

## CHAPTER I

### Shanland and Its People

The Shan States, with its 60,416<sup>1</sup> square miles, the size of England and Wales, form the eastern part of the Union of Burma. It lies on a plateau whose average height is about 2000-3000 feet, with peaks rising to 6000 and 8000 feet. Some of the valleys, however, have an altitude as low as 800 feet.

The boundaries of these Shan States touch China, Laos and Thailand in the north, east and south. The State of Kayah which, like the amalgamated Shan States, forms a constituent state in the Union of Burma, is part of the boundary in the south. In the east, it runs with those districts of Central Burma from Pyinmana to Shwebo.

Rivers and streams in the Shan States empty themselves into three world famous rivers, the Irrawaddy, the Salween and the Mekong, and the water divided between these three drainage systems can be discerned quite clearly falling within the Shan States on a large-scale physical map of Burma. Of the three big rivers mentioned only the Salween passes through the whole length of the country, while the Mekong forms the eastern boundary for a distance of some two hundred miles. Unlike the Irrawaddy, neither of these two are navigable for more than a few dozen miles at a stretch because of the swift current and rapids in them. The same is true of all the small rivers and streams that flow through the Shan States into the three "mother rivers", but many of them can be harnessed for hydro-electric power and irrigation, should the economy of the country demand it. Some of the better known tributary streams are the Namlwe, Namkha, Nampang, Namteng, Nampawn, Nantu (Myitnge), and Nammao (Shweli). The Nampilu (Baluchaung) which drains the Yawnghwe valley and the Inle Lake is being harnessed at Loikaw to supply electricity for the whole of Central and Lower Burma and parts of the Shan and Kayah States. The Paunglaung flows through the Shan States for a distance before it enters the plains at Pyinmana to become the better-known river of Sittang.

The highest peak in the Shan States is the Loileng (8777 feet) in Mongyai or South Hsenwi. Other high peaks are Loi Pangnau (8408) in Kengtung; Loimaw (8098) and Menetaung (8265) which separate the two main branches of the Pawan rivers, namely the Tampak and main

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1. Shan States proper 57,816 square miles - 1931 census, Wa States 2600 square miles - FACE, Pt. II, p. 190.

Nampawn itself; and Loisang (8129) near Mongkung. Innumerable peaks towering between 6000 and 8000 feet are found all over.

Some of the better known hill-station towns in the Shan States are Loimwe (5200 feet), Loilem (4500), Taunggyi (4700), Kalaw (4200), Namhsan (5300), and Kutkai (over 4000 feet).

With these peaks and hill stations, it must not be imagined that most people in the Shan States live at high altitudes. There are people of various racial tribes who believe they cannot live below the height of 5000 feet, but the more populated areas are those river valleys on the plateau itself. In some of these valleys the winter mists seldom rise before ten o'clock in the morning. It is here that most of the Shans live to cultivate their rice fields and tend their gardens and orange orchards.

With its 60,416 square miles, the Shan States make up about one quarter of the area of all Burma which is 235,492 square miles. But for this big area, the population is incomparably small. The following population figures are from the 1931 census:<sup>1</sup>

All Burma including the Shan States	14,667,146
The Shan States alone	1,506,337.

The rate of growth of population is not fast, as can be seen from these figures:

1901	1911	1921	1931
1,236,357	1,348,740	1,433,542	1,506,337

At this rate of growth the present population should be between 18 and 19 hundred thousand.

Like the rest of Southeast Asia, the Shan States have a monsoon climate with the well-known hot, wet and cold seasons, with this difference: the monsoon rain is not unbearably continuous and the height of the plateau turns the oppressive hot air of the Irrawaddy-Sittang basin into a cooling breeze even in the warmest months, while the winter is pleasantly cold with a cloudless sky.

