

# Adoniram Judson

1788–1850:

THE WORD  
OF GOD TO  
BURMA

by C. P. Hallihan

'...BREAK DOWN YOUR PRIDE,  
AND YIELD TO THE WORD OF GOD.'

A map from the late 1800s reveals a divided Burma. The expanding pink of the British empire is prevalent, and indicative of the territorial upheavals in the Indo-China region.

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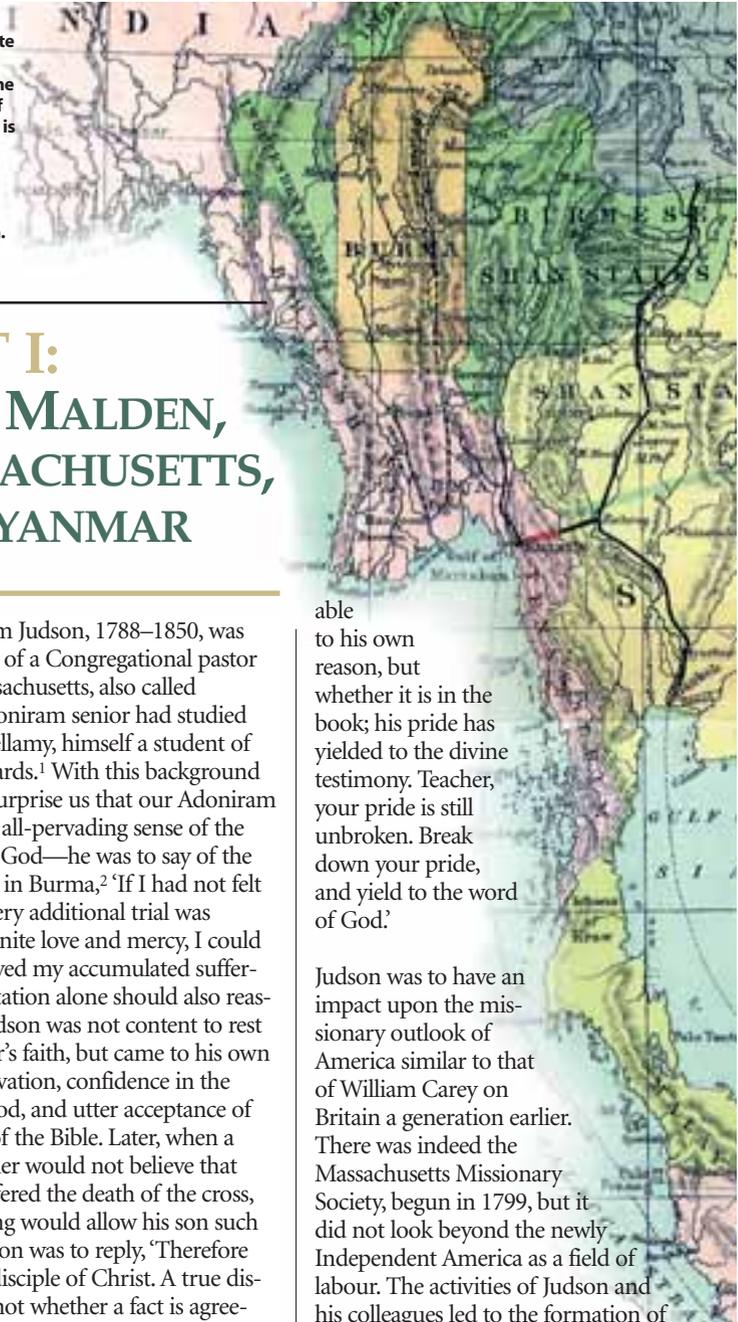
## PART I: FROM MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS, TO MYANMAR

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Adoniram Judson, 1788–1850, was the son of a Congregational pastor in Massachusetts, also called Adoniram. Adoniram senior had studied with Joseph Bellamy, himself a student of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>1</sup> With this background it should not surprise us that our Adoniram Judson had an all-pervading sense of the Sovereignty of God—he was to say of the trials of his life in Burma,<sup>2</sup> ‘If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.’ This quotation alone should also reassure us that Judson was not content to rest upon his father’s faith, but came to his own remarkable salvation, confidence in the goodness of God, and utter acceptance of the authority of the Bible. Later, when a Buddhist teacher would not believe that Christ had suffered the death of the cross, because ‘no king would allow his son such indignity,’ Judson was to reply, ‘Therefore you are not a disciple of Christ. A true disciple inquires not whether a fact is agree-

able to his own reason, but whether it is in the book; his pride has yielded to the divine testimony. Teacher, your pride is still unbroken. Break down your pride, and yield to the word of God.’

