

# A Brief Study on the Development of Pa-O Literature

Khin Lay Yi\*

## Abstract

In this paper, the Pa-O literature is divided into two sections—the first is the earliest Mongpyoe period literature and the second is late Htithain period literature. The monks are the first inventors of the Pa-O literature. The Pa-O literature is based on Buddha Sasana (Buddha Teaching) and now it has developed a lot. However, the Pa-O literature field still needs to progress more than the current situation. So as to improve the Pa-O literature, the Pa-O national people should participate in the literature works by following three ways 'Gather, Imitate and Compile'.

Keywords: compile, literature, Pa-O, prosody, thesis

## Introduction

This paper is aimed at the literature history of the Pa-O nationals who reside in Myanmar. The majority of the Pa-O nationals live in the southern part of Shan and Mon State, Kayin State and Bago Region. The Pa-O nationals possess own language and style of writing. The aims of conducting a research on this paper are to reveal and promote the national literature of the Pa-O, to provide necessary assistance to the Pa-O region and to strengthen friendship and goodwill among the different national races.

The first part refers to the earlier period before 1948 and the second after 1948. Mongpyoe Sayadaw Bhaddanta Kawisara from Nyaungshwe Township appeared in the earlier period while Htithainkyang Sayadaw Bhaddanta Sunanda from Taunggyi appeared in the later period. Later, the Pa-O literature has gradually. To be able to submit the paper, collections of data, photographing, field trips and interviews were collected. This paper should not be regarded as a perfect one. I confess that I would take up responsibility if imperfections are found in the paper.

## Ethnic Background

It is believed that numerous races entered Myanmar from Western China, Tibet Plateau and Northeastern India many centuries before the Bagan Period. This migration occurred for several centuries. Due to emigration, the evidence for the root of races are not easy to be traced. It is believed by some scholars that Myanmar was previously inhabited by Negrito race followed by people who spoke Austroasiatic languages. Tibeto-Burmans gradually moved southwards to establish villages and towns. Among them Pa-O resided in large numbers in Southern Shan State and Thaton District.

---

\* Professor, Dr, Department of History, Yadanabon University

## Pa-O

The name Pa-O or Taungthu is one given by Myanmar. In the Bagan inscription of 1276 A.D., the name Taungthu is found. The name Taungthu implies people who live in the mountains, people who migrated from the south or simply people who engaged in Taung-ya. Pa-O people do not want confusion in the meaning of the word. It was agreed to change the name "Taungthu" to "Pa-O" with general consensus at a public referendum led by Thaton U Hla Pe of Pa-O National Organisation held in the compound of Yekyaw Monastery, Mawkyaw Quarter, Thaton Township in 1948. A request was made later to the government resulting in legalizing the name "Pa-O" as representing the whole race.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure(1) U Hla Pe who claimed the Government to officially approve that Taungthu was renamed Pa-O (Photo by Researcher)**

The name "Pa-O" is a Pa-O word with "Pa" meaning "Breaking off" and "O" meaning "to peel". It comes from a legend. The history of Pa-O is mainly based on legends and these were kept from generation to generation. Pa-O intellectuals say that such things as alchemists are just a metaphor for wise people and dragons are just imageries of powerful people depicting gratitude towards parents. In many races, there were legends before the emergence of a writing system.

## Costume

As there are many nationalities living in Myanmar, each wears their own national dresses for the sake of distinction. The national costume of Pa-O is black. Pa-O nationals wear a uniform black colour regardless of social status, wealth or age. The black colour is representative of Pa-O who do not entertain competitions and also for protection against the weather. Qualities of the black colour are believed to be profundity, strength, constancy and contentedness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Khin Lay Yi, *Paoh Society, Tradition and Customs*, Ph.D (Dissertation) Department of History, Yangon University, 2007, Unpublished. p.9.