Thus, all the hill stations and most areas in the Shan States have one of the pleasantest climates in the world. From November to March it is pleasant to have a log fire in one's house, though most indigenous homes make do with charcoal braziers even in December and January, in homes of either split bamboo or unseasoned timber, neither of which can be called draught-proof. On the treeless plains of the Myelat and Central Shan States and some of the high plateaus, it can be bitingly cold at night. These places normally have ground frost for

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1. The 1933 (urban) and 1954 (rural) census of Burma does not yet include the Shan States.

two or three weeks every winter. This frost turns a thin sheet of water in a flat receptacle into ice, and the children love to make this ice, as much as European children do their snowballs.

With such a climate, it is natural to find both tropical and temperate products in the Shan States.

Of agricultural products, rice, by both wet and dry cultivation methods, is the most important. After providing the staple diet of the people it leaves a small surplus for local export. Rice forms song themes and inspires poetry among the Shans, as among other rice-growing and rice-eating people in Asia.

Potatoes and opium are the next most important products. Potatoes grow largely in the Myelat, the highland that borders Central Burma districts in the west almost the length of the Shan States. Almost all the potatoes consumed in Burma come from this area.

The word opium conjures up a picture of dreamy, lotus-eating peasants. Many Shans may be dreamy, but few are opium addicts. The opium is legally grown east of the Salween on mountain slopes or small stream valleys well above the height of 3000 feet. Part of the crop is bought up by the Government at fixed rates which vary from year to year. By far the larger part finds its way through smugglers' caravans and inaccessible jungles into the world, or rather under-world, market of morphia and cocaine. The country is too undeveloped for the opium-grower to change from this crop to anything that will fetch him as much money from such a small area of ground, and the Government resources are too limited to affect the change by force.

Next in importance among the agricultural produce are tea, thanatpet (cigar wrapping leaf), coffee, oranges and cabbages. These are produced in sufficient quantity to take their place in all-Burma trade. Traders and middlemen dealing in them have become rich, out of proportion to the money received by the cultivators or actual producers; but that is enterprise and free trade.

Garlic, indigo, wheat, other fruits (e.g. strawberries, pears and pine-apples) and vegetables (especially introduced European varieties), cotton and tobacco form products that are important to local economy and a small amount of them finds a market outside the Shan States.

Among forest products, teak is the most important. It is found in areas below the altitude of 3000 feet in the basins of streams that find their way into the lower reaches of the Salween, the Paunglaung, the Nammao or Shweli, the Namtu and the Zawgyi. Some hardwood, such as chestnut, ingyin and padauk (ironwood of Burma), and soft wood like in and pine are found all over. Lac is another important forest produce. Buteau frondosa (or mawkkao in Shan, pauk in Burmese) the true flame of the forest and one of the chief host trees for stick lac, bombax (mawngiu or letpan), the

silk cotton tree, bauhinia (mawksio) and many other less-known flowering trees adorn the countryside up to the height of 5000 feet from January till March or April. These together with such introduced varieties as the wild cherry, pink cassia, jackaranda, gul mohur or flamboyant, yellow laburnum, and blossoming shrubs and creepers (e.g. the golden shower or venus's flower, bongainvilleas, poinsettia), give much colour to the Shan hills and valleys.

The chief cottage industries are silk weaving, Shan bag weaving, pottery, lacquer ware, silver ware, Shan hats or khamauk or kup, fine split bamboo weaving, and Shan dah or sword.

Not least of the cottage industry products is the wooden figure-carving of Mongnai. These figurines of tribes of Burma, carved out of yemane<sup>1</sup> and six or eight inches high, make extremely practical gifts of aesthetic value. There are many carvers but the only master who can give proportions and individuality to his figures is Maung Nyun, a home-loving Shan who prefers to produce just enough to keep his family happy in Mongnai.

Apart from silk and Shan bag weaving none of the cottage industries is well organised. Properly managed, all could increase their output and market value tenfold and help their producers to raise their standard of living.

