

# **The Dance in Ritual: The Dance of Toy Elephant in Kyaukse, Mandalay Region**

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## **Abstract**

This research examined the toy elephant dance in ritual of Kyaukse, Mandalay region. The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between the dance of toy elephant and local community and to illustrate the symbolic meaning of the donation and the dance of toy elephant. Qualitative research method is used in this research. Research tools are interviewing methods and participant observation. Toy elephant donation has existed because of the vow of the King Anawrahta. It is changed by the invention of local people. Consequently, toy elephant making and dance is invented and dance ceremony is celebrated. The toy elephant dance ceremony is the vehicle to transmit the local tradition to younger generation, to bind the social ties among natives and to make unity and harmony bring about for the society.

key words : ritual, symbol, Kyaukse

## **Introduction**

Ritual is important to all human societies. Anthropologists have identified at least two kinds of rituals or rites: rites of passage and rites of intensification. Rites of passage are communal ceremonies held to publicly mark the changes in status an individual goes through as he or she progresses through the life cycle. Rite of intensification is celebrated communally by the whole group either at various points in the yearly cycle, such as spring, fall, or the winter and summer solstices; or at times when the society is exposed to some kind of threat. Societies may hold rites of intensification to mark planting, in hope for a good crop, or to mark the harvest, in thanks for what has been given (Rosman and Rubel, 1995).

Moreover, rituals are often closely tied to myths. Myths consist of a people's assumed knowledge about the universe and the natural and supernatural worlds and about humanity's place in these worlds. Figures in myths are symbols with many levels of meaning and that myth is easily remembered for transmission from generation to generation. Therefore Rituals and Myths are symbolic expressions of beliefs. Similarly, dance is an important factor in ritual. From the dancer's perspective, which is usually shared by audience members of the dancer's culture, dance is human behavior comprising purposeful, intentionally rhythmical and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movements. Dance may increase one's energy and provide a feeling of invigoration.

In Myanmar, there are many rituals according to their traditional culture. (Keinayi and Keinnaya dances of Shan and toy dance of Manuha, Bagan town). But there are few researches in Myanmar ritual from anthropological point of view. Besides, maintaining and transmitting of traditional heritage is challenged by the various problems. So, toy dance in ritual of Kyaukse, Mandalay region is chosen to examine the ways of maintaining and transmitting of traditional heritage.

Kyaukse Township lies in the central part of Myanmar. It is 32 miles away from Mandalay. The district lies between 21° 9' and 22 north latitude and 95° 57' and 96° 58' east longitude. Its area is 1,274 square miles and its population in 1921 was 142,677. Its name is taken from the town which forms the district headquarters and means 'the stone weir.' (J.A.Stewart, Kyaukse District, Volume A, 1925, Rangoon, Burma, p-1). The following is the list of families, housing and the number of population in gender and age.

Table 1. Households and Families

No	Site	Households	Families
1	Wards	6820	7088
2	Village tracts	38539	39467

Table 2. Population in gender and age

No	Site	Above (18) years			Under (18) years			Total		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Wards	11470	13802	25272	4906	4906	9812	16376	18708	35084
2	Village tracts	59451	65988	125439	30556	31240	61796	90007	97228	187235

From the above Table 1 and Table 2, it can be known that the population in village tracts is bigger than that of the town-wards.

The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between the dance of toy elephant and local community and to illustrate the symbolic meaning of the donation and the dance of toy elephant. Qualitative research method is used in this research. Research tools are interviewing methods and participant observation.

In this research firstly the linkages between community and toy elephant dance is illustrated, then the art of making elephant is explained. After that the ceremony of toy elephant dance is mentioned. In conclusion, the function of toy elephant dance ceremony is discussed.

