

## THE IMPACT OF SOME MYANMAR PROVERBS IN MYANMAR CULTURAL SOCIETY

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### Abstract

Myanmar proverbs often emphasize moral values like honesty, generosity, patience, wisdom, respect for elders, and the importance of considering consequences, frequently using animal imagery to convey these messages, with key themes including the value of hard work, not being greedy, and speaking truthfully. Other proverbs address themes such as respect, hard work, and the significance of community and relationships, showing how these principles are woven into the fabric of Myanmar culture. Myanmar proverbs often embody moral values and practical wisdom, reflecting deep ethical insights in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Culture, Society, Proverbs, Moral Values

### Introduction

There are many proverbs in Myanmar literature. Proverb are concerned with ethical conduct, social,behavior beauty, religion, culture, knowledge and etc. People used proverbs when they want to say “a short wise saying”. They express the views of men about their fellow men and about human life in its various aspects. Therefore, proverbs have been classified under five kinds; (1) human characteristics (2) human behavior (3) human relationship (4) the world and (5) man. These divisions are arbitrary and based on convenience; a proverb may have more than one implication, depending on the circumstances in which it is used.

Every nation, every society, and every ethnic group has its own culture, language, and proverb. There are various ways of revealing and studying the culture of a certain society. Among them, a proverb is one of the ways. No proverb came into existence automatically. The proverbs can come into existence on the basis of their cultural behaviors, traditional thoughts, and the place where they live.

The word “proverb” is derived from the Latin word “*proverbium*”. The word “*proverbium*” is combined with the two words: ‘pro’ and ‘*verbium*’ which means ‘saying’ or ‘saw’ and ‘word’ respectively. So, “*proverbium*” literally means a short well-known saying that expresses an obvious truth and often offers advice. In Myanmar term, the word “proverb” can be defined as “a short wise saying”. The word “proverbs” means the “proverbs”. *Sagabaunj* means literally “similar saying” which are essentially similes or parables.

A proverb is a short pithy saying in general use, stating a general truth or piece of advice. They are usually introduced in written or spoken language by the words “like as” and “as it were”. Myanmar still use these saying frequently, whether in formal speech or in daily conversation. Myanmar proverbs are influenced by the very rich cultural values, moral values, and the strong belief of Theravada Buddhism. A proverb is one of the mental conditions of an individual or society. They are memorable to everyone because of their significant character. There are many proverbs in Myanmar literature.

### Aim and Objectives

This rsearch aims to explore how Myanmar proverbs reflect and influence cultural values and moral practices in Myanmar society, analyze their role in guiding human behavior and social relationships, and highlight their significance in Myanmar’s traditions and ethics.

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## **Research Methods**

In this paper, the descriptive method and evaluative method are used.

### **Some Common Themes in Myanmar Proverbs**

Myanmar proverbs encompass various themes that reflect the country's cultural values and traditions. Many proverbs emphasize the importance of learning and gaining wisdom. For example, "A wise person learns more from a fool than a fool learns from a wise person," underscores the value of humility in learning.

Proverbs often highlight the significance of respect, especially towards elders and authority figures. "Respect your elders as you respect your shadow" illustrates this principle. There is a strong emphasis on diligence and persistence. A common saying is, "Through hard work, one can make the impossible," encouraging effort and determination. Many proverbs show the importance of family and community ties, such as "A single tree cannot make a forest," which highlights the need for collaboration and social cohesion.

Proverbs often reinforce the value of being truthful and trustworthy. For instance, "Even if the world is full of lies, a truthful heart will find a way," stresses the long-term importance of integrity. Concepts of balance in life, emotions, and actions are prevalent. "Too much of anything is no good" serves as a reminder of the dangers of excess. Many proverbs reflect a deep connection to nature, often imparting lessons learned from the natural world. "When the wind blows, the grass bends" suggests adaptability in the face of change. These themes encapsulate the essence of Myanmar's cultural and ethical landscape, showcasing the wisdom passed down through generations.

Proverbs are a rich source of cultural values and reflect the beliefs, traditions, and moral lessons of a society. In Myanmar, proverbs encapsulate various aspects of the community's worldview and daily life. Many Myanmar proverbs stress the importance of family and social bonds. For example, "The wise are humble," underscores the value of humility and the importance of maintaining good relationships within the community. Proverbs frequently contain moral lessons. The saying, "Do not do unto others what you do not want to do to yourself," mirrors the universal value of empathy and ethical behavior, which is deeply ingrained in Myanmar culture.

