

A Study on Toddy Workers in Myingyan Township

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Abstract

The toddy-palm industry played an important role in Myanmar society since Bagan Era. The toddy trees are found to grow in the arid regions in Upper Myanmar. According to the observations, the palmyra palm trees are found to grow in such regions as Kyaukbadaung, Sintku, Nyaung-U, Taungthar, Pakkoku, Myingyan, Myitchei and Yeizagy. Most of the rural people in Myingyan Township made a living with toddy-climbing work. Therefore, a research was made to reveal the life of toddy workers or toddy climbers who made a living with toddy climbing and jaggery making. It is found that the living of family is insufficient only with a work of making jaggery.

Keywords : Toddy Palm, Toddy Workers

Introduction

Myingyan District is situated in the central Myanmar. It is adjacent to Ayeyarwady River in the west, Sagaing Region in the north, Kyaukse and Meikhtilar Districts in the east, and Magway Region in the south.¹ In 1897 under the colonial rule, it comprised of Myingyan, Nahtogyi, Taungthar, Kyaukbadaung, Bagan and Nyaung-U Townships.² Then, by the 1916 Constitution, Taungthar and Nahtogyi were incorporated into Myingyan Township in Myingyan District, Meikhtilar Division.³ In the physical features of the land of Myingyan Township of 1982, the areas of high ground are few, and most of the land are the plains. The weather of Myingyan Township is hot and bone-dry. May is the hottest month and January the coldest month. The fall of rain is normal.⁴

Condition of Toddy Workers and the Materials on Toddy Industry

The toddy-palm tree thrives in every land site except wetlands. Based on planting method, the toddy palm tree grows as male plant (staminate plant) or female plant (pistillate plant) differently. About 20 years after being planted, it comes out as male

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¹ Burma Gazetteer-Myingyan District Vol B-Rangoon Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1906, p.1

² *Myingyan Myone Hmattan Pyuzuyei Aphwe* (Myingyan Township Record Compilation Committee), Mandalay Region, Myingyan Township, September 1982, p.9 (Henceforth, Record Compilation)

³ *Myingyan Myone Thamaing* (History of Myingyan Township), Department of History, Myingyan Degree College, June 2008, p.9

⁴ Record Compilation, 1982, 3

toddy-palm or female toddy-palm differently.⁵ A large amount of income comes from the vacant lands and virgin soils of the arid zone in the central Myanmar where paddy cultivation does not thrive, by means of toddy planting and toddy climbing work. Therefore, the toddy-palm industry is important together with the agricultural work.⁶ The toddy saps are obtained from both the male palm and the female palm.⁷

There are many similarities and dissimilarities in variety of plants grown according to the weather and nature of water and land. Among the dissimilar plants, the toddy-palm tree is a kind of plant mainly dissimilar with many countries.⁸ Botanically, the toddy-palm or palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) belongs to the family of Palmaceae or Palmy. One can see the toddy-palm and palm-like trees in Asia, Africa, America and the islands in the Pacific Ocean. The Htan is called Corypha Palm or Toddy Palm. The corypha palm was written and called "piy" (ပိယ) in ancient time. Now, the Bamars call it "pe" (ပေ).⁹ Therefore, toddy-palm industry is an important work in Myanmar rural society.

Everybody cannot carry out the difficult toddy work as the toddy tapper has to climb the toddy tree at the risk of his life and has to be skilled at works according to the toddy season and time. However, the family usually inherits and conducts the toddy work. If the father is old, the son usually has to climb the toddy tree. If the mother is old, the daughter usually has to cook toddy sap. The heredity or lineage of toddy industry was inherited.¹⁰ Climbing and cutting toddy fruits and toddy leaves.¹¹ Among toddy workers who chiefly make a living with toddy at present, 80% of toddy workers have no forest of toddy trees of their own. They have to carry out toddy work, giving jaggeries or palm sugars as thizarkha (rent for cultivating a piece of land) to the owners of toddy forest a day

⁵ Maung Lin Thu (Nyaung-U), *Htan-hnint Htanlokngansainyar Thikaungzayar* (Knowledge on Toddy-palm and Palm Industry), Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press, 1989, pp. 17-19 (Henceforth: Lin Thu, 1989)

⁶ Dr Toe Hla, *Konbaungkhith Kyeiletluhmusipwar Bawa* (Konbaung Era Rural Socio-Economic Life) (1752-1885), Yangon, Universities Press, 2004, p. 142 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 2004)

⁷ Pyei Phyto Thet and Maung Thin, *A Study on Toddy Palm Culture in Central Myanmar*, July 2010, P.2, Meikhtilar University

⁸ Cartoon Kyi Win, *Myanmar-Myeinhma Myanmar Htan* (Myanmar Toddy Palm from Myanmar Land), Yangon, Kyaw Hla Press, First Printing, December 2013, P.31 (Henceforth: Kyi Win, 2013)

⁹ Lin Thu, 1989, 13-14

¹⁰ Interview at 2:30 pm, 19.8.2018, with U Pu Lon, a toddy climber, 65 years of age, Htein Pan Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

¹¹ See Photo (1)

in three days or a day in four days.¹² The life of toddy-palm climbers continues to exist in the life of letlokletsars (hand – to mouth worker).

