student protests and a lasting boycott that are seen as defining for the struggle for national self-determination.

In this article, I look at the early days of colonial education planning and preparations for the establishment of the university which tell us much about colonial ideology and education objectives as well as how these were negotiated and undermined by the ruled.

Rangoon University was established fairly late, in the twilight of empire, so to speak. Universities in India - Calcutta and Madras - had been founded already in 1857, at the height of British imperial power and national self-confidence: The 'Indian Mutiny' had been successfully crushed, the British government had taken over from the EIC, and the British Raj was born. 1877 Queen Victoria became Empress of India. Educational institutions in Rangoon were affiliated to Calcutta university from the 1880s.

By 1920 the situation had changed decisively. In contrast to the decades before, a separate university for Rangoon was now thought advisable, detached from Calcutta and particularly Bengal, which were seen as a hotbed of anti-British rebellion and sedition (Nyi Nyi, 1964: 12).

It was not altogether easy to find literature on the development of the university. Student activism and student protests, both in pre- and post-colonial times are comparatively better covered, less so the events that led to the foundation of the university. But

these are particularly interesting to analyse British colonial and education policy. There are the felicitation volumes, some short studies and a few publications from the 30s (Pearn, 1939; Peacock, 1934: 283-284; Aye Kyaw, 1993). Maung Htin Aung, the first rector of Rangoon University after independence, has some remarks about the student boycott of 1920 in his History of Burma (Maung Htin Aung, 1967), and Alicia Turner (2014) looks at the significance of the student boycott. Boshier (2018) discusses the connections between BRS and Rangoon University. After the university reopened in 2012/2013, a number of articles about it appeared in Myanmar newspapers and on the web (Maung Thet Pyin, 2018).

I shall look not so much at the Yangon University of the present, but at its antecedents to trace the pre-history of the University. Efforts by both English and Burmese intellectuals combined to bring it into existence, an event welcomed by students and educated citizens, but at the same time leading straightaway to conflict and boycott, a defining event for the anti-colonial struggle. I look at the significance of education both generally and in a colonial context. But first, a short description of the campus as it presents itself nowadays, still much the same as that constructed between the wars.

In lieu of a frontispiece: The campus (Yangon University 2019)[1]

> "Maung Thet Pyin, who now has passed his mid 60s, would love to see his Alma Mater turn 100 in 2020, which is just a couple of years away. May be he would be one of the more fortunate alumni to be able to participate both the 50th and 100th anniversaries. But that would be moving too much ahead." (Maung Thet Pyin, 2019)

"Yangon University is one of the most complex and contested spaces in Yangon, one of immeasurable political importance for the history of the city. It is where successive generations of the country's brightest minds have come together to imagine a better future for themselves and their peers. For that reason, it was also the theatre of many moments of upheaval during Myanmar's fraught 20th century." (Yangon University, 2019)

The campus is typical for British-built university campuses from the late 19th and early 20th centuries: It resembles the British red brick universities, less the small university towns in England or the earlier Indian (1857) universities which had imposing grounds, but were - and are - dispersed over a larger area. University Madras, e.g. dominates a large stretch of the waterfront in Chepauk, Chennai. In a way, these universities may be compared to 'total institutions' or a 'gated community', secluded and secure, but also isolated. This shows clearly in the guard houses and barriers at the main entrance,

1 Information for this and the following paras is also taken from personal observations.

with the difference that entrance and exit are less controlled.[2] Certainly nowadays nobody checks who enters and leaves the campus, but until 2012 this was quite different.[3]

The campus was constructed from 1922-1932, the Convocation Hall was inaugurated in 1927 (Pearn, 1939: 281; Saw Mra Aung, 2019: 8-9). In 1931 the whole campus was officially opened (Peacock, 1934: 283-84). It is a kind of quarter circle between the southwestern bank of Inya Lake (formerly Victoria Lake) and a long stretch of Pyay Road, situated in the Kamayut township, immediately north of Golden Valley, a residential area north of the former cantonment and developed from 1907 for the colonial civil service and well-to-do Burmese (Pearn, 1939: 276). It is nowadays a prime piece of real estate just about eight kilometres north of downtown Yangon. A former student has described the lively time during the construction of the Inya Lake campus when students shuttled between campus and lecture halls (Nyi Nyi, 1970: 2). Teaching was conducted in town, where University College and Judson College were located, viz. on Commissioner (today Bogyoke Aung San) Rd. and Kyemendine Rd. At that time, the campus was still located on the fringes of the settled area, very much removed from the hustle and bustle of the town, a place of retreat, but also of isolation, near the town, but not of the town. In fact, it was largely still a jungle teeming with wild life and mosquitoes and filled with fruit trees (Saw Mra Aung, 2019). As late as 1927 and 1928, wild boar and hog deer were said to be encountered and killed (MNN, 1955-57: 181). Halls of Residence (student hostels) were only opened from 1925-26, until that time, students were housed in dormitories downtown (Saw Mra Aung, 2019).[4] The gravest danger apart from man-eating mosquitoes were thieves from Kamayut village who at night would steal the students' belongings. University Avenue and Inya Road were sandy footpaths or waterlogged ditches at most, made into proper roads only from 1928 onwards (Saw Mra Aung, 2019). Nowadays, the campus is still a place of retreat, but certainly no longer isolated. All around traffic roars through the intersection of Insein and Pyay roads, and the hustle and noise of nearby Hledan market, the favourite shopping place for university teachers and staff, is ever present.

