One of the most important issues enmeshed in the historiography of early Burma is the notion of the “downtrodden Talaing.” This is the belief that King Alaungpaya in the eighteenth century had conducted a war of extermination of the Mon people, enslaved them, and had deliberately created a derogatory Burmese term (talaing) to be used thenceforth for the Mon people. How tragic that these cultured people, the Mon, the “Greeks of Southeast Asia,” who gave civilization to the more barbaric Burmese and T’ai speakers, were treated in this terrible way. This kind of commiseration made the Mon sentimental favorites of their colonial masters, both scholars and officials, and the myth became the basis for the conceptualization, organization, and reconstruction of nearly all of Burma’s precolonial, and to an appreciable degree, also its colonial and postcolonial history. Not surprisingly, the theme of the “downtrodden Talaing” is thoroughly entangled in the Mon Paradigm, and although not entirely unambiguous, I suspect that sympathy for the Mon may have originally inspired the whole thesis; it certainly precedes it. This chapter describes the genesis, development, and perpetuation of one of the most egregious myths in colonial Burma’s historiography.

Although I do not wish to debate the issue of whether the Mon as a people were in fact oppressed by Burmese speakers as claimed, it is, however, quite revealing that I have found nothing in the precolonial Mon histories that show any indication that they were, or felt themselves oppressed by any group, including the Burmese speakers, even when both parties were at war. Nor is this notion found in early Chinese, Arabic, or Burmese sources. Equally important, it is also not found in some of the earliest English-language reports about Burma, notably those of Michael Symes’s missions to the court of Ava in 1759 and 1802.

In fact, the image of a victimized Mon people was not initially a self-image at all; it was a colonial construct, found originally only in English in the official memoranda just prior to and during the First Anglo-Burmese
War of 1824, and during the second half of the nineteenth century in western-language scholarship on Burma. Eventually this downtrodden image made its way into the colonial historiography of early Burma during the twentieth century, and from there to the next generation of Burma specialists, until today it is still being nurtured by our modern propensity to favor the underdog, celebrate minority ethnic autonomy, and show a general dislike for the authoritarian state, if not the state itself. It is as if colonial-period officials and scholars had produced a movie about early Burma in English unbeknownst to the indigenous, non-English-language-speaking society, which the following generations of Burma “experts” dealing with the subject of Mon-Burman relations largely accepted. And that “movie” rather than Burmese society itself, by and large informed today’s understanding (actually misunderstanding) of Burma.

To reiterate, however, I am less concerned with the issue of alleged oppression, or even with the “real” etymology of the word talaing, than I am with showing how the notion of that supposed oppression was constructed and how colonial etymology of the word talaing was made commensurate with its desired consequences.

The First Anglo-Burmese War and the Downtrodden Talaing

So far, I have traced the notion of an oppressed Talaing peoples most explicitly to a proclamation made by Sir Archibald Campbell, commander of the British forces during the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, addressed to the Mons of the Delta.

. . . Against you, inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Pegue and the noble Talian race, we do not wish to wage war. We know the oppression and tyranny under which you have been labouring for a length of time, by the cruel and brutal conduct of the Burmese government towards you; they acknowledge you by no other title than the degrading and ignominious appellation [sic] of slaves; compare, therefore, your condition with the comfort and happiness of the four maritime provinces, . . . now under the protection of the British flag . . . choose from amongst yourselves a chief, and I will acknowledge him!1

But how could Archibald Campbell, hitherto unknown in Burma affairs, have had such misinformation about the “Talian” people unless the information had been given to him? It suggests that prior to or during the First Anglo-Burmese War the notion of a downtrodden Talaing people was already present in the official discourse of the British Government of India. Yet I cannot find that notion earlier, even in one of the earliest British accounts of Burma: Michael Symes’s journey to Ava in 1795 where, for the
first time, he explains, in a footnote—suggesting that the use of the word “Taliens” among English speakers was new—that the people of Pegu, everywhere called Peguers, were actually called “Taliens” by the “Birmans.” Nearly all previous English-language accounts, such as that by Captain George Baker in 1755, referred to the people of Pegu as “Peguers,” not Talaings. And importantly, neither Baker nor Symes had anything to say about any oppression or that the word talaing implied any sort of enslavement. Thus Campbell must have gotten that elsewhere or made it up as a contingency of war.

Symes’s report was considered too “favourable” by the next envoy of the East India Company to Ava, Captain Hiram Cox, whose mission was from 1796 to 1798. According to Dorothy Woodman, Cox’s journal was “bad-tempered and misleading” and “provided the basis of one of the most hostile accounts of Burma ever written in time of peace.” Yet I did not find any reference in it that the word talaing implied enslavement, although Cox did write of the “tyranny,” “impertinence,” “dishonesty,” “arrogance,” “insolence,” and “perversity” of “these [Burmese] people.” Cox’s report was followed by G. T. Bayfield’s Historical Review of the Political Relations between the British Government in India and the Empire of Ava, about which Hall wrote: it “is full of blemishes” [while his] “anti-Burmese prejudice has led him to be deliberately misleading, or even to falsify the record.” But he too apparently did not say anything about the downtrodden Talaing. Thus when and where precisely the notion of an enslaved Talaing people originated is not entirely clear, but it must have occurred after Symes (or Cox) but before or with Campbell.

Campbell’s plea included another, related idea, called the “Pegu Project.” Its objective was to take the Mon living in Burma and those who had fled to Siam during the previous several decades and recreate, at Pegu, “the ancient kingdom of the Mon” as a counterbalance to the court of Ava. The British Government of India, perhaps thinking that the Siamese might be eager to accept a strategy that would reduce the power of the Burmese while creating a buffer between them (the Siamese) and the Burmese, relayed the message to Siam to secure their help in the British War with the Burmese.

