

A Study on the system of Paintings and the Jātakas at Tilokaguru Cave in Sagaing

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Abstract

Myanmar culture has its origin in Bagan Period when Buddhism was first embraced. Buddhism has influenced on literature, languages, culture, tradition, art and architecture. This can be seen as a fact in the wall paintings in Tilokaguru Cave in Sagaing Hills. This paper aims at highlighting the influence of Buddhism on Myanmar architecture in Nyaungyan Period through a study on the wall paintings in Tilokaguru Cave. The wall paintings in the cave suggest that the Myanmar of Nyaungyan Period used Jātaka, Buddhavaṃsa Pāḷi and the Aṭhakatha (commentaries) in the wall paintings. They might not have only intended to decorate the walls, but also to give the viewers chances to develop wholesome mind. The knowledge of ancient Myanmar on Buddhist literature can also be seen in the paintings. It is noticeable that those ancient people used Buddhism widely both for religious and social purposes. This paper compares the wall paintings and Jātaka available in Tilokaguru Cave that was built in Nyaungyan Period with Buddhist literature. The studies will be helpful in observing the art of painting in Nyaungyan Period. Besides, they will give some information on the lifestyle of those people in Nyaungyan Period. Moreover, the lessons on social communication and behavior that can be learnt from those paintings are guidelines for the people of today to live their lives wholesomely. Most usefully, those paintings also depict the love of parents to their children, the nature of the wise and kind behavior of people in society.

Key words : wall painting, Jātaka,

Introduction

During the reign of ancient Myanmar kings, there were ten kinds of arts and crafts. These arts and crafts were prefixed with 'pan' or flower which signifies craft, occupation or trade.

These arts and crafts are referred to in Myanmar literature in the following couplet: "flowers of ten different kinds not meant for offering at shrines." The ten kinds of art and crafts are as follows: 1. Ba-dein - the craft of gold or silver smith, 2. Ba-gyi - the art of painting, 3. Ba-bu - wood-carving, 4. Ba-daut- stucco-molding, 5. Ba-din - bronze-casting, 6. Ba-da maut - stone-carving, 7. Ba-be - the craft of blacksmith, 8. Pann-ywun- the craft of lacquer ware, 9. Pann-pwut - wood-turnery and 10. Pa yan - masonry. Based on the descriptions in stone inscriptions, the ten kinds of arts and crafts were already well developed in the Bagan period. It can therefore be assumed that Mon and Indian craftsmen already arrived in Bagan during the Bagan period.

Wall paintings Available in Sagaing

There are ancient wall paintings available in and around Sagaing. Scholars date them as belonging to the period between 16th to 17th centuries AD, during the second Innwa Period. The wall paintings are available at Tilokaguru Cave, Loka Hmankin Cave, Ananta-thuriya Cave, Mipaukgyi Pagoda, Paw-taw-mu Pagoda in Shwe Min Won, Maha Theindawgyi, Vizado Pagoda near Chin-thae-thone-se Pagoda, Ahtet Kyaswa Chaung Pagoda, the small pagodas in front of Pyu-kan Monastery, the small pagodas behind Datpaung-su Pagoda in Kyauk-sit, a small pagoda near Shwe-taung-oo-hmaw Pagoda, Laung-maw-oo Monastery in Ywa-thit-gyi, Pitaka-tike, Shwe-san-taw Pagoda, and Oak-kyaung-tike, etc.

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All of those places used to have a lot of wall paintings, but presently only the paintings at Tilokaguru Cave, Loka Hmankin Cave, Mipaukgyi Pagoda, and the Piṭaka-tike in Ywa-thit-gyi are available in good condition. Most of the rest wall paintings were severely damaged by the weather and due to lack of proper maintenance. Some of the wall paintings have fallen off the walls, and some remain with faded feature.

A History of Tilokaguru Cave

The wall paintings in Tilokaguru Cave belonged to Nyaungyan Period (1597-1751), and they are seen almost in their original qualities. The cave is located in Tilokaguru monastery campus which is in the south-west of Swan-Oo Punnya-shin Pagoda, in the west of Sagaing Hills, near Buddhist Academy in Sotapan Quarter. This cave is marked as field number 788. A young monk who lived in Jetawon Monastery in Innwa Royal City thought of disrobing, but later he changed his mind and moved to Sagaing Hills.