### **The Historical linkages between the folk and donation of toy elephant**

Myanmar King Anawrahta (1044-1077 AD) wanted to get the holy tooth from Sri Lanka. But the king of Sri Lanka fearing the war wage between Bagan and Sri Lanka gave a replica to King Anawrahta. King Anawrahta kept it in the palace and worshipped there. So, Shin Arahan suggested the king to enshrine the tooth proceeded in a stupa so that all subjects could benefit. Then the king set the tooth on a jeweled turret on a white elephant and made a solemn oath saying, "Kneel wheresoever's it be pleased to rest!" The elephant ascended and knelt at Shwezigon and the king enshrined the tooth in Shwezigon pagoda. On the second time, another tooth proceeded and it was laid on the elephant and then it knelt on Mt. Tangyi. Then the king established a stupa. Then, on the third time, another tooth proceeded and the elephant knelt at Lokananda at which he built a pagoda. On the fourth time, another tooth proceeded and the elephant stopped on Mt. Tugyin and the king built a stupa there. The elephant crouched a while on Mt. Thalyaung and ascended Mt. Hkaywe and Mt. Pyek. The king also constructed stupas there.

After the king had established stupas on mounts Thalyaung and Pyet, he made a solemn vow, saying, 'Let the folk donate foods and rice to the pagodas I built once a year. Let those who perform as I bid prosper and yield the crops abundantly. If not, let the negligent leave round bamboo tray and rake.' Only then did he make a vow that subjects would share the merit accrued to the king and the white elephant that bore the tooth relics through ten toy elephants in foods offering in Mt. Shwe Thalyaung. As the vow was made solemnly, the rite of donation of toy elephant has been held since the reign of King Anawrahta (1044- 1077 AD). It is a tradition that the rite of donation of ten toy elephants together with foods offering

and the festival of lights has existed in Kyaukse. At that time, Kyaukse was a paddy field of the country.

### **Changing from Snack Elephant to Man-stuffed Elephant**

Since the reign of King Anawrahta (1044-1077), in the rite of donation of toy elephant, snack elephants had been put in plates and offered to the Buddha. There are ten kinds of elephants<sup>1</sup> in Buddhist literature. Snacks are made in the forms of those elephants as a token. Then prescribed elephants were donated at four gates of Shwe Thalyaung Buddha (Reclining Buddha) on the eve of October (Thidingyut) Full-moon day and the pagoda trustees did some recitations. Then, after a long lapse of time, snack elephants were transformed into mud elephants covered with gold and silver hue papers. Then, gradually, the folk had donated small elephants that were woven with bamboo and paper and carried onto shoulders. They made a turret in which small elephant was put on the palanquin and they carried it.

Then, without any turret, small elephant was put on the palanquin at whose four corners white, red, blue and yellow flags and banners were set up. They mounted shouldering the elephants on sedans on the eve of full-moon day of Thidingyut. Before hiking, they have turned the market at the foot of mountain with music and dance three times and then the folk came up the mount. The road was bad for climbing the mountain. There they faced some difficulties in carrying elephants. Then, one of the monks from Kyaukye constructed iron stairways along the way up to the mount. Because of such stairways, climbing up with small elephant put on the palanquin made difficult for them. Then, Hsaya Ngegyi started weaving man-stuffed elephant in 1876. As many people liked to see such elephants, sedans were obsolete gradually. Since then, the rite of man-stuffed elephant has been come in vogue till the present time.

### **The Use of Elephants as Symbols**

The folk in Kyaukse donate different kinds of toy elephants and then they use toy elephants as a symbol. At the entrance and exit of Kyaukse along Yangon-Mandalay highway there are welcoming signboards written "Welcome to Kyaukse" and "Greeting from Kyaukse" with toy elephants(See. Fugure-1). Then in the centre of the town there is a sign of five elephants. It is found that toy elephants are used as symbols at the gates of pagodas and temples, at offices, universities and guesthouses, etc (See.Figure-2). Logos of elephants are found in teashops, restaurants, bookstores, stores and filling stations, etc. As said a folk, "*We use toy elephants as symbols so much so that guests from other regions may know it and then elephant implies to be a good charm for business.*"

### **The Art of makingToy Elephant**

Groups of elephant dance entrust artists to make toy elephants since August and September at the artists' houses. Making toy elephant is called *Sinyoke Cho* in local language.

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<sup>1</sup> They are 'Kalawaka' (an elephant with ten men's strength), 'Gangeya' (an elephant haunting in the environs of River Ganges), 'Pannara' (yellow-skinned elephant), 'Tabma' (brass-skinned elephant), 'Pingala' (stripe hued elephant), 'Gandha' (fragrant elephant), 'Mangala' (elegantly walks about), 'Hema' (gold-hued elephant), 'Uposatha' (flying elephant) and 'Caddan' (white elephant with six-rayed tusks).