The main entrance to the campus is on University Avenue. From other roads of the quarter circle - Pyay Road, Inya Road, mostly forbidding walls, fences, and much greenery are visible, but the initiated know the many side and back entrances and the secret paths into and out of the campus. Judson chapel, an integral part of the university, yet apart from it in its own grounds (again, the initiated know the shortcut from there into the campus) is accessible from Pyay Road.

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2 Something the military government tried to change in the 60s when it (re-)introduced strict curfew times for students in the hostels and even had the doors locked after 6 p.m. (Yen Saning, 2013). The article claims this contributed to further student protests.

3 I remember vividly how in 2012 our colleague celebrated in this volume and I innocently walked into the campus in search of the rector's office with the explicit permission of the Director of Higher Education. We were harshly stopped by an individual on a bicycle barking at us where we were thinking we were going. Only after the pro-rector had been called and ascertained from the DHEL that we were there legitimately, were we allowed to proceed instead of being unceremoniously marched off the premises.

4 The warden of one of them, Pyay Hall was B.R. Pearn, who in the late 40s became a trustee of the university and was the author of the very comprehensive History of Rangoon.

The campus is - like much of Yangon - still green and pleasant even in the heat of the day with huge trees lining Adipati street and the side roads and lawns.

An alumnus of the university, Maung Thet Pyin (nom de plume of U Thiha Saw, executive editor of the Myanmar Times) called his alma mater Mya Kyun Nyo Nyo in a recent article in the Myanmar Times.

Literally, Mya Kyun, in Myanmar, is an emerald island, or rather a green island. Nyo Nyo, could mean many things, including, a grove of trees. Indeed, it is still a very green campus and the university itself is old enough, much older than Maung Thet Pyin, to witness historical events and upheavals the country underwent in the last 140 years (Maung Thet Pyin, 2018).

As a residential university, the campus contains not only the convocation hall and lecture halls, but also a number of dormitories and sports facilities (Yangon University, 2019). Pegu Hall, where reportedly Aung San stayed during his study course, still stands nearly unchanged and untouched from the 1930s as well as Taungoo Hall and several hostels for female students, who were admitted to the University from the start, though in much smaller numbers than males. Besides, faculty and staff also were provided free accommodation on the campus in the shape of spacious and comfortable bungalows. Only the space of the former student Union building on the right just after the entrance and dynamited in the 60s lies still empty and overgrown.

It was on this spot that RASU students built a tomb for U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations until 1971, to honour him, but the tomb was destroyed by the military troops and local authorities on December 10, 1974. The impressive Central Library[5] is on the right just beyond the hostels.

The most iconic building on the campus is certainly the Convocation Hall, which since its completion (Yangon Time Machine, 2018) has hosted the annual graduation ceremonies and many important speeches. It is the first building one sees when entering through the main gate, since Adipati Road runs straight towards it. It has hosted visiting world leaders for speeches, notably former US President Barack Obama in 2012 and in the Diamond Jubilee Hall in 2014 (Yangon Time Machine, 2018).

Judson Chapel was built in the early 1930s. Its tall tower is the university's other main landmark. It is named after Burma's first Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson (Yangon Time Machine, 2018).[6]

If one ventures into the side streets away from Adipati Road one reaches more hostels and residential buildings, but also little open-air canteens dotted round the campus and the lecture halls and offices of the Arts and Humanities faculties: Taunggoo Hall, Vaisali Hall, Ramanna Hall, surrounded by trees and with easy access to Pyay Road. A brand new mess for the Arts Faculty has been donated by the Koreans, the KIS building.

Staff, students and alumni are very proud of their campus and are happy to see it filled with life again since 2012 after so many years of enforced silence.

5 The funds for which were donated by Raja Reddiar in the 20s (Peacock, 1934: 284).

6 John D Rockefeller, Jr. donated 100,000 rupees for the chapel's construction.

The Significance of Education

In ancient times, education was the leisure pursuit of an elite that had no need to work with its hands for its livelihood, that could indulge in 'unproductive' activities like reading, writing, philosophy, mathematics, and religion, in other words, speculation about the origin and meaning of life. It was possible only when there was a productive surplus that could sustain unproductive parts of society like religious specialists and the idle educated. Education for a long time had no meaning for 'real life', but was nevertheless thought to be part of a rounded personality. Universities that were established in Europe in the early middle ages were places for religious and theological instruction. In mediaeval Europe, learning was imparted by religious specialists, learning that was eventually put to use also for the administration of (church) property, or pronouncing on legal and administrative questions. In Myanmar, like in most Buddhist countries it was the monks who not only meditated on the meaning of life and on matters of religion, but also provided education for the bulk of the population, education that went beyond training for survival. Till today, the Myanma term for university is Tekkatho, a word harking back to ancient Takshashila (whose ruins can be seen outside the borders of Islamabad till today), reputedly the earliest seat of Buddhist learning.

With the start of industrialisation the function of education in Europe and later in the colonies changed. Education became a filter that divided the mass from the selected few (Rothermund and Simon, 1986: 1-12). It sorted people according to social status, ability and economic need. To operate machines (whether looms or weapons) and for many other activities in industry one needed more than labourers performing stereotypical functions. Education became necessary to keep the country and the economy running, and thus streamed people into their social, but crucially into their economic places in life: Basic three Rs (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic) for the masses, secondary education for specialised workers and technicians, higher education for the thinkers, inventors and the leisured class. Modernity required everybody to read, write and do arithmetic. And in some contexts practical knowledge acquired a prestige it had not had earlier. Education became a necessity to be able to work and earn one's livelihood. This made more acute a problem that had existed before, but now became threatening: Formerly, the educated elite could be relied upon to affirm, confirm and legitimate the ruling elite and to work hand in hand. People questioning the existing conditions were quickly eliminated, though their ideas often lived after them (Socrates, Galilei, Copernicus). Education was a double-edged sword, but since few people had access, it could be controlled and a certain amount of academic liberty and freethinking retained.

