

Treasures of the National Library of Myanmar

MS. MYA OO

Director

National Library of Myanmar



ABSTRACT

The National Library of Myanmar inherited over 5600 volumes of palm-leaf manuscripts from the Bernard Free Library. The manuscript collection of the Bernard Free Library was enriched when it bought two very important manuscript collections: (a) Kinwun Mingyi collection and (b) Bagan Minister U Tin collection. The National Library is proud of her rich collection of rare and valuable ancient Myanmar manuscripts, palm-leaf and folded paper book (*Parabaik*) that are regarded as sacred collection. These treasures are preserved at the Library for their original medium to be last longing and contents for researchers and scholars. Apart from the text included in these manuscripts, the art of writing on manuscripts and ornamented features of the manuscripts are intangible cultural heritage of Myanmar people. Basic materials used for Myanmar traditional manuscripts are leaf and handmade paper as medium, and iron stylus, ink stylus and soap-stone for writing materials. It is wondering the art of writing on manuscripts to get beautiful scripts and illustrations which still exist for over 200 years. As Myanmar people valued the literature like their treasure, they adorned the written mediums with Myanmar traditional arts and crafts such as lacquered covers, glass mosaic art, decorated paper art, etc. The arts and crafts on Myanmar traditional manuscripts are urgently needed to preserve for sustainable development of Myanmar cultural heritage.

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I'd like to thank to the Rector of the Yangon University to give the opportunity of paper presentation in this Symposium and also thank to Dr. Hlaing Hlaing Gyi, Librarian of the YUL to invite me to participate in this occasion.

My paper is focused to the appraising of our people on the literature and literary materials. This paper is based on the traditional manuscripts collection of the National Library of Myanmar.

Before the content, may I brief of the National Library of Myanmar. The National Library of Myanmar inherited the collections of the Bernard Free Library which was established in 1883 by Sir Charles Edward Bernard, the British Commissioner of Lower Myanmar. He collected the valuable manuscripts collection from the Mandalay Palace after annexation of Upper Myanmar by the British.

After Independence, the Union Ministry of Culture was formed in 1952 and the National Library was established under this Ministry. Unfortunately, the National Library was moved to several places from the Jubilee Hall to current place during 64 years. In 2013, the National Library (Nay Pyi Taw) was opened in the capital city of Myanmar. In 2015, the Branch Library of the National Library (Yangon) was opened at the first floor of the National Museum in downtown. Recently, the Government provided a historic building in downtown to open the National Library (Yangon).

The vision of the National Library is "TOWARDS THE NATIONAL LITERARY HERITAGE CENTRE" that focuses on the preservation of Myanmar literary heritage.

The National Library of Myanmar has maintained the rare manuscript collections of palm-leaf and *parabaik* which are inherited from Bagan Minister U Tin collection, Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung collection, Taung-Twin Monastery collection and Bernard collection. Besides the existing collections, the National Library has acquired rare manuscripts from monasteries and private collectors. Some were purchased but most of them were donated. With the collaboration projects of the National Commission for the Preservation of Traditional Manuscripts, the National Library had participated to record the manuscripts in various parts of the nation.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture aims to preserve the enrich collections of rare palm-leaf and *parabaik* manuscripts as national literary treasure. At present, the palm-leaf manuscripts collection is increased up to 17511 volumes and *parabaik* manuscript is increased up to 1970 volumes. The invitation for donation of manuscripts and printed publications to the National Library is announced to the public. The donated collections are kept as special collections of those individuals that to be increased in future.

Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung (1821-1903) who was an influential minister, diplomat, and an author of legal treaties collected many palm-leaf manuscripts and *parabaik* manuscripts. Bagan Minister U Tin (1861-1933), an expert on *parabaik* manuscripts and administrator, also collected many rare manuscripts. After the British annexation to Upper Myanmar, manuscripts collections from the Mandalay Palace were sent and kept at the Bernard Library. Beside those collections, other well wishers donated the rare manuscripts to the library.

The rich collection of Myanmar manuscripts, palm-leaf and folded paper book (*Parabaik*) are regarded as valuable collection of the National Library. They include Buddhist religious texts and commentaries as well as text on traditional medicine, astrology, mathematics, domestic productions, history, literature and customary law. Most of them are at least 200 years old and some of them are about 250 years old.