Different kinds of toy elephants are wild elephants, embroidered elephants, baby elephants and white elephant. Then artists make elephant statuettes to be donated to pagodas and elephant heads in which children can wear and can dance like an elephant. The cost of wild elephant is about from 70,000 kyats to 100,000 kyats and they can get 30,000 kyats of profit. It costs 800,000 kyats to 1000000 kyats for an embroidered elephant and profit might be 70,000 kyats. The small elephant is from 40,000 kyats to 50,000 kyats and the profit will be left at least 15,000 kyats.

### **Materials Needed for Weaving Toy Elephant**

Necessary materials needed for weaving toy elephant are bamboo, pieces of cloth and paper. Then glue, soot, paint, reel of thread, plastic, a pair of round looking glass, tire slippers for the paws of the elephant and bamboo frame and a bamboo stock in one foot for swinging the head of the elephant are also needed. The bamboo from Pyinmana town is mainly used. A piece of cloth for an elephant is a piece of red or black cloth for fixing the joints of head and neck and a piece of black cloth for fixing the legs. Pieces of paper for an elephant are gon paper, blue paper, cement sachet paper, gold hue paper, silver hue paper and red paper. Glues made of ordinary rice powder and sago are used to stick these papers. Those glues are boiled for half an hour. When sago glue is made, ripe tamarinds are added to last long. Gon paper is stuck with rice glue so are gold hue and silver hue papers done with sago glue. Soot mixture is used to paint the eyes, eyebrows and follicles of the elephant. To get soot, kerosene lamp is lit and it is covered with alms-bowl or pot. And then the soot is scratched with bamboo slit. It is mixed with alcohol or neem resin or syrup of bitter gourd. Ochre is used for red and brown colours. To weave embroidered elephants, materials like wild elephants are needed. Then white paper sheets, sequins and velvet pieces are also required.

In the present time, it is found that instead of bamboo frame, an iron pipe of 27 inches long and a spring are used and instead of bamboo stock, iron tube is also used. Then, a piece of St. Michael black cloth is used instead of a piece of red cloth that is fixed at neck joint and tied at tusks and a piece of St. Michael black cloth is used to fix at feet of the elephant instead of black cloth. Gon paper and blue paper are no longer used but coarse paper is essential enough. Besides, soot mixture is obsolete but nowadays, enamel paint, oil and water paints are used. Here, water paint is that enamel paint is added with water. And oil paint is also meant enamel paint added with methylated spirit. With these materials it is ready to weave the toy elephant.

### **The Way of Weaving the Elephant**

To weave elephant head, only two men are essential enough. The artist who is skilful in weaving the head of the elephant makes a framework of the head while the other paints the head (See.Figure-3). In spite of taking two hours to weave the head, being covered the head by layers of paper and sundried, it takes about two days to complete the head of the elephant. If the artist fails to weave the head systematically, defects such as high forehead, big mouth, crooked trunk, thin cheeks, etc, can be seen. Therefore, the head of the elephant is the touchstone of the artist.

*An artist aged 48 said.*

*'In weaving the toy elephant the head is the most important, so, I do not ask my sons or daughters. I myself weave the head. Through the type of the head of the elephant, the four workmanship of the artist can be evaluated.'*

Then another weaver of toy elephant who is seventy-five years old said.

*'In weaving toy elephant, the part of the head is the most creative. It is not easy to weave such an excellent head. Some have big mouth, crooked nose, high forehead, etc. Others are asymmetry i.e., big head with small body. Such elephants are not pleasant enough to behold.'* The artists use to sign their names on the ears and cheeks of the elephant. An artist aged 48 said as follows.

*'I sign the name of grand-master who taught my father the art of weaving elephant. I like to express my debt to him.'*

Then, an artist who is 37 years old said.

*'I always write the name of my father because I owe him a great deal.'*

In making the head of the elephant, long ago paper was used but nowadays two layers of paper are stuck. Gon paper and blue paper are no longer used but coarse paper is in vogue. Soot was used to paint brows, eyelashes and spots on cheeks but now water and oil paints are used ( See Figure-4). Lime was used to paint tusks but now enamel paint is used. In spotting there are six spots on the head, six on ears and straight brows are striking enough and it differs from the olden elephants .