With the spread of literacy after the reformation in Europe this kind of control became more difficult, and once general schooling became compulsory, the 'great unwashed' could not so easily be kept in their ordained place. The government tried to ordain what was taught and how much, in order to prevent protest: school curricula were fashioned according to the specifications of governments. In higher education, this control was less strict, there the freedom of science was supposed to apply, but only up to a certain limit: education should create obedient subjects at all levels. And the subjects with higher education were expected to justify the political and social status quo to the lower

orders and teach them their place. Gramsci (1932) called these intellectuals organic: they were part of the elite and supported its interests.

Again, there was a problem here: the organic intellectuals did not always conform to their assumed task, and the masses rebelled. Friction at the edges led to changes, and even only basic education did not always create obedient subjects. Knowledge itself created doubts, and people who asked questions. So one had to balance the amount of education provided with the danger that it could spin out of control. Even if the government limited the content of education, a literate public could access information beyond it. In other words: educated people and especially students are a dangerous social group.

Education in a Colonial Context

How did the role and filter function of education play themselves out in a colonial setting? The problem posed itself even more acutely here. Once the colonial rulers had conquered a region or a country, they had to make it pay, and that meant they had to administer it with as little expense as possible. And for that they needed personnel and staff, preferably from the region, because personnel from the motherland would be too costly. And even if they ruled with people of their own country, they had to communicate with the local people somehow and get them to cooperate in a rudimentary fashion to prevent unrest and revolt. Colonial education had to be geared to a limited objective, viz. to raise loyal staff on the lower administrative levels from among the local population.

Monastic education that had always been there to provide people religious knowledge and a rudiment of literacy, was initially sought to fulfil that function, but quickly turned out neither willing, suitable nor sufficient. The British relied on another religious corporation, the Christian missionaries. The big advantage was that they had been there even before the conquest of Burma was begun and/or completed. They had been coming since the 17th century and set up schools for the newly converted. The British employed the products of these schools for their administration before eventually setting up their own.

The missionaries had realised an important fact very early: if you want to work with the local people and create loyalty, you must know something about their culture and society first. The famous American Baptist Adoniram Judson had been in Burma since 1813, trying to convert people from Moulmein to Mandalay with very indeterminate success. Still, he managed to create a small Baptist congregation in Rangoon and founded a school in 1830. More significantly, he was the first to translate the Bible into Burmese and edited a Myanma-English dictionary still in use today. Missionaries were not necessarily the servants or knight-errants of the colonial powers. Often it was quite the opposite: they tried to learn the people's language (admittedly in order the better to convert them with). And they got acquainted with the people's literature in order to better argue against it. But this gave them a much more equivocal view of the colony than the rulers and often an appreciation of local culture which the government lacked. They were the first to provide modern secular instruction both in the people's language

and in English. The rulers, while often denigrating the missionaries' effort, still drew on this and often left education in the hands of the clergy, because it was cheaper. There were civil servants (the 'Orientalists') that went along with the missionaries' views advocating a study of local culture and conditions and teaching in the local language, but from about 1835, a view propounded by Macauley (1835) became more influential: he thought little of indigenous languages and literature, and wanted instead to make all the ruled into little 'brown' Britishers.

Yet even the Macauleyists could not completely ignore local culture and traditions. The late 19th century was the height of Imperialism and of the alleged civilising mission of the British. But it was not so easy to claim barbarity for a people that had ruled mainland Southeast Asia for many centuries and boasted a culture and religion much older than the western one. The solution was to proclaim local culture and history merely an inferior forerunner of Western, i.e. British history and culture, or claiming that the present condition of the country was a decline from ancient greatness. The aspect of interpretation was here important: who had the power to interpret history had also the power to control the past and by extension present and future. As an Indian colleague of mine put it many years ago: today it is not the future that has become unpredictable, but the past. Collecting 'historical texts' and editing them thus became a means to achieve this control of the past. To stand in a line of legitimate rulers conferred power and the right to rule, which showed most clearly in India where the British took on the role of the legal successors of the Moguls.[7]

Knowledge and control of the past had been always important for indigenous rulers as well in the shape of inscription and chronicles. Under Myanmar's Konbaung dynasty this attained new heights: the rulers collected chronicles and tales of Myanmar's past from all over the country and had them brought to the capital in order to streamline and unify them to get a 'correct' picture of the country's history and commissioned new chronicles. This was done to find some defence against the onslaught of the colonising powers.

Though this proved futile in the end, because it could not prevent the conquest of Burma, the colonial government likewise started to collect information about the people's history, often in the shape of commissioned chronicles, e.g. the Portuguese and the Dutch in Ceylon. In Burma, civil servants and academic amateurs with an 'Orientalist' bend founded the Burma Research Society in 1910 accompanied by a journal in which European and Burmese scientists wrote about and translated Burmese history and philology, inscriptions and chronicles. The journal survived until 1980 and was then superseded by the Bulletin of the Burma Historical Research Commission founded in 1955. Like the missionaries, the BRS did not always conform to the expectations of the rulers either, they were impressed with the high civilisation and impressive history of Burma (Boshier, 2018: 236-237), which sometimes countervailed the Imperial Idea (see below).

