



CHASING CHERROOTS

A weekend in Myanmar

By Taco Tuinstra

After the turbulent TABINFO exhibition in Bangkok last November (see “The show that went on,” *Tobacco Reporter*, January 2010), Myanmar felt like an oasis of peace and tranquility. That was an illusion, of course, because the country formerly known as Burma is ruled by a brutal military junta with a deplorable human rights record. But as a Western visitor with a return ticket, I was able to enjoy the weather and sights without suffering the oppression endured by ordinary Burmese.

I had been fascinated by images of old Burmese women smoking gigantic cigars, like the one printed on this issue’s cover, courtesy of Sebastian Zimmel. And after extensively covering non-cigarette tobacco products such as kreteks, bidis and snus, it was time to spotlight a lesser-known “other tobacco product” in *Tobacco Reporter*.

Webster’s New World Dictionary describes a cheroot as a cigar with both ends cut square. Although they

are smoked in other countries—the Swiss call them *stumpen*—cheroots are usually associated with Burma, perhaps because the country’s former masters, the British, took a liking to them too. Cheroot smoking was so widespread in colonial Burma that an imperial administrator once described them as “a Burmese facial feature.” The cigars also feature prominently in the works of authors such as George Orwell (*Burmese Days*) and Rudyard Kipling (*Mandalay*).

Like other dictatorial countries, today’s Myanmar is less keen on reporters and other foreign commentators. Even trade journalists—whose writings are unlikely to threaten the regime—must be careful, as the country’s paranoid rulers are prone to erratic behavior. In 2005, the generals baffled the world by moving Myanmar’s capital from semi-cosmopolitan Yangon to a remote, arid field near Pyinmana. The relocation was supposedly carried out at the urging of an astrologer, although some suspect

a more down-to-earth motive: fear of an Iraq-style invasion.

Needless to say, the project presented a huge cost that the country can ill afford—not to mention the inconvenience caused to ordinary Burmese, who now must travel hundreds of kilometers inland for official business. Human rights groups have accused the government of building its new capital with forced labor, a practice that is widespread in Burma. Even the cheroot manufacturing sector has been implicated, with some well-connected manufacturers allegedly taking advantage of a free workforce.

So I applied for a tourist visa instead, hoping that if my cover were blown, a politician would bail me out, as happened when U.S. Senator Jim Webb secured the release of a lunatic who had swum into Burma to deliver “a message from God” to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Or, better yet, when Bill Clinton traveled to North Korea to free two journalists charged with illegal entry.

But perhaps it would be safer to invoke my Netherlands citizenship in case of trouble. After all, Myanmar’s superstitious generals might be more intimidated by the appearance of Dutch Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende (he looks like Harry Potter) than Bill Clinton’s \$200 coiffure.

To punish the regime for its behavior, the international community has imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar, but with mixed results. The country’s bountiful natural resources, including hydrocarbons, minerals and timber, have proved irresistible to many foreign investors, and some argue the population suffers more from the boycott than do the generals.

The sanctions affected the local tobacco industry too. In 2003, the British government formally asked British American Tobacco to divest its majority shareholding in Rothmans Pall Mall Myanmar (RPM). While agreeing to pull out, BAT questioned whether its withdrawal would benefit Myanmar’s people, citing employment, its social responsibility programs and the exemplary working conditions at RPM.

“While we understand and greatly respect concerns about human rights, we have not changed our fundamental view that it’s not the best way forward for businesses to withdraw unilaterally from countries whose governments’ human rights records are criticized,” the company wrote in a press statement.

RPM was established by Rothmans Singapore in 1993 and joined the BAT group when Rothmans and BAT merged in 1999. In 2004, BAT sold its share to Distinction Investment Holdings of Singapore, which continued producing BAT brands under license until September 2008.

Going strong

Like elsewhere, cigarettes have been gaining popularity at the expense of traditional tobacco products in Myanmar. But cheroots still dominate the market, even in urban





areas. The foot-long “whackin” cheroots described by Kipling are still popular in the countryside and are usually rolled by the smokers themselves. The cheroots I saw for sale in Yangon, by contrast, were much smaller—perhaps 15 cm long—and premanufactured.

No doubt, price plays a role in their continued popularity; cheroots, which are typically sold per stick, are significantly cheaper than cigarettes. The cigars also offer more “bang for the buck” because they self-extinguish when not puffed on. In terms of ignition propensity, cheroots would probably comply with the strict tobacco regulations of some rich countries.

