URBANISATION PROCESSES AND THE URBAN SYSTEM

EARLY URBANISATION

Cities and urban development have a long history in Myanmar – if, that is, the comparatively large settlements in question may be classed as cities, particularly in a European sense, in that they were characterised by, for instance, some degree of centrality, functional differentiation and social diversity and had a reasonably efficient transport system. There is a body of physical evidence to suggest that they may indeed be classed as such, specifically the extensive areas of palaces, pagodas and urban settlements dating back to pre-colonial times, which were the embodiment in stone of the cosmogonic principles underpinning the Hindu-Buddhist high cultures of continental Southeast Asia under their godkings. Notable examples are the cultural systems, empires and cities of the Pyu, in and around Pyay, Mandalay and Bagan, the Mon empire in the area around present-day Mawlamyine, the landlocked cities along the state and territorial borders, most of which have remained remarkably stable for centuries, and the ports and trading centres along the coast of Rakhine, the Ayeyarwady Delta, Mon and Tanintharyi (for Sri Ksetra: Hudson/Lustig 2008, Su Su/Win Kyaing 2016, for Bagan: Kan Hla 1977, Hudson/Nyein Lwin/Win Maung 2001). Various studies on these early (pre-colonial) settlements explore the consolidation of their influence based on their religious and cultural (Dumarcay/Smithies 1995, Frasch 1996) or political and economic significance (Frasch 2002, Moore/San Win 2007) and provide evidence that in their heyday, they were centres of both sacred and secular power (Taylor 2009). Many walled sites and particularly the water management in the towns have been investigated (Moore 2004, Moore/Swe Than 2006, Moore/San Win 2007, Moore/San Win/Priet Phyo Kyaw 2016).

Under British colonial rule, which commenced in the coastal regions in 1826 and, after the three Anglo-Burmese Wars, was then consolidated across the entire territory of present-day Myanmar from 1886, an urban-based administrative and trading network was established. However, outside Yangon, the capital in those days and a major port (Pearn 1939), an extensive economic and social reshaping of existing settlements – in other words, urbanisation in a European sense – did not occur, for until 1937, the colony of British Burma was, to a large extent, ruled by the British Raj as an eastern province of India. Burma was regarded simply as an annex – an additional space of primary interest as a source of natural resources, until it was finally granted at least administrative autonomy, lasting only a few years. Nonetheless, two development trends could be observed during the British colonial era: firstly, the cities gained in significance with the expansion of resource extraction (mining, timber extraction), accompanied by a modest flowering of industry (Storz 1967: 237-277) and an increase in population numbers (in this context, individual urbanisation processes during the colonial era would be a worthy subject of study), and secondly, the existing system – if it can be described as such – of settlements and cities was reorganised, with a shift of economic focus southwards towards the metropolitan area of Yangon. There are numerous individual depictions of cities, dating back to the British colonial era and the early years of independence, in documents of a statistical and descriptive nature, most of them in encyclopaedic format (see, in particular, O’Connor 1907, Anderson 1876, for example).
With independence in 1948, the beginnings of industrialisation and, particularly in the 1950s, the influx of rural refugees due to political instability, insurrection and rebel attacks in the countryside, the country’s few cities – viewed as safe havens – briefly experienced a massive population increase (for Yangon, see Kraas/Yin May/Zin Nwe Myint 2010, Thomson 1995). In subsequent years, this influx generated further momentum towards urbanisation, primarily in Yangon and Mandalay, but to some extent also in Pathein, Mawlamyine and Myitkyina. After 1962 and the proclamation of a ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’, an ideology which was to a large extent distinctly anti-urban (or at least pro-rural) determined the direction of the country’s regional development for decades. Only in the capital Yangon were there several phases in which ‘new towns’ were constructed. Despite the name, however, they cannot be compared with British new towns from this period; in terms of their phenotype, they were more akin to rural settlements, albeit located on the outskirts of Yangon. Nonetheless, this led to some limited urban expansion (Aung Win 2006, Zin Nwe Myint 1998, Kraas/Yin May/Zin Nwe Myint 2010, Yin May 1962, 1999 and 2006).

With the start of Myanmar’s transition and the introduction of a market economy in 1988/90, urbanisation picked up pace, initially and most visibly in the then capital Yangon (Leonard 1985, Mya Than/Rajah 1996, Naing Oo 1989, Seekins 2005, Than Than Nwe 1998, Zin Nwe Myint 2006a) and in Mandalay, the largest city in central Myanmar. From the mid to late 1990s, visible signs of urban transformation could be observed in other larger cities (Mawlamyine, Bago, Monywa, Pathein, Meiktila and Sittwe) as well as in some settlements close to the border (Lashio, Myitkyina, Dawai and Kengtung), where transregional trade strengthened markets and transport hubs. The extent to which these trends – no longer isolated cases by then – can be described as a system or network of cities/settlements merits further discussion.

