

## Water Tradition in Myanmar

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### Abstract

Leslie White writes that technology determines the evolution of culture and also that cultural development is determined by technology ( $C = E \times T$ ) (White, 1949 p. 368, 369). Harris points out that infrastructural determinism describes the distinctions between mental and social behaviors. In particular, infrastructure (production and reproduction), structure (domestic and political economies) and superstructure (behavioral and mental) are the keywords of cultural materialism. The interface between nature and culture can be understood through infrastructural determinism (Harris, 1968, p. 5). In this approach ideational superstructure creates mental satisfaction and sense of safety when the people carry out their livelihood strategies. In this paper there are several research objects: how the Myanmar people in the field site connect with supernatural power for their success, who takes responsibility to communicate with these supernatural powers, and what the main reason is for interactions between humans, nature, and culture. In order to collect the data, three main methods were used: observation, participant observation and key informant interviews. When the research findings were composed, descriptive research design and case study methods were used. This research shows that technology is essential to community development and also that the ideational mental superstructure is necessary for the community members to enjoy mental and physical satisfaction and to live safely.

**Keywords:** mental and physical satisfaction, superstructure, structure, infrastructure, Cultural materialism, Myanmar, community development, sense of security

### 1. Introduction

This paper looks at the ways that native people respond to their circumstances and create solutions for their physical and mental satisfaction. In particular, the paper examines how they connect with supernatural power to promote their success; who takes responsibility to communicate with these supernatural powers; and what are the main reasons for interactions between humans, nature, and culture. In order to collect the data, observation, participant observation and key informant interviews were used. Descriptive research design and case study methods were used to analyze the fieldwork findings. This research shows that technology is essential to community development and also that the ideational mental superstructure is necessary for the community members to achieve mental and physical satisfaction and to live safely.

### 2. Technology and Ideational mental superstructure

Technology can be defined as a branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interaction with life, society and the environment drawing upon such subjects as industrial arts, engineering, applied science and pure science (www.Dictionary.com, 3-10-2018, 8:32 PM).

Leslie White writes that technology determines the evolution of culture and also that cultural development is determined by technology ( $C = E \times T$ ) (White, 1949 p. 368, 369). Technology also makes possible deep environmental damage because of human's greed. They desire more benefit, and so they may overuse or destroy their own environment, or the place where other people, plants, and animals live. Careful use of technology and knowledge will determine survival. Technology has threatened environmental habitat conservation and the society's cultural development. Degrading the conservation quality of the environment raises the natural disaster risk.

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Harris points out that infrastructural determinism draws a distinction between mental and social behaviors. In particular, infrastructure (production and reproduction), structure (domestic and political economies), and superstructure (behavioral and mental) are the keywords of cultural materialism. This interface between nature and culture can be understood through infrastructural determinism (Harris, 1968, p. 5). In this approach ideational *superstructure* creates mental satisfaction and sense of safety when the people carry out their livelihood strategies. In my study areas, we focused on the ways that residents connect with supernatural power for their success, who takes responsibility to communicate with these supernatural powers, and what the main reasons are for interactions between humans, nature, and culture. This research shows that technology is essential to community development, but also that the ideational mental superstructure is necessary for the community members to enjoy mental and physical satisfaction and to live safely.

### 3. Research Methodology

When the data were presented, descriptive research design was applied. Case studies and key informant interviews were main instruments for data collection. Aukkyin Ward, Mawlamyine Township, Lathar Street, Lanmadaw Township, Yangon, Thidakonepyin, Ngathaingchaung Township, Ayeyarwady Region, Pindaya, Inlay Lake were selected as the research areas to discover how the residents maintain and transmit their traditional beliefs and practices that have influenced their socio-economic welfare from generation to generation. People living in my study areas, and particularly the people who still believe and practices their traditional rituals concerned with water uses, water resources, water products, rivers, and creeks were the primary research population. They were the key informants, and story tellers for this research. Some findings represent in the lower part of Myanmar and some were concerned most parts of Myanmar in general. In other words, making religious offerings to the U Shin Gyi will represent a characteristic practice for the believers living in the lower part of Myanmar and making offerings to the Shin Upagutta is practices within most parts of Myanmar.