Judson was to have an impact upon the missionary outlook of America similar to that of William Carey on Britain a generation earlier. There was indeed the Massachusetts Missionary Society, begun in 1799, but it did not look beyond the newly Independent America as a field of labour. The activities of Judson and his colleagues led to the formation of





**A typical Massachusetts home of the period**

the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, an organisation rooted in the Congregational Churches of the day, but also the ‘mother’ of American mission organisations. Judson’s early and comprehensive change of mind on the matter of baptism meant that he also was the catalyst in the formation of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions, in 1814.

When considering the sufferings entailed in Adoniram’s obedience to the heavenly vision, one other great name comes to mind—Henry Martyn. It is truly astounding that in the dawning years of the 19th century these three men, Carey, Martyn and Judson, were all in and around Calcutta! Martyn and Carey met; Carey and Judson met; Martyn and Judson missed one another by a handful of years.<sup>3</sup> Not only entering the Kingdom but also gladly serving the Kingdom through much tribulation marked all three men. An uncompromising and uncomplicated satisfaction and delight in the Sovereignty of God joined with a robust preaching and proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ adorned the testimony of all three. The urgent necessity of pro-

viding the enduring record, rule and reference of the Bible, in the languages of their hearers and converts, was the dominant task laid on all three.

## **ADONIRAM JUDSON— BEGINNINGS AND CONVERSION**

Adoniram Judson was born into the heady beginnings of the United States of America in August 1788, just nine months before George Washington, reluctant but triumphant general of the Continental Army, was unanimously elected first President, April 30th 1789. Judson’s father, Adoniram senior, was a congregational Minister in Malden, Massachusetts, later in Wenham, then Braintree, and then Plymouth. Young Adoniram was notably serious, eager and intelligent, entering Rhode Island College at an early age and achieving academic distinction. As with many a preacher’s son, he had once delighted in gathering his young friends and ‘preaching’ to them. Now, to his family’s distress his reliance on the power of reasoning, together with the strong influence of a fellow student, Jacob Eames, led to his being enamoured of deist, free thinking views of the Living God and religion. He declared his unbelief to his father and left home to begin a tour of the Northern States,<sup>4</sup> followed by the tearful prayers of his mother and sister.

One night at an inn was passed in acute discomfort because of inescapable evidence of someone gravely ill in an adjoining room. He made inquiry next morning and learned that a young man had indeed died during the night, a young man by the name of Jacob Eames, his deist mentor! By this most startling providence Judson’s fig-leaf rationalism was ripped from him, and he was spiritually naked and ashamed before his father’s God, the God of the

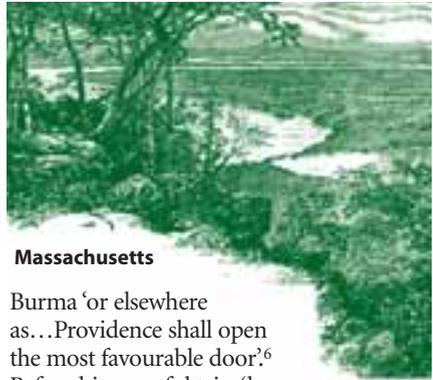
Bible. All that had been presented to him, from a child, as Truth, now crashed in upon him as true indeed. He returned to Plymouth, September 1808, in great distress of mind and spirit. By the 2nd December he had solemnly committed himself to God and to the ministry of the Gospel, and in May 1809 became a member of Third Congregational Church in Plymouth.