Our collections of traditional palm-leaf manuscripts are categorized in five main types: *Shwe-myin*, *Kyan-sit*, *Myin-ni*, *Myin-net* and *Pae-gyan* (or) *Myin-phyu*.

Shwe-Myin (golden line) palm-leaf is gilded an all four edges of the bundle. It was used exclusively by the royalty and kept in royal libraries and archives, & monastic libraries by members of Myanmar royal family.

Kyan-sit (ribbed-cylindrical) palm-leaf is coated with vermilion on the two length-wise edges with about 4” in the middle gilded and used by court officials, & in donations to monasteries supported by them.

Myin-ni (red line) is coated with vermilion on all four edges. *Myin-net* (black line) is coated with black resin on edges. *Myin-phyu* (white line) or *Pay-gyan* (rough palm-leaf) is no coated or no colouring on edges. These types were used of common people.

When you see the completed bundle of palm-leaf manuscript, it has covers (*Kyan-pon*), pairs of bamboo pins to keep a bundle (*palin dine*), and text. The covers of the palm-leaf manuscripts are vary with the type and their donors. We have palm-leaf manuscripts with lacquer covers, decorated resin covers, glass mosaic covers and non-decorated wooden covers. For *parabaik* manuscripts, most of them have non-decorated hard hand-made paper attached with the text. Some *parabaiks* have decorated hard paper covers and glass mosaic covers.

Our people had valued on the literature even for each alphabet as “temple” because of the Buddhist Pitaka Text. When we used palm-leaf as writing material, many Buddhist Pali texts and commentaries were copied from the stone inscriptions and then they copied from one palm-leaf to another. Those Buddhist texts were kept systematically with covers and wrapped up with cotton or silk cloths to store in decorated wooden containers (*sa-taik*). It’s no doubt those palm-leaf manuscripts were gilded and in adorned covers.

Here is an example of palm-leaf manuscript covers which have gilded lacquer art on both sides. There are floral designs in the middle and lines at the edges.

Another manuscript has painted wooden carving covers. Its floral designs are very detail and all covers are in red paint. There are some palm-leaf manuscripts with non-decorated wooden covers. Most of the palm-leaf need covers to protect the leaves.

Some white *parabaik* have glass mosaic covers which are pasted on the first leaf of volume. The top cover has title of the *parabaik* in the middle and adorned with floral designs with colourful glass or gem stones. Another white *parabaik* has cover with pressed flowers design on thick paper. Its title is written with golden ink in beautiful script.

Art of Writing

Writing on the palm-leaf, *parabaik* and *Kammava* is an art of our people. Writing on palm-leaf has to follow its rule that start from the back side of the first leaf and end at the face side of the last leaf. At the first and the last leaf, texts were written in the middle, between two small holes (*palin pauks*). It was hard to write on the leaf with iron stylus, thus, even skillful person could finish only 6 leaves for a day. Person who made copy on palm-leaf needed not only to know alphabets but also to be calligrapher. Those persons were appointed as copying clerks during the reign of Myanmar kings. It was unable to erase the wrong writing on palm-leaf thus the copying clerks had to be more concentrate on their work. There are beautiful hand writings on palm-leaf manuscripts. In some cases, monk writers wrote their texts on the palm-leaf by themselves.

Here are handwritings on palm-leaf in different languages (Pali, Mon) and different lines (i.e. 5 lines, 8 lines, etc.).

There are two kinds in paper *parabaik*; black *parabaik* and white *parabaik*. Writing material on black *parabaik* is small stick of soap stone (Kant-gu-san) and, brush, charcoal and piece of reed stalk for writing on white *parabaik*. Most of the *parabaiks* are notes, statistics, lists of social works but there are some records on the ceremonies, pictures, maps, and layout plans. The National Library has some illustrated *parabaiks* on royal boats, astrology, figurines of royal cavalry, map, and layout plan of the palace.

The handwritings and pictures on *parabaiks* are also beautiful in some cases, for example, picture of universe, text and pictures of royal cavalry (spear shooting), royal boats, etc. In additions, there are roll of handmade papers of Shan Buddhist literature. These collections are bound at the top and kept in roll.

