

## The Study of Bullock-Cart Making Cottage Industry in Myanmar

Than Than Htay\*

### Abstract

Cart means of transportation used in many parts of the world since ancient times. Likewise, carts were recognized as a means of transport in villages and were essential in agriculture, trade and various ceremonies used in the past Myanmar society. The study of this paper is "Sustainable development of bullock cart cottage industry in Myanmar". The aim of this research is to study the difficulties of bullock-cart cottage industry in Mandalay region. This study highlights the specific approach, "the role of the bullock cart in Myanmar society and describing the causes and effects on bullock cart cottage industry in Mandalay region, where cart makers and users joined to maintain the cart culture. The methodologies applied in this research were Qualitative research methods, Key Informant Interview (KII), Individual Depth Interview (IDI) and Observation. The cart-making cottage industry has a long history that was and still is the part of the Myanmar rural community and becomes part and parcel of Myanmar culture. It also manifest the skills of our ancestors, and taking into consideration of the importance and impact of this simple bullock-cart on the maintenance of Myanmar culture, ways and means to preserve this authentic Myanmar symbol must be found, whatever the difficulties may be in store in the future. Lastly but not the least, empirical data from various monitoring surveys are presented and analyzed to give an assessment of the impact of the bullock making cottage industry in *Wetlu* Village, Nahtoggyi Township, Mandalay Region.

**Keywords:** bullock-cart, sustainable, difficulties, decreasing

### Introduction

In the various stages of human civilization, man had improvised a range of tools, implements and weapons for their survival, and at a later stage of human advancement they constructed vehicles to facilitate their means of transportation in their migration or travelling to other parts of the world. Men's invention largely depended on the available natural resources of their habitat, and also on the demands of their society. And mankind had experienced changes in the course of time; new inventions appeared replacing the old ones, or the old disappeared gradually.

The cart (*He*) one of the most ancient vehicles used by man along the course of human civilization to transport goods and merchandise, and to ride himself to his desired destination. A **cart** is a [vehicle](#) designed for [transport](#), using two [wheels](#) and normally pulled by one or a pair of [draught animals](#). A *handcart* is pulled or pushed by one or more people. It is different from a dray

---

\* Associate Professor, Anthropology Department, Yadanabon University.

or [wagon](#), which is a heavy transport vehicle with *four* wheels and typically two or more horses, or a [carriage](#), which is used exclusively for transporting humans.

A **bullock cart** or **ox cart** is a two-wheeled or four-wheeled [vehicle](#) pulled by [oxen](#) (draught [cattle](#)). It is a means of transportation used in many parts of the world since ancient times. They are still used today where modern vehicles are too expensive or the infrastructure does not favor them.

As Myanmar is mainly an agricultural country, the cart was the most ancient invention and it was also one of the skilled products of Myanmar handicraft. Since the mainstay of Myanmar economy was agriculture, seventy percent of the Myanmar population was necessarily farmers; and in the past Myanmar kingdoms, agriculture was given the top priority for the kingdom's feudal economy. In the agricultural economy the cart is indispensable and it is one of the main tools which the peasant cultivators had been relying on since the days of the kings. Apart from the use in transporting agricultural product carts were also used in warfare, carrying war materiel and soldiers during the days of monarchy.

In the post-independence ruled by period, the parliamentary government, the Revolution Council and the military administrations, the role of the bullock-cart had not changed up to the present. The Myanmar cart and the farmers are both sides of the same coin, the striking symbol of Myanmar rural life and at pagoda festival, in which part and parcel of the social village life, especially in the past era of monarchy (**See figure-1**).

After 1988 at the time of introducing the market economy system agricultural machines and tools were imported, such as ploughing, threshing, winnowing machines, farming equipment and the like; such use of modern machines and equipment resulted in the decreasing use of the traditional bullock- cart, and this paper was examined whether these changes are related to the governing administration, policies.



Figure (1)

### **Literature review**

Society strive its continuity and existence according to the environmental conditions of its surrounding. People have been descending down from generation to generation with the addition of new ideas and objects.