7 One of the reasons for the eternal problems between India and Pakistan is one of legitimacy. At independence India took on the role of the legal successor of the British Raj and thus of the Moguls. Pakistan has never forgiven India for this, because it considered this role its natural right.

This constellation highlights the ambivalent function of education in a colonial setting most clearly: The British needed docile subjects to work in their administration, but these subjects should at the same time be qualified and able to act autonomously within limits. To some extent they could achieve this with personnel imported from India, but this did not work indefinitely. By the start of the 20th century, one needed Burmese personnel on a near equal level with the British. So in this very idea of local education, the anti-colonial protest was already contained, because once people were educated like the British, they wanted to be treated like the British.

Universities as places of control and protest

What then is so important about a university, both as a physical place and an institution of learning as compared to a school? There is no better place to control the past and legitimate the present than institutions of education and learning. Universities are crucial places where information about the past is collected, controlled, and imparted.

While a university is a place of education, it is also one of discussion, debate and analysis. In other words, it is not only a place of learning, but also of thinking. But secondly, it is for this reason also a place a step away from 'real' life, a place of freedom and even experiment. Being 'a step removed' may give one a clearer view of things and an incentive to act. At the same time, 'a step removed' means also place of isolation, never more so than when it is constructed as a total institution. It is a place to create organic intellectuals. Again, this is more stark in a colonial setting.

The British established institutions of higher learning in their new possessions with the intention to teach the subjects the right topics and the right history, viz. that of the rulers, of England and Empire and that of the subjects according to the view of the rulers: a history of former greatness and current decline. They wanted to present themselves as the bringers of a new civilisation. People were supposed to learn their own history through the eyes of the rulers. In this way, the British hoped to legitimate their rule and to create acquiescent subjects who worked in its service.

For a while, the subject people accepted the new system and the new language, because it seemed to provide a way to jobs, upward mobility and eventually equality with the rulers. They sent their children to missionary or government schools teaching in the rulers' language and acquired the new knowledge. The government tried to keep this development under control by limiting access to educational institutions: there was the eternal fear of a 'glut' of unemployed English-educated who might create unrest (PRHM, 1934: 65-66; Aye Kyaw, 1993: 8-9). The objectives of education were rather different for rulers and ruled, but even in the government they were often vague and paradoxical. These were objectives difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, as much later the military government of Myanmar realised to its - and the students' - dismay: if you train qualified people, they might easily qualify against you.

Antecedents of Rangoon University

Rangoon University illustrates this paradox in an exemplary fashion, not least because it emerged as discussed above, in the twilight of empire. As Jan Morris (1983: 104) puts it in Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj:

> The greater universities established by the British in India, notably those in the Presidency towns, deliberately set out to transfer British ideas and values to the Indian middle classes, if only to create a useful client caste. Their curricula were altogether divorced from Indian tradition—no more of those thirty-foot kings—and their original buildings were all tinged somehow or other with architectural suggestions of Cam or Isis [these are rivers flowing through Cambridge and Oxford, respectively; the authors].

This notion easily applies to Rangoon University too.

Schools on Macauley's principles were established very soon after the second Anglo-Burman war 1852/53 for English and mixed children. Missionary schools served the same children and children of Burmese converts. Some Buddhist parents sent their children to these schools as well (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 8-9). A department of education was founded in Rangoon in 1868, and entrance examinations to the University of Calcutta could be held there (Aung Kin, 1970: 51), but until 1874, only elementary schools existed.

The better ones of these were then converted into high schools (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 9). In the same year, the Government High School in Rangoon opened (Aung Kin, 1970: 51). In 1876, this High School began to offer secondary courses. Until then, pupils had only been able to finish Middle School. From now on, they could sit for the entrance exam of Calcutta University at the school. Since 1878 college level instruction was offered at the Government High School (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 9). Some sources therefore date the opening of Rangoon College in this year. However, the college department proper was only opened in 1880. Students were able to sit for the F.A. (First Arts) exam of Calcutta University. In 1881, an Education Syndicate was formed to represent the educational interests of Burma. It was an autonomous body looking after curricula and standards of examination. In 1883, Rangoon College was affiliated to Calcutta University and students could study up to the B.A, degree. However, until 1889, only very few students graduated from this and other colleges, mostly in Law (Aung Kin, 1970: 53). From that time onwards, however, both the number of students and that of Burmese students increased considerably until 1912. They could take English, Maths, Chemistry, Pali, Philosophy, Physics, Logic and Law for the F.A. or B.A. and B.Sc. exams (though the latter was intermittently discontinued) (Aung Kin, 1970: 54; Nyi Nyi, 1970: 12).

Alongside the secular establishments, the Baptist Cushing High School was founded in 1872, which opened a college department in 1894. It was also affiliated to Calcutta University up the First Arts standard and was called Baptist College, renamed Judson College in 1918 (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 9). The idea of a University for Burma was mooted by the syndicate already in 1892 (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 58; Aung Kin, 1970) and again in 1901, though nothing came of it at the time (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 10), because the government of India did not favour it. Instead, in 1904, the Government retook control of Rangoon College, which had been under the syndicate since 1885, and renamed it Government

College. It was hampered in its development because it was affiliated to Calcutta only for English, Vernacular Composition, Maths, Chemistry, Physics, and Baptist College for English, Vernacular Composition in Burmese, History, Philosophy and Pali (Aung Kin, 1970: 54).