### 4. Religious Ritual and Ideational Superstructure

Most people living the materially developed, developing and underdeveloped situations need some sources of physical and mental satisfaction for their life. Technology makes possible the cultural development of a society, but it focuses on the physical world, not the mental world. Because of technology, people living in the world are faced with uncertain, insecure life. In Myanmar, some people living near water resources such as Rivers, Creeks, Ponds, Lakes believe in the power of U Shin Gyi, a spirit possessed with supernatural power. This is most popular among the people living in the southern part of Myanmar. The people living in the middle and upper part of Myanmar do not know or believe in U Shin Gyi. The Buddhist monk Shin Upagutta is revered in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. Believers pay respect and make offering to the Shin Upagutta who has the power to protect and save human beings who are faced with trouble in their ways, particularly with regard to water routes. Both U Shin Gyi and Shin Upagutta are paid respect in my study areas. U Shin Gyi is a regional spirit. People living in Rakhine State, in the Ayeyarwady Region, in the Ayeyarwady delta, all around the Bago Region, throughout the Yangon Region, in Mon State, in the Taninthayi Region, in Ye, and in Dawei the residents believe in his power and celebrate rituals for him. The famous and beloved figure of Shin Upagutta is a Buddhist monk who completed the monk's practices and arrived finally at Nirvana (divine enlightenment). Some Buddhists believe that he has long life and has the power to save and protect human beings from any danger. They celebrate rituals for Shin Upagutta. When the research findings were described, some data were presented as the case studies to see the ritual vividly.

#### 4.1 Rituals for U Shin Gyi

When we consider community development, we should understand the residents' real observable situation, as well as their less visible situation with regard to needs and wants. And we should focus on how they try to adapt to their physical environment and how they try to construct a stable and secure life. Particularly, their attitudes, values and concepts for their beliefs should be learnt to understand their relationships between nature, culture and the interactions between nature and culture. In the following section the reasons why the people believe and practice the rituals of U Shin Gyi is presented.

U Shin Gyi lived in Bago. He was a young man and wanted to celebrate his initiation ceremony, which is a ceremony for transitioning from childhood to adulthood. But he and his mother did not have enough money for this ceremony. So he went to Kyunyo (Brown Island) or MeinmahlaKyun (beautiful lady Island) in the Ayeyarwady Region to earn money by cutting down trees with the boat men who do this work. The guardian of this island did not like any music or songs. He made a mistake by playing a harp as he liked to do this. Because of his mistake, he was sacrificed near the Island. People believe that he became a spirit and looks after the people who believe and pay respect to him. Some hold rituals for him twice a year: before June and after the full moon of Thadingyut (during October). Some conduct this ritual just once per year, before June or during October.

Supplicants make offerings to U Shin Gyi of cooked sticky rice, palm sugar, coconuts, bananas, coconut water, water, flowers, candles, tea leaves, and betel nut. Some people pounded cakes of sticky rice (*Montzam* in Myanmar), sugar, coconuts, bananas, coconut water, water, flowers, candles, tea leaves, and betel. Some people offer these things to U Shin Gyi because they believe that if they pay respect and offer some foods to him, they will get his help with things such as business success, family members' health problems, and so on. If they fail to pay respect and present offerings to him, they can meet with heavy rain, strong storms, big waves and the destruction of their boats suddenly underway. If they see a crocodile in their stream or river, they understand they need to offer something to U Shin Gyi; it is a sign or warning not to forget him.

When they want to conduct a ritual for U Shin Gyi, they request ritual professional to communicate with U Shin Gyi. Some heads of the households make arrangements for a ceremony with them. This religious specialist leads the celebration at the village level and at the ward level. For example, in the case of the Kyaukmyaunggyi Ward (Yangon Region) U Shin GyiPwe is celebrated annually. Kyaukmyaunggyi Ward is an urban area. Most people living in this ward are traders, government employees, or private business owners, but they all celebrate U Shin GyiPwe annually, almost like a pagoda festival. Every resident participates in the ceremony by donating flowers, fruits, cakes and money to the spirit medium who is leading the U Shin GyiPwe. They celebrate U Shin GyiPwe for seven days and entertain the public with their ZatPwe (free show).