Captain Henry Burney, then envoy to the court of Siam, was to inform them of this strategy. Apparently not Burney’s own idea, he had obtained information from an intelligence report received from a Capt. Robert Fenwick, commanding officer at Martaban, and had presented it in a formal letter, signed by Burney, to the ministers of the king of Siam. In part, it stated that the British Government “has determined upon restoring the old Pegu Kingdom and establishing the Talliens as a barrier between the Burmese and English and Siamese. Such an arrangement will it is hoped be
highly satisfactory to the Court of Siam, and urge it to the most prompt and decisive cooperation with the English.”

D. G. E. Hall in his biography of Burney made several attempts to convince the reader that Burney did not agree with the Pegu Project. He even called it a “hare-brained” scheme and said that Burney bent over “backwards in an effort to treat the proposal seriously though quite obviously in his opinion it was impracticable and absurd.” These, however, were Hall’s own conclusions made much later in hindsight; there is no evidence that Burney did not consider the project seriously at the time. Indeed Burney wrote that his concern was whether the British should keep “absolute pupillage” over the revived “Pegu Kingdom,” not whether it was a viable idea, demonstrating that he did consider it seriously. The issue for Burney, it appears to me from his letters, was not so much whether the Pegu Project should be implemented, but how best to do it.

In any case, the idea of creating an independent Pegu kingdom ruled by the Mon, as well as the related notion that the word _talaing_ conveyed notions of enslavement, had nonetheless become very much part of the official colonial discourse on Burma by the time the First Anglo-Burmese War had commenced. And although it may have originated as a political strategy—that was in fact discarded after Britain annexed the maritime provinces of Arakan and Lower Burma—it was likely the seed that later developed into the idea of the downtrodden Talaing. Virtually all the colonial scholars of Burma were also its officials, so that scholarship, like trade, followed the flag.

**The Talaing Question and Scholarship of the Nineteenth Century**

The policy that originally played the Mon minority of Burma against the Burman majority for immediate, wartime reasons, had direct consequences subsequently on colonial scholars and their Mon-speaking clients with regard to Mon-Burman relations. As wartime ideas led to a fuller, academic extrapolation of the downtrodden Talaing theme, scholars now searched for and “found” an etymology of the word _talaing_ that fit those preconceptions. Unfortunately, the belief of the downtrodden Talaing (if not the etymology) is still with us today, much like the colonial period’s projection backward into Burma’s history of its prejudices regarding the myth of Rāmaññadesa.

The notion of the downtrodden Talaing appeared to have first surfaced among semischolarly publications in the mid-nineteenth century. Here the work of the Rev. Francis Mason was crucial. In the dedication of his book made to Phayre, on whom Mason depended heavily, he wrote:
The golden age, when Pegu was suvanna-bumme, ‘The land of gold,’ and the Irrawaddy suvanna nadee, ‘The river of gold,’ has passed away, and the country degenerated into the land of paddy, and the stream into the river of teak. Yet its last days are its best days. If the gold has vanished,—so has oppression;—if the gems have fled,—so have the task-masters; if the palace of the ‘Brama of Toungoo’ is in ruins, who had ‘twenty-six crowned heads at his command,’—the slave is free.  

Subsequently, the etymology of the word talaing became more seriously debated in semischolarly circles, albeit among a small group, beginning with Phayre in his 1873 article called “On the History of Pegu.” There he suggested just the opposite of what most officials had been saying. He argued that the word talaing was likely derived from the word talingana, a reference to the people from the Orissa region of South India by which (as Ussâla or Ussâ) Lower Burma was also known. The word talinga is apparently a later variant of kalinga. As such it is found not just in Lower Burma but elsewhere in Island Southeast Asia, taking such forms as keling, kaling, kling in Malaya, Siam, Cambodia, and perhaps even the Philippines.  

The important point to note with Phayre’s 1873 etymology is that talaing was considered an exogenous term with absolutely no ties to Alaungpaya’s conquest of any downtrodden people. And even though Phayre’s article is one of the earliest scholarly opinions on the subject without much linguistics theory to support it, it still receives acceptance among respected scholars today. As Wheatley stated rather emphatically in 1983, “there can be no doubt that the Burmese appellation ‘Talaing’ for the Mon people of the south is derived from Telingana. . . .”  

One year after Phayre’s work was published, the Rev. James Madison Haswell published his Grammatical Notes and Vocabulary of the Peguan Language, which ignored Phayre’s opinion and continued the downtrodden thesis instead. He wrote that the etymology of the word Talaing stemmed from two Mon words, ita luim (or ita lerm), which he said meant “Father, we perish.” Haswell conjectured that it was a “cry of distress doubtless . . . often heard in the wars of extermination waged by kings of the Alompran [Alaungpaya] Dynasty against the Peguans, whenever they raised the standard of revolt. From this was probably derived the word talaing the Burmese nickname for the Mons.” Absolutely no linguistic principles were presented to explain this conjectured etymology and link with Alaungpaya; it was simply asserted. But he had connected, perhaps for the first time the words ita lerm, talaing, and Alaungpaya.  

In 1883 and 1884, about a decade after Haswell’s work came out, Emil Forchhammer published the two parts of his Notes on the Early History and
It was to become the most important source for perpetuating the theme of Burman oppression of the Mon. In part II Forchhammer took Haswell’s statement about the plight of the Mon and made it part of the conclusions he had already reached regarding Mon-Burman relations and published in part I of his work in 1883. Like Haswell, Forchhammer ignored Phayre’s thesis that the word talaing came from talingana. He offered instead the following explanation.

Prior to Alaungpaya’s conquest of Pegu, he wrote, “the name Talaing was entirely unknown as an appellation of the Muns [Mon], and that it nowhere occurs in either inscriptions or older palm leaves and that by all nations of Further India the people in question is known by names related to either Mun or Pegu.” He postulated that the “word ‘Talaing’ is the term by which the Muns acknowledged their total defeat, their being vanquished and the slaves of their Burmese conqueror. They were no longer to bear the name of Muns or Peguans. Alompra stigmatized them with an appellation suggestive at once of their submission and disgrace.” Therefore talaing meant “one who is trodden under foot, a slave. . . . Alompra could not have devised more effective means to extirpate the national consciousness of a people than by burning their books, forbidding the use of their languages, and by substituting a term of abject reproach for the name under which they had maintained themselves for nearly 2000 years in the marine provinces of Burma.”16 As we shall see, this was sheer nonsense.