But the idea of a university was pursued regardless, both by British educators and leading Burmese citizens, who wanted to end the affiliation to Calcutta University and have an establishment of their own, rather than just a college. A preliminary Act for establishing a university was drafted by government and reviewed by the syndicate 1909-10. A meeting was called by the syndicate in 1910 with a few Burmese members also attending and which discussed the university question in a lively manner. It was finally decided that the two colleges, Rangoon and Judson College should be combined to a teaching university with a network of hostels. The proposal was submitted to the government, but until 1912, there was no reaction. This was actually the year of the visit of King Edward to Burma, and the YMBA (Young Men's Buddhist Association)[8] took the opportunity to demand a university in their felicitation address to him (Aye Kyaw 1993: 11). In the same year, the Indian government allotted a budget for the establishment of the university (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 12-13).

Again it took several years until the plans took shape. For some years controversy raged over the location of the university - at that time still planned in today's downtown area. But already then, alternative plans to house the university in a campus and buildings of its own were put forward (Aung Kin, 1970: 56). However, with the outbreak of WWI, all plans were more or less suspended and only resumed in 1917.

By this time, not only local citizens, but also the colonial government were firmly in favour of a local university; however, the reasons for this demand and the ideas about the shape of the institution differed widely. The war had brought forth clearly the desire of the colonised peoples for self-government and independence, and the British, while conceding some of these demands, at the same time tried to hold on to their rule (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 16). The affiliation to Calcutta now seemed distinctly disadvantageous (Nyi Nyi, 1970: 12).

The local citizens, on the other hand, and particularly the college students had their own reasons for desiring a university for Burma. They wanted more from it than just a good education and good job prospects. While not yet actively clamouring for independence, their educational aspirations were mixed with political ones. They were in favour of a local university teaching in English, separate from Calcutta and implicitly, with more Burmese instead of Indian teachers. The young students, moreover, had been influenced by liberal and anti-colonial thinking that spilled over from India and were well-informed about the political reforms (Montague-Chelmsford reforms) in preparation there. They were angry that Burma was not granted similar reforms. This constellation was prone to conflicts. This was not the middle of the 19th century, when universities in India were a demonstration of British superiority, but the sunset of empire. The YMBA again came to the fore regarding the university, when its General Council visited Calcutta to meet Montague and Chelmsford in 1917 and put the demand for a university before them. Finally, in 1918 a committee made up of English government

8 An organisation founded in 1906 on the model of the Young Men's Christian Association.

officers and academics and a number of Burmese members from the Burma Education Society, Burma Reform League and later also the YMBA (Aung Kin, 1970: 56), was tasked to formulate a plan for the establishment of Rangoon University and to draw up study courses. The committee's recommendations were based on the report of Calcutta University (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 16). It was planned as a self-governing academic body under the protection of the government. However, in early 1919 leading Burmese citizens and scholars strongly criticised the plan, pointing out several defects in the University Draft Bill (Maung Htin Aung, 1967). The British favoured a unitary university, the Burmese a federal one - with affiliated colleges. It became quasi-federal only on the pressure of Washington which wanted to keep the American founded Judson College autonomous (Nyi Nyi, 1970: 13). A major complaint was the compulsion for the students to stay on campus which would be very expensive,[9] another, that no affiliation of colleges outside Rangoon was planned (according to the Boycotters' memorial of 17 December 1920 as related by Lu Pe Win (1970: 7, 43). The biggest complaint which was also widely discussed in the papers was that regarding entry qualifications. Honours students who had passed their matriculation must show proficiency in English and one other subject in the entrance exam. If they failed in this, they were required to undergo another year preparatory coursework before entering the university (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 17). This was seen as a requirement primarily affecting Burmese students and thus discriminatory (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 7).[10] In fact, it was a measure to limit the number of Burmese entering the university (Maung Htin Aung, 1967). Other criticised clauses concerning the time allowed for an Honours Bachelor's or Masters's etc. (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 8) The demands to abolish these clauses were mixed up with political ones clamouring for reforms similar to the Montague-Chelmsford measures in India.

The government disregarded the criticisms and went ahead with its plans. Therefore, in early 1920 a meeting was held by Burmese demanding the postponement of the University Bill until the critical points had been remedied. An additional point this time was that the governing bodies of the planned University had only very few Burmese members and were thus not representative (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 18). Despite Burmese opposition, the bill was approved by the legislative council and became the University Act in mid-1920. It came into effect on 1st December 1920, and thus the University was constituted with Rangoon - now University - College and Judson College as constituent members. The Inauguration was planned for December 7, but that plan came to naught because the students boycotted the inauguration.

While the colleges had only offered a limited range of subjects (see above), the university in addition offered Oriental Studies (Pali and Burmese), history, (especially Far Eastern history and History of Burma) (Peacock 1934: 284), Biology, Economics, Geography, Geology, Forestry, Education and Engineering (Nyi Nyi 1970: 14). Luminaries like

9 Peacock (1934: 284), gives a sum of £ 2/month for board and lodging in 1932.

10 What was not clearly spelt out here and elsewhere, but was the main point of the criticism was the fact that the British demanded a high standard of knowledge of English to enter the university. So students who had passed all their exams, but not the English one, had to go to remedial classes. This was severely resented. Lu Pe Win claims that even the High School Exam had a success rate of only 15%.

