


**New Calendar, Old Social Class,  
and Buddhist Tradition:  
A Case Study of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt  
and His Family Members**



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**[ Abstract ]**

This article explored how the introduction of the Gregorian calendar transformed the Buddhist traditional practices of a noble class family who lost power in the royal court during the emergence of the British in Upper Myanmar. It examined in micro-level, the said changes by way of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's diary, which recorded the social and economic conditions of Mandalay, then the capital of the Myanmar kingdom, from 1886 to 1898. When Burmese kings reigned in Mandalay, the court closed on Sabbath day, when the Buddhist Burmese went to monasteries to fulfill religious obligations. The introduction of the Gregorian calendar turned Sunday into a regular day off, which left Sabbath day to be used for more work. This prevented the then noblemen to attend to monastic duties as they had to use the day, for example to go to the bank to draw their pension. This research reveals that the Gregorian calendar has transformed the day off from "holy day" to "holiday."

**Keywords:** Gregorian calendar, holy day, holiday, noblemen, Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt

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## **I . Introduction**

This article explored how the introduction of the Gregorian calendar transformed the Buddhist traditional practices of a noble class family who were lost power in the royal court during the emergence of the British to Upper Myanmar. This was carried out with the reading and analysis of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's diary, which recorded the social and economic conditions of Mandalay, then the capital of the Myanmar kingdom, from 1886 to 1898.

Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt (November 29, 1845-August 10, 1930), head of Wekmasuk town, was a high ranking official in the Myanmar royal court and a famous nobleman during the colonial period. Having faithfully recorded in his diary the changing socio-economic environment in Mandalay immediately after the British annexation, he is considered a primary and valuable historical recorder of his period in Burmese language. His diary written from 1886 to 1898 chronicled Mandalay's transition to British colonial rule was published by the Myanmar Historical Commission and Historical Research Department in three volumes (2005, 2006, 2007).

There are a few studies that utilized the aforementioned diaries. Ohn Kyi (1998) used it to look at the socio-economic conditions of Mandalay during the early colonial period, focusing on how the relatives of the Burmese king and other noblemen coped with the coming of the British. In two separate articles, Myo Oo (2018, 2019) studied the printing history of the last Myanmar kings in Mandalay and the photography of monarchs and noblemen during the said period.

This article expands the said literatures by dealing with the concept of day off in the experience of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt and his family, as it looks at the effect of the introduction of the Gregorian calendar to their lives, most specifically their Buddhist practices. It takes off from an earlier exploration of the effect of the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in several other contexts (see Menh, et al. 2015: 23).

On the formation of the Myanmar state during the colonial period, Robert Taylor (2009) used the word "rationalization" to

describe the British colonial administration of Myanmar into modernity. The introduction of the Gregorian calendar in the colony may be regarded as a part of rationalizing administration. It certainly transformed community life, from its simplicity and traditionality to a complexity characteristic of heterogenous, urban, and modern societies. Its uniting factors have been displaced, as German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1987[1887]) would have it.

## II. The Composition of Traditional Burmese Calendar and Gregorian Calendar

### 2.1 Traditional Burmese Calendar

Irwin's "The Burmese Calendar" (1901) and Chatterjee's "Traditional Calendar of the Burmese" (1998) explain the system of the traditional Burmese Calendar used since the seventh century. It is attributed to Indian brahmins, astrologists with a good knowledge of the calendar, and most of whom were from Varanasi, who settled in Myanmar. They took charge of astrological calculations and adopted the Indian calendar system. The calendar has two cycles during in the time of the Burmese kings—religious and civil. The Burmese Calendar was allowed to be circulated when Myanmar was put under British India by way of the Burma (Myanmar) Gazette every year (Chatterjee 1998: 144; Irwin 1901: Para 1).

The civil cycle follows a luni-solar calendar, with an intercalary lunar month (Chatterjee 1998: 146). The year has twelve months, with each assigned with a 29 or 30 day-duration, alternately. The intercalary lunar month is added in some years to adjust the length of the year. The seven days are also named after the Sun, Mon, and the other five planets, as common in all countries. The month is divided into two periods, waxing and waning. The 15th of the waxing period is pegged at the full moon day, *Labyi-ne*, and the day of the new moon lands in the last day of the month, usually the day 14 or 15 of the waning period, *Lagwe-ne* (Chatterjee 1998: 154).

