

# MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES

## YANGON FIELD TRIP REPORT April 2018

Lindsay Bremner



Yangon Field Trip Report by Lindsay Bremner  
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Monsoon Assemblages is a research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 679873).

**UNIVERSITY OF  
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**MONSOON  
ASSEMBLAGES**



European  
Commission

Horizon 2020  
European Union funding  
for Research & Innovation



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission

## Itinerary

Monday 23 <sup>rd</sup> April	Tuesday 24 <sup>th</sup> April	Wednesday 25 <sup>th</sup> April	Thursday 26 <sup>th</sup> April	Friday 27 <sup>th</sup> April	Saturday 28 <sup>th</sup> April
<p>AM Arrive in Yangon Transfer to Hotel</p> <p>PM Meeting with an environmentalist</p>	<p>AM: Work in hotel, make phone calls setting up meetings for the week</p> <p>PM Walk around Central Yangon, visit YHT Exhibition, visit Shwedagon Pagoda</p> <p>Meeting with Architect 1</p>	<p>AM: Meeting with an academic</p> <p>PM Trip to Dala Township</p>	<p>AM Further walks around central Yangon,</p> <p>PM Meeting with the heritage director</p>	<p>AM: Trip to Yangon Department of Meteorology and Hydrology; meeting and tour with four meteorologists</p> <p>PM Meeting with a UN diplomat</p> <p>Visit to Yangon Zoo</p>	<p>Fly back to London</p>

### FIELDNOTES

#### Summary

During April 2018, Lindsay Bremner spent a week scoping out the possibilities for the project's research in Yangon, making initial contacts for the project's field work in 2019 and preparing the ground for the student field trip to take place in November 2018. Given that the project did not have a partner in Yangon and the difficulties of making contact with people there by email, this was found to be necessary. During the week, she met with an environmentalist, an architect, an academic, a

heritage director, four meteorologists and a UN diplomat. Other contact names and details were also gathered and Lindsay spent time in Yangon and Dala to get a sense of the city and its environs.

#### *Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April*

- In the morning, I spent time in the hotel trying to set up meetings for the rest of the week and walked around the district where the hotel was located.
- In the afternoon I met with an environmentalist who was formerly Professor of Zoology at Yangon University. He was one of the few who had responded to a request to meet prior to

arrival. His organisation was set up in 2010 as an NGO registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Two part mission: to run training courses in how to construct questionnaires and collect field data, 2 months long, max 30 students; 2/3 of their students from the government sector, 1/3 from ngo's or the private sector; and to conduct research. Current project is on the Chindwin River where gold and jade mining conducted. Investigating environmental impacts on river dynamics and morphology, water quality, socio-economic aspects, bio-diversity and eco system. Funded by the Stockholm Environment Institute, Blue Mountain and Critical Ecology. Previous projects were Climate Change / Resilience Project for Plan International – Study of 8 townships vulnerable to floods and cyclones. Community Development project 2017-2019 – CEBF Grant funded; 5 villages around a national park in the central region, a key biodiversity area. Project on conservation awareness and community development.

- In response to my questions, he said that monsoon rains come from mid-May till September in Yangon, mostly in June, July and August. Increasing disturbance due to human factors. During monsoon season, there is flooding in certain townships of Yangon, in particular South Dagon and North Dagon (Dagon is the old word for Yangon). Dagon Seikkan Township. I asked if anyone had done any work on this, he answered UN Habitat or World Vision might have.
- Colonial monsoonal infrastructure – he spoke of a large underground channel taking the water to the river, but did not know where it was. But then there was enough space for water to sink into the soil. Now that is not the case.
- Water supply to Yangon comes from three large tanks, not all townships have municipal water supply though. He himself has a tube well. Some areas have silty water so tube wells not possible, such as Dalla Township. The government is encouraging people to dig earthen ponds / lakes to store rain and use rain water for the

whole year. In central Myanmar where it is drier, they use tanks to deal with flood and drought.

#### *Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> April*

- In the morning, I spent time in the hotel following up on contacts given to me by the environmentalist and trying to set up meetings for the rest of the week.
- In the afternoon, I walked around central Yangon, visited the Yangon Heritage Trust exhibition and then the Shwedagon pagoda.
- In the late afternoon I met with architect 1. I asked her of her experience of the monsoon. In 2017, she said that it had rained off and on till the end of December, which really surprised people. The monsoon increasingly unpredictable. We no longer have a winter, she said, all we have is a less hot summer and a more hot summer. As a teenager, she remembers that they could live without air conditioning all year round. Now air conditioning is compulsory. It has got hotter due to deforestation – a lot of forest has been lost in the country due to illegal logging and mining. They are also experiencing ground water issues. Government has said that it can not provide piped water to any new development, tube wells are required. This is hugely problematic. Surface paving has affected the ability of the land to absorb water.
- She is working with the Association of Myanmar Architects to rewrite the building regulations. Still rely on the British ones. Regs, building codes, zoning regs and green building codes still being worked on. She is working on the green building code – support from UN Habitat for travel for meetings, apart from that donates her time for free. A Japanese group is now assisting with this. All buildings currently require a building permit application, but as regs are out of date, it depends on who reviews this as to whether it gets through or not. Corruption is rampant. The

Myanmar Architects Council – a new semi government registration body.