Apart from that, our people created wrapping rope by woven to describe letters. It was amazing art to weave such a thin and long rope with beautiful letters.

There are long toddy palm leaves for writing royal orders. Royal orders issued by Myanmar king had to write in one line on a long toddy palm leaf. These orders had seals (i.e. lion, peacock, *hamsa* bird, etc.) of the king. The handwriting on the orders are different from texts on the palm-leaf, with long tail for alphabets like ‘ရ’ and vowels like ‘ဝ’, etc. Royal orders of

ministers were written in two lines on a long toddy palm leaf. These orders are both in straightness and in coil form.

Kammava

Kammava manuscripts are the formal monastic acts or ceremonies prescribed in the *Vinaya*. The manuscripts have been produced in many forms and sizes such as ivory, palm leaf, metal, etc.

The scripts on *Kammava* are in lacquered black “tamarind seed” lettering on a complex gilt red and gold (or silver) background, on both sides of the leaves. The medium are golden lacquered sheets which are adorned with beautiful illustrations, even under the texts. The first page is usually written in the middle and the edges are ornamented with pictures combining floral designs and *devas* or celestial beings.

The covers of *Kammava* are varied with the materials. Some have golden lacquered covers and some have glass mosaic art covers. Both sides of the covers are full of illustrations of *devas* in different postures of offering flowers to the sacred Buddhist text. The figurines are so stylish and dressed up.

Preservation and Conservation Functions

Preservation is one of the major functions of the National Library of Myanmar. Preservation and Conservation Section was started with book binding and then expanded to traditional manuscripts and printed collections. As the National Library has maintain printed publications, manuscripts and other library materials as national literary heritage, we have done preserving & conserving palm-leaf manuscripts, scanning rare books & transforming PDF form for the user service, repairing originals with transparent tissue to be strong and keeping in acid-free paper boxes.

Annually, in the dry seasons, palm-leaf manuscripts are applied with lemon grass oil and stored on shelves in a room. Also some damaged *parabaiks* are repaired with local handmade paper, wrapped in handmade paper and stored in cabinets. We place camphor balls on shelves and in cabinets. Cleaning the manuscripts is carefully done.

Digital Preservation

Digitizing of palm-leaf and *parabaik* manuscripts in National Library (Yangon) is started in 2016-17 fiscal year with the mini scanners; Fuji Xerox Docu Works 8 and Fujitsu ScanSnap SV600. Due to the limited staffs and some issues on electricity, the National Library has finished 38 volumes of manuscripts including 11 *parabaik* and 27 palm-leaf text.

We have collaboration work with Yangon University Library to digitize text on Myanmar traditional medicine from palm-leaf manuscripts. This year, we have already done 30 volumes of traditional medicine in digital form.

Finished works are going to be published in printed forms year by year. This year Royal boats and their rules for occasions will be published before the end of fiscal year. This publication will be in original size of *parabaik* together with modern print scripts for clear reading.

Training on PAC

The National Library (Yangon) has arranged short training course on preservation and conservation of library collection including our traditional manuscripts. Many young people do not have knowledge on palm-leaf and *parabaik* manuscripts and their value. In this regard, the National Library (Yangon) invited Senior Librarian U Nyunt Maung who is expert on manuscripts to give lecture and demonstration of Myanmar manuscripts.

Conclusion

Regarding the preservation and conservation function, the National Library (Yangon) has poor condition of current building, limited staffs and lack of well trained librarian or conservator, and limited budget. We need well trained librarians or conservators for systematically maintain of our valuable collections. We need technical assistance for research on our traditional methods of conservation and facilities for storage of different kind of library materials.

The National Library is trying to disseminate Myanmar traditional manuscripts both in original form and text to public in digital and printed format. Its purpose is not only for digital preservation but also to love and value Myanmar traditional manuscripts and its ornamented arts as well as to cherish our traditional arts and craft.

There are many unpublished texts in palm-leaf and *parabaik* manuscripts in the library. As Myanmar manuscripts are very old like 250 years, we have to maintain those systematically for long existent. In this regard, we need more digital preservation task and disseminate them on web and printed publication. We do expect collaboration programmes with other libraries and institutions from local and oversea for preservation of our valuable manuscripts.

Thank you.