### 2.2 The Gregorian Calendar and New Holidays in British Myanmar

The Gregorian calendar introduced new holidays British Myanmar,

with some mandated to be regular: Sunday, New Year's Day, Christmas Day, Vocational Holiday, Thadingyut and Thingyan Water Festival holidays. Some were instituted as special holidays commemorating significant episodes: Prince Albert's Funeral Day and the Honorable Holiday of Lieutenant Governor Frederick William Richards Fryer's administration.

Sunday has been assigned as a day off since the early colonial period, which is really not the case in the time of the Burmese kings. Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt, though no longer a government staff after the third Anglo-Burmese War (1885) recorded that in some Sundays, he had to go to the bank to receive his pension from the British government. Pensions were given every first day of the month starting May 1886. Clearly, the institution of Sunday as rest day in 1886 (Than Tun 2005: 170, 235, 304, 329, 353 and so on) changed the lives of the people of Myanmar.

Though Sunday was turned into a rest day, offices did not close on Saturdays. Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt recorded having received his pension in some Saturdays: September 1, 1888 (Than Tun 2005: 369), January 1, 1887 (Than Tun 2005: 206), September 1, 1888 (Than Tun 2005: 369); December 1, 1888 (Than Tun 2005: 390), among others.

The New Year's Day was an additional celebration to the Burmese New Year Thingyan Festival. Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt first recorded a New Year Holiday in January 1, 1887 (Than Tun 2005: 206). He also noted it in the years 1889 (Than Tun 2006: 31), 1891 (Than Tun 2006: 218), 1895 (Than Tun 2007: 132), and 1897 (Than Tun 2007: 416).

Christmas Day was first recorded by Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt in 1886, a year after the Third Anglo-Burmese War. He recorded it twice in his diary, in 1886 (Than Tun 2005: 204) and 1889 (Than Tun 2006: 115). It is believed that government offices were officially closed in during Christmas Day.

The day Commissioner Fryer assumed the post of lieutenant governor was also proclaimed into a special holiday, as recorded by Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt in May 1, 1897 (Than Tun 2007: 472). Another special holiday was Prince Albert's Funeral Day on January 20, 1892 (Than Tun 2006: 326).

In Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's entries mentioning the claiming of his pension, some holidays were also mentioned but were left unexplained. March 1 and 2, 1893 were holidays, a Wednesday and a Thursday, respectively (Than Tun 2006: 456-7). In November 1, 1893, he recorded that offices and the bank were closed, with no reason mentioned (Than Tun 2006: 541). He was only able to receive his pension only on November 2, 1893 (Than Tun 2006: 541). Around the same time, in October 31 and November 1, 1895, he also recorded not going to the bank (Than Tun 2007: 248), only to receive his pension on November 2 (Than Tun 2007: 248).

On the other hand, there were two records of Queen Elizabeth's birthday in Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's diary, containing the following entries: "today was the British Queen's birthday and 15 or 30 shots of cannon were fired" (Than Tun 2005: 152) and "today was British Queen's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration birth day and some shots of cannon were fired" (Than Tun 2005: 342). He does not mention whether they were proclaimed holidays.

In addition to gazette holidays, the colonial government initiated summer and winter vacations in British Myanmar. According to Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt, some of them, Burmese noblemen and their wives, were invited to the house of the Deputy Commissioner of the Jurisdiction for some tea and snacks on October 9, 1886.

Meanwhile, the Deputy Commissioner identified two holiday months in a year, October and January, according to British tradition. 11 holidays were slated in October, including October 8, 1886 (Than Tun 2005: 188).

### **2.3 Counting Systems and Sabbath Day Overlaps with Weekdays**

The Gregorian calendar generally determines holidays based on the days of the week, e. g. Sunday.<sup>1</sup> In this, there are generally four Sundays in a month. On the other hand, in the case of traditional Burmese holidays, the considered Sabbath Day, is counted by date.

Based on lunar system and there are four Sabbath Days in a

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<sup>1</sup> Although British authorities initiated some holidays, like Christmas and New Year's Days, Summer and Winter vacations were not regular holidays.

month: the first falls on the day of the waxing moon, the eighth day; the second falls on the full moon, the fifteenth day; the third is on the waning moon, the eighth or the twenty-third day; and the last on, on the new moon, the twenty-ninth or thirtieth of the month.<sup>2</sup> Both Gregorian and Burmese calendars may be similar in those but the manner of counting differentiates them.

Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt’s diary show the many instances that Sunday overlapped with Sabbath Days. His diary is a good material for statistical analysis as he was pious to have recorded the Sabbath Days of the period, from 1886 to 1898. The entries also give us a glimpse at ho his household coped with the transition. My statistical analysis will follow the historical period used to publish his three-volume diary to count the number of Sabbath Days in the years mentioned.

As the concept of the holiday was transformed by the additional holidays mentioned, it may be inferred that Sabbath Days were not days off, and holidays may not have necessarily coincided with Sabbath Days. Significant religious days were however recognized as holidays by the colonial government. The table below show the said overlaps:

<Table 1> Sabbath Days from 1886 to 1898

Year	Total	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1886	37	6	5	4	6	5	5	6
1887	49	8	8	7	8	6	5	7
1888	49	6	8	6	5	7	9	8
1889	49	6	5	7	8	8	8	7
1890	48	8	8	8	8	5	5	6
1891	50	7	7	8	6	7	7	8
1892	45	7	6	3	6	8	7	8
1893	50	6	7	9	8	6	7	7
1894	49	8	8	8	6	6	6	7
1895	51	8	7	6	6	8	7	9
1896	48	6	6	7	8	7	7	7
1897	50	7	8	8	8	7	6	6
1898	3	0	0	0	0	1	2	1

<sup>2</sup> According to the traditional calendar, some months contained 29 days e.g. Dagu, Wagaung. and Thidingyut etc. Some contained 30 days, e.g. Kahson, Waso, and Tawthalin, etc.

From this table, one may see that Sabbath Days fell less and less on Sundays during the early colonial period. 16.21% of Sabbath Days fell on a Sunday in 1886; 16.32 % in 1887 and 1894; 12.24% in 1888 and 1889; 16.66% in 1890; 14 % in 1891 and 1897; 15.55 in 1892; 12% in 1893; 15.68% in 1895; and 12.5% in 1896.

## **2.4 From Holy Day to Holiday**

Holiday essentially means a day's official closure of offices and schools. In the reign of Burmese kings, the court closed on Sabbath Days that fell on the eighth, fifteenth (full moon), eighth (twenty-third), or the fourteenth or fifteenth (new moon fell on twenty-ninth or thirtieth of a month). On these days, officials went to monasteries to take the precepts according to Buddhist tradition.

This was totally changed after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar. Sundays may have become a regular day off but work on Saturdays often prevented many Burmese Buddhists to attend to monastic duties. Some Sabbath Days also overlapped weekdays and people were mostly working. The colonial period transformed day off from "holy days" into "holidays."

The British recognized the Buddhist Thingyan and Thadingyut holidays. Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt records the ten Thingyan holidays starting April 11, 1892 (Than Tun 2006: 349). He also noted that in one Thadingyut, on October 2, 1887, the seventh month of the Burmese year, he was not able to get his pension (Than Tun 2005: 276). He only received his pension on September 3, 1887, as the bank was closed on the full moon day of Thadingyut. (Than Tun 2005: 276).

## **III. The Effect of the Gregorian Calendar to Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt and His Family**

### **3.1 The Observation of U Latt**

Table 2 shows that in 1886, Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt was able to observe 51.35% of the Sabbath Days which constitute 35.13% of the total number. In 1887, he recorded 42.85% and observed 32.65%;

in 1888 44.89% and 40.81 %; in 1889, 38.77% and 18.36%; in 1890, 51.93% and 25%; in 1891, 72% and 20%; in 1892, 73.91% and 47.82%; in 1893, 73.46% and 26.53%; in 1894, 84.61% and 34.61%; in 1895, 74% and 40%; in 1896, 68% and 30%; and in 1897, 68.08% and 44.68%.

<Table 2> Observation of Sabbath by Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt

Year	Total	Not Recorded	Recorded	Observed	Not Observed
1886	37	18	19	13	6
1887	49	28	21	16	5
1888	49	27	22	20	2
1889	49	30	19	9	10
1890	52 (48+4)	21	27	13	4
1891	50	14	36	10	26
1892	46	12	34	22	12
1893	49	13	36	13	23
1894	52 (49+3)	8	44 (41+3)	18	26 (23+3)
1895	50	13	37	20	17
1896	50	16	34	15	19
1897	47	15	32	21	11
1898	4	2	2	0	2

The year which garnered the most number of Sabbath Days was 1894, and the least, 1897 [excluding 1898]. On average across twelve years, he observed 32.95% of Sabbath Days. On days he could not fulfill his obligations, he was on official business or claiming his pension.