In the book of "Transportation in Early China" methods of transportation were described in detailed. There are four methods of transportation: carts for transportation on land, boats on water, and sledges on mud and hob-nailed boots on hills-had been explained in the Historical Records of Saw-ma Ch'ien. There is nothing particular for the transport historian to write a comparative account of bullock transport cart. Although, it was still the important and main means of transport today. The advantages are: low cost in manufacturing and repairs, affordable by peasants of limited resources and its flexibility. Although bullock carts are signs of backwardness their importance cannot be ignored. The government policies especially the economic policies which makes it possible to communicate, use and see other cultural products accelerates culture change.

### **Aim, Objectives and Questions**

The aim of this paper is to study difficulties of bullock-cart cottage industry in Mandalay region. The specific objectives are to explore the role of the bullock cart in the Myanmar society and to analyze the causes and effects on bullock cart cottage industry in Mandalay region. Research question is "What are the reasons for the decrease in bullock cart cottage industry in Myanmar?"

### **Research Methodology, Populations, Area and Period**

This research used descriptive study design. Both primary data and secondary data were used in this paper. Primary data was collected from direct personal interview with their family including makers and bullock-cart making cottage industry. The secondary source of the data includes books, journals, and newspapers, published and unpublished research work and internet/online study. Book researches, library research and field researches are carried out in order to collect necessary information for this research. Thirty people were interviewed. They are the owner of cart making cottage industry, cart maker, their families, and cultivators. Research area is *Wetlu* village, Nahtoggyi Township, Mandalay Region, Myanmar. Study period was conducted from 2016 to 2017.

### **History of Study Area**

The *Wetlu* village is located at 9 miles north of *Nahtoggyi* Township, *Myingyan* District, Mandalay region. The origin of the village is unknown, but oral tradition is that during the time of Bagan King *Alaung-sithu* the first inhabitants came to live around the present area. However,

around that locality the *Wetlu* cart is famous for its quality, durability and the saying around that locality is: “*Hle Hmar Moe Hmaung, Nwar Hmar Thoe Kyaung*”, which implies that the best quality bullock-cart is the product of cart maker, *U Moe Hmaung*.

### **Background History of Bullock-Cart**

The cart is defined as a form of vehicle drawn by human labour or animals<sup>1</sup>, and in the course of its long history there was hardly any record when it was first invented and put to use. When the cart was employed in its initial stages, the wheel was just a rough handiwork, this type of wheels were used in long distance travels. The wood planks became loose and weak. It could be said that carts were in use before the arrival of Buddhism in Myanmar; in the chronicles of Lord Buddha<sup>2</sup>.

In the stone inscriptions of Bagan, the donations of the Bagan citizens constructing pagodas, temples and monasteries were described, thus manifesting the belief of the ancient Myanmar. The reign of King Anawrahta *Meikhitla* pond were dredged up and over a hundred bullock carts were used in that undertaking.

During the Inwa Period there is a clear evidence of having a "Royal Carriage" during the Inwa period, described in the article by U Min Naing, and the cart was jeweled with precious stones as it was the use of the Myanmar King. And this historical fact is found in the article entitled "The Royal Cart of Inwa Period"<sup>3</sup>.

And during the Inwa Period the term (*Hle*) and (*Ya Htar*), cart and carriage, were differentiated according to its use, the carriage for the Royalty and nobles, the cart for transporting goods and for the conveyance of common citizens<sup>4</sup>.

The last Konbaung Period, the designs of the carts were more stylish as described in the Royal *Parabaiks* (folding palm-leaf books), especially the cart offered to the king by *Tha-yet-kaing* village chief.

Another painting that portrayed the majestic and elegant style of the Myanmar royal cart was in the fifteen-page folded *Parabaik*; when it was spread to full it projected a view of King Mindon, the penultimate king of last Konbaung Dynasty, inspecting the huge *Kyauk-Taw-Gyi Buddha Image* hewn from the marble of *Shwe-gyin* mountain.

