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A History of Myanmar

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Introduction

Myanmar, also known to the world as Burma, is a country whose history stretches across millennia—a tapestry woven from the threads of migration, conquest, faith, and resilience. Nestled at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, Myanmar occupies a strategic and often-contested geographical position, bordered by India, China, Thailand, Laos, and Bangladesh and connected to the vast Bay of Bengal. Throughout its long existence, the land and its peoples have stood testimony to the flows of culture, commerce, and ideas that have shaped the broader region.

The early story of Myanmar is one of ancient migrations and the rise of the first urban centers. Archeological findings reveal that humans have inhabited its valleys and hills for over 13,000 years, while the riverine civilizations of the Pyu laid the groundwork for the distinctive cultures that would follow. The kingdom of Pagan marked an epochal turning point, unifying the Irrawaddy Valley and nurturing a Theravada Buddhist tradition that endures at the heart of Myanmar's identity. Successive waves of rulers—kings and conquerors from Toungoo to Konbaung—left their mark not only in palaces and pagodas but in the intricate mosaic of languages, customs, and beliefs.

Yet Myanmar's path has been anything but linear or peaceful. The region's strategic importance exposed it to the ambitions of neighboring kingdoms and, eventually, to global empires. British colonial rule transformed Burmese society, economy, and politics, provoking both conflict and reform, and sowing the seeds for a powerful nationalist awakening. World War II turned Burma into a major theater of conflict, fueling both collaboration and resistance, culminating in the hard-won battle for independence.

Independence, however, did not deliver Myanmar from turmoil. The dream of a federal and unified nation was soon tempered by internal strife—a complex legacy of colonial borders, ethnic diversity, and deep-seated grievances. Military coups, socialist experiments, pro-democracy uprisings, and international isolation defined decades of modern Myanmar history, while the population bore witness to both moments of hope and times of tragedy. The emergence of a fledgling democracy in the early 21st century raised new expectations, though it was marred by continuing ethnic conflict and humanitarian crises.

This book aims to chart the rich, complicated, and often dramatic history of Myanmar from its ancient origins to the present day. It seeks to illuminate the interplay of politics, culture, religion, and identity that has shaped Myanmar's destiny, as well as to present the voices and experiences of its diverse peoples. In tracing this narrative, we will see how external pressures, internal divisions, and enduring dreams of unity

and justice continue to shape Myanmar's future.

Whether the reader approaches with prior knowledge or curiosity alone, the story of Myanmar invites us to reflect on the complexities of nationhood, the legacies of history, and the enduring quest for dignity, peace, and self-determination. As Myanmar moves through yet another turbulent era in the 21st century, understanding its layered past has never been more vital—for scholars, for neighbors, and for all who care about the story of humanity.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Peoples of Myanmar

Myanmar, a nation also recognized as Burma, sprawls across the northwestern portion of mainland Southeast Asia, a region often referred to as Indochina. Its total area is a not-insignificant 676,578 square kilometers (261,227 square miles), making it the second largest country in Southeast Asia. This kite-shaped land stretches a considerable 1,275 miles (2,050 km) from north to south, with a slender tail extending down along the western coast of the Malay Peninsula.

The country is strategically positioned, sharing land borders totaling 4,053 miles (6,523 km) with five neighbors: China to the north and northeast, Laos and Thailand to the east and southeast, and Bangladesh and India to the west. To its south, Myanmar meets the waters of the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, boasting a coastline of 1,384 miles (2,227 km) adorned with islands and archipelagos, most notably the Mergui Archipelago. Myanmar is nestled between the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates, lying to the southeast of the formidable Tibetan Plateau.

The topography of Myanmar is a dramatic interplay of mountains and lowlands, dominated by a horseshoe-shaped mountain complex and the valley of the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River system. The mountain ranges generally follow a north-to-south axis. The northern reaches are home to peaks that soar to impressive heights, with Hkakabo Razi reaching 5,881 meters (19,296 ft), the highest peak in Southeast Asia. The western flank is defined by the Arakan Mountains, also known as the Rakhine Yoma, which run from Manipur in India southwards through Myanmar's Rakhine State and almost to Cape Negrais on the Bay of Bengal. These mountains, composed of ancient crystalline rocks, act as a natural barrier separating the Arakan Coast from the rest of the country. This western range includes the Naga Hills, Chin Hills, and the Patkai range.