Figure(2) Symbol of Pa-O (Vijja Zawgyi and Naga) and Pa-O traditional costume  
(Photo by Researcher)

### Language

People of various races have their own characteristics such as language, literature, traditional dress and customs. Pa-O already have their own language, literature, traditional dress, characteristics dignity. Pa-O use a language, which is one of languages of Tibeto-Burmans group.<sup>2</sup> In the spoken Pa-O language, they use the sound of 'Ra' and 'Sa'. Their language also has Myanmar archaic words and Pali words. It is because their languages are in the same group of linguistics, and so they are interrelated to each other. However it may be, it can be deduced that Pa-O nationals have their own language. Pa-O nationals have traditional tales, riddles, proverbs, sayings and songs. When Pa-O nationals came to literate, many of them started to compile literary works. Generally, the history of Pa-O literature is categorized into two periods.

### Pa-O Literature History Before 1948

#### Mongpyoe Period Literature

The earlier period of the Pa-O literature history was called Mongpyoe period. Mongpyoe age was named after Mongpyoe Monastery Presiding Sayadaw Ashin Bhaddanta Kawisara from Inlay region in Nyaungshwe Township.<sup>3</sup> The Sayadaw first recorded events in Pa-O language writings on Pei (palm-leaf prepared for writing), Parabaik (writing tablet made of paper, cloth or metal in the form of accordion folds) and paper roll. The Sayadaw resided at Hsaungpho ward and expressed the Pa-O writing on Pei and Parabaik. As far as I know, the theses from Parabaik compiled by the Sayadaw are stated.

<sup>2</sup> Myanmar Language Commission, *Myanmar-English Dictionary*, Yangon, 2001, p.254.

<sup>3</sup> *Interview with U Khun Toe Yan* (the Secretary of the Supervisor Committee for Teaching Pa-O Literature), 60 years.



Figure(3) Parabaik and Pei written in Pa-O language (Photo by Researcher)

Gihi Moral Character Thesis, Khandipoatwini Mahawa Thesis, Winiparsaik Thesis, Dhamma Dipani Winiparsaik Thesis, Winisuhtawa Thesis, Pariwathuzarna Thesis and Thila (Moral) Thesis were inclusive of Vinaya (code of conduct for Buddhist monks) and Pitakas (the three repositories of Buddhist Scripture).<sup>4</sup> All of the said theses define the moral character. Waithatara Jataka and Wailama Sutta are Suttam Theses (the Lord Buddha's discourses made with reference to a particular person). Abhidama Novel First Volume Thesis and Dartukahta Thesis are Abhidhama (Buddhist doctrine embodied in the third basket of Tipataka). Owada Thesis was aimed at the interest of the Pa-O nationals. In this thesis, the Sayadaw fought against worship Nat spirits. The Pa-O nationals worship the village guarding Nat and Sasana guarding Nat placed on the shrine, but they did not worship other Nats.

#### **Buddhist Monk Writers**

The next renowned compiler was Naunghin presiding Sayadaw from Hsisai Township. The famous thesis of Sayadaw is the Rust Thesis. The Rust Thesis was aimed at realizing rare human life and the value of time. The title of the Sayadaw was Ashin Nyarninda Bhidhaja. Sachewy Sayadaw was named after Sachewy Monastery in Taunggyi. Skilled and learned Sayadaw in Pitakas handed down the literature heritage to future generations. The doctrine of Buddha from the literature of Pitakas was compiled through the Pa-O language. The famous Parabaik writings of Buddha teaching are three precepts - impermanence, trouble and non-self and six objects of sense. Moreover, the Sayadaw compiled the lines of words for pouring water, wishing for something, praying for the well-being of others, expressing one's wish that others may also acquire the benefits from one's meritorious deeds equally and worship Buddha whenever meritorious deeds are done regarding the offering of alms, water, flowers, light to Lord of Buddha.