One hears a great deal about the mineral wealth of the Shan States, but apart from the big mine at Bawdwin (silver, lead, zinc and copper) and its huge, modern processing plant at Namtu, no really big-scale operation is seen anywhere. A small but primitive pit mine at Bawzaing produces enough to make its owner a wealthy man. Tungsten and wolfram ores are worked by open cast method around Taunggyi and Mongnawng-Mongshu areas. A small mountain of iron ore near Taunggyi is reported to contain a very high percentage of good iron, but there is no prospect of any large-scale development in the foreseeable future. Perhaps more is needed of capital, surveying and prospecting, managerial and organisational skill, and practical encouragement of foreign capital by Government.

The Shans are reputed to be good traders. This statement seems truer of the past than of the present. Even in the past when they were good and great traders it was on a petty scale. Caravans of bullock carts, pack bullocks and occasionally mules can still be seen, but their importance is on a much reduced scale and they serve mostly areas inaccessible to motor traffic. From the time of the British annexation of Upper Burma and the Shan States till the early thirties of this century, Shan traders roamed Burma and northern Siam dealing in various agricultural produce as well as precious or semi-precious stones. The more lucky ones sometimes obtained teak leases and became rich. But

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i. Gmelia arborea.

through governmental regulations and other causes, many such Shans in the southeast have since lost their identity and become citizens of Siam.

Even in ordinary trading, modern progress and competition demand education, organization, capital and, above all, perseverance, which the Shans as a whole lack.

This is not to say that the Shans as traders are dead. Some are adjusting themselves to modern needs and methods, and can claim a five-figure income, but the majority need to exert themselves more.

The plague of many of the Shans is gambling. During a pwe or festival in the Shan States there is always a gambling den; and there are three, four, or more pwes annually in every big township. As likely as not, a whole year's earning can literally go down the drain at one of these gambling pwes. Some of the big pwes last as long as ten or fifteen days and each will yield to authorities gambling contract money of ten thousand kyats or more per night. Two or three weeks before the gambling nothing much can be done in the locality because of the preparations for it! During the pwe no one talks of anything else except gambling. After the pwe two or three weeks are spent in recovering from physical and mental effects of the gambling. Thus, each pwe really consumes about two months of time, energy and money of the people. The dispensing of the gambling contract and the receipt of its revenue were the exclusive perogatives of the local sawbwas or chiefs before the surrender of their powers in April 1959. Now those rights are maintained by boards appointed by Government, except in Kengtung and Manglon where the present arrangements are that their sawbwas will give up their powers at the end of the year (1960).

The Shans are almost all Buddhists and their three or four pwes take place in a locality or capital of a State in April (new year), at the end of the Buddhist lent in October, in March (Tabaung pwe or the pwe of Lonsee, i.e. the 4th month), and during the pleasant months between October and March in honour of some local pagodas. In these pwes the people with their families are out in their best clothes and jewellery. Here petty traders with their bullock carts or pack bullocks can be seen doing brisk business in competition with those coming in lorries and buses from afar. Rows of sellers of food and of trinkets make a pretty scene at night with their kerosene lamps. Many a wedding has come about as a result of meetings and sweet coquettish words during pwes. Many Shan folk tales have their setting in pwes. Everybody is happy and care-free. The whole scene presents a perfect picture of pastoral mirth and gaiety, until one sees around the gambling booth the dead-serious faces of both grown-ups and children (sometimes under ten years of age).

In a society that has just emerged from the feudal age and wants to call itself modern, the effect of such an unproductive

activity as gambling on the moral principles and morale of the rulers and the ruled is devastating.

But the Shans are not so bad as a sight of these pves might lead one to think! They have their good side: their past contains incidents of vigour and glory, and their near-present has revealed to foreign observers many positive quantities which I hope the following quotations from some British writers of the period just before their entry into the region (when writing was not intended for the Shans to read of themselves) will show.

Before quoting these it might just be noted that the Shan States is also inhabited by peoples other than the Shans. The following is a break-down of the various races:

Total (excluding East Manglun)	=	1,486,688.
Burma Group	=	190,523.
Lolo-Musho Group	=	84,421.
Kachin Group	=	63,895.
Tai (Shan) Group	=	697,417.
Palaung-Wa Group	=	171,101.
Karen Group	=	178,283.
Chinese Group	=	64,449.
Indian Races	=	32,604.
European & Anglo-Indians	=	1,157.
Others	=	1,887.