Although the theme of the enslavement of the “Taliens” had appeared before both Haswell’s and Forchhammer’s works in Archibald Campbell’s proclamation, it was Forchhammer who explicitly wrote that the word talaing meant, in the Mon language, being “trodden under foot,” “a slave.” That the word talaing was a reference only to the Mon may have come from Haswell, since the earliest version of what later became Judson’s Burmese-English Dictionary, stated in 1826 that Talaing were Peguers;17 that is, the many different people who happened to live in or were from Pegu. It was the way every other observer at the time and earlier had referred to them. And there is nothing in the 1826, the 1852, or the 1883 editions of Judson’s Dictionary of Talaing being enslaved or downtrodden.18 This notion appears only with the 1893 edition of Judson’s, when Forchhammer’s etymology of the word Talaing as “persons trodden upon” and Alaungpaya’s alleged role were incorporated in it for the first time. Indeed, it was reproduced verbatim: “Alompra stigmatized them with an appellation suggestive at once of their submission and disgrace,” exactly what Forchhammer had written in 1884.19

To be sure, Stevenson, the compiler of this edition did not agree with Forchhammer’s etymology. He wrote in the preface that he had “inserted the extracts [from Forchhammer] because they are interesting. . . .” He
then stated that he was “inclined to regard the derivation . . . [of Forchhammer] as somewhat fanciful . . . [and] think it is . . . highly probable that if Alaunghpara had wanted to leave a lasting stigma on the Mun, or Talaing, race, he would have used a Burmese epithet for the purpose,” not a Mon one, since the word Talaing “is surely not a compound of any two Burmese words known to most persons, . . .”; it is derived from the Mon root “lain,” and the nominal particle “ta.” Then he queried most revealingly whether talaing was even “a word now extant in the [Mon?] language?”

As we shall see, it never was part of the Mon language!

As if to stress his point regarding fanciful attempts at etymology, Stevenson also noted that there were no linguistic grounds for another etymology provided by “the late Dr. Forchhammer” either. This had to do with the name of the town Bassein (Pathein in Burmese) which Forchhammer thought “was derived from the fact that in some bygone war a certain ‘thein’ (ordination hall) at the place had been the scene of much slaughter and therefore the Burmese called it Puthein, or ‘hot thein.’” Stevenson remarked that such a derivation was “very unusual” and very “unlikely.”

We know, of course, that this was also sheer nonsense, as the word Bassein comes from the Old Burmese Pusim, which had made its appearance at least by the mid-thirteen century in Old Burmese, and only later appears in Middle Mon as Kusim in the Kalyani Inscriptions of the late fifteenth century.

Perhaps Forchhammer’s views received attention because of his reputation as a scholar and his position as government archaeologist and professor of Pali at Rangoon College, and perhaps also because of his righteous indignation regarding the “plight” of the Mon, a sentiment which was clearly shared by others, such as Mason. However, when compared with Phayre’s relatively neutral view of the same subject, Forchhammer’s indignation is puzzling. It may have been the result of his personal experience among the Mon while conducting research for the publication of Part I in 1883. He focused on Lower Burma and particularly the Mon areas, and perhaps that shaped his views when Part II came out in 1884. Since it appeared a year after Phayre’s History of Burma, it must have also been directed at Phayre’s theory, still expressed in that History, that the word talaing was derived from talingana. It almost seems as if Forchhammer wanted to see the Mon as a “down trodden” group for some personal reason, the pursuit of which is beyond my competence and the subject of this book. Whatever the reason for Forchhammer’s attitude, the discourse on the enslavement of the Mon that had appeared during the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826 had now not only permeated and shaped the works of both Haswell and Forchhammer but also found its way into Judson’s Dictionary of 1893.
To reiterate, the definition of the word *talaing* as a downtrodden people was *new*. It was *not* found in the 1826, 1852, and 1883 editions of *Judson’s*, and the word itself might no longer have been widely used in indigenous society. The facts show, therefore, that only after 1884, and as a direct result of Forchhammer’s definition, was the downtrodden definition of the word introduced into colonial-period scholarship for the first time. And its inclusion in the 1893 edition of *Judson’s* was not the result of original and contemporary research, but of Stevenson’s decision to include Forchhammer’s “etymology” because it was “interesting.” Thus the definition of the word *talaing*, in one of the most authoritative reservoirs of knowledge about Burma for westerners—*Judson’s Burmese-English Dictionary*—on the eve of the twentieth century is actually a late nineteenth-century colonial-period construct.

Forchhammer’s definition had another important consequence: it also apparently changed the meaning of the word *myanmä* in *Judson’s* subsequent editions. In the 1893 edition, *myanmä* had been defined as both “Talaings and Burmans collectively”: that is, as an inchoate *national* term. Twinthintaikwun Mahasithu’s *Myinma Yazawinthit* [“New history of the Myanmar”], written about a hundred years before *Judson’s* 1893 edition, also reveals a similar pattern in this development of the word *myanmä* from a more narrow, ethnolinguistic definition towards a more inclusive, collective, inchoate *national* term. Indeed, as demonstrated in previous chapters, even the sixteenth-century sections of the *Zatatawpon* had begun to express similar sentiments. The process revealed a movement towards nationhood, in which the narrower, ethnic meaning of the word *talaing* had finally merged with the broader, more collective term *myanmä*, at least by the nineteenth century. This kind of evolution is not surprising because Burmese (*myanmä*) speakers were the dominant group that continued to rule the polity that became Burma, so that the name of the largest ethnic group and the name of the polity had become synonymous. The same happened to the Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian polities. However, in the 1953 and 1966 editions, the definition of the word *myanmä* had reverted to its more narrow, ethnolinguistic meaning to apply to Burmese speakers only, and the word *talaing* to Mon speakers only. Forchhammer’s ethnolinguistic definition had apparently influenced a change (at least in lexicography) in the direction towards which the word *myanmä* was naturally headed—a “national” meaning that included both groups.