## **ADONIRAM JUDSON— MISSION AND MARRIAGE**

Judson was saved, grounded in the truth, a lover of the Bible, and well taught to consider the details of the workings of Providence. These characteristics marked the rest of his life. In the Andover Seminary he was one of a small group passionately concerned about Mission,<sup>5</sup> and several things inclined his thoughts to Burma. Putting aside the probability of academic preferment, and declining a near certain appointment to a prestigious church ministry, Judson, together with his like-minded colleagues, made the burden for mission known to the Congregational Churches of Massachusetts.

The next year, 1811, the newly formed Foreign Missions Board sent Judson to England to confer with the London Missionary Society. Any joint venture seemed to be impracticable, and so he returned to Plymouth. There he was appointed a Missionary to Asia, to

be located in



**Massachusetts**

Burma 'or elsewhere as... Providence shall open the most favourable door.'<sup>6</sup> Before his eventful trip (he was captured by French privateers!) to England, Adoniram had lost his heart to Ann Hasseltine, and after his return they were married at Bradford on February 5th 1812.<sup>7</sup> Twelve days later they embarked at Salem on the brig Caravan bound for Calcutta. Ann had confided in a letter to a friend that she was '...willing, and expect, if nothing in Providence prevents, to spend my days in this world in heathen lands... [determined] to give up all my comforts and enjoyments here, sacrifice my affection to relatives and friends, and go where God in his Providence, shall see fit to place me'. Ten years later she made a trip home to the US, for health's sake, returned to Burma in 1823 and died there in 1826. Adoniram never saw his parents again, returning very briefly to the US in 1845, thirty-three years after his departure.

**Plymouth, Massachusetts**

## ADONIRAM AND ANN JUDSON IN INDIA

The Judsons were four months voyaging around the Cape of Good Hope, and arrived in Calcutta in June. Parallel with that voyage another inward one had taken place. In full expectation of making converts in Burma, Adoniram gave himself anew to the question of baptism. Earnest discussions with his bride, reading and re-reading his Greek Testament, resulted in the pair arriving in India persuaded of a Baptist view of that ordinance. This I record in no spirit of argument, but as a profoundly serious matter of fact for the missionaries and their companions. They made the same journey that Henry Martyn had made, to Serampore, to enjoy fellowship and hospitality with William Carey and the company there. Judson records in his diary: 'September 1st, announced to the Secretary of the A.B.C.F.M. my change of sentiment on the subject of Baptism. September 6th was baptized in Calcutta, with Mrs. Judson, by the Rev. Mr. Ward.' All connection with his sending churches and their support had been cut; there was no Baptist Mission involvement in the States. 'By faith' and 'courage of conviction' took on new depths of meaning!

Being now Baptists was only the beginning of their troubles. Under the scant umbrella of the East India Company, India was under British dominion, and in 1812 Britain and America were at war again.<sup>8</sup> 'These Judsons then,' one can hear the Establishment in their clubs, 'American Missionaries? American spies more like! And anyway we don't like missionaries of the Serampore kind, they encourage the natives and insult the gentry.'

The whole American party was summarily ordered to return to America and their plea to re-settle elsewhere in India was refused, and they were then ordered to sail to

England. A request that they be allowed to go to Mauritius (Isle de France) was granted, but only two could travel on the ship available. Mr. and Mrs. Newell went, and the Judsons remained in Calcutta. After events which read like a schoolboys' adventure story they at last came to Mauritius in January 1813. There they learned that Mrs. Newell had died.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Newell left for Ceylon, and the other member of the company, Mr. Rice, embarked for America to seek the support of Baptist Churches there.

The Judsons were alone, outside of Burma, having no ministry, and no apparent support. Perhaps they thought on Joseph in prison, and Psalm 105.<sup>19</sup> 'Until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him'. After a temporary stay on Prince of Wales Island in the Strait of Malacca, and a journey which severely tried Ann's health, they at last came to Rangoon, Burma, on July 13th 1813, almost eighteen months after leaving America. In Rangoon Adoniram and Ann took up residence in the English Baptist mission house, where Felix Carey, eldest of William's three sons, had begun a Gospel work. To his father's great disappointment, Felix had not persevered in this labour, and indeed was absent when the Judsons arrived. Soon afterwards Felix entered government service, leaving the Americans in possession of the Mission assets. 'Felix is shrivelled from a missionary into an ambassador,' lamented his father.

