



## Pascal Khoo Thwe: *From the Land of Green Ghosts*

(1967)

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Genre: Autobiography (literary). Country: Myanmar.

Born in 1967 in Phekhon, Myanmar (Burma), Pascal Khoo Thwe, the author of the acclaimed autobiography *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2003), grew up in the southeastern part of the Socialist Republic of Burma. A descendent of the Padaung tribe living in the Karenni State, Thwe has been strongly influenced by his tribal upbringing. Though Thwe identifies himself as part of the Burmese nation, he distances himself from the Burmans, who represent both the ethnic and the religious majority of the country – the Buddhists. Instead, he strongly identifies with the Burmese tribes who make up the bulk of the ethnic minorities, and who have been suppressed by the Socialist regime which rose to power in the post-independence era, during the 1950s.

In *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2003), Thwe reflects on his personal journey from his humble beginnings in the remote town of Phekhon to his move to the University of Mandalay in the 1980s, followed by his escape to Thailand from the terrors of the Burmese government, and his subsequent exile in England. In an attempt to narrate a personal history of his indigenous origins as well as his hybrid upbringings, Thwe's book covers a span of three decades, consisting of historical facts as well as intimate account of his tribe's animist beliefs and life-philosophy. In that regard, Thwe's autobiography could be described as a culmination of disparate histories, cultures and events: his burning desire to tell the story of his Padaung tribe; the pre-Buddhist belief systems of the Burmese minorities; his dangerous flight from Burma into Thailand; his exile to England and his education at Caius College with the help of a Cambridge professor, John Casey, whom he coincidentally meets in the late 1980s in Mandalay.

Chronologically structured, Thwe's narrative opens with events from the author's childhood, teenage years and early adult life in a retrospective mode, giving the uninformed reader the most basic account of Burmese history and politics, including the influence of British colonialism on people and economy. Drawing from his own experiences, Thwe recounts the formative aspects of his socialization in the first person to shed light on the multiple socio-historical trajectories that shaped his identity -- Buddhism, Catholicism, animism, and western education. His recollection of family life and his coming-of-age in Socialist Burma combines Indigenous oral storytelling traditions, lyrical prose and a documentary mode of narration. In addition, Thwe's autobiography relies on the myths of the Padaung tribe as well as the memories of the author that are linked to the symbolism of the former's animist beliefs. Nature, animals, ghosts and spirits are active part of Thwe's narrative, evoking a sense of surrealist as well as magical realist modes of storytelling.

*From the Land of Green Ghosts* consists of three main sections and subchapters within these sections: "The Idyll of the Tribe", "Revolution and Flight", and "Rescue". Introducing the reader to the Padaung belief system, the

first chapter “The Idyll of the Tribe” recounts the Genesis according to Thwe’s grandmother. Having displayed a strong faith in the legends of Padaung from an early age on, Thwe learns about the mythology of his tribe and maintains a strong belief in the power of nature and its spirits. The Padaung story of creation is followed by the author’s portrayal of his family’s religious and spiritual diversity. Catholic missionaries traveling through Phekhon en route China had introduced Christian faith to the Padaung, converting Phekhon into the only Catholic town in Burma. Baptized by an Italian priest, and despite his stated belief in tribal mythology, Thwe practices Christian religion and attends the local seminary where he receives a western education. Events of his biographical past are told in an analeptic perspective by recounting the experienced events in chronological order.

The biographical narration is seamlessly infused with the historical facts such as the British occupation of Burma or the nostalgia of the many ethnic minorities for the British whom they regarded as the harbingers of a “golden era”. Thwe’s historical account also extends to the Japanese invasion of 1942, which further connects to his life history through personal accounts of his family members. The Burmese nationalists had hoped that an alliance with Japan that would help overthrow the British, but soon after Second World War it became clear that Japan had no intentions of granting independence to Burma. As supporters of the British in the war against Japan, however, the many minority communities of Burma did not share the same sense of longing for independence as the Burmese nationalists. While underscoring the defiance of the minorities against the establishment of independent Burma in 1948, Thwe recalls of his grandparents’ memories of the Japanese destroying and burning houses of Phekhon as well their nostalgia for the British Empire which had promised them political autonomy. However, once the military commander Ne Win’s Socialist programme came into effect the 1960s, the political autonomy of the minorities became a far cry from reality. These developments had a significant impact on Phekhon and its community.

Throughout the first section Thwe deals with the pro-British sentiments of his grandparents, who appear most often in the active memory of his childhood. Neither his mother nor his father seems to have a significant presence or influence in the years of his adolescence. Though it is his parents who provide him with proper shelter and food, moral codes and life skills are taught by, and mediated through, his grandparents. His grandmother, a representative of the “long-necked Padaung” community, introduces him to the tribe’s mythology, one that plants Thwe’s interest in spirituality:

I wanted to know whether we all had common ancestors, what they did and where they came from. Some of these questions were answered by my grandmother – as long, that is, as we entered into the mythic world of the stories they told over ten years in the evening dinner. And why should we not enter it? It was a world in which our own tribe was important, and our group of related peoples also important. It explained and justified our way of life. It was very different from another sort of history in which we were marginalized, eccentric and even an embarrassment – a history which contained plenty of mythology of its own. (Khoo Thwe 9)

The ritualized telling of tales and stories at dinner or before sleeping determines how Thwe perceives himself as a member of his community. Dealing with the tribe’s origin and celebrating its mythic foundation functions as a way of self-assurance and shapes the tribe’s internal coherence as well as Thwe’s identity. Being influenced by the Catholic belief that gained momentum within Phekhon due to the presence missionaries, Thwe is fascinated by the aesthetics of the Catholic iconography at the local church in his hometown. As his second faith, the teachings of the western religion also complement animism and its instinctive practices of his tribal faith. Memories of him living the life of a farmer’s son, and contributing to the circle of sowing and harvesting, slash-and-burn farming are tightly connected to the symbolism of fire and its cleansing power in Christianity.