It is true that the word *myanmä* (as *mranmä*) per se had appeared much earlier, in 1102 AD. At that time, though, it was an ethnonym for Burmese speakers, so that the term was used in adjectival phrases such as “Mranmä music” and the “kingdom” or “country of the Mranmä.” This kind of usage was also applied to minority cultures and polities perceived to have been
Myth of the “Downtrodden Talaing”

comprised of other ethnolinguistic groups, so that Pagān inscriptions mentioned “Rmeñ music,” “Tircul music,” and the “kingdom” or “country of the Tanluin.” By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Twinthin’s chronicle and Judson’s Dictionary were both using the word myanmā as if it referred to a national group (the Burmese), rather than just to an ethnolinguistic one (the Burmans).

But it did not remain that way, perhaps because of Forchhammer’s ethnically loaded definition of talaing in the 1893 edition of Judson’s that also changed the meaning of myanmā in its subsequent editions—after all the words had been combined—thereby helping to perpetuate that transformation. Forchhammer’s retrogressive definition of talaing as a distinct, ethnolinguistic group had frozen in time both the definitions of myanmā and talaing, stopping their evolution towards the newer, collective, national meaning in the single term myanmā that they had already acquired by the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reversing the trend backwards towards an eleventh-century definition instead.

Thus Forchhammer’s views of reified ethnicity had prevailed. The manner in which people in positions of power and influence can and do change the path of language and history by the simplest of acts is rather amazing; in this case, a conjectural reconstruction of a single word based on not a shred of evidence. But in order to prevail, belief in that definition had to have also been part of a larger “consolidated vision,” to use the late Edward Said’s term, of others in power at the time.30

Notwithstanding the retrogressive definitions of the words myanmā and talaing as distinct ethnic terms in the 1953 and 1966 editions of Judson’s Dictionary, the Constitution of 1947 deviated from that definition of myanmā in the political arena, and returned the term to the broader sociopolitical definition towards which it had been headed before colonial-period scholarship interfered. It became the word to represent all citizens of Burma.31 Politics thawed what had been frozen in time by the pseudo linguists. J. S. Furnivall, with his usual vision, noted that the trend towards a “national consciousness” had been arrested by the British;32 and I would argue, so was the word myanmā that expressed that national consciousness.

The Talaing Question in the Early Twentieth Century

By 1912 U May Oung had already proved Forchhammer’s assertion—that the word talaing did not exist earlier than Alaungpaya—to be incorrect.33 Duroiselle was more blunt: “the derivation offered by Forchhammer... followed later by J. Gray, is absolutely inadmissible, not only because it is fundamentally wrong, not to say absurd, but principally because it makes the word ‘Talaing’ originate with Alompra in the 18th century.” He then went
on to cite the numerous texts that May Oung had presented earlier, extant prior to Alaungpaya, in which the word can be found. They include Pagán and Ava period inscriptions, the literature of the Ava period, and the chronicles that followed both. And as Wheatley showed later, the word was also found in Arabic and Chinese sources.

In 1913 G. W. Cooper attempted to reconcile Phayre’s etymology of talaing (that it came from talingana) and U May Oung’s and Duroiselle’s recent exposé of Forchhammer’s erroneous assertion (that talaing was invented by and did not exist prior to Alaungpaya) with Haswell’s etymology (that talaing was derived from ita lerm). That would preserve the all-important downtrodden thesis. Cooper therefore traced the origin of the word talaing not to Alaungpaya but to a class of people called Ita Lerm as described in two nineteenth-century Mon manuscripts. These Ita Lerm were said to have been individuals born of exogamous marriages between Mon women of Lower Burma and South Indian fishermen of “Talingu.” To verify the authenticity of the information contained in the two manuscripts, Cooper sought the testimony of five senior Mon monks.

He began by focusing on two questions. First, was the information about the Ita Lerm contained in the two manuscripts plausible? In a written response, one of the priests, who was eighty-five years old, testified (in perfect Burmese), “I, . . . priest of the Thkekkaw Kyaung, . . . do certify that I have seen the Weerng Dhat manuscript [that is, the Dhatuvam. sa or “Genealogy of the relics,” originally a Sinhalese Buddhist text written in Pali] and that we, of the Mon race, accepted what is written in the manuscript as correct.” And what he verified was that “fishermen of Talingu, a Kala or foreign race, arrived in the Thatôn district and through their marriage with the women of that place (Mons) had children.” Of this Cooper wrote: “the Talaings therefore . . . were the offspring of a mixed marriage between the Indian fishermen . . . and the Mons. . . .”

But neither the manuscripts nor the monk said any such thing. The translation of the manuscripts and the original Mon copies Cooper provided were not referring to the Talaing; they (and the monk) were both speaking of the Ita Lerm. Cooper, having assumed that the word talaing derived from the word ita lerm (following Haswell’s etymology) had already concluded that the origin of the Ita Lerm people was the same as that of the Talaing. In effect, his research “results” only reiterated his original assumption.

Now that he had connected the Talaing and Ita Lerm via South India’s “Talingu” (thereby accommodating Phayre’s thesis), the next problem was to provide the Ita Lerm with some antiquity. He was compelled to do this by May Oung’s and Duroiselle’s articles that the word talaing preceded Alaungpaya. Cooper found the “answer” in the same two manuscripts.
They described a king named “Ajeen Neer Geerng Geer . . . [who] knowing that the race was destroyed or had [been] deteriorated by the father [this is probably where Haswell got his “Father, we perish” definition], offered them for that reason to the pagodas. . . . From that King’s time, the year 300, up to now they are called ‘Ita Lerm,’ and are well known by that name.” 42 Cooper took this statement about the Ita Lerm being offered as pagoda servants and connected them to the Tanluin people of the Pagán period by speculating that as pagoda servants the Ita Lerm had been taken to Pagán with their mythical king Manuha during King Aniruddha’s equally mythical conquest of Thatôn in 1057. 43 (Once again the conquest of Thatôn served as the universal explanation for the history of the Mon in Lower Burma, and the downtrodden Talaing thereby became thoroughly entangled in the Mon Paradigm.) Needless to say, Cooper’s analysis was an anachronistic quantum leap backward through time regarding terms and institutions not only separated by centuries of history but unproven to have been connected either linguistically or historically.