## ADONIRAM AND ANN JUDSON IN BURMA— RANGOON

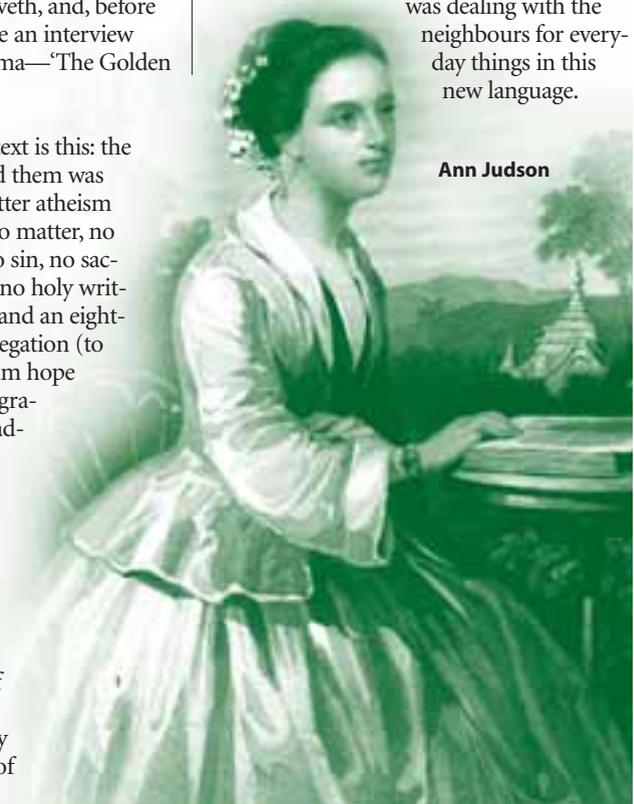
The current Empire in Burma had been precariously and despotically ruling since 1755. British authorities in India maintained a wrangling relationship with the Burmese, whilst the French authorities favoured the rebel forces in the north and

eastern regions. Endless border strife between (British) Bengal and (Burmese) Arakan brought about the breaking of diplomatic connections between Britain and Burma in 1811. If the Judsons were not welcome in India as being American, they were even less welcome in Burma as being 'English'! By 1824 the Judsons were to be caught in the midst of open war between Burma and British India, and all the underlying xenophobia became sharpened towards these white English-speakers. This is the incessant context of so much that was achieved under the grace of God by these truly committed disciples. The protective protocols of the 'Golden Throne' made access to the 'Golden Ear' almost impossible. But with God all things are possible to him that believeth, and, before the end, Judson did secure an interview with the Emperor of Burma—'The Golden Kingdom'.

A further part of the context is this: the religion prevailing around them was Buddhism. A system of utter atheism and universal negation; no matter, no body, no soul, no God, no sin, no sacrifice, no heaven, no hell, no holy writings, only a fourfold rule and an eightfold path, only the final negation (to cease to exist) as only a dim hope through aeons of soul migration up and down the shadow bondage of existence, from insect to Imperial Prince and round again. And again. And again. Many trials and dangers were in the way for Adoniram and Ann Judson, but the joy of holding forth the Light of the World in that darkness—which was foolishly styled by some the Light of Asia<sup>10</sup>—sustained them.

The first ten years of their labours from 1813 were largely given to learning the Burmese language. There was no published grammar or dictionary, not even an English-speaking teacher: just the need and the call. In a day when seminaries are discontinuing the study even of New Testament Greek, the laborious acquisition by the Bible men like Tyndale, Carey, Martyn, and here Judson, of the language skills needed for the fulfilment of their task is a standing challenge.<sup>11</sup> It is an intriguing fact that Ann Judson, in assuming the whole domestic management of their affairs in order to give her husband time to pursue his language work, became at the start a more fluent and idiomatic speaker of

Burmese! Necessarily so—she was dealing with the neighbours for everyday things in this new language.