In chapter four, Thwe provides an intimate yet insightful description of the seasons and their spirits called *Nats*, and their transition from slash and burn farmers to wetland farmers. The family's habit of making and drinking rice-wine shows that rice, their major source of diet, is crucial for the food supply. When socialism took over food production, it had a devastating effect on rice farming in and around Phekhon, and the Padaung community in particular suffered from the regulations on farmers who were forced to sell rice at throwaway prices.

Although Padaung's tribal identity is shaped predominantly by means of religious and ritual practices, it is not entirely averse to western thought and education. For instance, Thwe's father, a veterinarian and once a student himself, who initially dismisses his son's plans to study further, goes on to encourage Thwe to attend university and achieve things he himself could not. Towards the end of the first section, the young Thwe moves into a boarding house run by the local priest, having decided not to take up his father's advice, whom he considers a weaker family head, much less of a leader, than his grandfather. In his quest for personal development and inner vocation, his ambition to become a priest at the age of thirteen turns out to be unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, learning Latin and English at the seminary instill in him a sudden desire for education. Thwe subsequently returns to Phekhon to symbolically mark the caesura in his life course and then leaves his hometown for Mandalay to enroll at the university for a degree in English Literature.

The second section, "Revolution and Flight", narrates the experiences of Thwe's foray into student politics. Courses in English Literature, among other subjects he chooses to study, appear promising and emancipating. English novels are treated as a precious source of knowledge for their political content, their availability so rare that sometimes a single copy of a novel would be shared by the entire class of English students. The closings of universities in 1985 and the effect of the first demonetization had a lasting impact on people's lives. Forced to come back to Phekhon, Thwe starts working as a waiter in Mandalay. In 1988, after the second demonetization, he meets Dr. John Casey, a Cambridge professor, at the restaurant where he works. Thwe's stint in Mandalay is followed by another return to Phekhon, which shields him from being politically exposed to the military junta in Mandalay.

As the period of ongoing demonstrations against the repression of the military regime swells, Thwe's personal situation drastically worsens. When Moe, Khoo Thwe's girlfriend, is imprisoned due to anti-regime activities and subsequently disappears, he actively reflects on the injustices and terrors of the military regime. Moe's disappearance in particular becomes the crux of his narrative, one that determines the rest of his political trajectories, including his decision to join the resistance movement. In the process, Thwe incites the national leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and her speeches as the inspiration for his own political activism. In the subchapter "Revolution and Flight", Thwe provides a detailed account of his escape into the Karen rebel areas along the Thai-Burma border, where he receives shelter and protection from other minority rebel groups such as the Kachin, the Wa, among others, where he also witnesses the brutalities of the Burmese army.

As the correspondence with Dr. Casey throughout the flight remains steady, the last section of the book, "Rescue", narrates Thwe's crossing of the border to Thailand and getting accustomed to the possibility of not returning to Burma. A meeting arranged by Dr. Casey in Maehongson, Thailand, and a further meeting with the British Ambassador in Bangkok transpires in Thwe's flight from East Asia to England in 1991. In England, Thwe struggles with the new culture but also benefits from the relative safety and protection of not being persecuted. With the help of Dr. Casey, Thwe gains admission to read English Literature at Caius College. Initially Thwe finds the educational culture in England, particularly that of Cambridge, particularly challenging to cope with, which leads him to a period of depression and isolation. Upon returning to Thailand where he meets his father for a brief reunion, Thwe experiences an inner conflict arising from his urge to lead a safe life abroad and his solidarity with the resistance movement in Burma. Thwe's autobiography closes by reflecting on his graduation and receipt of an academic degree in English Literature from Cambridge University. Thwe proudly attends the convocation in traditional Burmese clothes, as he becomes the first Padaung person to receive a degree from Cambridge.

Thwe's autobiography, which is his only published work to date, attracted international attention – rightfully so – and was reviewed by the major literary outlets in the world, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Kirkus Reviews* and the *Financial Times*. In the 2002, it won the Kiryama Pacific Rim Prize (Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* won the prize the same year in the “fiction” category).

*From the Land of Green Ghosts* is a unique blend of autobiography, life writing and national history that provides rich insights into the exiled minorities, displaced subjects, and dispossessed communities of postcolonial Myanmar. A major contribution of Thwe's work is its ability to synthesize tribal beliefs systems with modern (educational) aspirations, and postcolonial politics of identity, belonging and nationhood. In that regard, Thwe's work makes a fine contribution to an understanding of indigenous ways of being and belonging in postcolonial Myanmar. *From the Land of Green Ghosts* is an essential resource for any student of Burmese literature.

### **Work cited**

Khoo Thwe, Pascal. *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey*. Harper Perennial, 2003.

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