#### Case study 1

U Thaug, 70 years old, is a ward level administrator. He told his experience concerning U Shin Gyi. He described the reasons why the fisher men, and the ship and boat owners make offerings to the U Shin Gyi spirit and how they responded when they met with danger on their way out on the water. During 1980s, Mawlamyine's economy was regarded as a golden age because of its Black Market (*HmaungkhoZay* in Myanmar). At that time the Myanmar Socialist government did not allow communicating with the outside world. Citizens had to use only local products. Local products were not good quality and not available for all. People had to buy daily necessities from cooperative associations (*Thamawaryama* in

Myanmar). For example, they could buy only one longyi (lower garment for male) for a household; buy only rice for one person per month (4 Pyi) and so on. So, business men devised ways to buy modern products from neighboring countries such as China, India, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia and so on. Their business was illegal but they tried to trade with outside world.

They relied on waterways for their transportation during those days. They went to Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia by boat or ship. Every ship and boat carried a shrine for U Shin Gyi and the required raw materials to make meals to offer to U Shin Gyi. My informant went to Penang Island in a boat in 1975. On the way, another boat came to attack them. When the boat men saw that oncoming boat, they abandoned their boat. The leader of those boat men prepared a meal for U Shin Gyi and offered it to him. Their boat escaped from danger and arrived at an Island safely. They did not know the name of the island or the people there. They did not understand their language but the islanders helped the boatmen to go to Penang Island. Even today most fishermen and businessmen engaged with waterways and water products pay attention to the spirit of U Shin Gyi. In Mawlamyine, most people believe in the power of U Shin Gyi and make their offering ceremony twice a year. Nowadays, 20% or 30% of residents continue this belief and make offerings to U Shin Gyi. But the remaining 70% or 80% of residents abandoned their belief to U Shin Gyi because of Buddhist monks' mission work.

### Case Study 2

Mr. U Zaw is a 68 year old scholar who told me how people living in Thidarkonepyin, Ngathaingchaung believe in U Shin Gyi and also their regional or local spirits. In this region, people make offerings to U Shin Gyi, and to ThidarMaungHnitma (MaungHnitma means sibling), as well as to AmayThidar, to Koemyot Shin and to Kayinma spirits before they celebrate a wedding ceremony, at the time of a Buddhist novitiation ceremony, and whenever they go into a forest to cut down trees or to hunt the animals. If they go to a forest and climb mountains, they have to use cars and carts. They always bring offerings for these spirits with them. They even carry the shrines on their cars and carts. They still believe and pay attention to their local or regional spirits.

### Case Study 3

Daw Hla is a 65-year-old house wife. She told me how she protected her family members' security and success in business or socio-economic situation. She believes in the U Shin Gyi spirit's supernatural power to keep people safe from danger, and the spirit also helps them to become successful in their business. Most of the people living in the city of Mawlamyine believe in U Shin Gyi and celebrate rituals for him twice a year: one is before June, July, August and September and another one is after these four months. These four months are called *Wardwin Karla* (rainy season) in Myanmar. Before Buddhist Lent (*War-mawinhmi* in Myanmar), they use cooked sticky rice, or steamed sticky rice, palm sugar and coconut for offering the meal. The time after Wardwin (called *Wargyut* or *Warhtwet* in Myanmar), they use *Monkzam* (sticky rice pounded mechanically to become a flat sheet), sugar, coconut, and banana for the offering meal. They make their offerings to U Shin Gyi late in the evening. They believe that if they offer U Shin Gyi this meal then U Shin Gyi will protect them from any danger and help their business become successful. But during the last ten years one Buddhist monk told them that this offering was not the Buddha's teaching and it is a mistake. After that they did not do this ritual in their places. However, some people were faced with difficulty in their business, so they again offered meals to U Shin Gyi and prayed for him to guard their business. They overcame their difficulty after offering to U Shin Gyi. My informant gave me one example: U Maung lost his business and had to pay 100,000,000 kyats in debt last