The second question Cooper asked the Mon monks was whether or not the Talaing and the Mon people were the same. Not only was the question misleading, it was also disingenuous, for it was deliberately designed to get a particular answer. Had he been genuinely interested in finding the origin of the Talaing, as suggested by the title of his article, he should have asked if Ita Lerm and Talaing were the same, not whether Mon and Talaing were. And by asking the question within the context of the manuscripts’ description of the degraded Ita Lerm class, of course the Mon monks said no, not wishing to be associated with the Ita Lerm. Not surprisingly, the senior monk testified that “the Mons are not Talaings and should not be called thus for the reason that the Talaings are a degraded race and half castes,” an obvious reference to the Ita Lerm, about whom he had just testified and therefore had every reason to believe was still the subject of discussion. The monk further stated that “this is also what is written in old manuscripts.” That was not what was contained in the manuscripts the monk had been shown at all; the word talaing never once appears in them. Cooper’s “methodology” had clearly misled the monk into assuming that Talaing and Ita Lerm were the same in order to get the answer he wanted. The monk then obliged Cooper by saying that “the Mons are not the same as Talaings but of a different class. . . .” 44 The testimony of the other four Mon priests followed suit, also written in perfect Burmese.

Cooper’s entire approach was a self-serving process of subtly manipulating the contents of the texts and “leading the witnesses” to produce the results he wanted: namely, that the Ita Lerm were the origin of the Talaing and that present-day Mon did not consider themselves to be Talaing (alias Ita Lerm). Raising the second issue, which was quite irrelevant to the topic
of his article, was clearly political, and led to his plea at the end, that “under these circumstances and out of some consideration for the Mon race as a whole, we should call them by their own name, Mon, and not Talaing as hitherto. . . . Why . . . should we continue to call them by a name which undoubtedly gives them pain?”

But in fact Cooper never provided any evidence that the word *talaing* was ever used in precolonial Burma in such a derogatory manner. Indeed, as we shall see, the whole notion that the Talaing were a victimized, despised group belongs to twentieth-century colonial ethnography and found initially only in the English-language literature. It cannot be found in precolonial, indigenous texts. Thus for Cooper to entreat his readers to be more socially aware of the pain being called Talaing inflicted on the Mon (an invention of his own making) was a rather self-serving and self-righteous supplication. Nevertheless, it suggests that the issue had now shifted from shoddy historical linguistics and “methodology” to political correctness.

In 1914 Blagden wrote a devastating critique of Cooper’s article and the sources on which he had depended. Probably the most balanced, clear-headed, and brilliant Burma scholar of this generation, Blagden showed that there is no good evidence that the word *talaing* was derived from *ita luim* (as he spelled it). “I am convinced,” he wrote, “that [the Old Burmese form] *Tanluin*. . . . cannot by any of the ordinary principles of Mon word change be derived from *ita luim*. . . .” or their old forms. Moreover, Blagden argued, the word *ita* has not been found in the Pagān (and, I would add, Ava) inscriptions, although *luim* might have been represented by the late (fifteenth century?) *rlum* or *rlim*. Therefore, Blagden concluded, he was not bound to admit that two Mon words were adopted into Burmese under the form *tanluin*, before demonstrating instances of change of the *r* to *n* and *n* to *m*, either within the Mon language itself or between it and Burmese. Besides, he wrote, it is not known whether *ita luim* is even Mon to begin with and whether it is two words or one.

Blagden’s critique not only showed Haswell’s original contention that the word *talaing* came from the word *ita lerm* to be linguistically untenable —on which Forchhammer’s and Cooper’s theses depended—it meant that the word and people called Tanluin in Old Burmese are also unconnected to the word and people called Ita Lerm. In other words, although the account in the manuscripts Cooper presented as evidence on the origins of the Ita Lerm class per se may be entirely viable—that the class was perceived as a product of undesirable exogamous marriage patterns—that has no necessary bearing on the origins of the word and group of people known as Talaing or their assumed predecessors, the Tanluin of the Pagān and Ava periods. There simply is no evidence that Ita Lerm and Talaing were ever connected historically, or (therefore also) etymologically. That notion also
Myth of the “Downtrodden Talaing” 273

exists only in English-language scholarship, and, as far as I know, did not appear before Haswell’s Grammatical Notes of 1874.

As to whether ita lerm was even a Mon expression presents an interesting case that needs more linguistic research. For our present purposes, the following will have to suffice. Because Halliday’s Mon-English Dictionary published in 1922 includes the word ita lerm (as italem), at first glance it does appear to be a Mon word. But Halliday’s definition of italem was taken verbatim from Haswell’s Grammatical Notes. The entry in Halliday’s dictionary said: “Italem, int. [interjection] Alas! (Literally: Father, we perish).” Haswell’s said: “int. Alas! Literally, Father [we] perish.” Therefore Halliday’s definition is not independent confirmation of Haswell’s, only reiteration, and nearly verbatim at that. In addition, Halliday’s dictionary gave apa as the Mon word for “father,” but stated that ita could be an obsolete form of “father,” but only in combined form in the word italem, quite a tautology. In the end, neither Haswell nor Halliday provided any proof that ita lerm (or italem) existed prior to the mid-nineteenth-century manuscripts presented by Cooper or that the word (or words) were Mon to begin with.

I think it is quite possible that ita lerm might have been derived from the Pali and originally reflected Sinhalese social institutions, not Mon. If one looks at the Mon script in Cooper’s manuscripts, rather than his awkward romanization into English, the spelling of ita lerm and the letters used to write it suggest a derivation from the Pali itthi linga, which means “female organ.” In the 1893 edition of Judson’s Dictionary as well, the Pali word appears as itthi lim in the Burmese-Mon script, also meaning “the private parts of the female.”