<Table 3> Observance of Sabbath by Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's Wife

Year	Total	Not Recorded	Recorded	Not Observed
1886	37	2	2	0
1887	49	3	3	0
1888	49	1	1	0
1889	49	2	0	2
1890	52 (48+4)	7	5	2
1891	50	3	1	2
1892	46	5	4	1
1893	49	14	14	0
1894	49	14 (13+1)	11	3(2+1)
1895	51	24	17	7
1896	48	16	12	4
1897	50	19	17	2
1898	3	0	0	0



<Table 4> Observance of Sabbath by Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's

Year	Total	Recorded	Observed	Not Observed
1886	37	0	0	0
1887	49	3	3	0
1888	49	0	0	0
1889	49	0	0	0
1890	52 (48+4)	7	5	2
1891	50	3	1	2
1892	45	3	2	1
1893	50	10	8	2
1894	49	13 (12+1)	8	5 (4+1)
1895	51	23	17	6
1896	48	26	21	4
1897	50	18	16	2
1898	3	0	0	0

The tables above show that the Sabbath Day observance of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt's wife and family members was far less. Table 5 shows that his wife observed 5.4% of the total Sabbath days in 1886. This is not very far from the rate of observation of his family. Despite this, we may still conclude that religious practices were still maintained despite the changes.

<Table 5> Percentage of His Wife's Observance

Year	Total	Recorded
1886	5.4%	100%
1887	6.12%	100%
1888	2.04%	100%
1889	0%	0%
1890	9.61%	71.42%
1891	2.12%	33.33%
1892	8.88%	80%
1893	26%	100%
1894	22.44%	78.57%
1895	33.33%	70.83%
1896	25%	75%
1897	34%	89.47%

<Table 6> Percentage of His Family Members' Observance

Year	Total	Recorded
1886	0%	0%
1887	6.12%	100%
1888	0%	0%
1889	0%	0%
1890	9.61%	71.12%
1891	2.12%	33.33%
1892	4.44%	66.66%
1893	16.32%	80%
1894	33.33%	61.53%
1895	33.33%	73.91%
1896	43.75%	80.76%
1897	32%	88.88%

### 3.2 The Effect of the New Calendar on Traditional Buddhist Society

If we remember, there are four Sabbath Days in a month. In the days of the Burmese kings, courts are closed and people go to monasteries to perform their obligations (Zawgyi 1995: 41). Among these are the Thingyan Water Festival (Burmese New Year), Thadingyut, and Tazaungtaing. These were days of rest, a break from the daily work of officials (Aung Thein 1983: 15, 27, 37, 50).

Clearly, the Gregorian calendar changed all these, as may be seen in Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt’s own recording. He had to attend to both personal and royal matters, as may be seen in the next table.

<Table 7> Days Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt Could not Observe the Precept

Year	Bank	Office	Meeting (House)	Total	Sabbath Day	Percentage
1886			1	1	37	2.7
1887	2	2	4	8	49	16.32
1888	1			1	49	2.04
1889	1		2	3	49	6.12
1890	1			1	52	1.92
1891	1		19	2	50	4
1892	1	2	1	4	45	8.88
1893	1			2	50	4
1894					49	0
1895	1			1	51	1.96
1896	1			1	48	2.08
1897	5	2	1	7	50	14

In this table, 1894 recorded no overlap between Sabbath Day weekdays. 1887 recorded the most number of overlaps. Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt could not observe the precepts by 16.32% that year. On average, across twelve years, he could not observe precepts by 5.33% of each year because of his engagements. His experience is taken as something reflective of a regular Buddhist Burmese who had to work and live according to the new order of time.

Based on the combined appreciation of our tables, those who worked in offices or in a companies in those days could have only observed 14.43% of the total number days to observe the precept between 1886 and 1897.

#### IV. Conclusion

The case of Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt is indicative of the changes experienced by Buddhist Burmese society after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in the early days of colonialism. Instead of being able to practice their faith during Sabbath Days, as prescribed by the Burmese traditional calendar, he and his family members were also overtaken by different concerns. This also reflects the changes being experienced by ordinary workers during the colonial era.

This experimental work has also underlined how the concept of “holy day” was transformed into “holiday” as it had examined in a micro-level individual behaviors that may be deemed reflective of the larger behavior of people in this particular part of the social history of British Myanmar.

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Received: Sep. 06, 2019; Reviewed: Dec. 09, 2019; Accepted: Jan. 10, 2020