For weaving the body of the wild elephant-two for making the frame of the body of the elephant, two for covering the paper, one for painting the elephant and one for covering gold and silver hue papers (See Figure-5). Men weave the body of the elephant while women cover with coloured papers. It takes about five days to weave the body of the elephant. The artist usually writes his name on the body, the name of the elephant on both sides of the body, the number of years of performance on the front leg and the name of the quarter on the hind leg, etc (See.Figure-6).

In weaving embroidered elephant, six men need to do so like in weaving wild elephant. It takes about one month to make an embroidered elephant. The art of weaving the embroidered elephant is similar to that of wild elephant. In making embroidered elephant, some owners ask the embroiderers separately and the artist embellishes the elephant. Some sew sequins themselves at home. In embroidered elephant glass mosaic is created.

### Taking the Toy Elephant from the Artist's House

On the day when toy elephant is taken, members of a group go to the artist's home by carrying big and small gongs on a trishaw and striking them, playing short drum, oboe, cymbals and bamboo clappers and singing songs. In the house, the artist put the elephant on chairs. Then he prepares two bowls of offertories. One is dedicated to "Koe Thein Shin Spirit" and the other is to "Utena Spirit." Koe Thein Shin Spirit is the one who is believed to own Kyaukse Town while Utena Spirit is to control and train wild elephants. There are three bunches of yellow bananas, one coconut, gold and silver flowers and nine candles in each bowl. The bowls are put in front of the elephant and the dancers in the group enter into the elephant. The artist raises the offertory to offer Utena spirit. Then nat song is played thrice and the dancers dance 'Nat doe' called 'Lamine worship'. The elephant bows the offertory three times. After that, the dancers frolic such kinds of dances as Lay-khin, ah-yai, ah-yin,

and seven dances (monkey, ogre, zaw-gyi, princess, lad, neophyte and minister) (See Figure-7). And then the group takes the toy elephant back.

On the way back from the artist's house, the group goes round the town to get donation in front of every house. They inform some intimate houses, take a rest, dance and accept money from the inmates of the houses. Hosts and hostesses serve the troupe with relishes and snacks. It is called sin-hto (the elephant gores). It is believed that when an elephant gores a house, it would prosper economically. Sometimes two or three troupes halt in one spot and dance and sing merrily. Songs for entertainment are Ko Gyi Kyaw, Big Brown Kite Swirls, Don't talk nonsense, Pride, etc. After the expense for the elephant dance competition is left, the remaining donating cash is intended to give in charity to the pagodas. Such meritorious acts as whitewashing the pagodas, renovation of monasteries, digging lakes and offering 1000 oil lamps to the Buddha, etc are performed. Besides such acts, offering kahtain robes to monks and donation to the Orphanage Institutions, etc are also done.

Now, only a few elephant troupes go round with traditional musical instruments but many a troupe goes round with their trophies on the first motorcar and then they play electric guitars and organ and sound boxes on the second motorcar. In donating houses with elephant dances, songs they entertain are classical as well as pop and Opar Gangnam style. But some troupes have their own songs and they sing the audience. A dancer aged 19 said,

*"We can dance with classical and pop songs. But the songs we entertain most are 'Chan-mye-par-se' (Let all be pleasant and happy) in the morning and 'Ko Gyi Kyaw' and 'Opar Gangnam Style' in the evening."*

The wife of the group leader cooks meals so that the members of the troupe could serve on their return from ask for donation. Meals are rice of 4 pyis, 1 viss of pickled mango, 1 viss of gram seed and 1 viss of pork.

### **The Practice of Toy Elephant Dance**

In practicing elephant dance, they do not dance with toy elephant but they shoulder two bamboos and frolic with left legs and right hand rhythmically. Then, the dancers, master of the dance and musicians practice unanimously. It takes two weeks for them. They train youths aged 14 of 15 who are interested in elephant dance in the wards. In doing so the elder hand down the dance to new bloods and make preserve traditional dance. They teach the youths free of charge and volitionally. It takes about one month for the youths to train the dance. They could learn the dance easily because even children aged five or six put their hand behind the head and frolic their feet forwards and backwards. A certain elephant dancer who is thirty years old said,

*"I can teach the children easily because they are accustomed to seeing the dance. So, they can grasp how to dance."*

From the above statement, we can understand that elephant dance is transmitted to the youths from the childhood by intimating the adult behaviors.