This crucial term ita lerm, on which the entire theory of the downtrodden Talaing rests, with its heart-wrenching dramatic links to Alaungpaya’s conquests and the alleged extermination of the Mon peoples and destruction of their culture, may actually be a reference to female sexual organs. Given the explanation in the Mon manuscripts presented by Cooper, where offspring degraded by their Mon mothers’ sexual union with Indian fishermen became the Ita Lerm class, a Pali etymology for the expression actually makes more sense. The undesirability of certain exogamous marriage practices and their half-caste children, decried by the Mon, probably reflected what were originally Sinhalese caste rules. Remember that the two Mon manuscripts Cooper used were called the Dhätuvam. sa (originally a Śrī Laṅkan text). The expression ita lerm, therefore, may have been a deliberate vulgar parody created by the Mon male, in which the woman (characterized by her sexual parts) was ultimately blamed for the degradation of “the race.” Since Haswell and Halliday were both Christian missionaries, I suspect they would not have been particularly enamored of this definition, even had they known about or considered the Pali option. But because Judson
seemed to have known his Pali well (and was also American Baptist), he
probably had no such inhibitions.

All this only lends support to Phayre’s position that the word *talaing*
came from *talingana*, although not necessarily via *ita lerm*. Blagden sup-
ported Phayre by writing that the *talingana* derivation is more in ac-
cordance with “the ascertained rules of Mon word formation in the oldest
known period of the language than the *ita luim* derivation.” 53 Whatever the
actual etymology of *ita lerm* or *talaing*, the evidence does not support Has-
wel’s original thesis that *talaing* was derived from *ita lerm* and that the lat-
ner was a cry of distress caused by Alaungpaya.

But there is a caveat. Although clearly no precolonial linguistic or his-
torical evidence has linked the words *talaing* and *ita lerm* with Alaungpaya’s
conquests, such an association may have developed subsequently among
the Mon in the twentieth century. That would explain in part the colonial
and early postcolonial ethnography regarding the status of people called
Talaing. Blagden noted that “the Mon do use the term ‘Talaing’ but apply
it to a particular and somewhat despised class amongst themselves.” 54 But,
he concluded, it was likely an attempt “to shift on to the shoulders of a
despised class the burden of a name which was unpopular because [it] was
used by a foreign conqueror.” 55 It is from this analysis by Blagden, appar-
ently, that Wheatley nearly seventy years later obtained his information
regarding the development of the word *talaing* as “presumably an attempt
on the part of the [Mon] majority to shift the obloquy of a disparaging ep-
thet on to the shoulders of the class least able to repudiate it.” 56 These con-
clusions also seem to be confirmed by Christian Bauer, who states that the
term *talaing* “is rejected nowadays by the Mons themselves who reconstruct
it as a popular etymology of literary Mon . . . meaning bastard.” 57

But since such usage by the Mon themselves is taken from twentieth-
century testimonials, the derogatory connotation of the word appears to be
a very late development. It may be that the word *talaing* replaced the
despised *ita lerm* only during the colonial period, a phenomenon which
Cooper and others then mistakenly projected back on Pagán times. As we
shall see in the next section, prior to the twentieth-century the Mon never
used the term *talaing* either for themselves or anyone else, and all earlier
usage by others was neither derogatory, nor was it a term of subjugation
and enslavement.

The Evidence on the Talaing (Tanluïñ) people in Early Sources

The earliest possible reference to what may be the word *talaing* occurs in
an external source: the *Hsin T‘ang-Shu*. 58 Subsequently, an Arabic source
dated to around 851 AD mentions the word *tanluwing* that some think may
have been a reference to *talaing*. It then appears in the late-thirteenth-century Yuan source discussed in earlier chapters regarding a “new Teng-lung kingdom.” *Talaing* is found once again in an early-fifteenth-century Chinese account. To date, I have not found it in any South Asian source.

Its first indigenous occurrence is in the Old Burmese inscriptions of Pagan. The two earliest are dated to 1082 and 1107, although Luce dates its first appearance to an inscription of 1204 AD instead. Thereafter, it recurs in Ava period inscriptions and the *Zatatawpon*, where the word *talaing* is found in what may be a fourteenth-century list of “one hundred and one people.” Subsequently, the word *talaing* is found in other sources, including the early eighteenth-century chronicle of U Kala, and Twinthin’s, dated to the late eighteenth-century. Around the same time that Twinthin wrote, *talaing* (as “Talien”) appears in one of the earliest English-language sources to mention the subject, the first journal of Michael Symes, and by the beginning of the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–26, it is again mentioned in Archibald Campbell’s proclamation as “Talian.”

Moreover—and contrary to Stevenson’s “etymology” discussed above that the word *talaing* was a combination of two Mon words—it has not been found in a single Old Mon inscription of the Pagan period so far recovered. Nor is it found in a single Middle Mon inscription. When King Dhammazedi wanted to celebrate the glory of his realm, he called it “this Rman kingdom of ours” not this “Talaing kingdom of ours.” *Talaing* is also not found in any precolonial Mon chronicle discussed in the previous ten chapters. It is not found even in the manuscripts Cooper used to make his case, or in the early twentieth-century Mon chronicles published at Pak Lak, Thailand. And if Shorto’s and Halliday’s dictionaries, along with Bauer’s works cited in this book, are, taken together, comprehensive, it means the word *talaing* cannot be found at all in the Mon language of Southeast Asia. It is truly a term used only in, or with reference to, Burma, and is clearly exogenous to Mon vocabulary itself.

