

Ancient Myanmar Manuscript Collection in Yadanabon University



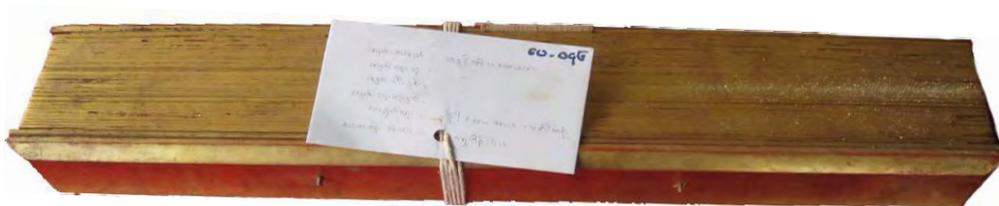
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ABSTRACT

In Myanmar, there are invaluable historical and literary materials in traditional texts to trace the past and use them to understand the present preserving the written records. So Myanmar has a long tradition of preserving palm-leaf and parabike manuscripts as the predominant writing media. The tradition of preserving manuscripts in libraries, both in the Royal Palace and Court and in the monasteries continued through the ages. So, preserving these traditional manuscripts is the task of librarians and archivist for posterity. This paper mainly aims to identify which valuable historical records are available at the Yadanabon University and to initiate digitization project of these old records by the international collaboration. It presents a brief overview of Yadanabon University and its library. It emphasizes on the ancient Myanmar manuscript collections acquired by the Yadanabon University. In addition, it covers the challenges faced by the Yadanabon University to establish digital preservation of these manuscript collections. It will be useful for establishing international co-operation and support to implement digitization project.

Key words: palm-leaf manuscripts, parabike manuscripts, historical records, Yadanabon University, digitization, international co-operation

Introduction

In Myanmar, there are invaluable historical and literary materials in traditional texts to trace the past and use them to understand the present preserving the written records. Myanmar has sustained a glorious tradition of preserving knowledge. Myanmar people used writing materials for communicating knowledge. They used palm-leaf and parabike manuscripts as the predominant writing media. So Myanmar has a long tradition of preserving palm-leaf manuscripts and parabike manuscripts. The tradition of preserving manuscripts in libraries, both in the royal Palace and Court and in the monasteries continued through the ages.

In earlier times, when palm-leaf manuscripts were used as reading materials, they were carefully looked after and preserved by monks, royalty and layman. These manuscripts were regarded as sacred objects because the majority of them contained Buddhist religious texts and commentaries, and even literary, medical, astrological and legal works. So, preserving these traditional manuscripts is the task of librarians and archivist for posterity. Librarians and archivists become guardians of the intellectual heritage of our culture

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study mainly aims to identify ancient Myanmar manuscript collection acquired in Yadanabon University. Its objectives are:

- To identify which valuable historical records are available at the Yadanabon University
- To impart knowledge about the values of manuscripts texts
- To initiate digitization project of these old records
- To get international collaboration for the digitization project

Scope of the Study

This study covers a brief overview of Yadanabon University and its library. It analyses palm-leaf manuscripts and parabike manuscripts collected at the Yadanabon University. In addition, it presents the challenges faced by the Yadanabon University to establish digital preservation of these ancient manuscript collections.

A Brief Outline of Yadanabon University and its Library



Figure 1. Yadanabon University

Yadanabon University was originated in Mandalay Regional College established in May 1973. It was changed into the Mandalay University (Yadanabonmi Campus) in April 1980, Mandalay Yadanabon College in September 1996. In February 2000, Mandalay Yadanabon College was upgraded to Yadanabon University. It is located in Amarapura Township, Mandalay region Myanmar. There are 961 administrative staffs and 777 faculty members and the student population is over 20000. The name of the rector is Dr. Aye Kyaw.

There are two degree colleges affiliated to Yadanabon University. They are Myingyan Degree College and Mandalar Degree College. The university offers under-graduate programmes and graduate programmes in 25 specializations, such as English, Myanmar, Myanmar studies, history, geography, law, international relations, oriental studies, philosophy, psychology, archaeology, anthropology, library and information studies, sport science, botany, microbiology, zoology, physics, nuclear physics, chemistry, biochemistry, mathematics, geology, industrial chemistry and computer studies.