**Ann Judson**

# T I M E L I N E

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| <p><b>1755–1865</b> Burmese Konbaung Dynasty, Rangoon its capital.</p> <p><b>1769</b> Dr. Benjamin Blayney's edition of the Authorised Version.</p> <p><b>1776</b> AMERICA DECLARES INDEPENDENCE</p> <p><b>1781</b> Henry Martyn born</p> <p><b>1783</b> William Carey baptised</p> <p><b>1785</b> Andrew Fuller's <i>Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation</i></p> <p><b>1786</b> The cotton plant introduced in Georgia</p> <p><b>1788</b> <b>Adoniram Judson born, Malden, Mass.</b><br/>The Philadelphia Quakers free their slaves</p> <p><b>1789–97</b> George Washington, U.S. President</p> <p><b>1789</b> FRENCH REVOLUTION begun.<br/>Ann Hasseltine born</p> <p><b>1790</b> Benjamin Franklin died</p> <p><b>1791</b> John Wesley died</p> <p><b>1793</b> Carey in India</p> <p><b>1794</b> Paley's <i>Evidences</i></p> <p><b>1795</b> London Missionary Society founded</p> <p><b>1797–1801</b> John Adams, U.S. President</p> <p><b>1799</b> Religious Tract Society founded</p> <p><b>1799</b> Church Missionary Society founded</p> <p><b>1800</b> First Greek NT printed in America: Mill's, ed. Caleb Alexander</p> <p><b>1801–09</b> Thomas Jefferson, U.S. President</p> | <p><b>1804</b> British and Foreign Bible Society founded</p> <p><b>1805</b> Battle of Trafalgar</p> <p><b>1806</b> Henry Martyn in India</p> <p><b>1807</b> John Newton died</p> <p><b>1808</b> <b>Judson dedicated himself to the Gospel of God</b></p> <p><b>1809–17</b> James Madison, U.S. President</p> <p><b>1810</b> American Missionary Society</p> <p><b>1811</b> <b>Judson visited the London Missionary Society in England</b></p> <p><b>1812</b> <b>Judson married Ann Hasseltine in Bradford, Mass., and embarked for Calcutta</b><br/>Napoleon begins retreat from Moscow.</p> <p><b>1812–14</b> USA and Britain at war</p> <p><b>1813</b> <b>The Judsons arrived in Rangoon, in connection with Felix Carey.</b><br/>Henry Martyn died.</p> <p><b>1814</b> American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions established</p> <p><b>1815</b> <b>Judson's son (Roger Williams Judson) born</b></p> <p><b>1816</b> <b>Roger Williams Judson died.</b></p> <p><b>1817–25</b> James Monroe, U.S. President</p> <p><b>1817</b> <b>Judson Gospel of Matthew in Burmese</b></p> <p><b>1819</b> <b>Judson began public ministry in Burmese language. First Burmese convert.</b></p> |
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Mandalay

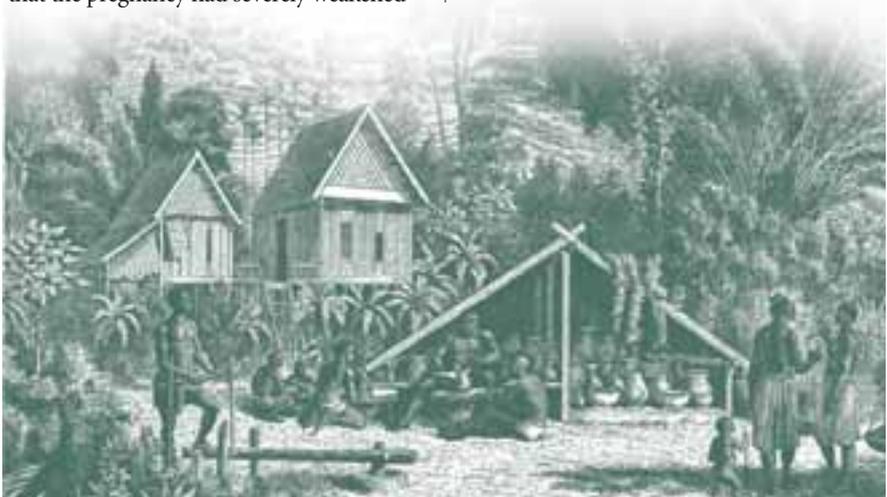
Adoniram, though, realised that if a Bible and Christian literature were to be produced in the new language, it would have to be grammatically and stylistically correct to endure the challenging scrutiny of the Court and Religious experts of that time and place. Only then would others receive them. No wonder that he should say, 'A young missionary, who expects to pick up the language in a year or two will probably find that he had not counted the cost'. His own resolution was steadfast and clear, 'Notwithstanding my great incompetency, I am beginning to translate the New Testament, being extremely anxious to get some parts of Scriptures, at least, into an intelligible shape, if for no other purpose than to read, as occasion offers, to the Burmans with whom I meet.'