Further east, the Shan Plateau, originating in China, dominates the landscape, with an average elevation of about 910 meters (about 3000 ft.). While called a plateau, it features mountains with steep slopes. The Bilauktaung range, a southern extension of the Shan Plateau, marks a portion of the border between southwestern Thailand and southeastern Myanmar. These mountainous regions and the central lowlands frame the river valleys where the majority of the population and agricultural land are concentrated.

The heart of Myanmar's geography and, indeed, its history, is the Irrawaddy River. This principal river flows through the center of the country, stretching approximately 1,350 miles (2,170 km) from its source in the glaciers of the high northern mountains to its delta on the Andaman Sea. The Irrawaddy is formed by the confluence of the Nmai

and Mali rivers in Kachin State. The Nmai, the eastern branch, carries a greater volume of water but is less navigable due to its strong current, while the Mali, the western branch, has a gentler gradient. The river's drainage basin is vast, covering about 404,000 to 411,000 square kilometers (156,000 to 158,700 sq mi), encompassing a significant portion of Myanmar's land area. Five of Myanmar's largest cities are located within its basin.

The Irrawaddy River is not merely a geographical feature; it is Myanmar's most important commercial waterway, facilitating trade and transportation for centuries. Its valley forms the historical, cultural, and economic heartland of the country. As the river approaches the Andaman Sea, it forms a vast and fertile delta, beginning about 58 miles (93 km) above Hinthada. This delta region is incredibly important for agriculture, particularly rice cultivation. The Bago Yoma, a prominent but relatively low mountain chain, lies between the Irrawaddy and the Sittaung River in the lower central part of the country. Other smaller mountain ranges are also found within the lowlands.

Myanmar's climate is predominantly tropical monsoon, characterized by three distinct seasons: a hot, dry inter-monsoonal period from mid-February to mid-May, a rainy southwest monsoon season from mid-May to late October, and a cool, relatively dry northeast monsoon season from late October to mid-February. The climate varies across the country, influenced by distance from the coast and altitude. Coastal regions, including the Irrawaddy Delta and Rakhine State, experience high temperatures, heavy rainfall, and high humidity, with annual rainfall often exceeding 2,500 mm. The central dry zone, in contrast, receives significantly less rainfall, typically between 500 and 1,000 mm annually, and experiences greater temperature variations, with temperatures sometimes exceeding 40°C. The more mountainous regions in the north and east are generally cooler and receive moderate rainfall, usually between 1,000 and 2,000 mm per year. The northernmost parts of the country can even experience snowfall at higher elevations.

The topography and climate have profoundly shaped the distribution and development of Myanmar's diverse peoples. Myanmar is an ethnically diverse nation with a complex mosaic of groups. The government officially recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups, which are broadly categorized into eight "major national ethnic races": the Bamar, Kayin, Rakhine, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kachin, and Karenni. However, this official categorization has faced criticism for grouping disparate linguistic and cultural groups together. The Bamar people constitute the majority, making up about 68-69% of the population and primarily inhabiting the central lowlands, particularly the Irrawaddy valley. The ethnic minority groups are largely located in the peripheral mountainous areas, occupying a significant portion of the land area.

Among the officially recognized ethnic minorities, the Shan and Karen (Kayin) are two of the largest groups. Other significant groups include the Rakhine, Mon, Chin, Kachin, and Kayah (Karenni). It is worth noting that the official list of 135 ethnic groups is

controversial, with some researchers suggesting that the actual number of verifiable distinct groups is much lower. Furthermore, several ethnic groups, such as the Rohingya, Burmese Chinese, and Burmese Indians, are not officially recognized, despite having substantial populations within the country.

The historical migrations and interactions between these diverse groups, influenced by the geographical landscape, have played a crucial role in shaping Myanmar's history. The river valleys and fertile plains have historically been centers of power and population, while the mountainous border regions have often served as havens for ethnic groups seeking autonomy. This interplay between the central lowlands and the surrounding hills has been a recurring theme throughout Myanmar's past and continues to influence its present.

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