D.G.E. Hall, Gordon Luce, C. Duroiselle, and John Furnivall were teachers at the university (Anon, 1970: 20).[11] A medical college was attached in 1924. The university offered degrees up to B.A., M.A., , B.L. and MBBS (MNN 1970: 113).

Only in 1941, the department of Oriental Studies was renamed Department of Burmese language and literature, with the father of current President U Htin Kyaw as principal. The 75th anniversary of the department was celebrated in December 2016 with the President as chief guest (New Light of Myanmar, 2016).

All subsequent institutions of higher learning founded by the British were under Rangoon University's administration until 1958, when Mandalay College became an independent university (University of Yangon, 2018). In spite of the early boycott Rangoon University became one of the most prestigious universities in Southeast Asia, attracting students from across the region.

Imperial Objectives of Colonial Education

By opening the university, the government hoped to provide education oriented to the West and geared to English requirements (Boshier, 2018: 237). In the 1920s, this did not mean any longer just to train loyal government servants, but it was meant to inculcate in them an active consent to and affirmation of, the Imperial Idea (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 13; Boshier, 2018: 239-241); of the greatness of empire, the superiority of British civilisation and thus the legitimacy of British rule. University education demanded that the students subscribe to the idea that the fate of their country and their success in life were tied to British rule. The Imperial idea was to be spread with songs, flags, articles, and through university education (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 14-15). The Imperial idea also showed in the discussion about the university when it was declared a British gift to the Burmese people (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 9).

The University Act provided control over the University and to some extent academic content to the government (the Governor was ex officio the chancellor like in India until today), contradicting the claims that it would be self-governing and academically autonomous, and it limited access to the university through fees and tight entrance regulations. Its curriculum gave rise to protest because it provided education geared more towards interests than Burmese requirements: knowledge about British and Western history and literature (and by implication, British greatness), was privileged over local history and literature. To be sure, Pali was taught in colleges and university because it was considered a classical language (Turner 2018: 129), yet there existed government high schools where Latin and Greek were still compulsory subjects.

The location of the new campus was geared towards isolating the students, with tight regulations for appearance and behaviour that could serve to alienate them from the rest of the population. Simultaneously these regulations should create a feeling of belonging to a separate class, being part of an elite. In exchange, one belonged in the

11 This source claims that the boycott in total lasted about four years. Aye Kyaw (1993) gives the title as First and last years. He claims the author was the well-known Indian lawyer N.C. Sen.

select few and even was granted a certain amount of academic freedom and behavioural licence.

The imperial idea immediately encountered the nascent or no longer so nascent nationalism and the demand for independence. The students rejected and counteracted its implicit assumptions. They retreated into their Burmese and Buddhist identity and self-image and from there drew the confidence to challenge the educational authorities. Once the boycott was decided upon, they withdrew to religious premises, the Shwedagon and adjacent monasteries, to continue their struggle (Boshier, 2018: 240-41).

Not even all of the English teachers and members of the BRS subscribed to the Imperial idea. They endeavoured to give Burmese history and literature its due place in education. Gordon Luce, D.G.E. Hall and John Furnivall belong prominently in this category. Luce, moreover, was a rather unsuitable model for the Imperial idea: he was ostracised by the British community and denied the position of Head of the History Department until the late 20s, because he had the impudence to marry a Burmese wife, succumbing to 'Burmanisation', something that was simply 'not done' among English teachers and civil servants (Boshier, 2018: 235). This reaction showed the sheer meretriciousness of the Imperial Idea's claim to justice and equality. The local people, however assimilated, would forever remain the house elves of the ruling magicians.

The Boycott of 1920

So, no sooner the University was established than the students who had newly been admitted to enter the university started to protest. They had attended Government or Judson College while still affiliated to Calcutta and were thus well-informed about the issues surrounding the birth of the university and the foregoing discussions. And they were very much against the University Act. Therefore, on 3rd December, they decided to boycott classes, the exams on 5th December and the inauguration planned for 7th December. In a meeting deciding on the boycott, an Indian student, N.C. Sen, - later a famous lawyer - advised to send a memorial to Reginald Craddock, the governor and chancellor, before taking any action, but this suggestion was rejected. Such a memorial, it was argued, would vanish forever in some drawer and never be answered one way or the other. The Principal of Rangoon college, Matthew Hunter, begged the students to return to classes. The answer was that they did not object to their teachers, but to the University Act (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 22, 24; Lu Pe Win, 1970: 3-4, 44).[12] They referred to the discussions and criticisms of the university committee which had not been remedied, and demanded the annulment of the University Act, nothing less. One sore point was the prohibition for external students (from colleges outside Rangoon and vernacular schools) to take the entrance exam, another one that the vice-chancellor was chosen unilaterally by the governor, and not, as originally assured, from among a number of

12 In fact, students seemed to respect and like their English teachers and principals, some criticisms notwithstanding, which still comes through in the article by Saw Mra Aung (2019), which does not mention the boycott at all, but with a certain nostalgia describes the early years of the 'infant university'.

individuals suggested by the university members (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 23). The language of instruction being English did not provoke protests at all at this time, it was rather the standard of English required, which was seen - rightly - as limiting the number of students allowed to enter university. To sum up, it was not the establishment of the university that was resented, but rather the way it was constituted and the regulations governing it.[13] The demands were eventually laid down in a public memorial to Governor Craddock on 19th December 1920 demanding the annulment of the University Act.