### **Types of Myanmar Proverbs**

Proverbs express the views of man about their fellow men and about human life in its various aspects. Therefore, they have been classified into five categories: (1) human characteristics (2) human behavior (3) human relationship (4) the world and (5) man. These divisions are arbitrary and based on convenience; a proverb may have more than one implication, depending on the circumstances in which it is used.

There are various conceptions of the meaning of a proverb. Every proverb is short to the point, full of essence, meaningful, distinct and pleasant for the employment of rhyme. It can be observed that there are many characteristics in proverbs: they are

1. Short and to the point
2. Full of essence
3. Meaningful

4. Distinct
5. Pleasant
6. Memorable
7. Easily understanding
8. Effectiveness, etc.

The usefulness of proverb is asserted by Hla Thamein in his book “Myanmar Proverbs” as follow:

“A proverb used effectively and fittingly can substitute for lengthy paragraph of pompous expressions. In some cases, the use of correct proverb can help a great deal to explain more explicitly, where as the ordinary presentations may tend to prolix and circumlocutory.”<sup>1</sup>

When we study proverbs, we can find various kinds as follows;

1. The proverbs based on Buddha Birth Stories (*jātakas*), historical, accounts, traditions, legends, myths, and folktales include:
2. Proverbs that concern social dealings,
3. Proverbs that express the nature (good or bad) of human beings,
4. Proverbs that reveal the determination, strength or the power of the mind,
5. The proverbs that proclaim the law of nature as changing,
6. Proverbs that combine the opposite natures,

The proverbs can generally be classified into five kinds:

1. Proverbs that state the epistemological view,
2. Proverbs that state the ontological view,
3. Proverbs that state the ethical view,
4. Proverbs that state the societal norms,
5. Proverbs that state the nature of man.

Every nation, every society, and every ethnic group has their own culture and proverbs. There are a variety of ways to study the culture of a certain society; among them, the revelation of proverbs is one such method. No proverb comes into existence automatically; they arise from cultural behaviors, traditional thought, customs and the context in which they exist.

Proverbs are filled with expressions of wisdom and experience. They are a collection of short moral composed or compiled by numerous unknown individuals. The most commonly accepted view is that these individuals are professional sages who offer moral and religious instruction to young members of the upper-class.

It can be said that proverbs are one of the mental conditions of individuals or societies. Anthropologists have stated that human society evolves through dialectical process of physical

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<sup>1</sup> Thamein, Hla. (2000). *Myanmar Proverbs in Myanmar & English*. Rangon. Padamyar Ngamaunt Sarpay. First Edition. P.7.

and mental condition of human beings. Thus proverbs represent a branch of the main stems of literature that reflects one of the mental conditions of humans.

The contribution of the proverbs to the people is highlighted by Hla Thame in his book “Myanmar Proverbs” as follow:

“There are serious instructions and lessons to be followed in the communal life, and there are also witty remarks and unchallengeable truth of despite the anonymity of their originators”<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs can reveal the basic principles of ways of thinking of respective society. They can give men a graphic picture of the development and progress of human life and thought. And, he said the benefits of proverbs as follows:

“The proverbs have endured for a long time and will continue to do so relentlessly. They have given rise to numerous and will boldly stand as a historical and etymological source of references in the language”.<sup>2</sup>

Proverbs meant to offer characteristics general advice about how to behave or conduct oneself and how to navigate daily life. In addition, proverbs may impart many other beliefs, such as;

- (1) Knowledge,
- (2) Wisdom,
- (3) Industriousness,
- (4) Good will,
- (5) Good character or morality,
- (6) Consideration or sympathy for others,
- (7) Being a helper to those in need to help,
- (8) Understanding the nature of the world,
- (9) Knowing and understanding universal truths
- (10) Knowing and respecting the traditional customs of a certain nationalities, etc.

Therefore, proverbs can enhance or improve people’s way of life. The function of a proverb is to give the general advice about how to behave or conduct oneself and how to exist or survive in daily life. Myanmar proverbs throw light on various human characteristics breed, behavior, speech and physical feature.