He learnt lessons from the learned monks in Sagaing Hills and lived at the place in the south of Punnya Pagoda, and the place is now known as Tilokaguru. He lived in a small cottage and taught the young monks Piṭaka literature. The number of students gradually increased and they lived in huts near their teacher. When Innwa king paid a visit to Punnya Pagoda, he saw the monks there, and built a cave with a tunnel to the monk. The king also offered the monk the title 'Tilokaguru'. Queen Ratanapon, the mother of King Asankhaya Saw Yon, lived near the cave. The queen donated a monastery decorated with gold. There is a pagoda with the title 'Ratana' and a marble inscription near the cave, and they were the donations of King Thihathu, whose title was Siritibhuvanādityāavarasīhasū-radhammarājā, the son of King Min Khaung of Innwa, in 785 M.E. Some believe that the cave was built during the reign of King Naravara in Nyaungyan Period.

Tilokaguru Monastery was donated by King Naravara of Innwa who took the throne in 1034 M.E. The king also offered the monk Tilokaguru title and built a cave and a tunnel for him. It belonged to Nyaungyan Period (1597-1751). The wall paintings also belonged to Nyaungyan Period and they were painted 300 years ago. The tunnel was faced to the north-west and the front part was built with bricks, but the interior parts were dug in the rock.

There are three entrances to the cave, and the middle entrance leads to a shrine room, the tunnels lead to six meditation rooms, and the steps on both sides of the cave lead upstairs. The side entrances provide the light in the tunnels. The main purpose of this cave is probably to serve as a meditation place.

The corridors in the north and the south and the shrine room have the walls full of paintings with some damages. These priceless wall paintings are now maintained by the National Department of Archaeology (Northern) in Mandalay.

The system of painting and the Jātakas

The wall paintings in Tilokaguru Cave are part of the history of Myanmar paintings. Since it belonged to Nyaungyan Period, the paintings are influenced by the style of that period. The faces of men and women look the same, and they looked back to chat. The paintings of the people sitting look like that they were the royal officials in the assembly. The depiction of the life story of the Buddha seen on lacquer wares of later periods uses the style of paintings in Tilokaguru Cave.

The pictures of the Buddha and Arahants are beautiful and authentic. Various kinds of Bodhi trees are used instead of ornamental backdrop of the throne for the Buddha. The colour of robes is bright red. One of the unique features in the paintings is the pictures of twenty-eight Buddhas, the Bodhi trees under which they attained enlightenment, and their disciples are painted on every wall. Floral paintings are more authentic than decorative. The paintings of lotus buds and flowers look more real than those of Bagan Period. The leaves and flowers

of other trees are also closer to the nature. The lines are beautifully carved so that the flowers look as if they are dancing in the wind. There are some paintings of trees, groves and mountain ranges. Elephants, lions, and flying birds are seen along with those paintings.

Jātaka -nipāta is the most effective text for the propagation of Buddha-sāsanā, and for this reason, wall paintings in Buddhist buildings are filled with Jātaka. Beside the discourses, the Buddha also taught Jātaka, the life stories of him, in ways that they were taken as interesting and convincing teachings.

The Buddha told his disciples the stories of his previous lives - how he fulfilled the perfection, how he sacrificed himself, how he acted, and also how he made mistakes. He also taught what the desirable and undesirable results of his wholesome and unwholesome deeds were interacting. These life stories explain the theory of kamma. The purpose of Jātaka stories is to provide the moral behavior of man, righteous ways of thinking and development of wisdom. Therefore, each and every life story of him gives some lessons.