Yadanabon University is the largest university in Upper Myanmar. Yadanabon University is trying to upgrade international collaboration with foreign countries and sending the scholars to other countries to promote capacity building of faculty members, researchers and students. The university signed MoU with four foreign institutions, such as Chiang Mai University, Thailand, Gifu University, Japan, Northern Illinois University, United States and Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia Community Legal Education Initiatives (BABSEA CLE), Thailand.

Yadanabon University Library



Figure 2. Yadanabon University Library

Yadanabon University library was established along with the Yadanabon University in February 2000. The library mainly operates three basic functions, such as:

- *Collections*: select, collect, and preserve information
- *Organization*: to organize the information that is collected, organizationa tools,
- *Services*: to provide direct assistance to the users in their search and retrieval of information

Our library vision is to provide comprehensive resources and services in support of the research, teaching, and learning needs of the university community.

There are seven sections organized at the library. They are eLibrary, periodical section, procession section, computer section, circulation section, reference section and reading room. Twenty two departmental libraries are affiliated to main library. There are 12 library staffs providing library services. The library holds over 36200 volumes, and 86 titles of periodicals. It acquires 143 bundles of palm-leaf manuscripts and 85 folds of parabike manuscripts. The library provides circulation service, reference service, reading room service, Internet access service, and online database access services.

The library opening hour is 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM on Monday through Sunday in the month of December, January, February, March, June, July, August, September. In these months, the library is opened on the whole week except gazetted holidays. In April, May, October, November, the library is opened at 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM on Monday through Friday. The library is opened only on weekdays in these four months.

The library provides access to high quality e-resources. Academic reference databases, such as EBSCO Discovery service, and eTekkatho Digital Library are available at the library. Over 25 online databases are available through elibrary Myanmar Project supported by

EIFL/OSF. So, the library can provide effectively its resources in teaching, learning and research of the university community.

The library offers online database access training, subject guide training for faculty members, students and library staffs. Twenty PCs, 29 laptops are provided to access the online e-resources and Internet access. In addition, the library provides wifi free zone and online public access catalogue (OPAC) to its users.

Ancient Myanmar Manuscript Collection in Yadanabon University

Yadanabon University started to carry out ancient Myanmar manuscript collection programme collaborated by Department of Myanmar, Department of History and Yadanabon University Library in 2003. It collected palm-leaf manuscripts and parabike manuscripts by accepting donation from the monasteries. These old manuscripts were donated by the monasteries in Amarapura Township, Sint Ku Township and Kyaukpadaung Township in Mandalay Region and Pakokku Township in Magway Region. These monasteries are:

- Obo Southern Monastery, Amarapura Township
- Letpantha Monastery, Sint Ku Township
- Ont Mhon Monastery, Kyaukpadaung Township
- Thiriyadana Monastery, Pakokku Township
- Daka Village, Amarapura Township

Palm-leaf Manuscript Collections

Palm-leaves have been the most popular writing materials in India and Southeast Asia countries where Buddhism and Indian culture spread. Palm-leaf manuscripts were probably in use in Myanmar from the early years of the 1st century AD when Buddhism was first introduced into the country. Due to the harsh tropical climate palm-leaf manuscripts have not survived older than 300 years. Palm-leaves produced from Pe-bin (Palm tree) provided broad leaves to write on and they were the most widely used material for traditional manuscripts. These manuscripts were known as pe sar.

There are five main types of palm-leaf manuscripts. They are as follow:

- Shwe-Myin, or Shwe-bein-cha
- Kyan-sit
- Myin-ni
- Myin-Phyu, or pay-gyan



Figure 3. Different Types of Palm-leaf Manuscripts

The subjects in the palm-leaf manuscripts are mostly religious works such as, the teaching of Buddha, Tipitaka and commentaries, and historical documents, traditional medicines, astrology and astronomy, customary law, and literary works. Letters are inscribed in both sides of palm-leaf.

Palm-leaf manuscripts usually give two dates, viz the date when manuscript was copied and recopied. Quite often, the colophon contains useful biographies and bibliographical information together with name of the donor and a short prayer.