These figures are out of a population of 1,506,337 excluding East Manglun (19,649). It is often forgotten that the number of real Shans is slightly less than half of the total.

What sort of people are the Shans?

Temptation is great for the writer to describe them in superlative terms, but it will be better to record what other people say. The people are not what they see or think of themselves, unless confirmed by their own deeds, or by opinions of others. The Japanese and the Germans may not openly call themselves great, but the way they have risen from the unconditional defeat and utter ruin of the last war has made a mark in the world and has entitled them to greatness.

The following is an opinion on the Shans:

The Shans are a thrifty people. Being the inhabitants of a mountainous region, the necessities of life are not so easily obtained as in the fertile deltas of the Irrawaddy and Menam. They are good agriculturists, but excel in trading, by which they supply themselves with food and merchandise not obtainable in their own country. The houses of the better class exhibit a cleanliness and comfort not found among Burmans of the same rank! They have independence of characters and are

given to jealousies and personal dislikes which have kept them divided politically and socially. In warfare they are often cruel and vindictive, not only seeking to put to the sword all men of a hostile region, but often slaughtering the male children which fall into their hands. In time of peace, they are cheerful, hospitable and ready to render help to one another. An innate restlessness gives rise to frequent change of residence in the Shan country itself, so that often, a good percentage of the population in a principality is not native born to that principality. This would doubtless cease to a considerable degree under the peaceful rule of a wise government which secured to the people a reasonable taxation and security in the possession and enjoyment of prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

This is another:

The Shans are endowed with many of the natural qualities which are bound to make for success when allowed to develop under stable government affording protection against oppression and robbery, and giving encouragement to agriculture, trade, and commerce. They have artistic instincts, and some of their silver work is very fine. As there was no coined money in the States even within the last twelve or thirteen years, Shan travellers used to bring down finely wrought and richly chased silver bowls which they exchanged for their weight in rupees in order to make purchases in the bazaars. They are a thrifty people, and they have keen commercial instincts! Sprung from a race of mountaineers, and themselves occupying lofty tracts, they share the natural inheritance of qualities characteristic of the races which have to struggle with nature for the necessities of life. The same natural causes which created differences of this sort between those living north of the Humber and the Mersey, and those living in the more genial southern portion of England, - between North Germans and South Germans; between Norwegians or Swedes, and Italians or Spaniards, - have been in operation to make the Shan of the Burmese-Shan plateau an entirely different man from the Burmese of the Irrawaddy valley, or the Siamese of the Menam valley. Consequently, they have greater independence of character, are better agriculturists, are keener traders, and have a much better knowledge of the value of money than either the Burmese or the Siamese. But the political and social strife and the constant internecine warfare of the last two centuries have made them prone to intense jealousy and personal dislikes, and have rendered them apt to be cruel and vindictive, defects which may probably soon become obliterated under peaceful, good government.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cushing, J. H., Monograph on the Tai Shans. Report on the Census of Burma, 1891, p. 201.
  2. Nisbet, J., Burma Under British Rule - and Before, vol. II, pp. 418-419.

And yet another:

In person the Shans greatly resemble both the Siamese and Burmese, but, as a rule, they are fairer. They are muscular and well formed, and average at least an inch higher. The eyes are moderately linear, the nose is small rather than flat, and here and there has enough bridge to be almost aquiline! The mouth is large, and is made to seem more large by betel-chewing, which discolours the teeth and gums, and rivets attention. The hair is long, straight, and lank, and rarely any other colour than black. The Cis-Salween Shans tattoo to mid-calf, and also higher up the trunk than the Burman. Some of the chief's bodyguard in former days were tattooed from the neck to the ankle, and a few had even the face and the back of the hands tattooed in blue. In addition to the regulation "breeches," charms, usually in red, appear on the chest, back, and arms, as they do in the case of the Burmese. The Shan tattooers are said to be the best, but the custom seems to have begun with the Burmese. The Siamese do not tattoo, and the Lao are specially divided into the Lao Pung-kao, or White-paunch Lao, who live in the east, along the Mekhong River; and the Lao Pung-dam, or Black-paunch Lao, who live in the west. The black and white sobriquets apply accordingly as the man is tattooed or not. The tattooed Lao extend to Muang Nan.