A Buddhist monk writer who should be known in the literature history of the Pa-O was Hsaungpyoung Sayadaw U Kay from Pinlaung Township. The Sayadaw wrote 38 ways of conduct, ten principle virtues and Buddha's life story by prosody. The benefits of the ways of conduct ensure prosperity for the human life. Therefore the Pa-O inherited

<sup>4</sup> Parabaik Collection by Pa-O National Library (Taunggyi).

the invaluable doctrine of Buddha. Pinpwe Sayadaw U Thila of Pinlaung Township compiled herbal medicine (Beindaw).<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the Sayadaws said above in the course of historical event of Pa-O Parabaik literature, Mongpyoe Sayadaw did the craft of blacksmithing. Naunghin Sayadaw did the art of making items in gold. Sachewy Sayadaw composed literature garland. Hsaungpyoung Sayadaw nursed the literature saplings. Pinpwe Sayadaw used a metaphor that the literature flower would be in bloom. The Parabaik literatures compiled by the venerable Sayadaws are the kinds of poem and prosody and are related to religious affairs.

Although it was believed that Mongpyoe Sayadaw wrote the first-ever Pa-O literatures, it was guessed that the literature writing might emerge earlier than Mongpyoe era. This was because it had to take some time to reach the thesis writing level. The thesis writing level came after the art of writing. The literature documents fell into ruin as no one kept them as historical records. Some were damaged because of severe climate, pests and destroyers.<sup>6</sup> We should not suppose that the literature emerged after events were recorded in writing. Literature histories were believed to have originated in legendary stories. When we studied literature and culture of the society, the basic points were ancient legendary stories. Legend originated in verbal history that the posterity of the ancient people practiced. At a time when the literature writings came into view, these legends were read as literatures. As a result, it could be said that the literature history started with verbal history. Literature writings came into existence by repeating to memory. Therefore, legends, rural folk tales, reciting habits of poems and prosodies represented the literature.

### **Preacher Man**

According to the proposal of historian Dr Than Tun, verbal conversation was the first language and the basic foundation for literature writing. Verbal conversation dissemination was the way of writing. In connection with the proposal, there were some people who served the duties of Pa-O literature propagation once the earliest Pa-O literature history was studied. They were 'Maw' composers. Before the emergence of the Pa-O literature writing, 'Maw' composers repeated to memory on 'Ngaungtet' (poems and prosodies) and preserved them.<sup>7</sup> 'Ngaungtet' means to depict affection, longing,

---

<sup>5</sup> Parabaik Collection by Naungtayar Monastery (Pinlaung).

<sup>6</sup> *Interview with U Khun Tun Hlaing* (Pa-O Scholar), 85 years.

<sup>7</sup> *Interview with U Khun Pinnya Boke* (the Chairman of the Supervisor Committee for Teaching Pa-O Literature), 66 years.

adventure and beauties with the use of the pleasant sounds and gives knowledge and pleasure.



**Figure(4) Preacher Men (Maw composers) (Photo by Researcher)**

In AD 18 century, Mongpyoe Sayadaw, Naunghin Sayadaw, Sachewy Sayadaw, Hsaungpyaung Sayadaw, and Pinpwe Sayadaw were the Pa-O monk composers and they wrote Theravada doctrine of Buddha, Waithantara (The Tenth of the Ten Great Jatakas) from the Great Jataka, other Suttan (the Lord Buddha's discourses made with reference to a particular person) Vinaya (code of conduct for Buddhist monks), Abhidama (philosophy of an individual) in the ethnic language.<sup>8</sup> 'Maw' composers preached to the congregation about the literatures written by monk composers at the religious talk in the public place. Some 'Maw' composers were more attractive than the monk composers in preaching to the congregation about Great Jatakas, charity, precepts and meditation. 'Maw' composers could skillfully demonstrate and preach to meet with the satisfaction of the congregation. They could be regarded as those propagating the Pa-O literature.

#### **Pa-O Literature History After 1948**

##### **Htithein Period Literature**

The literature development reached the thriving level of paraphrasing from the poem level. The literature development is changing depending on the current situation of era. The Pa-O literatures before the age of paraphrasing were based on spoken words. The pronunciations of verbal spoken were created as the literature. Some writings were not based on correct consonants and vowels in the Pa-O literature. When the paraphrasing era of came, consonants, vowels and pronunciation needed to be accurate in the writing style and good paraphrasing also appeared.