The university authorities threatened expulsion of the students for the rest of the term if they did not return by 23rd December, which the students countered with withdrawal notices. The deadline was extended to January 5, 1921 (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 29). A Boycotters' Conference subsequently took place at the end of December with lively participation of the women students. It passed 15 resolutions, some of which differed somewhat in their thrust from the demands in the memorial of 19th December: one of these confirmed that the students would not rejoin government schools, that the rules for European and Anglo-Vernacular schools were not suitable for Burmese, that Burmese students should be allowed to wear Burmese footwear and that they should be allowed to read newspapers on campus (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 31). The demands might seem only relevant for education - the requirements for English competence, the compulsion to live on campus, the cost of education - and sometimes even banal - the rules about footwear and the prohibition to read newspapers on campus. But these were issues that determined life chances and the chance for an autonomous life. And particularly the last two demands are illuminating. They concerned issues that defined Burmese identity: slippers were the normal footwear of the Burmese, and of course much more suited to the climate than shoes. Questions of footwear had been sensitive, moreover, at least since the de-shoeing controversy of 1906 (Turner, 2014: 139; Thant Myint-U, 2008: 205; Aye Kyaw, 1993: 20, 28). The prohibition to read newspapers on campus, on the other hand, interfered with the claimed academic freedom of the university: was knowledge and information only to be provided in the classroom? These rules show the tight control the authorities tried to exercise over the Burmese students both physically and mentally, and to make them conform to British norms of appearance and demeanour.

The Burmese public supported the rather esoteric and elite boycott to an astonishing degree. They sent food and other necessities to the students encamped in the Shwedagon. Governor Craddock tried to dismiss the boycott as the action of young boys and girls who had been seduced by agitators and politicians. He claimed that for the students the whole thing was nothing more than a big prank. The English press followed his argument and denounced the boycott as manipulated by interested circles (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 8).[14] The Anglo-Indian students and the Anglo-Indian press joined the chorus, but MP Colonel Wedgwood, from the far left wing of the Labour Party (and grandfather of Tony Benn) who visited Burma at the time cautiously supported the boycott in a public address on 12th December (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 27).[15]

13 The resolutions and demands are listed in Nyi Nyi (1970: 51-52).

14 He states a bit later, (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 17), however, that in his report to the viceroy, Craddock termed the students' movement a 'terrible threat to the authority of the British crown in Burma.'

15 Lu Pe Win (1970: 13-15, 31), from 1923 Lecturer in Oriental Studies, puts the matter a bit differently. He says in the meeting with Wedgwood, the latter asked the students if they would return to clas-

The issues at stake might have appeared insignificant and purely educational, but they had political repercussions of identity and respect beyond that. This showed in the simultaneous establishment - or renaming - of vernacular schools into national schools, and eventually the foundation of a national university. Some of these schools were earlier run by the YMBA, which now opened their doors to the strikers and even offered them teaching assignments. These schools taught in Burmese and on Burmese issues and were considered to be more attuned to Burmese requirements (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 24).[16] The emergence of these schools was not at all liked by the government, and it accordingly tried to hamper their functioning by centralising high schools and school policy. This was eventually unsuccessful because once dyarchy was introduced in Burma as well education came under the purview of a Burmese Minister of Education. Therefore, after U Maung Gyi had been appointed Minister of Education in 1923, he had the University Act amended in 1924. Students from external and national schools were now allowed to take the entrance examination (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 59). Vicariously the boycott also led to endeavours to read and translate foreign literature into Burmese and thus to the famous Nagani club.

The protest of 1920 more or less petered out, by January a third of students had returned on the pressure of parents (who often were civil servants) and teachers (Lu Pe Win, 1970: 17). But the rest continued and were even publicly supported by the All Indian Congress Committee (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 32). The boycott went on until April 1921 with even High School students joining. Examinations were held in March 1921 regardless (Anon, 1970: 19). After six months, most of the boycotters had returned to school and college, even those who had started to teach in the national schools, though remnants of the boycotters held out until 1924 (Lu Pe Win, 1970a: 58).

The boycott still counts as the first big national protest movement in Burma, a forerunner of the more political boycotts of 1936 and 1938 (Nyi Nyi, 1970: 19; Aye Kyaw, 1993: 67-68). In the late 1920s and 1930s a large number of future political and intellectual leaders of Burma until the 80s and 90s were educated at Rangoon University: Aung San (father of current State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi), U Nu first Prime Minister, Dr. Ba Maw (Prime Minister under Dyarchy and during World War II), U Kyaw Nyein (member of APFL and minister under U Nu), U Thant (the first ever Asian who became the Secretary General of the United Nations in the 60s), U Thein Pe Myint (renowned author and journalist) and dozens or perhaps hundreds more as detailed by Lu Pe Win (1970a).

Conclusion

"They focused on discipline. They didn't give the students freedom," said Khin Zaw. "Freedom comes first in a democratic system, and then discipline follows. So they controlled [the students]." (Yen Saning, 2013)

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ses if he accompanied them and endeavoured to redress their grievances. The students rejected this, to which he said that a boycott would only be successful if they all stood firm till the end.