The Shan dress is a pair of trousers and a jacket. The coat is of Chinese pattern. The cut of the trousers varies considerably. Sometimes they are much the same as the Chinese, with well-defined legs, but in the north, and among the better-to-do classes generally, the seat is often down about the ankles, and the garment generally is so voluminous as to look more like a skirt than a pair of trousers. The turban is usually white in the north; of various colours in the south. The Shan-Chinese wear indigo-dyed, somore head-dresses. The broad-rimmed, limp, woven grass hat is the great characteristic of the Tai of British territory. These flapping straws are made in China, and are not worn by the Shan-Chinese, or by the Siamese Shans. During the rains and the hot weather they wear a huge conical covering, like a candle extinguisher crushed down.<sup>1</sup>

These are foreign opinions on the Shans of the Shan States of Burma, and they have been reproduced without comment! The three writers have been regarded as qualified to express sane opinions on the subject.

A fourth opinion may be harmlessly added; and it concerns the Shans of Mengwu, French Laos at the time,<sup>2</sup> and those of Monglem, now in South Yunnan.

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1. Scott, J. G., Burma Handbook, pp. 114-115.

2. 1898-998

Personnally, i.e. in their face and figure, the Shans resemble the Japanese, and the women are, to say the best, just as unconventional and fascinating. But there the resemblance ends. The men are lazy good for nothing fellows, who never, unless absolutely obliged, do any work. The women toil during the summer in the rice fields, and when at home are industriously employed in weaving cloth. Their costume is very pretty, consisting of a turban embroidered with gold thread, a short tight-sleeved jacket, a long white petticoat, and a coloured shirt. Their skirts are so much more becoming than the ugly misshapen trousers of the Chinese women, and it is this difference in costume which strikes the eye of the traveller coming from China ....

The principal town of Meng Lien is situated on the side of a sloping hill at the northern end of a large cultivated plain, 3600 feet above the level of the sea. The mountains around are covered with thick forest, and the plain is watered by the Nam Lien, a cool, limpid, and sluggish river, which runs at the foot of the incline on which the town is built. It was certainly the prettiest place that we had visited during our trip. In the plain, nestling among the woods, are many other villages, and the total population must be nearly 20,000 ....

Amongst the other races of this part of Yunnan the immorality of the Shans is proverbial; but it is not at first apparent to the passing stranger, who is often at a loss to know how such a bad reputation has been established. The fact that both sexes mix freely together, and are on terms of social equality, however contrary to Chinese ideas, does not offend the foreigner's sense of propriety. Further acquaintance, however, will show him that the Shan girls, outwardly so pleasing, modest and industrious, are utterly wanting in virtue; whilst the men are dissolute, even the students in the temples throwing off their priestly dress and demeanour at nightfall. The unmarried women are allowed the most absolute freedom, and have many lovers; but once married, they become as a rule, good and faithful wives, and take a prominent part in the management of the household.<sup>1</sup>

This opinion is certainly unflattering; but every race has its weaknesses. If it is considered that this opinion does not concern the Shans in the Shan States, the following comment will not be out of place.

If a disaster occurs somewhere in the world, some Shans are apt to say that it is not in Burma and therefore it matters not.

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1. Carey, F. W., Journeys in the Chinese Shan States, Geographical Journal, May 1900.

Should the disaster take place in Burma, the same people say it is not in the Shan States. If it happens in the Shan States, they say it is outside their State. If it does in their State, they will say it is not in their town or village. If it comes to their town or village, they say: "That is not our house." If the disaster befalls their own house .....

Such a way of thinking of course had been responsible for the World War II, beginning with the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1932.