In Mongpyoe literature, a word has different sounds and meanings and so it is difficult to read. (For example- Kar- 1. Car 2. Chin 3. Move forward) the word "Kar" has three different sounds and three different meanings.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, along with the independence in 1948, Htithein Sayadaw invented the symbols necessary for the writing for

---

<sup>8</sup> Parabaik Collection by U Khun Yama (Taunggyi).

<sup>9</sup> *Interview with U Khun Yama* (the Researcher of the Pa-O Literature and Culture Central Committee), 61 years.

ensuring consonants, vowels and spellings to be correct. One spelling must produce only one sound.



**Figure(5) Htithin Sayadaw Bhaddanta Thunanda (the benefactor of Pa-O literature)  
(Photo by Researcher)**

### **Literary Activities**

In 1948, Htithin pieces of writing were distributed to seek approvals. In addition to Htithin piece of writing, Donlikaung manuscript, Pinsone manuscript, Payintaung manuscript and Pintakhwar manuscript appeared at the same time. Taungkyaunggyi Sayadaw, Kan Oo Sayadaw, Inpawkhon Sayadaw and Naungkar Sayadaw formed “Sangha Organisation for Manuscript Selection”. Inpawkhon Sayadaw acted as the chairman of the ceremony in Pahtamataung Kyaunggyi, Taunggyi on 29-11-1950. The Pa-O literature amendment Sangha meeting was held for the first time in which Htithin manuscript was supported as the manuscript of the entire Pa-O nationals.

Htithin Sayadaw gave lecture on the Pa-O primer literature at the worship service ceremony held at Htan temple in 1951. Courses were opened in Hsisai, Taunggyi, Meneltaung, Naungkar and Kyauktalonegyi in 1952 and the Pa-O literatures were lectured. In 1957, the Pa-O tried to print and publish its book on literature. The books on the primer of Pa-O were published for the first time and there were 5000 circulations. At that time, the Pa-O nationals not only from the high lands but also from Thaton, Kyaikkaw, Theinseik, Hpa-an and Kawkareik learned the Pa-O literature. In 1961, the primer of the Pa-O language was re-printed by using pictures to enable the people to learn it with interest.

Under the leadership of seven Sayadaws of the Pa-O Sangha Association for Safeguarding Race and Religion held a ceremony to support Htithin manuscript for the second time in Kyauktalone Pagoda on 23-3-1968. The reasons why the Htithin manuscript was held again were to stop possible divergent opinions among the Pa-O nationals. Under the leadership of The Pa-O Sangha Association for Safeguarding Race and Religion and Pa-O national leader U Aung Kham Hti, more than 800 members of Sangha from the lower Myanmar and hilly regions, more than 100 ‘Maw’ composers, university students and about 100,000 people held Htithin manuscript for the third time in Naungyarsai region on 23-3-1978.

The ceremony to support Htithein manuscript for the fourth time was held in Kyauktalonegyi on 26-2-2011, attended by 96 invited monks, Pa-O national leader U Aung Kham Hti, the officials of township administration department, disciples and more than 500 town-elders. In this way, Htithein era manuscript was supported for the fourth time through the approvals of most of the people.<sup>10</sup>

The Pa-O literature of today is the literature that most of the people recognize and accept. A little difference is found in some writings of the Pa-O, but it does not matter. These different writings are based on positive attitude aiming at developing the national literature. Nevertheless, the literature development concerns all nationals. Special attention must be paid to the meeting minutes of National Conventions that include the delegates representing the entire national people and the Central Sangha Committee. The Pa-O literature is made up of 33 consonants and 16 vowels. The Pa-O literature was invented based on Myanmar alphabets for ensuring Pa-O literati to learn Myanmar literature and for Myanmar literati to learn Pa-O literature with ease. The mathematics of the Pa-O nationals is the same as that of Myanmar, but the pronunciation is different.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Interview with U Aung Khan Hti* (Patron of Pa-O National Organization), 80 years.