16 He claims Burmese was taught in University College only from 1924.

This is not a quote regarding colonial administration, but the military government of Burma after 1962. It clearly demonstrates the ambivalence and the risks for colonial and/or authoritarian governments of providing education. The knowledge and expertise and, most importantly, the support of an educated class are needed for the functioning of the administration, but it is this very class also that poses the greatest danger, because they so easily can get out of control. Their loyalty is always fragile, never guaranteed; they can simply refuse to accept the ideology of the rulers. The aims of education under these circumstances are not only contradictory, but irreconcilable. The fate of the Imperial Idea could serve here as a dreadful warning: As already Alice in Wonderland realised: two into one won't go. Rangoon University with its protest and struggle right at its birth is a prime example for this dilemma: it was meant as a gift to the ruled, but the subjects refused to accept this sign of generosity of a benevolent government. They saw it for what it was: a Trojan horse.

The remedy sought for this dilemma was twofold: one, construct a secluded and circumscribed space to prevent too much communication with the outside and thus prevent protests. Yet the spatial isolation in a 'total institution' intended to keep the students apart from the people in the end enabled resistance. Students could get together, communicate and plan. And the isolation was never as total as desired. The university eventually became the centre of a web or network of connections formed by parents, BRS teachers, politicians, workers, and students which spurred the latter to action (Boshier, 2018: 233). The military junta many years later seems to have realised this fact: it gave up the isolation of the campus (by closing it for years on end) for the segregation and even atomisation of students in far away new universities or by forcing them into distance education. Precisely the communication the physical presence on campus enabled was thus cut off and made student action so much more difficult.

The second part of the programme was a variation of the Imperial Idea: create a group (client caste) that perceives itself as belonging in an elite: if you join the university, you may eventually join the heaven-born, the select few who joined the ICS. You will be part of an elite, removed from the mass of the people, an elite endowed with privileges and liberties. But being part of this elite carried a price: you had to conform to strict rules and regulations of appearance and behaviour. You had to assimilate eventually giving up your identity and accepting British superiority and dominance. It was expected that parents, who wanted jobs for the boys, would exert this pressure to conform. Except that the boys refused:

An English education was accepted as necessary to get a job and earn one's livelihood (Anderson, 2006: 20-21, 41-49). It was at most a working language, not more (though most of the products of Rangoon University wrote and spoke a standard of English that one can only weep over with envy in the face of the English proficiency of today's graduates). Only the required standard of English was questioned as a limiting device for educated Burmese (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 20; Nyi Nyi, 1970: 15; Lu Pe Win, 1970: 10). Similarly, the opening of the university was welcomed: had Burmese intellectuals not clamoured for it for years? But they wanted it not as a gift, but on their own terms. The students wanted more from an education than being made fit for subaltern jobs, an education geared towards Burmese requirements, instruction in their own history and literature, an affirmation of their own identity. The researchers of the BRS supported

and confirmed them in this objective emphasising the importance not only of Pali, but of Burmese language and history, something that would give them not only knowledge of the past, but control of their present and future (Boshier, 2018: 238). Once the promise of Macauley that if people became little Britishers they would attain equality had been shown as fraudulent eventually even the dominance of the English language was questioned: the national schools taught in Burmese. The junta later ordained instruction exclusively in the mother tongue with no English at all.[17] Whereas the British had hesitated to sacrifice quality to control and had limited access to education instead, the military junta did the opposite: if one could not reconcile quality and control, quality would be sacrificed because quantity, the number of students in higher education, was considered a sign of success.

The boycott of 1920 highlighted the paradoxes of education in a colonial setting in an exemplary fashion. When the university was founded British power was waning, the civilisatory mission had lost its shine and was recognised for the lie it was. The students realised they would never fully belong in the elite and even for a partial belonging, the cost was too heavy. Equality was a promise never fulfilled. This made the boycott of 1920 more than an educational protest and created a legacy of politically aware and active students. Students, as mentioned in general are an extremely dangerous social group. They challenge the powers that be by their mere existence despite or because of the powers' need for them.

The British knew this and accordingly tried to denigrate the boycott as either a prank or as an attempt to get good jobs (though what would be damnable in striking for better jobs?). But it was more than that, it was a political and anti-colonial beginning. The public realised that issues beyond just education and jobs were involved and supported the strikers, and Myanmar National Day still commemorates the event (University of Yangon, 2019). The significance still connected to the boycott shows clearly in the fact that a monument commemorating the 11 students who started it was erected on the terrace of the Shwedagon after independence (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 49). It can now be visited again after having been blocked off by the junta after the protests of 2007. The British were unable to enforce the rules, and so was - eventually - the military.

Before ending, one last consideration: while the boycott of 1920 was the start of a national and political campaign, questioning of British educational policies and standards had occurred long before that: when in 1882/83 Rangoon College was affiliated to Calcutta University, that was precisely when demands for a local university were voiced for the first time (Aye Kyaw, 1993: 10).[18] This university should be able to teach, set and conduct exams independently from outside agencies, be they Oxford and Cambridge

17 And then with an ingenious twist: if you did not have teaching material in the native language, you just abolished the discipline, as happened to IR in the 60s.

18 In the same year the government for the first time conducted official examinations in Pali in an attempt to create sympathies for its rule among important Buddhists. These examinations subsequently turned out very popular, though they did not much to enhance the prestige of the colonial government (Turner, 2018: 129).

or Calcutta.[19] Burmese educated and intellectuals voiced these demand requesting the upgrading of the College to a University independent of Calcutta.

By providing wider access to education for Burmese and by 'donating' a university, the British hoped to blunt the edge of the protests, but achieved exactly the opposite. That then is the paradox of education: if you start teaching people to think, they will think, and that might lead to quite unforeseen consequences.

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19 Compare this to Malaysia where children took the Secondary exam in the schools according to Cambridge specifications until the 70s.

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