Furthermore, in the wall paintings at *Taung-tha-man Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda* built by King Bagan of Konbaung Dynasty, there are pictures of Myanmar carts of Amarapura Period. The different designs of the cart in the middle year of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflecting the social ranks in the

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the Myanmar Encyclopedia.

<sup>2</sup> 550 Bodhisatta Stories

<sup>3</sup> Min Naing, U, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Citra,1994.

Myanmar feudal society: carriages used by the royalty and aristocracy, the carts used by the spouses of courtiers in social occasions<sup>5</sup>.

In the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century the common citizens used the cart known as Bago cart; in the late Amarapura period light carts with 16 support stands were in use and at the head of the cart was the figure of a royal page by (*Thu-nge-taw*) installed as a decoration. It could be said that the features of the Myanmar cart became complete in the late Amarapura period.

To sum up in brief, the past Myanmar had the inventiveness to build this simple vehicle to suit the needs on social customs of the feudal society; the simple means of conveyance to travel, transport and to shield against the weather. This vehicle had become the indispensable part of work and play in the Myanmar social life, for royalty and the common citizens.

### **The Role of the Bullock- Cart in Myanmar Society**

#### **Agricultural, Social sector and Transportation**

In the years before the implementation of the market economy, the bullock cart had been the principal means of ploughing and transportation of agricultural indispensable tool for their livelihood and the cattle become the part of their family. The cultivators have to plough in deep mud during the rainy season, however much the roads are flooded with water; the cart is the only means of transport in their daily lives.

The cart is the principal means of communication in the agrarian way of life. It is the indivisible part of the village social fabric whereby one can see long caravans of bullock carts visiting the festivals; the seasonal pagoda festivals are the centres of village social and cultural activities where the villages folks meet their friends and relatives, enjoying the song and dance troupes (*Zat-pwes*) and buy food necessities and bullock cart paraphaneria from the festival stalls **(See figures – 2 & 3)**.

At the *Wetlu* village elders of the cultivator family keep different designs of carts for their descendants. Besides, the tradition of this *Wetlu* village is to give a plot of land, a cart and a pair of oxen to their sons and daughters when they marry and start their own married lives. At the *Wetlu* village the *Padauk* wood is used for making *Pontaung* as well as making prayer beads according to their religious belief; and the figurine of a “bettle” sculpted from *Pontaung* wood is kept inside the house as an amulet to ward off five evils, the villagers' belief.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nyo Mya,U,2003



Figure (2) Bullock-Cart at work



Figure (3) Using of bullock-cart in social sector

### Parts of Bullock Cart

A bullock cart is built formed with six different integral parts which collectively name as a cart. **(See figure 4)**