After the end of British colonial rule (and the first systematic nationwide censuses were conducted), the urban population as a percentage of the total population fluctuated considerably, falling from 12.3% (947,000 persons, 1891) to 9.3% (991,000, 1901), 9.3% (1.13 million, 1911) and 9.8% (1.3 million, 1921) and then rising to 10.4% (1.52 million, 1931). It should be noted that improvements in the agricultural economy had a dampening effect on migration and city centre of Mawlamyine
that more efficient census data gathering in rural areas is also likely to be reflected in the statistics (Hla Tun Aung 2003: 204-205). Since independence, the urban population has risen from 13.5% (2.58 million, 1953), 23.6% (6.8 million, 1973) and 24% (8.5 million, 1983) to 28.8% (13.1 million, 1996) (Hla Tun Aung 2003: 205).

DEVELOPMENT OF MYANMAR’S URBAN SYSTEM

A small number of studies conducted to date explore the development of individual cities, at least indirectly, with a focus on particular historical periods (Frasch 2002, Kraas/Gaese/Mi Mi Kyi 2006, Rivet 2000, Singer 1995). Currently, however, no publication deals specifically with the urban system in Myanmar (or Burma, as it was known until 1989).

In the era of the pre-colonial empires, specifically those of the Pyu and Mon, and within and among the territories in the Shan Hills, around Mrauk-U/Sittwe (Zin Nwe Myint 2016, Zin Nwe Myint et al. 2016) and Myeik, trade relations undoubtedly existed over longer distances, later extending across major regions, e.g. via the Burma Road and the Assam-Bhamo-Yunnan Route (Thant Myint U 2011). However, a more elaborate network which consisted of more than linear connections was slow to emerge and generally existed only in sub-regions under certain territorial rulers (Hla Tun Aung 2003: 203-205).

One example is the region around Bagan, an ancient city which, chronicles show, was fortified in or around 850 AD by King Pyinbya (Frasch 1996: 43-44). From the 11th century, Bagan was, for around 250 years, the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan, the first kingdom to unify the regions that would later constitute modern Myanmar. During this period, Bagan became one of the most influential cities in continental Southeast Asia, with a population thought to have exceeded 200,000. Its ascendency as the world’s largest Buddhist metropolis of its time began in 1057, when King Anawrahta (1044-77) conquered the Mon capital of Thaton and – as was the custom in Southeast Asia after successful military campaigns – brought back captives, among them craftsmen, masons, plasterers, smiths, doctors and scribes. A construction boom began, triggering a wave of settlement and territorial expansion. In its heyday, the Bagan/Pagan Kingdom encompassed large areas of the Ayeyarwady plain, with the exception of Bago and some districts in the Delta; other territories were obliged to pay tribute. Two centuries later, in 1287, a Mongol army led by Kublai Khan invaded, pillaging and burning. In 1299, hostile Shan princes sealed its fate. It is clear that these invasions came after an era of progressive social decline, with a weakening of secular rule and an increase in the power of the monasteries (Frasch 1996: 342). At its height, thousands of buildings were constructed in Bagan; estimates vary between 2,230 and around 5,000 monuments and more than 12,000 individual buildings in all (Dumarcay/Smithies 1995: 9-27, Kraas 2002). Rich stucco ornamentation created from a mixture of sand and limestone, precious murals and elaborate friezes with depictions of demons, mythical creatures, birds, fig leaves and pearls adorned its structures, attesting to a sophisticated culture and advanced artistic skills. Like Angkor, the Bagan Kingdom was built on the wealth generated from rice production, but unlike Angkor, the government and administration were obviously neither ‘hierarchically structured nor rationalised through the allocation of specific tasks to individual officials’ (Frasch 1996: 36). It may thus be assumed (although this requires separate investigation) that in the surrounding area, too, no obviously hierarchical or strategic system of trade – and therefore no single system of settlement/urban development – was in evidence. Beyond its ‘internal’ administration transregional economic and geostrategic factors appear to have been a key factor in the city’s founding on this site, above all its ideal location at the confluence of the Chindwin and the Ayeyarwady, within reach of the fertile rice growing areas around Kyaukse and Minbu and at the intersection of major trade routes linking China with northern Myanmar, Assam and Bengal.
URBANISATION SINCE 1988

Given the still moderate pace of development during Myanmar’s early transition compared with other Southeast Asian countries and the relatively firm control of the process by the administrations, few of the ‘classic’ urbanisation problems affecting other Southeast Asian cities, notably in the context of urban densification and sprawl, can be observed at present. However, developments are now starting to pick up speed.