Until now, Yadanabon University collects 143 bundles of palm-leaf manuscripts. By the types of these manuscripts, its collections are as follow:

Table 1. No. of Palm-leaf Manuscripts Collected at the Yadanabon University

Sr. No.	Types of Palm-leaf Manuscripts	No. of Palm-leaf Manuscripts
1	Shwe-Myin, or Shwe-bein-cha	53
2	Kyan-sit	75
3	Myin-ni	8
4	Myin-phyu, or Pe-gan	7
	Total	143

It was found that these palm-leaf manuscripts can be divided according to the copying date. Among these manuscript collections, the manuscript that was copied on the earliest date is *Vinicchaya Tika*. It was Kyan-sit pay and copied in ME 1109 (AD 1747) and the manuscript that was copied on the latest date is *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā Nissaya*. It was Shwe-bein pay and copied in ME 1287 (AD 1925). Majority of these manuscripts, 65 bundles were copied in Kongbaung period, ME 1114-1247 (AD 1752-1885). Others were copied in Colonial Period. It can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. No. of Palm-leaf Manuscript Collections in Colonial Period

Copying Date	No. of Palm-leaf Manuscripts
ME 1251-1260 (AD 1889 – 1898)	6
ME 1261-1270 (AD 1899 – 1908)	32
ME 1271-1280 (AD 1909 – 1918)	3
ME 1281-1287 (AD 1919 – 1925)	3

Copying dates were not found in 23 bundles of palm-leaf manuscript. Among these manuscript collections, majority are Tipitaka. It is in 101 bundles. Tipitaka covers Theravada Buddhist scriptures written in pali using Myanmar scripts. Some are translation into Myanmar of Buddhist text, including Nissaya translation. Various types of commentaries on teaching of the Buddha can be seen in some manuscripts.

There are three types of Tipitaka. They are:

- Vinaya Pitaka – It is disciplines or codes of conduct for Buddhist monks
- Sutta Pitakka – Particular discourses delivered by the Lord Buddha
- Abhidhama Pitakka – Higher teachings of the Buddha

By the types of Tipitakka, there are 50 bundles of Vinaya Pitaka, 12 bundles of Sutta Pitaka and 39 bundles of Abhidhama Pitka. In addition, Tipitaka were in different kinds as follow:

- *Pāli* – written in *pāli* using Myanmar scripts (ygVdawmf)
- *Aṭṭhakathā* – commentaries on Buddhist *Pāli* texts (t|uxm)
- *Ṭīkā* – Sub-commentaries (#Dum)
- *Nissaya* – word by word translation of *Pāli* texts (edos)
- *Pāṭha* (*Pāṭh*) – Reader (ygXf)
- *Yojanā* – Interpretation (a,mZem)

In addition to the Tipitaka, there are other subjects in these manuscripts collections. The following table shows no. of bundles in various subjects.

Table 3. No. of Palm-leaf Manuscripts on Various Subjects

Sr. No.	Subject	No. of Bundles
1	Traditional medicine texts	2
2	Literary works: Poetic works (Pyo, Lutar) and prose works (Fiction, Jataka Tales)	8
3	Grammar Texts	13
4	Arithmetic	2
5	Doctrines of Buddha	14
6	Kammava (Legalized Pali passages used by the monks)	3

With regard to the writers of these palm-leaf manuscripts, some were written by famous monk-scholars. In some collections, writers were not found. 29 bundles of these manuscripts were written by famous monk scholars. The followings are some famous monk scholars who wrote palm-leaf manuscripts collected at the Yadanabon University.

- Taunng Twing Sayadaw (Khin Gyi Phyaw)
(တောင်တွင်းဆရာတော်ခင်ကြီးဖျော်)
- Son Htar Sayadaw (Venerable Nandamālā)
(ဆုံထားဆရာတော် အရှင်နန္ဒမာလာ)

- Nyaung Kan Sayardaw (Venerable Chekinda)
(ညောင်ကန်ဆရာတော် အရှင်စက္ကိန္ဒ)
- Nyaung Kan Sayardaw (Venerable Puññasetṭha)
(ညောင်ကန်ဆရာတော် အရှင်ပုညသေဋ္ဌ)
- Nyaung Kan Sayardaw (Venerable Kavinda)
(ညောင်ကန်ဆရာတော် အရှင်ကဝိန္ဒ)
- Taungphilar Sayardaw (Venerable Munindaghosa)
(တောင်ဖီလာဆရာတော် အရှင်မုနိန္ဒယောသ)
- Nay Yin Sayardaw (Venerable Ariyālaṅkāra)
(နေရင်းဆရာတော် အရှင်အရိယာလင်္ကာရ)
- Bargayar Sayardaw (Venerable Dhammabhinanda)
(ဗားကရာဆရာတော် အရှင်ဓမ္မာဘိနန္ဒ)
- Shwe Oh Min Sayadaw (Venerable Jambūdhaja)
(ရွှေဥမင်ဆရာတော် အရှင်ဇမ္ဗုဓဇ)
- Htantapin Sayardaw (Venerable Nandamoja)
(ထန်းတပင်ဆရာတော် အရှင်နန္ဒမောဇ)
- Taung Bilu Sayardaw (Venerable Uttamasāra)
(တောင်ဘီလူးဆရာတော် အရှင်ဥတ္တမသာရ)
- Oh Bo Sayardaw (Venerable Uttamasāra)
(အိုးဘိုဆရာတော် အရှင်ဝါရမိန္ဒ)
- Detkinawun Sayardaw (Venerable Alaṅkāra)
(ဒက္ခိဏာဝန်ဆရာတော် အရှင်အလင်္ကာရ)