Such parts are:-

1. wheel
2. axle
3. frame bar
4. yoke
5. main frame
6. driver's seat

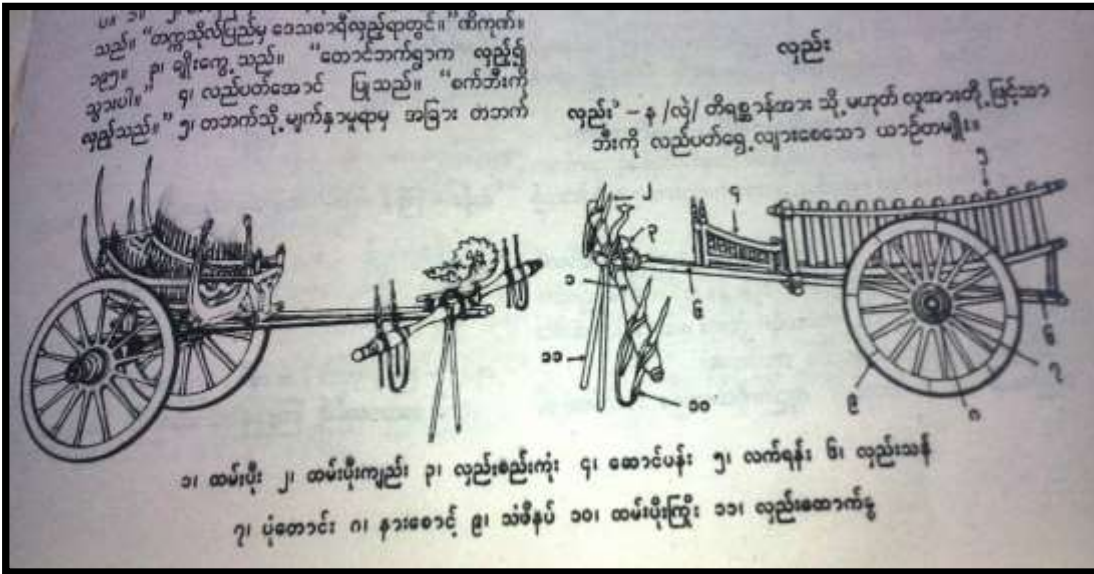


Figure (4)

**Challenges to be faced in cart making**

When the study of the process making bullock-cart, two kinds of challenges were found the scarcity of raw materials, and scarcity of skilled labour, were found.

**Scarcity of Raw Materials**

Nature has bestowed Myanmar with thick hardwood forests and our ancestors were wise enough to cut timber for the construction of a cart, leaving the base stump of a tree up to the height of the boson of cutter, only for the building of a cart only, according to the oral traditions handed down to the descendants, but as of now teak and Padauk hardwood are valuable exports. And owing to deforestation timber becomes scarcer than ever and the price rises to skyrocketing levels.

**Wetlu** village cart-maker, sixty-three year old making carts since the age of nine, told that he received a limited supply of timber during the one-party rule of BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party): 24 pieces of wood, eight inches width, 4 inches thick and 27 inches in length; one piece of wood cost 75kyats for a cart. He got a supply of wood for two carts, which he sold for two thousand kyats, thus covering his family expenses for a month. **(See figure 5)**

According to the oral traditions handed down to their descendants, but as of now teak and *padauk* hardwood are exported and also owing to deforestation timber becomes more scarce than ever and the price of timber rise up to unprecedented levels. The cost of bullock cart at *Wetlu* village is now about 850,000 *kyats*, and so it has become a big problem for the peasant cultivators; naturally the bumper harvest time is financially good for the cultivators when they can purchase a new cart, but now due to unstable weather, low output and waste the cultivators' income drop and cannot afford to buy a new cart for their work, thus leading to less demand for new carts.

About 50 years ago the durability of a cart made at *Wetlu* village lasted at least from 25 to 20 years, but owing to the use of less quality raw materials the durability of the contemporary carts are now less than those of in the past. "The quality of the wood is now not up to the quality of the past hardwood", said a cart maker from *Wetlu* village.

All in all, the negative features affecting the Myanmar art of making carts may disappear in time, thus leading to the loss of the important pillar of Myanmar agrarian culture.



Figure (5) Lanzin News Journal

**Scarcity of skilled labour**

The younger generations of the *Wetlu* village do not have the interest to engage in their village traditional profession, and most of them leave the village to work abroad, mostly they go off to Malaysia. Another factor that deters the young men to enter this cart making business is that the work needs detailed and intensive skills requiring much effort and time to learn, but in return receives less income, thus hardly anyone wants to become an apprentice in this livelihood. To sum up, all these negative developments in the cart making work suggest the gradual decline in the sector of cart making. And the *Wetlu* village, once the centre of cart making, cannot resist the changes of the time.

At present owing to the shortage of skilled labour, the cart making enterprise had become a family business, for the cart maker cannot hire any labour. A cart-maker of 65 years old connected on the dwindling numbers of skilled labour:

"I have a family of five members: two sons, a daughter and us parents; it has been my profession since I was a bachelor and this cart-making is the only craft I know, so I want to hand over my craft to my sons doing with some persuasion. A cart-maker must have interest and must possess an artistic eye to make the cart attractive. But in the long run, it is difficult to maintain our family tradition in this age of labour and material shortage."



### **Effects of Governmental Policies and Environmental Changes on Cart Making Industry**

Since the economic basis of Myanmar is mainly agriculture the staple food of Myanmar is rice, and successive governments since Independence had laid down policies and schemes that would develop the agricultural sector, once the major foreign exchange earner of the country. And this emphasis on the development of agriculture could be seen in the time of Bagan era as King Anawratha dug up ponds and built dams during his reign.