In the earliest domestic sources written in both Old Burmese and Old Mon, the people called Talaing are also *not* connected to the people called Mon or Rmeñ, contradicting one of the most universally accepted conventions in the western study of Burma and considered to be “common knowledge.” Indeed, if one were to ask anyone in Burma *not familiar with westernized Burma studies* what the word *talaing* means, they would invariably point to another ethnic group such as the Pwo Karen, or to a mixed group of some sort, but *not to the Mon*. That Talaing were not considered Mon is reinforced by a statement in the inscription of 1107 discussed in Chapter Ten, thought to have been erected by Kyazittha, and written in Old Burmese. In it, the king stated that he had obtained a “Tanluîn wise man” on one of
his Lower Burma campaigns when he destroyed the “Tanluin kingdom” of Ussāla. Since he had already used the term Rmeñ five years earlier in his 1102 Old Mon inscription, why did the king not also say the “Rmeñ wise man,” and the “Rmeñ kingdom of Ussāla,” unless the word talaing was not a reference to the Mon people at the time?

It is possible that the Old Burmese did not yet have the word Rmeñ in its vocabulary at the time that Kyanzittha erected the inscription (1107), which is consistent with the late appearance of the Rmeñ people in Upper Burma, who are first mentioned in 1102. However, that would tend to confirm my contention that the Talaing and Rmeñ were indeed two distinct groups, as there already existed a word for the Talaing but not for the Rmeñ.

One could also argue, I suppose, that since the term talaing may have been a term of subjugation and an expression of hegemony on the part of the speaker, one would not expect to find an ethnonym such as Rmeñ, which reflects autonomy, in Old Burmese inscriptions, in much the same way Chinese texts used exogenous terms when referring to “inferior” Southeast Asians, or the way the United States government currently refuses to use the ethnonym Myanmā, obviously for political reasons but a statement of hegemony nevertheless. Yet nowhere in the Chinese, Arabic, Burmese, or the earliest of the English-language sources mentioned above was the word talaing ever used in a manner that suggested their subjugation or enslavement.

During the Pagán period, which provides some of the earliest and best evidence, people called Tanluin enjoyed a variety of socioeconomic and political statuses, dominating no particular class or enjoying any special rank. One was a minister at court, others were well-to-do artisans and craftsmen, and still others were those called kywan, that is, people lower on the social scale and attached to institutions or individuals. Kywan were not slaves as we understand the term, even though twentieth-century convention continues to translate it that way, despite studies proving the contrary. The largest number of Tanluin mentioned during the Pagán period belonged to this kywan category. So while some Tanluin played important roles, many did not. Other ethnolinguistic groups were also present and performed similar varieties of functions, some more important, some less. There is no reason to single out the Tanluin in Pagán or Ava as being extraordinary, or having any more significance than any of the other minority cultural groups, unless, of course, one wished to emphasize that exemplary role in retrospect, so that their “plight” in the twentieth century as downtrodden people would appear even more tragic.

The word talaing was not used in a derogatory manner in later Burmese chronicles either; at least it is no different from the way “Mexican”
Myth of the “Downtrodden Talaing” 277

and “Asian” are used in mainstream America today under noncontentious circumstances. Both U Kala and Twinthin used *talaing* in their eighteenth-century chronicles as a means of identification, not of disparagement, even though the latter’s work was written only a few decades after the conquests of Lower Burma by Alaungpaya, when, according to Haswell and Forchhammer, the king allegedly invented this word of enslavement and subjugation for the Mon people. And that belief and definition of *talaing* can be found only in English-language sources, and only within the academic and official circles of colonial society. Neither its definition nor its use can be found elsewhere; that was not part of indigenous society or its sources, which existed outside that colonial enclave of “knowledge” and people. Eventually, however, that “knowledge” about the Talaing became part of colonial and postcolonial scholarship that fed what Steven Kemper calls western cognitive interests, finally filtering down into Burmese society during the twentieth-century until it was applied to a despised group amongst the Mon by the Mon themselves. Only then were some of the Mon people of Burma persuaded (and rather easily too) by colonial officials and scholars that they were indeed “downtrodden” victims and that the word *talaing* was indeed a term of “enslavement.” It is this latter “knowledge,” begun by Haswell and Forchhammer, and perpetuated by Cooper, rather than Blagden’s better-reasoned and more scholarly critique of it, that most scholars of Burma have chosen to inherit.

In the final analysis, the only thing we know for certain about who the Tanluin people were during the Pagan and Ava periods is that they had come from, or were living in, Lower Burma at the time: that is all! It may be one of the reasons Luce wrote that the term *tanluin* probably applied to the people of Lower Burma in a general way and not specifically to the Mon. This was apparently still true by perhaps the fourteenth century when the Zatatapon listed Talaing and Rmañ as two distinct ethnic groups. By the time of U Kala’s *Mahayazawingyi*, the word *talaing* was still being used for Lower Burma people, but a half-century later, those same people were being called both Talaing and Mon in Twinthin’s chronicle. Apparently, then, what was once a general term for people in Lower Burma, had become, by the late eighteenth century, a more focused reference to the Mon people. In short, the reconstruction of the word *talaing* stemmed not from sound linguistics or good history, but from the *desired political and social consequences* of that “etymology.”

**Conclusion**

When colonial officials sought to recreate an independent Mon kingdom in Lower Burma as part of the British Government’s 1824 war effort to
counterbalance the Burmese monarchy in Upper Burma, it started a “dis-
course” on the “antiquity” of Mon civilization in Lower Burma and their
alleged oppression by the Burmans ever since Aniruddha’s eleventh-cen-
tury “conquest of Thatôn.” With Alaungpaya and his eighteenth-century
unification of Burma fresh in the minds of early British writers—some of
whom, like Baker, had actually met the king—it made the conquest story
of Thatôn not only more believable, but current and relevant. This led
some to create and endorse a popular etymology of the word that it meant
downtrodden, derived from a deliberate policy on the part of Alaungpaya
to degrade, enslave, and exterminate the Mon during his drive to unify
Burma in the mid-eighteenth century.