- She has worked as contact person for a number of projects – one with Hong Kong U and Cardiff University, another on a new masterplan for Yangon University (Prince Charles Foundation funded). With a Bath firm on conservation.
- She told me about a cyclone shelter project she worked on with a German architect after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Project was in Akace Chang Wa, a village near Pyapon in the delta area. Very remote site, no mobile phone connection, people rely on satellite phones, get radio news from other countries. Got by road to Pyapon, then by boat to the village. After the cyclone hit, people had to walk for three days to Pyapon, many died on the way. Bodies still on the side of the river when she visited in 2010. People have now stored rice and water in boats, secured between two palm trees so that they have food and water to survive when the next cyclone hits. Wealthy people rely on fishing. Large fishing boats. Described the conditions when she went – had to sleep under mosquito nets in the living room of one of the villagers, no toilets or running water. The second time she went, they stayed in the hospital, which was better. The cyclone shelter was two stories built of bamboo. The first floor collapsed in a subsequent weather event, school children inside, none injured. Government threatened to sue the donor and architects. She got involved to assess what to do. In the end, they removed the second story, so it is now a one story building.

*Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> April*

*AM*

- In the morning, I walked around downtown Yangon streets again and then visited Yangon Technical University where I met academic. 1. We discussed possibilities of collaboration. Short term collaborations require initiating a proposal for approval at

least 2 months before date of collaboration. Ongoing collaboration requires a letter of agreement (MOU). The department's research focuses on Heritage Conservation (Ministry of Culture), Sustainable Development (Ministry of Environment) and Myanmar Architecture.

- I asked her about flooding, She said that downtown Yangon floods near the rivers, and Dala Townships floods a lot as it is at the junction of the Yangon River and the Twante Canal. She referred me to a research paper she has written on this.
- In 2014 she worked on a Climate Change Adaption Planning Initiative funded by the Dutch. She has been doing her PhD at a University in Japan for past three years. Just took over as HoD a month ago. She is doing work on flood related issues in Hyndra (Hinthada?) and Pathein in the Ayeyarwady Delta. Hyndra floods the most as it lies between the river and the mountains.
- I asked her about the JICA Plan for Yangon. She laughed. It is clearly not popular. The YCDC has an alternative plan. Head of YCDC Planning is now an architect. She said I should try to see her.
- Since 2014, she had also been working on the Myanmar National Building Code. The English version is now approved; it is now being translated. She told me that only Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw have planning departments.

*PM*

- In the afternoon, I took a ferry ride across the river to Dala. An unpleasant experience on my own as I was hounded by young men wanted to show me around. All tour manuals warn against this as it is notorious for scams. I wandered around the township, noting many ponds and houses on stilts and then found the shipbuilding industry on the river bank. Was told that many

residents have arrived since Nargis from the delta. Poverty visible.

#### *Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April*

- I met with a Yangon based organisation's heritage director. She wanted to know who else I had spoken to and wrote it down. She told me that her organisation does advocacy and policy work for urban conservation, physical renovation, developing an inventory of heritage buildings, offers technical advice, runs heritage tours of the city and answers to regional requests. Their aim is not just conservation, but to make Yangon more liveable.
- The heritage organisation was founded in 2012. They work with the Yangon Regional Government, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Construction. Supported by local businesses and international organisations.
- She told me that if we wanted their collaboration in our project, I should draft a proposal and they would see if they could be involved. This would depend on capacity and timing.
- On the monsoon and flooding: The delta is mainly where it floods, and downtown due to lack of drainage. Every heavy rain it floods in the city, recedes after 1-2 hours. Other areas are waterlogged for months. The drainage system is currently being renovated. It rains for 6 months of the year. Seems to be starting late and ending early, or that is what the weather man says. Fewer days of rain, but heavier.
- Intense urbanisation going on in Yangon, now has 6 million inhabitants. Many of these internally displaced by weather events. Mentioned Nargis.
- After my meeting with her, I went to Bagan Book House on 37<sup>th</sup> Street. The Strand Hotel Bookshop, where they had purchased historic maps from had vanished, only a very fancy hotel shop inside.