After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar national governments, namely the parliamentary democracy administration of AFPFL formed Land Development Committee to implement a cooperative plan to develop this sector in 1958, and during the rule of Burma Socialist Programme Party, this committee was reinstated into (**See figures-6**) Mechanized Farming Department under the Ministry of Agriculture; however, this department could only use machines in the pilot projects during its initial days.

Likewise, after the 1988 uprising, the government of SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) introduced open-door market economy, imported agricultural machines aiming to modernize agriculture. As of now in townships where mechanized agriculture department exists, cultivators are offered chances to buy machines on three installments paying up in two years. Besides, private companies are also selling agricultural machines and fertilizers in installments to boost production, and that is one of the causes in the dwindling role of the bullock-cart in this sector.

Once Myanmar was blessed with thick hardwood forests, and the cottage industry of cart making had abundant supply of high quality hardwood raw materials, but deforestation, owing to many causes, have contributed to the scarcity of this high quality natural product, which in turn becomes the cause of decreasing quality of the cart. As a result the value of a cart rises to high levels, while the durability and quality of a cart in contrast sink to low levels. And only now the preservation of the natural environment is given priority in government long-term plans.

All in all these combinations of factors, the scarcity of hardwood such as teak and *Padauk* that in turn pushes the price up and lowers the quality of the cart, and the expanding role of the use of agricultural machines put the bullock-cart into a tight corner, thus offering a chance to study this important area of research which is no less important than the introduction of modern agricultural machines into Myanmar's agricultural sector.



Figure (6) Agricultural machines

### Discussion and Conclusion

Concerning with the objective one the role of bullock-cart in Myanmar society, it was to be noted that The area of *Wetlu* is one of the flourishing centres of bullock cart making profession. The history of cart-use in Myanmar could not be denied as it was expressed in Myanmar Buddhist literature, especially in Jataka 550 stories (Buddha Bird Stories), in Pali literature and in novels, poems and folk songs of Myanmar rural culture. There is a clear evidence of having a "Royal Carriage" during the Innwa period, described in the article by U Min Naing, and the cart was jeweled with precious stones as it was the use of the Myanmar King. And this historical fact is found in the article entitled "The Royal Cart of Innwa Period"<sup>6</sup>. According to objective two, this objective is to assess the contemporary situation owing to the changes of government policy in the cart-making enterprise; during the time of Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) the cart makers had a monthly supply of raw materials that was the hardwood quote doled out by the government. As the hardwood timber could not be got from the locality around *Wetlu* village, the cart makers have to purchase from the private market, which in fact is from the black market. And as the government officials are in a way not free from corruption, the quality hardwood like teak and *Padauk* can be got at the mercy of those corrupt officials. Besides, the cart makers do not have enough knowledge

---

<sup>6</sup> Min Naing, U, 1984.

and education to face and settle the problem with the government officials; consequently, the cart makers have to buy raw materials from private timber merchants at high prices.

In constructing a cart availability of required raw materials played a major part, so did the craft of the skillful labour in making the vehicle. In the past when cart industry was flourishing farm work and cart-making were mutually supportive in the Myanmar rural life, there were many eager apprentices, young men wanting to pick up the trade serving as learning wage-earners under the cart industry masters. At present, times and circumstances have changed: open door trade policy, transforming from traditional to mechanized farming, youths going abroad to work and scarcity of hardwood raw material.

Thus as times changes, the younger generations of the *Wetlu* village do not have the interest to engage in their village traditional profession, and most of them leave the village to work abroad, mostly they go off to other countries.

The post-independence period had tried in their policies had some effect directly or indirectly on the agrarian way of life. After 1988, the government's aim of changing is the traditional way into a mechanized agriculture. The use of the bullock cart become narrower as carts could not be driven on asphalt roads and across the newly built bridges. The cart industry of *Wetlu* village, suffered the effects of the similar fate of the Myanmar cart industry stated above. The cart industry at *Wetlu Village* in the Mandalay region had changed in accordance with the changing times owing to many combined short-term and long-term changes such as deforestation, difficulties in acquiring timber material, and changing forms of social system, and so the *Wetlu* making itself had to change in conformity with the prevailing social environment.