But such conclusions cannot be found in non-western sources, includ-
ing Mon-language texts. Nor can the derogatory use of the word *talaing*
be found among the Mon people before the twentieth century, and even when
it appears it was only after being pressed on them by colonial officials and
scholars. The indignation eventually turned to sorrow and sympathy, as the
plight of the Mon was compared with that of the Greeks, from which, of
course, they would be rescued by those same colonial officials and scholars.
By the early twentieth century both colonial masters and subjects were
together lamenting and mourning the “loss” of the Mon’s once-great cul-
ture of Burma.

With the help of their colonial “masters,” the Mon could now “reclaim
their history and culture,” but only with historiography, for it was something
they could no longer do militarily or politically, in either Siam or Burma.
In this endeavor, the conquest of Thatôn by Aniruddha became a rallying
cry, the event that explained to the Mon how the Burmese speakers had
oppressed them and taken away their ancient culture. As stated in an ear-
erlier chapter, the “fall of Thatôn” became their “Alamo,” a symbol of their
darkest tragedy, their loss of freedom, and the transference of their civiliza-
tion to Pagân, along with their religion, spirit cults, monks, artists, sacred
books, and of course, their *ita lerm* as pagoda servants. The notion of a
“downtrodden” Talaing people could now be extended back to the eleventh
century, while Pagân culture became the example par excellence of what
Thatôn culture “must have” looked like earlier—exactly how early Burmese
archaeologists, in fact, interpreted their data!—in much the same way and
perhaps for similar reasons that the Balinese, when their existence and cul-
ture was also being threatened by the Dutch, could point to Majapahit as
the exemplar of their once-great culture.

However, this twentieth century portrayal of the relationship between
Mon and Burmese speakers was not evident in earlier Mon texts concern-
ing other contentious events. After all, it was only in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries when modern nations were in the making that the
Mon could consider the previous Upper Burma conquests of Lower Burma in a new, nationalistic category of thought. Whereas the earlier Mon texts such as the Yazadarit had considered Upper Burma kings in much the same way that Siamese chronicles had regarded King Bayinnaung, even after two of his conquests of Ayudhya in the sixteenth century: as a cakkavatti (“world conqueror”) who belonged to a universal Buddhist world not composed of nations with marked boundaries and ascribed ethnicities. Only in a twentieth-century nation-state context, could Aniruddha be regarded as a Burman king who had conquered a Mon kingdom; these were categories, issues, and concerns not present before. Grieving Aniruddha’s conquest of Thaton while romanticizing Ramannadesa as the golden age of the Mon in Burma became important issues to the Mon only after colonial scholarship on the same subject had already appeared and molded it in that fashion. It was not only a late, colonially derived idea, but for the Mon of Burma, almost an afterthought, and mainly the perspective of those Mon who had not integrated well culturally or geographically into Burmese society but had retained their culture of exile in Siam.

This kind of “knowledge” and sentimentality regarding the Mon led to the interpretation of Burma’s history by colonial scholarship mainly as an ethnic conflict, whereby one distinct ethnic group was depicted as being in a struggle for its life against another because of that imagined ethnicity. Forchhammer’s words again best represent that view, despite its almost total historical inaccuracy.

[The] maritime provinces of Burma have been for the last eight centuries the scene of struggle for supremacy between the Burmans and Talaings. The victor destroyed the towns, fortifications, and religious buildings of the vanquished foe only to be served with a like measure of retribution when the latter again had found concert and strength under the cover of a feigned submission. It was the Talaings who suffered the last crushing defeat at the hands of the Burmans before the British conquered both. Alompra consigned the Talaing literature to the flames, defaced their inscriptions, prohibited the use of the Talaing language, and destroyed every town and village that ventured to oppose his progress. The Talaings today have nearly merged with the Burmans, their own vernacular is almost forgotten, their literature has not been rewritten, and their history and traditions are nearly effaced from their memory.

Phayre also shared Forchhammer’s views on the general picture of ethnic conflict, even if he disagreed with the etymology of the word Talaing or Alaunghpaya’s alleged role in it. Thus on several occasions, Phayre (among many other English writers) compared “Burma” with “Pegu,” as if they were two different countries, and wrote of the people of Upper Burma from what
he imagined was the true perspective that the Talaing had of them: namely, the “hated foreigners.” This binary model was perpetuated by Bode (and others), who, by the first decade of the twentieth century wrote in a similar vein when comparing Upper and Lower Burma as “two countries.” These views, incidentally, are astonishingly similar to those currently fashionable in the field of Southeast Asian studies, whereby differences within Burmese society are often regarded as profound and significant as those between it and those outside that culture, such as the West. The belief that ethnicity was a concrete, tangible entity rather than a relative, abstract perception shaped the periodizing of Burma’s history into phases of ethnic dominance and decline, an organizational scheme not found in, or shared by earlier domestic chronicles.

Thus, despite the scholarly discrediting of Forchhammer’s thesis of the downtrodden Talaing on several, crucial occasions by the first two decades of the twentieth century, the most important histories published on the country in English that followed him (as well as many that followed Phayre, Harvey, and Hall’s works) nevertheless perpetuated the gist of Forchhammer’s conclusions, so that the consensus of colonial scholarship on the nature and impact of ethnic relations on Burma’s history by mid century had not changed but strengthened. In fact, it provided the ideological basis and vindication for implementing the colonial government’s administrative policy of ethnic separation: divide and rule. It was, of course, rationalized as a process that equalized the races by eliminating the “traditional shackles” of hierarchy that had favored the majority ethnic group.

This late, colonially created image of “perpetual ethnic animosity” in the country was also projected backwards to a much earlier period, which additionally justified their policy as having “historical precedent.” Then, when it was placed in a western methodological framework of linear progress, it indeed appeared to be a natural development “confirmed” by the rise of nation-states in Southeast Asia organized mainly around majority ethnic groups.

The myth of the “down trodden” Talaing, its a posteriori affirmation of the Mon Paradigm, and the role of ethnicity in the making of Burma’s history were thereafter all institutionalized in colonial historiography and ethnography, in most cases by the same officials and scholars who had generated these ideas in the first place, to become the conceptual and empirical basis for Burma scholarship for at least another half-century, a process to be discussed in Chapter Twelve.