### **Aspects of Human Characteristics**

Myanmar proverbs throw light on human characteristics; breed, behavior, speech, and physical feature. There are many proverbs concerning of human characteristics. People believe that people are like progenitors, because like begets like. This view of heredity and breed plays a very important part in shaping the life of human being. It is most apparent in matrimonial affairs, and especially in marriage arranged by the parents of parties: wealth, status and other considerations all have to give way to family breeding.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.,P.15

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,

The first question asked by the parents about a prospective son- or daughter-in law is invariably: Does he or she come of a good stock? or Is there are any mad person or drunkard or gambler or leper in the family? The ancestors of the person concerned may be traced back for seven generations, because a gourd plant will not bear any fruit other than a gourd.

It is easier to go wrong in assaying up a person than in assaying a piece of gold or silver, so says an old adage. People have however touchstones may by which to test a man's character. Once a man has passed the test he is worth his weight in gold and will not sink into oblivion, since a genuine ruby will not be scorched if tossed into fire nor will it sink if thrown onto the mud. Lack of material wealth is preferred to lack of intelligence. A fool is mentally blind, mentally deaf and insensitive to all the beautiful things: Tell him to bring buttermilk and he will ask: Shall I bring the jar as well? He cannot read the letter or even if it is written as large as a basket; above all he is, to quote the proverbs, "buffalo before which it would be futile to play a harp". Myanmar proverbs portray him as a dunderhead, a braggart and an idiot all combined. The following Myanmar proverbs represent the characteristics of man.

For example,

1. ကြက်မှာအရိုး။ လူမှာအမျိုး။  
With fowls, the pedigree; with men breeding.
2. ဒီပုတ်ထဲကပဲဒီပဲ။  
Naturally the same beans from the bin.
3. ချောင်းရိုးမြောင်းရိုးတိမ်ကော၊ လူမျိုးမတိမ်ကော။  
Only rivers and streams can disappear without a trace; a human cannot.
4. အပွေးမြင်အပင်သိ။  
Seeing the bark you know the tree; seeing his expression you know his character.
5. ရွှေအကြောင်းဖယောင်းသိ  
Wax will show the quality of gold.
6. ပတ္တမြားမှန်နံ့မနစ်  
A real ruby cannot sink in the mud.
7. ကျွဲပါးစောင်းတီး  
Playing a harp before a buffalo.
8. ပိုးသာကုန် မောင်ပုန်စောင်းမတတ်  
The silk is all used up, but Maung Pon never learned to play the harp.
9. မပြည့်တဲ့အိုးတောင်ဘင်ခတ်  
A jar half full of water splashes about.
10. တောက်မိမီးခဲ တရဲရဲ  
An ember about to blaze glows brightly.

The above Myanmar proverbs can shows the characteristics of human nature. It can distinguish good man or bad man through characteristics. Human character is an important feature in the society. So these proverbs can shows human characters. Furthermore, Myanmar proverbs are concerned with the man's ways of life and values of life on Myanmar perspective.

### Aspects of Human Behavior

Some Myanmar proverbs used to describe the benefits of human behavior. In Myanmar tradition, altruistic outlook is basic principle for Myanmar social life. Altruism is selfless concern for the welfare of others. For Myanmar people, this idea were often described as the Myanmar moral rules.

Myanmar Buddhist tradition, the concept of Khanti or Tolerance is an important term for religious life and social life. The concept of Khanti means striving to fulfill perfection in patience; to be patient and forbearing. For example, in the light of Buddha, the future Buddha in a past existence as the recluse khanti vadi has his limbs amputated and his ears cut off by order of King Kalabu .But the recluse khanti vadi harboured no ill-will against the king and forgave him. This is an example of striving to fulfill the perfection in patience. So some proverbs refer to the weak point of evil conduct in human beings.