Those who dance in the elephant must be strong, fit and healthy because they are to load about 50 pounds weight of the elephant and frolic their front and hind legs rhythmically. Then, in dancing the front man and the back man must be unanimous enough to frolic, team spirit leads to the innovations of dances to win the prize and rehearse the songs and dances. So, unity and harmony bring about for the team.

## **The Holding of the Toy Elephant Dance Ceremony Opening Ceremony**

Firstly, elephant teams enroll at the main pandal. Security guards of the central pandal check whether the members of the team are drunken, they hold lethal weapons, the leader of the team controls other members not to fight each other or with the audience etc, or not. Then, they are allowed to compete the dance. The grand opening ceremony is held by white elephants of Myoma and Magha religious associations, worn by white umbrellas, entertaining on the stage, display elephants and contested elephants queue beside the stage and Myanmar song named 'Aung-se-pai-se' (Let's triumph and own). They entertain the audience with songs and dance and pray for wealth and welfare of the people.

## **Elephant Dance Contest**

It takes twenty minutes for a troupe to dance. There are about thirty members in a group on the stage. They are the master of the troupe, two men dancing in the elephant, one singer, four clappers, one cymbalist, one short-drummer, four big gong strikers, three small gong strikers, one flutist, two men raising flags, one man holding signboard and twelve men clapping their hands rhythmically (See Figure-8). Mechanical devices for singing such as amplifier, two loud-speakers, sound box and a generator, are carried on a motorcar. In some troupes there are both one master of the troupe and one elephant catcher. Other teams have king and queen together with master of the team and elephant catcher. In the elephant dance, the master of the troupe wears a black or fawn colored suit and holds a goad or lance. The elephant catcher also holds a Manila string or chopper. Other members wear white collarless shirt and jacket, same sarongs, badges and turbans. Firstly, the master of the team pays respect to the Buddha before the offertory taken readily, then the elephant crouches its head to kowtow and other members in the group clasp their hands in prayer attitudes. Then the master respectfully invites traditional spirits. After that, the troupe begins to play nat-do (special music for nats).

## **Rules and Regulations for the Toy Elephant Dance**

There are three groups of judges- No. 1 judges, No. 2 judges and No. 3 judges. In each group there are three mark-givers and one attendant marker. There are the president and a secretary to supervise all three groups. All judges give marks on (1) the name of the elephant, (2) the elegance of the elephant, (3) the dance and frolic of the elephant, (4) song, (5) singing, (6) music, (7) troupe and (8) discipline. The judges are very strict and after seeing all rules they give their marks in the sheets of forms.

In other words, marks are given according to the appearance, the dancing, their own specially written song, the singing, music and teamwork. Each category has a maximum of a hundred points. The judges are very strict and no elephants dare to be too frisky, not even the baby ones manned by boys of under ten, in a competition of their own class. The smaller elephants are also popular competitors as children begin early when it is the honour of their hometown at stake.

There are also judges who subsides the marks on breach of rules and regulations prescribed. They are cultural decadence, quarrel, violation of stability and failure to go round thrice.

## **Prize Distribution Ceremony**

There were three kinds of prizes for the elephants. They were embroidered elephant, wild elephant and baby elephant. The embroidered elephant was given the largest amount of money. In giving prizes money and cups were granted.

Although the embroidered elephant was given more money, nowadays, wild elephant has been given more money so as to preserve traditional culture. Then, those elephant which compete the dance over thirty years are also granted the 'Prizes of Perseverance.' The groups that go round Myoma market three times and entertain townsfolk on the ground are distributed with prizes. Besides money and cups, trophies of small elephant are also given.

## **Feeling of the Audience**

Folk, visitors from all regions and tourists come to see the elephant dance. The folk recreate seeing the dance. A man aged forty said, 'There are many festivals in Kyaukse but they are not as well-known as the elephant dance. Being farmers, we recreate our tiring work in seeing the elephant dance.'