Meanwhile Mr. Rice's 'deputation work' in the States had been well heard, and in his diary for 1815 Judson noted, 'September 5, received information of the establishment of the American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions...and their appointment of me their missionary'. For September 11th the diary note was 'Roger Williams Judson was born in Rangoon'. He might have added that the pregnancy had severely weakened

Ann's health. Their firstborn son was to survive a scarce nine months, to May 1816, a pattern of joy and sadness, receiving and losing that continued throughout Judson's life. Despite this Adoniram completed a grammar for the Burmese language in three years, and in May 1817 finished the translation of Matthew's Gospel. He also began to write tracts, and synopses and outlines of Biblical truth in Burmese which he distributed thoughtfully and prayerfully.

Baiting his line in this judicious way he made connection with his first serious inquirer. His sharp and logical mind, and winsome Christian spirit, cheerfully engaging the shrewdness of the few first listeners, even brought applause from them at times. Within six years, in April 1819, Judson took the plunge and ventured to preach in public, in Burmese, and in June he baptised Moung Hau, the first Burman convert. Several who had become attached to his informal early ministry followed, and so the mission became a happy body of believers.

*This would seem a good place to break the account, and resume, if the Lord will, in a subsequent issue of the Quarterly Record.*



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards 1703–58, graduate of Yale, Congregational Pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts, in the Great Awakening.

<sup>2</sup> Myanmar is the name now used for Burma. In this article I will mostly use Burma, the name that the Judsons would have used in English. Please see QR 546 1999 for an article on Myanmar.

<sup>3</sup> Please see QR 554 2001 for an article on Carey, QRs 562 and 563 2003 for articles on Martyn.

<sup>4</sup> He had dreams of the theatre, and associated with strolling players, admitting later to a vagabond and reckless time. He also remarked some singular Providences in this time, no doubt preparing the heart and mind for that which was to happen.

<sup>5</sup> Two of the group were from Williams College, where the famous ‘haystack’ mission prayer meeting had occurred.

<sup>6</sup> It parallels the church at Olney separating Carey to preach the Gospel ‘wherever the providence of God might open his way’.

<sup>7</sup> Ann is the first of Adoniram’s three heroic wives, two of whom loved him until their deaths. Speaking in human foolishness I feel that without Ann the Burmese Bible would never have been completed. The suffering, strength, faith, patience and sheer wifely help and encouragement of these magnificent sis-

ters in Christ deserves to be much more widely known.

<sup>8</sup> A war which brought British forces to attempt burning the White House, before it was concluded by the treaty of Ghent in 1814.

<sup>9</sup> This first American Mission fatality, on being informed of her imminent death, lifted up her hands in triumph and exclaimed, ‘Oh! Glorious news!’

<sup>10</sup> I have in mind the poem of that name by Edwin Arnold.

<sup>11</sup> ‘When we take up a language spoken by a people on the other side of the earth, whose very thoughts run in channels diverse from ours, and whose modes of expression are consequently all new; when we find the letters and words all totally destitute of the least resemblance to any language we have ever met with, and these words not fairly distinguished, as in Western writing, by breaks, and points, and capitals, but run together in one continuous line, a sentence or a paragraph seeming to the eye but one long word; when instead of clear characters on paper, we find only obscure scratches on dried palm leaves strung together, and called a book; when we have no dictionary and no interpreter to explain a single word, and must get something of the language before we can avail ourselves of the assistance of a native teacher, that means work’ (Judson on his Burmese beginnings).



Megui, Southern Myanmar