Parabike Manuscripts



Figure 4. White Parabike and Black Parabike

The other kind of writing commonly used by the Myanmar people is known as parabike. Parabike manuscripts are writing materials commonly used by Myanmar people. These old manuscripts are of much interest to historians and researchers studying the social-

economic conditions of a certain period in Myanmar's past. Majority of these parabike texts have been found in our country in the last fifty years ago and used more by scholars in Myanmar.

There are two main kinds of parabikes depending on the material and method of manufacture. Myanmar people mostly used black parabiks and white parabikes. Black parabikes were used as note books by many households or as a draft writing later transferred to either white parabikes or palm-leaf manuscripts. They were useful for social historians, for economic conditions, commerce and customs of Myanmar's past. They contained records kept by individuals and families of financial transaction, agricultural records, day by day accounts, medical formulas, short poems, etc. White parabikes were used mainly for illustrations, often in beautiful colours. They were used to record astrological and totooing design and for sketch maps, city and palace plans, diagrams of forts, routes for the army and so on. These manuscripts were used more by scholars in Myanmar. So, it can be regarded as textual gems of Myanmar's past.

Regarding the parabike manuscript collections at the Yadanabon University, there are 85 folds covering 224 subjects. 83 folds of black parabikes and 2 folds of white parabikes were collected. It was found that majority of parabike manuscripts were in Kongbaung period, ME 1114-1247 (AD 1852 – 1885). Among them, the parabik which was written in the earliest date, is traditional medivine text. It was written in ME 1182 (AD 1820). The parabik which was written in the latest date, is Lè mye paung sayin. It was written in ME 1289 (AD 1927).

The following table shows the subject they cover and no.of parabikes.

Table 4. Subjects Included in Parabikes and Its Number

Sr. No.	Subject	No. of Parabike
1	Religion	79
2	Bedin-kyan	45
3	Traditional medicine	28
4	Literary texts (poetic works, lyric poem, love letter, sentimental poem, etc.	11
5	Language	5
6	Dhammathat	6
7	Historical texts	1
8	Social life	28
9	Administration	6
10	Arithmetic	7
11	Economics	10
12	Architecture	7
13	Generalities	10

The followings are some of the parabike manuscripts acquired at the Yadanabon University.

- *Radanāpon shwe myo tawgyiti satan (&wemy Hka& TNrdKUawmf BuD;wnf pmwrf;)*, Black parabike, 13 lines, 11 yesi, 40 x 15 cm. (ME1221)
- *Kyauk sa yeni (ausmufpma&enf;)*, Black parabike, 14 lines, 19 yesi, 43 x 16 cm.
- *Myanma-kathè-saka (jrefrm-uonf;pum;)*, Black parabike, 10 lines, 11 yesi, 50 x 13 cm.

Planning for Digitization

Ancient Myanmar manuscripts form an essential part of our national culture and intellectual heritage. It is necessary for Myanmar people to draw up development plans to preserve and conserve our intellectual history as recorded in our traditional manuscripts. So, It becomes important for all librarians for planning and implementing a successful manuscript collections and preservation programme. Old texts from manuscripts should be made easily available and accessible to scholars. In this way, planning for textual preservation by digitization of these manuscripts was initiated at the Yadanabon University Library.

Conclusion

Yadanabon University Library is trying to continue manuscript collection programmes in order to draw up development plan for preserving and conserving intellectual history in our traditional manuscripts. In this way, it is necessary for Yadanabon University Library to upgrade modern ICT infrastructure and equipment for digitization facilities, to conduct staff training for digital preservation, to make easily accessible to these records for the historians and researchers and to establish international co-operation with ASEAN, Japan and other countries to implement digitization project.

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