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Burma and the politics of names

(13:51 AEDT, 12 July 2010)

Foreigners are often confused by personal names in Myanmar. There has also been a long tradition of pseudonyms, both inside the country and among Myanmar-watchers outside it. There are thus many traps for the unwary. In the interests of transparency, it should be noted that ‘William Ashton’ and ‘Kay Merrill’, both listed in the article below, are pen-names used at different times by the author.

The use of pseudonyms in international relations, public commentary and literature has a long and sometimes distinguished history.

An example of the former that springs to mind is George Kennan’s influential article ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, which was published in the US journal *Foreign Policy* in 1947 under the pen-name ‘X’.¹ In 1976, noted Australian Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans published *Chinese Shadows*, his trenchant critique of Maoist China, under the name ‘Simon Leys’.

The use of *noms de plume*, *noms de guerre*, stage names and the like has also been common in Asia. Burma, for example, has a well-established tradition of pseudonyms and other kinds of assumed names. This derives in part from Burmese society and culture, but it has also been encouraged by the country’s chequered political history.

1 ‘X’ [George F. Kennan], ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct.

There are a limited number of name elements in use by the Burmese.² Also, names are usually based on astrological portents and the day of the week on which a child is born. As a result, many Burmese bear the same name. Hence the widespread use of nicknames and other sobriquets, even in professional life, to distinguish individuals from their namesakes.

Some public figures have added the name of their hometown, like former health minister ‘Myanaung’ U Tin, or their profession, like ‘Tekkatho’ (‘university’) Phone Naing. It is also common for Burmese journalists and authors to be tagged with the names of their host publications, such as ‘Guardian’ U Sein Win and ‘Journal Kyaw’ Ma Ma Lay.

The developing use of *noms de plume* was an integral part of the evolution of modern Burmese literature, particularly since the final British conquest of the country in 1885. A ‘sampling survey’ of Burmese pen-names compiled by Cornell University in 1975 listed the titles of 650 pseudonymous works under 320 personal names.

Some British colonial authors also used pseudonyms. J.G. Scott’s classic work *The Burman* (1882) was published under the name ‘Shway Yoe’. Eric Blair, author of *Burmese Days* (1934), adopted the *nom de plume* ‘George Orwell’. He was inspired by another member of the Indian Imperial Police, Burma-born Hector Munro, who wrote short stories as ‘Saki’.

The reasons for adopting pseudonyms are many and varied. Some authors simply want to remain anonymous for personal or professional reasons. Others have considered it fashionable to publish under a pen-name. In the 1920s and 1930s, critics of colonial rule wished to avoid detection and arrest by the British authorities.

Burma’s famed Thirty Comrades, who allied themselves with Japan in 1942, all adopted *noms de guerre*. Nationalist leader Aung San was known as Bo Tayza (‘General Flames’). Another in the group was Ne Win (‘Radiant Sun’), who went on to rule Burma from 1962 to 1988. He was born Shu Maung—a name he was happy to discard as it betrayed his mixed Chinese–Burmese ancestry.

2 ‘Burmese Names’, *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burmese_name.

After Ne Win's coup d'état, many independent journalists, commentators and literary figures sought to hide their identities from the military regime. Despite heavy censorship, some were still able to become quite influential.³ This prompted the regime to ban the use of certain *noms de plume*—a practice it repeated after the 2007 'Saffron Revolution'.

During and after the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, many activists adopted pseudonyms. For example, Min Ko Naing ('Conqueror of Kings') is the *nom de guerre* of a key figure in the opposition movement. Many members of the militant All Burma Students' Democratic Front took new names, both for security reasons and to reflect their commitment to armed struggle.⁴

Some anti-regime figures have become well known under stage names. One is the satirist Zarganar ('Tweezers'), who in 2008 was sentenced to 35 years in prison for 'public order offences'. The undercover reporters who covered the 2007 civil unrest and later appeared in the docudrama *Burma VJ* used pseudonyms to avoid official retribution.⁵

Even exiled Burmese have felt the need to hide their identities, mainly to protect friends and relatives still living in Burma. Most journalists working for expatriate news services, such as *The Irrawaddy* magazine, publish their stories under pen-names.⁶ Burmese working illegally outside the country have used false names to avoid being identified and sent home.

Foreign authors and journalists covering Burma have also used pseudonyms, mainly to ensure they are not denied entry to the country. A rollcall of such *noms de plume* includes many that are familiar to Burma-watchers, such as Emma Larkin, William Ashton, Michael Black, Norman Robespierre, Clive Parker, Arnold Corso, Edmond Dantes, Kay Merrill and William Boot.⁷

3 Anna J. Allott, *Inked Over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors* (New York: PEN America, 1993), burmalibrary.org/docs/inked-over-ripped%20-out.htm [page discontinued].

4 Aung Naing Oo, 'Nom de Guerre', *The Irrawaddy*, 23 February 2008, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10524 [page discontinued].

5 *Burma VJ*, burmavjmovie.com/ [site discontinued].

6 *The Irrawaddy*, www.irrawaddy.com/.

7 See, for example, 'Emma Larkin: Writing about Burma', www.emmalarkin.com/test/ [site discontinued].

All these people have good reason to be wary of the Naypyidaw regime. Over the years, it has been highly sensitive to public criticism and quite ruthless in hunting down the relatives of exiles and 'defectors' opposed to military rule. Several prominent foreign journalists and academics have been banned from Burma for writing frankly about the regime's failings.

That said, the use of pseudonyms can pose problems. Given the dearth of reliable information about developments in Burma, it is often necessary to know who is speaking to make informed judgements about the reliability of their sources and the value of their analysis.

Also, if an author's identity is concealed it can be difficult to take into account any possible political bias or personal agenda. In the highly charged atmosphere that characterises the public debate on Burma, this is an important consideration. Even the military government has published propaganda and disinformation under pseudonyms.

Another problem is that, hiding behind false names, some activists have launched ad hominem attacks against scholars and commentators who have expressed unfashionable views about Burma or advocated unpopular policy positions. Not knowing the identity of their accusers, the targets of these attacks have found it difficult to defend themselves.

Given the wide range of views heard about most aspects of contemporary Burma, it should come as no surprise that even names can be controversial. After all, more than 20 years after the military government changed the country's official name, argument still rages over the relative merits of 'Burma' and 'Myanmar'.⁸

8 'Should It Be Burma or Myanmar?', *BBC News*, 8 May 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7389525.stm.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.