**ပျဉ်း-၃၃-ဖြိုး**

က <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ခ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဂ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ဃ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	င
စ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဆ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဇ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ဈ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ည
ဋ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဌ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဍ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဎ <sup>ထားဝ</sup>	ဏ <sup>ရိုး</sup>
တ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ထ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ဒ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	ဓ <sup>ဆိုင်, သွတ်</sup>	န <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>
ပ	ဖ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဗ	ဘ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	မ
ယ	ရ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	လ <sup>ရိုး</sup>	ဝ	သ
ဟ	ဠ <sup>ဆိုင်</sup>	အ		

ပအိုဝ်း သရစဉ်း (၁၆)ဖြိုး

စဉ်း	အနစ်း	သရ စီးပယ်တာ	အထိတ်းထန်းပျိုး	တောင်းအီ
၁	အ	-	အထွဲအနာ	
၂	အာ	-၁	အာဝါး	
၃	အီ	း	အီပနား	စွီးပနား
၄	အို	း	အြောတအီ	
၅	အု	-၂	နင်းအု	လိုးမုဉ်း
၆	အူ	-၂	အူမေး	
၇	အော	-း	စွန်အော	လိုးမဉ်း
၈	အေ	-း	အေ-အီ-စီ-ဒီ	အဂ်လိတ်စီး
၉	အံ	-း	လိုးတအံ	လိုးတဟီးတအံ
၁၀	အိ	-း	ထမ်းအိ	ဘဲ-ဘယ် အဆိတ်းပိုင်
၁၁	အိုင်	-း	လိုးစွီးအိုင်	လိုးဒီအီထောင်
၁၂	အိုင်	-း	အလိုးဟွမ်အိုင်	အရသားလိုး
၁၃	အော့	-း	ဗိုးအော့ထာ	ဖိုးမော့ဂုဏ္ဍအော့ထာ
၁၄	အော်	-း	ဝါးအော်ကိုင်	ပီ့ချောကိုင်
၁၅	အို	-း	လိုးအိုထာ	လိုးအာ ခြိုင် ထာ
၁၆	အို	-း	တအိုလူး	တအိုမုတ်

Figure(6) 33 consonants and 16 vowels of Pa-O literature  
(Source from Primer Pa-O Language Text)

၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇	၈	၉	၁၀
တာ	နီ	သွံ	လစ်, ဝတ်,	သူ	စွတ်,	သွစ်,	ကွတ်,	သုည	

Figure(7) Mathematics

(Source from Primer Pa-O Language Text)

**Paraphrase Writings**

Pa-O paraphrase writings came after Htithein manuscript was supported and approved as the national literature. Ashin Dhama Sarmi from Phahtamataunggyi Kyaungtaik in Taunggyi wrote books on religion and books on worldly affairs targeting new generation youths. Sayadaw wrote a book on prosperity dividing first, second and third volumes. Theingalawwarda Sutta and homily written by the Sayadaw were printed at Nay Pyi Taw Press in Taunggyi in 1952.

The basic law thesis of Buddhist monks written by Agga Maha Pandita recipient presiding monk Bhaddanta Letkhanar Sarmi of Kangyi Pariyati Sarthintaik in the Pa-O

language was printed at Nay Pyi Taw Press, Taunggyi in 1954. The Sayadaw wrote rules of conducts of Buddhist monks (Vinaya rules) and teachings of the Lord Buddha by the Pa-O language version. Buddha rules of conduct for motley grab of layman were compiled in the Pa-O language and this thesis was printed at Hsanthitsa Press in Nyaungshwe. The Sayadaw wrote several theses in the Pa-O language.

In addition to the medical theses, the Sayadaw wrote books on knowledge variety such as “Houng-thay-haik-ngar” (Thesis worthy of knowledge) and “Law-ka-kyin-thon” (Worldly practice).<sup>11</sup> “Shan State Journal” published in 1952 carried the particular sector for Pa-O literature, and perspectives, articles and news were stated through the Pa-O language version. The article stated in “Shan State Victory Sound” journal published on 24.8.1958 was written in the Pa-O language. Moreover, the Pa-O writings were found in the newspapers and journals. The Pa-O Culture Magazines featuring short stories, novels, poems, articles, plays, comics, letters to editor and biography were published and distributed in the country.