Moreover, irregular weather and ecological damage affected the farm workers of the country which resulted in the low increased from their livelihood. And as the cart industry and farm work are mutually depended, cart industry is also affected causing scarcity of workers, as cart makers cannot offer much income to worker. In the *Wetlu* village, the use of bullock-cart changes in accordance with the need of the times.

All in all these combination of factors, the scarcity of hardwood such as teak and *Padauk* pushe the price up and lower quality of the cart, and the expanding role of the use of agricultural machines put the bullock-cart into a tight corner. Thus it is offering a chance to study this important area of research which is not less important than the introduction of modern agricultural machines into Myanmar's agricultural sector.

**Recommendation**

This paper tries to put on record the threats, challenges and the plight of the cart makers; and if this paper serves as a reminder to the future scholars to pay attention to the importance and impact of this simple vehicle on the livelihood of cart makers.

**Acknowledgements**

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Tint Moe Thu Zar, Rector, Yadanabon University, for her permission and encouragement to conduct this research.

**References**

Christian Gilberti, September 10, 2019." Whatever Happened to the Carriages of the Burmese Kings?" The Burmese Rath or Imperial State Carriage, Every Day Book, pp.30.

Jenkins, J. G., 1959."Two-wheeled Carts", Gwerin, PP 11, 162-75.

Littauer M. A. and J. H. Crouwe,1986. " Earliest Known Three-Dimensional Evidence for Spoked Wheels", American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 90, No. 4, pp. 395-398, 1986.

Mallowan, M. E. L., 1965. " Early Mesopotamia and Iran", London.

Sanjoy Hazarika, 1987. "A Slow Modernization of India's Ancient Cart"

Tylor EB, 1907 IN Anthropological Essays Presented to Edward Tylor in Honour of His 75th Birthday, Oxford, Clarendon press.

စိတြ၊ ၁၉၉၄၊ မြန်မာ့လှည်း၊ စာပေဗိမာန်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။

ဆုရှင်၊ မောင်၊ ၁၉၇၂ ခုနှစ်၊ မြတ်ဘုရားရွှေတိဂုံ၊ စာပေဗိမာန်၊ ပထမအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။

ဇေယျာထက်(မင်းဘူး)၊ ၂၀၂၂၊ ကြေးမုံစာမျက်နှာ ၂၆၊ ၂၅.၅.၂၀၂၂

ထွန်းရှိန်၊ နတ်မောက်၊ ၂၀၂၁၊ မန္တလေးနေ့စဉ်၊ စာမျက်နှာ(အချပ်ပို)၇၊ ၁၀.၁၀.၂၀၂၁

မင်းညွန့်၊ ရွှေဘိုဦးဝင်းဖေ၊ ၁၉၇၂ခုနှစ်၊ နိုဝင်ဘာလ၊ လှည်းယဉ်ကြော့၊ ဇောတိကပုံနှိပ်တိုက်၊ ပထမအကြိမ်။

မြန်မာအဘိဓာန်အကျဉ်းချုပ်၊ အတွဲ-၂-၃-၄-၅၊ ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန၊ မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။

ရှေးဟောင်းမြန်မာကျောက်စာများ(ပထမတွဲ)၊ ၁၉၇၂၊ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဝန်ကြီးဌာန၊ ရှေးဟောင်းသုတေသနဦးစီးဌာန။

ဟုတ်စိန်၊ ဦး၊ ပါဠိမြန်မာအဘိဓာန်၊ အတွဲ(၃)(၄)။

ပထမညောင်ကန်ဆရာတော်အရှင်ကဝိန္ဒာဘိဝံသထေရ်၊ ငါးရဲ့ငါးဆယ်ဇာတ်ဝတ္ထု(ပထမအုပ်) ဧကနိပါတ်-ပထမတွဲ။