Artists made their effort to take part in the propagation of the Buddha-Dhamma through their paintings of Jātaka stories. Presently available wall paintings in Tilokaguru Cave contain thirty Jātakas. Among those Jātakas, the lives of the Buddha-to-be as a lion, an elephant, a horse, a buffalo, a cow, a deer, a Kinnarā, a Haṃsa bird (Brahminy duck), a koel, and a parrot, etc, those of dragons, garudas, tree spirits, and sky deities, etc, and those of deities, Sakka, Brahma and life as a human beings. The Buddha-to-be was born as human many times, but most of the paintings in the cave depict the lives of hermits.

Those Jātaka paintings seem to admire the life of hermits or ascetics who renounce worldly pleasure and spend their lives in seclusion for the peace they attain excel the worldly pleasure of householders, and they also are encouragement for those who wish to attain Nibbāna. Among those thirty paintings, there are thirteen Jātaka relating to the lives of hermits and four that depict the practices of hermits.

The former paintings include Jātaka number 263, 498, 501, 503, 505, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 528, 530, and 540, altogether thirteen Jātaka, and the latter are number 497, 512, 513, and 519, altogether 4 Jātaka. They all point to the fact that drinking, gambling, and deceiving acts destroy one, and that sensual pleasure produce the most painful results for man including ascetics. Those Jātaka stories depict the horrible pain that one may face in hells, and pleasure that one may have in the realms of deities. Besides, they also depict the lives of Brahma who live enjoying the peace of jhānas that are beyond the realm of sensual pleasure. There are paintings of those ascetics and hermits who are practicing jhāna in order to become Brahmas. Those paintings especially give a sense of man and man's life.

One may consider that the paintings of hermits are related to the life of Tilokaguru Sayadaw. This is because Sayadaw was once thinking of leaving the monastic life, but later he controlled his mind and led the life of a forest monk.

Among the Jātakas that are related to the hermits include the lives of the hermits who escaped from the bondage of sensual pleasure and lead the forest dwelling lives. Those Jātaka are as follows:

Jātaka number (263) Cūḷapalobhana Jātaka - the prince who could not bear the smell of women, (498) Cittasambhūta Jātaka - the hermit and the king, (523) Alambusā Jātaka - a female deity and a young hermit, and (526) Nikiṅkā Jātaka - a princess and a young hermit. Mundane moral lessons are seen in Sivi Jātaka and Vessantarā Jātaka that depict the story of the Buddha-to-be who gave donations.

Besides, Mahāumṅga (Mahosadha) Jātaka that depict the value of wisdom, Suvaṇṇasāma Jātaka that depict the life of a young son who took care of his parents, the story of two parrots whose lives were influenced by the surrounding they had, the story of the king and the Kinnara-kinnari couple that shows true love in a marriage, the story of a queen who was loyal, Mahākapi Jātaka that depict the wicked Brahmin and the monkey, the story of a

dragon who was in trouble for he disposes what was supposed to be a secret, the story of a tree spirit who gave a moral lesson for a king, Miga Jātaka and Haṃsa Jātaka that depict the loyalty to the leaders, Kumbha Jātaka that explain the danger of using intoxicating drinks and drugs, and Sampeyya Jātaka that depict the life of a dragon who kept his sīla pure. Therefore, it can be seen that the paintings in Tilokaguru Cave are the selection of special discourses related to forest dwelling hermits and that provide moral lessons.

Conclusion

Every country and every ethnic group has their own cultural tradition. Myanmar has inherited the culture of their ancestors, too.

Cultural tradition includes religious belief, philosophy, dressing style, painting, wood carving, dance, language and literature. Myanmar painting, wood carving, and dance is the pride of Myanmar. Ancient paintings had four styles – Kanote (traditional art style of depicting convoluted lotus stems, buds, blossoms, etc.), Kapi (traditional technique of drawing apes and the like), Nari (traditional art technique of depicting the female figure) and Gazar (traditional art style of depicting elephants, horses, etc). The arts at the temples in Bagan and Mandalay Royal City express the standard of the ten traditional arts and crafts that are the cultural tradition of Myanmar.

Cultural traditions develop along with the history of particular groups of people who value and maintain them. It is the duty of the people to preserve and develop their cultural tradition. Then only Myanmar will stand proudly with their own unique cultural tradition in the world.

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