Since the introduction of a market economy in 1988, the pace of urbanisation has accelerated significantly. For example, the urbanisation rate – in other words, the urban population as a percentage of the total population – in Myanmar has increased from less than 20% (1980) to 31.9% (2007) and 29.6% (2014) (Kraas/Spohner 2015). The urbanisation rates in the states and regions vary considerably: Yangon Region has the highest urban proportion (70.1%), followed by Kachin State (36.1%), Mandalay Region (34.8%), Nay Pyi Taw Capital Region (32.3%), Mon State (27.9%) and Kayah State (25.3%). Less than a quarter of the population is urban in Shan State (24.0%), Tanintharyi Region (24.0%), Bago Region (22.0%), Kayin State (21.9%), Chin State (20.8%), Sagaing Region (17.1%), Rakhine State (16.9%), Magway Region (15.0%) and Ayeyarwady Region (14.1%; MoIP 2015a: 5). Along emerging development corridors (e.g. the Taunggyi west-east axis, the corridor east of Mawlamyine towards Thailand or the link from Mandalay to China, first to the northeast and then switching north), the onset of increasing urbanisation is evident. The same is true of several border towns, e.g. the growing trade centres of Muse, Tachileik or Myawaddy (Kraas 2014c).

With its 367 cities and towns (official figure) and degree of equilibrium in its urban system, Myanmar – still – has the potential to expand its regional and small towns (Kraas/Zin Nwe Myint/Khin Khin Soe 2016) into drivers of relatively well-balanced national development through a policy of decentralised concentration. However, since political liberalisation commenced in 2010, development processes have begun to be concentrated to an ever greater extent on Yangon and Mandalay (Kraas/Yin May/Zin Nwe Myint 2010).

With the construction of the new capital Nay Pyi Taw – Myanmar’s official seat of government since 6 November 2005, located around 350 km north of Yangon (Gärtner 2011a) – key administrative functions and a substantial number of officials employed by the ministries and public authorities have relocated or are commuting regularly to Nay Pyi Taw, with a considerable two-way movement between

Residential quarters in Nay Pyi Taw
home and workplace. This shift north has moved the capital back to the traditional pre-colonial heartland of Upper Myanmar (Kraas 2014b).

The numerous regional towns – each with a population of less than 200,000 and in most cases between 10,000 and 25,000 – are strung out like pearls along the country’s main infrastructure corridors. Yangon and Mandalay are linked by three transport routes, with the western route passing through Pyay and the two eastern corridors – one the old highway, the other the new expressway – running in some extent in parallel through Bago, Nay Pyi Taw and Meiktila. The transport link from Bago via Mawlamyine to the south of Myanmar also passes through numerous settlements.

This has been accompanied by a gain in significance for the urban economy in the national context and by broad differentiation between the formal and the informal sectors, especially in the cities. In view of the still moderate development dynamics and relatively strong municipal administrations in Myanmar, signs of strain on the urban infrastructure – typical of other Southeast Asian countries (Kraas 2017) – are since a few years being observed and include traffic congestion, infrastructural bottlenecks, energy and electricity constraints (leading to high woodfuel consumption; Zin Nwe Myint 2006a), pollution and displacement of social groups. However, urban expansion – the encroachment of the cities into surrounding green and agricultural space – is clearly taking place, along with the emergence of gated communities (self-standing newly constructed settlements for the middle class and elites, with their own security personnel) and structural change in inner cities, with a functional shift away from housing and towards offices at the most sought-after – and now very expensive – locations, especially in downtown Yangon and Mandalay.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN INNER CITIES

Since the introduction of the market economy, visible processes of urbanisation have been discernible in almost all of Myanmar’s cities as a consequence of the surge in private sector start-ups, especially in commerce, finance and tourism services. The pace of transformation varies, however, according to local economic conditions and is most dynamic in the seven largest cities – Yangon, Mandalay, Mawlamyine, Bago, Monywa, Meiktila and Pathein.
The most obvious processes are catch-up tertiarisation and city-building and the emergence of real estate markets (land and property). The inner-city market and distribution systems are also evolving dynamically, with supermarkets and shopping malls springing up alongside traditional local markets. The boom in construction by private developers, especially the transition ‘winners’, and the construction of new tower blocks or the addition of storeys to existing buildings are resulting in social polarisation and partly resettlement. As a result of a surge in car ownership and the expansion and upgrading of much of the road network, suburbanisation is occurring in outlying areas. Although still at an early stage, some urban districts are beginning to form separate enclaves in the general cityscape; examples are international shopping malls and complexes with serviced apartments and gated communities. These new features of the urban landscape are planned, constructed, marketed and operated mainly by private developers and management companies and therefore evade strong regulation – evidence of the increasing importance of private capital-driven urban development based on international paradigms. Furthermore, the urban fringe – hitherto used for agricultural purposes – is increasingly being absorbed by new districts (such as Thanyin to the southeast of Yangon) with conceptually integrated and coherent functionality and futuristic architecture. This shows the extent to which the demands of the emerging middle class are encroaching on space and having a visible impact on the urban landscape.