The printing services ended palm-leaf inscription and Parabaik. Printing saved time and saved work. It caused less expenditure. It could do a mass production. Therefore, publication has made progress and it can enlarge knowledge. The Pa-O’s publication has developed a lot thanks to the printing services. Nowadays, the Pa-O nationals are publishing and distributing journals and magazines such as ‘The Golden Gong’ and ‘The People’s Voice’ and ‘Dabaung Gift’. For that reason, it can be seen that the Pa-O national literature is developing all the time.



Figure(8) Pa-O Magazines and Journals (Photo by Researcher)

### Pa-O Literature and Culture Organizations

Pa-O national races from the respective regions of the country formed Pa-O literature and culture organizations their township. With the aim of preserving and promoting national literature and culture, literature teacher-ship courses, literary

---

<sup>11</sup> Parabaik Collection by Pa-O National Library (Taunggyi).

courses, librarian courses and museum were opened. At the same time, the Pa-O national races held literature competitions, literary talks, and extemporary talks. Moreover, they compiled traditions and customs, histories, songs and stories as well as made researches. Starting from 1985, the Pa-O literature teacher-ship courses were opened in the Pa-O villages in the southern Shan State on a rotation basis.<sup>12</sup>

In brief, the Pa-O literature is the life-blood of the entire Pa-O national races. It is aimed at the entire Pa-O people, but not at a person or an organization. For this reason, no one should amend and imitate the literature writing style. The national literature task cannot be carried out through the single effort. If we try through the national strength, the literature task will meet with success. Now is the time the new generation youths to shoulder the responsibility of monks and national leaders for ensuring the development of the Pa-O literature.

### **Conclusion**

Pa-O were called Taungthu in the past, lived along with other national races during ancient time. Pa-O are the people with their own language, literature and culture. Now, Pa-O has their Self-Administered Zone with the release of Order 7/2008 (29.5.2008). The literature is a monument to the culture. If a race has literature, its culture will be in a permanent state of development. No literature means no race and no culture. For example, Pyu people had culture and literature in Myanmar. Pyu people disappeared as Pyu literature lacked development.

In conclusion, three ways must be followed so as to improve the Pa-O literature. Stories, rural songs and historical events that have not appeared in the literature must be recorded. The literature writing styles of ancient Pa-O literati should be imitated. The Pa-O intellectuals of today should compile reader books for the children and write grammar, dictionaries and historical events in a bid to improve the Pa-O literature. In doing so, the literature will develop and be useful to the society, lasting longer as the practicable literature.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Tint Moe Thuzar, Pro-Rector, Yadanabon University for encouragement. I am thankful to Pa-O Literature and Culture Organization, Taunggyi, for giving data. And then, I would like to thank Sayargyi Dr. Toee Hla (Vice Chairman 2, Myanmar Historical Commission) and Sayar Mya (MOFA), for their helpful comments on this paper.

---

<sup>12</sup> Pa-O National Organization, *Pa-O in the Union*, Taunggyi, 2006, p.129.

## References

Pei (In Pa-O Language)

Suvana Pakathani Kyan

**Parabaik** (In Pa-O Language)

Parabaik Collection by Pa-O National Library (Taunggyi)

Parabaik Collection by U Khun Yama (Taunggyi)

Parabaik Collection by Naungtayar Monastery (Pinlaung)

### **Interview**

U Aung Khan Hti (Patron of Pa-O National Organization)

U Khun Tun Hlaing (Pa-O Scholar)

U Khun Yama (the Researcher of the Pa-O Literature and Culture Central Committee)

U Khun Pinnya Boke (the Chairman of the Supervisor Committee for Teaching Pa-O Literature)

U Khun Toe Yan (the Secretary of the Supervisor Committee for Teaching Pa-O Literature)

### **Book**

Khin Lay Yi, *Paoh Society, Tradition and Customs*, Ph.D (Dissertation) Department of History, Yangon University, 2007, Unpublished

Myanmar Language Commission, *Myanmar-English Dictionary*, Yangon, 2001

Pa-O National Organization, *Pa-O in the Union*, Taunggyi, 2006.