A woman in Kyaukse, who is forty-five years old, said, '*I'm happy enough to see the elephant dance. We are proud of foreign visitors who enjoy seeing the dance.*'

A youth aged eighteen said, '*I'm very pleased to see the elephant dance. I dream of making an elephant and dancing in the elephant.*'

A certain woman from Yangon said, '*I long to see the popular elephant dance in Kyaukse. I come this year to enjoy the dance. It's worthwhile to behold the dance.*'

## **Donation of Toy Elephant on Shwe-tha-lyaung Hill**

On the full-moon day of Thidingyut, the rite of donation of toy elephants is held on Shew-tha-lyaung hill. In the morning of the day, distinguished personages of the town hold gold and silver hued elephants, go round Shwe-tha-lyaung pagoda three times in clockwise and pray weal and happiness of all human beings over the world. Alms-food and toy elephants are donated to the Buddha. On that day snack elephants offered to the Buddha on the eve of full moon day of Thidingyut are thrown down the hill. Then monks address the mantra and share merit accrued to King Anawrahta and the white elephant that carried the relic of the Buddha. After sharing merit, monks are served with meals and choicest foods. Townsfolk climb up the hill and offer the Shwe-tha-lyaung Buddha with toy elephants in clockwise (See Figure-9). At four gates of the pagoda, donors serve the pilgrims foods in charity- rice and curries, vermicelli soup, pickled plums, mangoes, etc, and traditional snacks such as pudding made or rice flour and dumplings, etc (See Figure-10). The elephants which won prizes entertain the audience at the foot of the hill. At night zat pwe (dramatic show) and anyeint (non-dramatic show) had entertained the audience there.

It is known that when some give toy elephants to the Buddha, they will prosper and succeed in life, keep healthy and peaceful and some return their gratitude to their parents. A certain pilgrim from Meiltila town, who is 55 years old, said.

*'My parents are the natives of Kyaukse and they donate toy elephants, choicest fruits and rice to the pagoda annually. Though I don't settle in Kyaukse, as the return of debt and gratitude to my parents, I come to donate such toys and alms food to the pagoda. And then I intend to hand down our tradition to my descendants.'*

A native of Kyaukse, aged 60, said as follows.

*'As King Anawrahta had built dams and weirs in this region, we farmers get along in agriculture and farming. As a token of gratitude to the king, we donate toy elephants to the pagoda. Because of this merit, we yield crops and produce lavishly.'*

Above saying illustrate the linkages among natives and land by binding toy elephant dance ritual.



Figure (1) Welcoming signboard



Figure (2) Elephant figures placing in front of an office



Figure (3) Making the elephant head



Figure (4) Decorating the elephant head



Figure (5) Making the elephant body



Figure (6) Drawing the name of elephant



**Figure (7) Offering to the spirits**



**Figure (8) Competing the elephant**



**Figure (9) Donors donating toy elephants**



**Figure (10) Entertaining pilgrims with foods in charity**

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Toy elephant donation has been existed because of the vow of the King Anawrahta. It is changed by the invention of local people. Then the toy elephant snacks were substituted by the mud toy elephant, the paper toy elephant, and the human stuffed elephants. Consequently, toy elephant making and dance is invented and dance ceremony is existed. The elephant dance is transmitted to the children from the childhood by watching the ceremony. When the children are grower, they can learn the dance for participating in the ceremony. Therefore it can be said that holding the toy dance ceremony is the vehicle to transmit the local tradition to younger generation.

The weight of toy elephant is about 50 pounds and those who dance in the elephant must be strong, fit and healthy because they are to load weight of the elephant and frolic their front and hind legs rhythmically. Then, in dancing the front man and the back man must be unanimous enough to frolic, team spirit leads to the innovations of dances to win the prize and rehearse the songs and dances. So, unity and harmony bring about for the team.

The natives believe that they will enrich and get ample crops, develop economically, etc, by donating toy elephants to the Buddha in Shwe-tha-lyang pagoda. Others donate so as to return their indebtedness to their parents. Thus, the rite is binding the social ties among natives.

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- မိုး (ကျောက်ဆည်)၊ ၂၀၀၆၊ ဆင်မြို့တော်ရိုးရာ၊ မြန်မာယဉ်ကျေးမှုပဲတော်များ၊ လာဘ်မိုးစွေစာပေ၊ မောင်ရည်စိုး၊ ၁၉၉၃၊ မြန်မာဆင်ရပ်ချုံး အနုပညာ၊ စာပေဟိမာန်အဖွဲ့।