For example,

1. သူများအကျိုးဆောင်အိုအောင်မဆင်းရဲ။  
If one helps others, he will not get into poverty till he becomes old.
2. ကုသိုလ်လည်းရဝမ်းလည်းဝ။  
A deed both subsistent and meritorious.
3. သူတော်ကောင်း နတ်ကောင်းမ ။  
Good spirits helps those who are conscientious and upright.
4. ပညာရှိအမျက် အပြင်မထွက်။  
The fury of a wiseman does not peep out.
5. သစ်ပင်အောက်ကျိုသေနိုင်၊ လူ့အောက်ကျို မသေနိုင်။  
One may be killed if he creeps underneath an old tree but one may never be kill if he succumbs to a person.
6. သည်းညည်းခံနိဗ္ဗာန်ရောက်။  
Tolerance leads to Nirvana.
7. ကာမကျူးလျှင်မွဲ၊ သေရည်ကျူးလျှင်ဆဲ။  
If a person indulges in excessive libidinous pursuits, he will soon become a paupe ; if a person indulges in excessive gulps of alcoholic drinks, he will become abusive.
8. ကိုယ်ထက်သာမနာလို။  
One usually feels jealous upon the other whom out scores.
9. ကိုယ်မလှကိုယ်မမြင်၊ သူမလှကိုယ်ရယ်ချင်။  
One cannot notice his own ugliness but he may get rid of others.
10. ကျေးဇူးရှိမှကျေးစွပ်။  
Where we owe gratitude, then there is only alternate way to be ungrateful.

The above Myanmar proverbs are describe the benefits of good conducts and evil conducts. The proverbs wanted all human beings to lead ideal lives to be kind, compassionate and considerate to one another and to practice patience, and the understanding in all activities. These proverbs show the good conducts which are important for human life.

### Aspects of Relationship

Some proverbs can express the relationship of parents and children, teacher and pupil, friendship, relative, and etc. The parent-child relationship is summed up in a saying that for parents 'The sight of their child is like a drop of cool, exhilarating water on them,' and their care stems from another maxim that the parents are the children's first teachers. The parents would always like to hear that there are true children of good parents and they also wish them to attain the highest rank in life.

The tie between friends is very strong indeed: friends travel in the same boat, they share the same happiness and sorrows, and they go through thick and faithfulness. Some proverbs are very harsh about such false friends. The proverbs that shows genuine friendship are as follows:

For example;

1. အရေးကြီးသွေးနီး  
In time of test family is best.
2. သစ်တစ်ပင်ကောင်းငှက်တစ်သောင်းနား။  
A good tree can lodge ten thousand birds.
3. ကျီးရိုသေ-ဘုတ်ရိုသေ။  
Crow pheasant respect crow and crow respects crow pheasant.
4. အေးအတူ ပူအမျှ။  
Together in happiness and trouble alike.
5. စိတ်ပေါင်းကိုယ်ခွာ။  
Mind together bodies apart.
6. တံငါနားနီးတံငါ မုဆိုးနားနီးမုဆိုး။  
Near a fisherman one is a fisherman; near a hunter a hunter.
7. ကိုင်းကျွန်းမှီကျွန်းကိုင်းမှီ  
Grass depends on the island, the island on the grass.

Therefore, proverbs can teach people's ways of life to live in harmony.

It may be said that Myanmar proverbs reflect the ethical values, norms, and beliefs of traditional knowledge and these are the basis of moral teaching. Therefore, Myanmar proverbs play a significant role in the moral teaching of Myanmar society, as they serve as a guide for decision making and problem solving.

### Aspects of the World

Some proverbs express what is happening in the world. The world is not only imperfect, but also tantalizing as well as aggravating. The world has an omnipresent force called karma which presupposes a belief in reincarnation.

The world is full of unexpected and inexplicable phenomena and incidents. Others such phenomena and incidents are those which afford delight or cause disillusionment and disappointment. The proverbs poignantly illustrate that the world is a bed of roses as well as of thorns. Some proverbs have so far projected an image of the world in an unfavorable light: it has more faults than virtues.

For example;

1. ကံသာအမိ ကံသာအဖ။  
Karma is the mother and Karma is the father.
  2. ရေစီးတစ်ခါ ရေသာတလှည့်။  
Sometimes poor, sometimes rich.
  3. လိုလျင်ကြံဆ နည်းလမ်းရ။  
Where there is a will, there is a way.
  4. နှစ်မရှိတော့ ကြက်ဆူပင်မင်းမူ။  
In a forest where there is no hard wood tree, the caster-oil plant becomes the king-plant.
  5. ကြီးနိုင် ငယ်ညှဉ်း။  
Yielding to a stronger and bullying weaker a wearier.
  6. ငိုအားထက် ရယ်အားသန်။  
More to laugh than to weep.
  7. မီးများမီးနိုင် ရေများရေနိုင်။  
If the fire is the greater the fire wins, if the water is greater the water wins.
  8. မှန်ကင်းတလှည့် ထင်းတလှည့်။  
The top of a pinnacle now, fire - wood soon.
  9. အမေကျော် ဒွေးတော်လွမ်း။  
Yearning for his aunt rather than his mother.
  10. ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ခင်မှတရားမင်။  
If the speaker is venerated, his instructions may be willingly accepted.
- The above proverbs express the nature of humans in the world.