#### *Friday 27<sup>th</sup> April AM*

- I met with four meteorologists, staff officers of the Yangon Department of Meteorology and Hydrology (the Met Office). We met in an office adjoining a large shed with many people sitting and working at desks. The Director was packing up her office as she was moving to Naypyidaw (promotion). No aircon, just fans. Very friendly, the other three women taking notes profusely as the Director and I spoke, not communicating much, just very busy taking notes. Fussed around the director as she was working out how to copy a file to a CD for me. Afterwards they opened up when showing me around.
- The Met Office was established on 1st April 1937. The head office no longer in Yangon but in Naypyidaw. An Indian man was the first director. Gave me a brochure of the history, but all in Burmese. Have 7 stations, one for each region. Have a large mandate, including meteorology, hydrology, seismology and tsunami warning. Use manual observation stations and automatic weather stations donated by Korea and JICA. The country has: 40 x ASO – Automatic Surface Observation Stations (Korean); 30 x Automatic Weather Stations (JICA); 115 x Manual Observation Stations; Upper Mandalay Region has 6, Lower Mandalay Region (Yangon) has 9; 3 x Doppler Weather Stations (radar), one in Yangon, one in Mandalay and one in ????. All donated by JICA. Data transferred by Single Site Band (SSB), a dedicated radio frequency, email or telephone.
- They have a small R + D team. Every 23<sup>rd</sup> March, they have a paper reading day, when they present their research to one another (nationally). She gave me a CD with her paper on it. However, weather and climate research is difficult to do. Their main function is data archiving. Receive A3 hard copy reports from all 115 stations each month, with data taken every 3 hrs,

which they have to digitise. Data from the radar station is taken every 15 minutes.

- Education and Training – with WMO and ASEAN support. The University offers a BSC Hons in Met and Hydro, started in 1993; have 15-20 students at the moment. One can do a PhD in Physics and Maths.
- On the monsoon – it is a seasonal event. In April and May now, due to climate change, experience cumulus storms and winds, very strong. During monsoon season, rain is becoming heavier and of shorter duration. Spoke about the old normal and the new normal. 1981-2010 – known as New Normal, monsoon lasted 121 days on average, late onset, early withdrawal. Annual rainfall has stayed the same, but delivered in shorter more intense patches. This leads to flash floods, particularly in urban areas. 1961-1990 – known as Old Normal, monsoon lasted 144 days on average.
- Old normal – 1981 – 2010; new normal after that. 18 May is onset date for the monsoon in Myanmar; by 6 June, the whole country is covered. It finishes / withdraws by the end of September.
- Hydrology – main concern is water transportation. They measure flow – high and low flow rates, water temperature, water levels etc. Sedimentation is studied by another department.
- Met management in the region by the Regional Special Meteorological Centre (RSMC) chaired by India. Known as the RE2 Region. Includes the Maldives, Oman, Yemen, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar etc. They manage information during the cyclone season, have a cyclone panel that meets once a year. Set up by the WMO.
- The Myanmar Emergency centre – includes the Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Relief and Resettlement - close co-operation with them for all disasters.
- They met with the YCDC often, many meetings to plan for the monsoon. Mainly the disaster management committee.

- Then the two staff members took me on a tour. Showed me their manual observation equipment read every three hours, 24 hours a day. Their auto weather stations donated by the Koreans and the Japanese. We then visited the office where all the data from the 115 weather stations around the country is digitised. These are hand written reports they receive on a monthly basis from each station. We then visited the weather forecasting office where their own data is recorded and weather maps are drawn by hand each day. Finally we visited the radar office. Data recorded on computer three hourly. Work 24 hour shifts. The only air conditioned office. Equipment donated by Japan in 2016. Measures rainfall up to 450 km radius, wind speed and direction up to 200 km radius.

*PM*

- Met with a UN diplomat. Their offices are in the same building as Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), two doors away from Plan International. MIMU director is AN Australian woman. The diplomat was a very friendly open woman. Was talking in the phone when I arrived, I helped myself to their publications in the hallway. On humanitarian needs and response in Myanmar. 2015 was a very extreme flooding situation. Flash floods, too much water too fast. 1,7 million people evacuated. 4 states declared states of emergency (for the first time). Post disaster response and recovery plans drawn up, but not much done due to elections shortly thereafter. Correlated with deforestation, urbanisation, rivers containing more sediment.
- I asked her about the Rohingya. She told me that the first clashes of the current crisis were in 2012. She showed me a map on her wall IDP camps, but said it was out of date. 2020 elections partly why more has not been done. There re 3-4 million Rohingya; the Rakhine worried they will become a majority – have many children. The Minister of Social Welfare just went to Bangladesh –

to guarantee they will be given a document to be able to move (like an apartheid pass) should they return to Myanmar. Rohingya not considered ethnics, brought by the British. No citizenship. Require permission to get married, only allowed two children. She had just returned from Sitwe in Rhakine State, where they are preparing for the monsoon. UNOCHA only co-ordinates, no projects. Explained to me how this works. Through a Humanitarian Country Team – WFP, UNICWF, UNFPA, WHO,

UNHCR, FAO, UNDP and Humanitarian NGO's, Int and National, such as Action Aid, World Vision, Oxfam, Plan International, UN Habitat etc. She said that the big gap was information management.

- After the meeting I visited the Yangon Zoo, where I witnessed a storm approaching from the west and a downpour.
- I then caught a flight back to London in the evening.