The most obvious change is currently taking place in the old quarters whose design and architecture date back to colonial times – in Yangon, this is the old city between Merchant and Anawrahta Road near the Sule Pagoda (Hlaing Maw Oo 2006, Kraas et al. 2014 and 2015). Here, large swathes of the old city – urban heritage of importance to the city’s identity and citizens’ identification with it (Hlaing Maw Oo 2006, Roberts 2016) – are being demolished to make way for new development (shopping malls, office blocks and apartment buildings, partly financed with foreign capital). With selective upgrading and gentrification, it may still be possible to save the substantial urban heritage in Yangon and other cities (AMA 2012, Kraas/Hlaing Maw Oo/Spohner 2014 and 2015). However, the fact that these downtown neighbourhoods are characterised by colonial-era architecture and stylistic elements can pose problems, as some decision-makers regard their upgrading as undesirable for historical reasons.
In addition, there is a risk that some modernisation projects lack sensitivity, with displace-
ment of lower-income groups and much of the informal sector, with the threat that the vibrant 
and organic life of these downtown communities will give way to sterile heritage-type develop-
ment, benefiting tourism at best.

NAY PYI TAW: THE NEW CAPITAL

With the construction of the new capital Nay Pyi Taw – the official seat of government since 
6 November 2005 – around 350 km north of Yangon, key administrative functions and a 
substantial number of ministerial employees have relocated to Myanmar’s interior (Gärtner 
2011a). The spacious new capital is divided into distinct functional zones – government dis-
trict, business centres, residential areas, embassies, hotel zones and recreation areas – 
linked by major transport routes. Notwithstanding all the criticisms of the scale and artificiality of the new city, whose conver-
gence with the old districts of Pyinmana, Leway and Tatkone has scarcely begun, there is 
no disputing that with its relocation northwards, the capital has moved closer to the 
country’s population centre and the historic heartland of Upper Myanmar. Moreover, un-
like other, mostly congested and burdened Southeast Asian capitals, Nay Pyi Taw is functioning well in terms of urban efficiency with-
out over-congestion and has an excellent quality of life.

YANGON: FORMER CAPITAL, NOW 
AN ECONOMIC CENTRE

There has been a small settlement, Dagon, on 
the territory of present-day Yangon since at 
least the 12th century. Its focal point was the 
famous Shwedagon Pagoda (Golden Pagoda), 
thought to date back to the 6th century. In its 
day, the pre-colonial city was located on the periphery of the empires and only gained sig-
nificance after Myanmar came under British rule, when secure harbour access was required. 
Having suffered extensive fire damage in 1841 and after being almost entirely destroyed in 
the war against the British in 1852, Rangoon – as it was then known – was elevated to the sta-
tus of capital of the British colony in 1885 (Pearn 1939). Planned on the basis of a grid pattern of main roads running from east to west and minor roads running from north to south, the city was designed by the British in accordance with contemporary notions of functionality and style in modern colonial cit-
ies. Initially planned for a population of 36,000, the city grew rapidly with the systematic ex-
pansion of agriculture in the Ayeyarwady Del-
ta, an ever more extensive urban infrastruc-
ture (port, trams, suburbs) and the growth of industry. There was a massive influx of people 
from the northern regions of the country, with targeted incentives being provided for Indian and (to some extent) Chinese, resulting in an almost threefold increase in the urban population – to 98,100 – by 1872. In 1921, the popula-
tion reached almost 342,000. In 1951, the ar-
ival of refugees from the post-independence insurgency had pushed the population of the then capital up to 650,000 (Yin May 1962, 1999 
and 2006, Kraas/Yin May/Zin Nwe Myint 2010). Today, Yangon officially has a popula-
tion of almost five million (4,728,520; MoIP 
2015b), not taking into account seasonal in-
migration. If smaller towns in outlying areas with close functional links to Yangon are in-
cluded, the total population of this conurba-
tion is around seven million.

Frauke Kraas, Aye Aye Myint, Hlaing Maw Oo, 
Myint Naing and Zin Nwe Myint