**Aspects of Man**

Some proverbs are concerned with man. Some reveal various aspects of man’s life and others show the ways to adjust themselves to their surrounding in the form of grim warnings and pieces of cogent advice. Some proverbs show one of the guiding principles in one’s speech and actions.

For example,

1. ပန်းအပွင့်၊ လူအကျင့်။  
The value of a flower plant is the blossom.
2. ပါးစပ်ကဘုရားလက်ကကားယား။  
Oh God, Oh God, comes out of the mouth, but unscrupulous are performed in practice.
3. နွားအိုမြက်နုကြိုက်။  
The aged bullock love to eat tender grass.
4. ကြံအစဉ်ချို၊ လူအစဉ်မချို။  
The sugarcane is sweet throughout the seasons, but the man is not so.

5. ကျားကြီးခြေရာကြီး။  
The bigger the tiger the bigger the pug - marks.
6. ထန်းရေမှူးကျွဲခိုးပေါ်။  
When one is drunk taking the toddy palmuine, he reveal his stealing of a buffalo.
7. မစားရတဲ့အမဲသဲနှင့်ပက်။  
One sprinkles sand on the morsel of meat for which one has no share to eat.
8. ဘယ်သူသေသေ၊ ငတေမာပြီးရော။  
No care whom dies. The important thing as the health of Nga Tay, one's own son.
9. ကိုယ်ထက်သာမနာလို။  
One usually feels jealous upon the whom out scores.

The above proverbs shows the bad characteristics of humans.

Therefore some Myanmar proverbs help us to realize such as human characteristics, human behaviors, relationships, the nature of man. In Myanmar too, proverbs are as old as Myanmar culture and they have made fair contribution to the foundation of its culture and society. Myanmar proverbs can pave a way towards better understanding of man's nature. They are also educative in character and impart knowledge of religious teachings and moral lessons. They also impart the sense of humour and wit of the Myanmar people. Beside these features, Myanmar proverbs exhibit some philosophical trends.

A study of Myanmar proverbs from a philosophical perspective would help us to understand the Myanmar way of life and the Myanmar way of thinking. Myanmar proverbs may be regarded as paradigms in which Myanmar philosophical thoughts are implicitly embodied.

### **Research Findings**

Proverbs are widely used in daily communication and serve as tools for moral education. Proverbs promote positive behaviors like altruism, tolerance, and humility. They contribute to social relationship by reinforcing shared values and cultural identity.

### **Research Contribution**

This research aims to provide insights for educators and cultural workers to integrate traditional wisdom into moral education. It highlights the continuing relevance of proverbs in guiding ethical behavior in modern society.

### **Conclusion**

Myanmar proverbs serve as a mirror reflecting cultural values and societal norms, as they promote wisdom, community, respect, hard work, and living harmoniously with others and nature. They are an integral part of Myanmar's identity, preserving its heritage and guiding both individual behavior and communal interactions. Myanmar proverbs have been passed down through generations, from one to another, each holding a valuable lesson or piece of wisdom. They have been used to teach children, pass on knowledge, and provide guidance in various aspects of life. Myanmar proverbs are not only a source of culture, society but also traditions of the country. The impact of Myanmar proverbs on cultural society and moral wisdom cannot be understated. These proverbs offer valuable insights into human nature,

relationships, and ethical behavior. They guide individuals to navigate the complexities of life and make informed decisions. Moreover, when elders speak to children, they often use proverbs. Additionally, friends and acquaintances also frequently use proverbs in their daily life. So, Myanmar proverbs have provided young people to have experiences, knowledge, and moral lessons.

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- စန္ဒာဆွေ၊ (၁၉၇၆)၊ “စကားပုံကပြောသောဒဿန”၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ရန်ကုန်တက္ကသိုလ်