Ingredients, however, could be more problematic for the developed world’s regulatory agencies, which might explain the dearth of exports. Cheroots comprise a mixture of tobacco leaves, chopped-up tobacco stalks and threshed stems from other plants. Some are said to contain sawdust or even narcotics, and one can only guess at their nicotine and tar deliveries, as tobacco ingredient disclosure remains optional in Myanmar. The government does, however, require cheroot manufacturers to print generic health warnings on their packages, accompanied by the statement “No sales to those under 18.”

Despite their rustic appearance, cheroots are quite mild. Manufacturers differentiate their products by adding jaggery (pure, unrefined whole sugar), lemon rind or tamarind pulp. Some even change their blends accord-

ing to the season—a “cool” smoke for the hot summers and a stronger one for cold wet days.

Bago

As luck would have it, an exhibitor I met at TABINFO had contacts in Myanmar. He set me up with his local agent, who in turn arranged for me to visit a cheroot manufacturing facility in Bago, 50 km north of Yangon.

Bago has been a cheroots production center for decades, but no tobacco is grown here. Leaf comes from Myanmar’s central plains, which have sandy soils and a hot climate. Factory owner Kun Maung Zin told me that the company was started by his grandfather many years ago and that his children would likely continue the business.

The company distributes some 500,000 cheroots per day. Its main brands are Hawk and Three Lions. Like most cheroots factories in Myanmar, the firm sells its products only in certain parts of the country. Kun Maung Zin focuses on southern Myanmar, and his products target “hardworking people” such as farmers and fishermen. He also exports limited quantities of cheroots to Thailand and Singapore, where they are smoked by Burmese expatriates.

Kun Maung Zin says he uses two tobacco types—a light variety that grows on sandbanks in the Ayeyarwady River, and a stronger-tasting type that is produced on land. He creates his blends in-house and contracts with

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10 local households for rolling. Even today, cheroot production is carried out entirely by hand. The rollers—almost all of them women—are compensated per piece. The best of them can manufacture more than 1,000 cheroots per day.

Rollers sit on the floor around a reed basket containing everything they need—tobacco, filters, wrappers, labels, bands, adhesive, scissors and a measuring stick. Filters are made out of corn cob husks, and a small piece of newspaper functions as a makeshift plug wrap. The entire contents are then rolled into a dried *tha na phet* leaf from the sebesten tree, a tropical scrub that grows primarily in Myanmar's eastern Shan state. Prior to use, the roller dips the leaves in water to make them more pliable.

The cheroot is glued together with rice glue or the paste of gooeey fruit, and then the label with the brand name is applied. The entire process takes place in a matter of seconds. Once the cheroots are finished they are either sold or stored. Those in storage are heated over a charcoal stove to prevent fungus.

Enforcement

While Kun Maung Zin's quaint production process is a world away from highly automated operations run by multinational cigarette makers, his concerns are remarkably similar to those of his more sophisticated counterparts. When asked about the biggest challenges facing his business, he named three that will sound surprisingly familiar to cigarette executives—competition from other tobacco products, workforce loyalty and brand piracy.

Even as cheroot smoking remains widespread in Myanmar, smokers are increasingly attracted to cigarettes, which are perceived to be more cosmopolitan. "I worry about the changing taste of Myanmar's smokers—especially the younger ones," says Kun Maung Zin.

Also, cheroot manufacturers compete intensely for rollers. Rolling cheroots requires great skill, and it is not uncommon for manufacturers to lure away their competitors' talent by offering higher wages.

But perhaps most surprising, from a Western perspective, is that even cheroots suffer from counterfeiting. Kun Maung Zin says his products are frequently targeted by imitators hoping to capitalize on the name recognition of his brands. "They will mix cheap tobaccos with the cuttings of other plants and forge our labels," he says. Most knockoffs are of poor quality. "The smoker will immediately notice the difference," says Kun Maung Zin.

Unlike multinational tobacco companies, Kun Maung Zin cannot afford sophisticated printing technologies to deter counterfeiters. Cheroots are typically bundle-wrapped with rubber bands, wrapped in cellophane film and then sold per stick. "We can only gather information and go to the police," he says.

But while Kun Maung Zin has no access to the security inks and holograms used by his counterparts in the developed world, he can take some comfort from the fact that the perpetrators—if caught—will be dealt with severely.

It's one of the mixed blessings of living in a police state. TR