There are two kinds of toddy climbers. The first kind comprises toddy workers who carry out agriculture and toddy work jointly. The toddy workers who make a living only with toddy industry emphasize and carry out toddy work, living only at toddy forests or plantations all the year round without discrimination of hot, rainy and cold seasons.¹³ In this tayar-gyin, toddy worker has to climb the toddy tree, taking yin-daung¹⁴ (portable ladder used in conjunction with the fixed ladder or yin-zwe to climb a toddy palm), yin-zwe¹⁵ (small ladder fixed to the upper part of a toddy palm tree), myu-o (earthen pot used in gathering toddy palm sap), dar¹⁶ (knife; chopper) and kalaing¹⁷ (length of wood wedged in between fronds to provide a seat for one dressing the crown of a palmyra palm).

When the toddy worker is climbing toddy tree one after another, his wife and children have to pack up or gather the myu-os (container earthen pots to collect toddy sap or juice).

All members of toddy worker family get up at 4 a.m and have to carry out the work one after another whole day long, withstanding the adverse effects of heat of the sun, rain and heat of fire, and it is uneasy to become a toddy worker who has to eat and work working without avoiding heat of the sun and fall of rain.¹⁸ Although the toddy worker family has to do the work without a rest, they get income only for eating, and so they cannot buy many clothings. As they live in the forest, they have no many cloths. They can support the education of the children to some extent. For extra use, they carry out raising cows and rolling cigars or cheroots.¹⁹ In up – country region, there is a saying of toddy

¹² Interview at 12 noon, 12.8.2018 with U Pyay Aye, a toddy climber, 90 years of age, Ku Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

¹³ Tetkatho Sein Tin, *Htan* (toddy-palm), Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press, 1969, p. 107 (Henceforth: Sein Tin, 1969)

¹⁴ Portable ladder fixed to the base of a toddy tree

¹⁵ Small ladder fixed to the upper part of a toddy tree

¹⁶ See Photo (2)

¹⁷ (a) Stick wedged in between fronds to provide a seat for one dressing the crown of a toddy palm or palmyra palm (b) See Photo (3)

¹⁸ Interview at 2:30 p.m, 19-8-2018, with U Soe Myint, a toddy climber, 47 years of age Ywathit village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

¹⁹ Interview at 12:00 am, 12.8.2018, with Ma Tin Tin Hla, a wife of toddy climber, 37 years of age, Ku village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

workers "Yinhtaung htaung pyaung, yinhtaung hle mwe" (If the yinhtaung ladder is standing ... prosperous, and if it lies down poor)²⁰

Hardships faced and solved by Toddy Workers

With regard to the yielding of toddy sap according to the season, Dabodwe and Dabaung are fixed as htan-pho (male toddy-palm) season, Dagu and Kason as hnyat (clamping) season, and Nayon, Warzo, Wargaung and Tawthalin as thiyint (maturing fruit) or htan-ma (female palmyra palm) season in carrying out toddy work.²¹ At the places with good land and water in Upper Myanmar, toddy trees put forth buds in Dabodwe, yield toddy sap in Dabaung and bear fruits in Dagu.²² Particularly, the townships such as Nyaung-U, Kyaukbadaung, Yeizagyo, Pakkoku, Myingyan, Taungthar, Meikhtilar, Mahlaing and Shwebo are the regions where toddy works are done at the most. Despite dissimilarity in the time of putting forth buds of toddy-palm trees and the time of entering workplace according to the weather condition, the methods, opinions and experiences on toddy work are similar, and toddy workers have to carry out toddy work wearily and poorly.²³ Toddy workers have to face difficulties such as decrease in getting toddy sap and decrease in income because the time of entering toddy work is late depending on weather condition, goodness and badness of land and water, and location and area.²⁴ Yield of toddy sap differs from one village to another in the villages within Myingyan Township. Toddy sap obtained from toddy tree grown in flat land and toddy juice obtained from toddy tree grown in high ground rock land differ in taste. Toddy sap obtained from the high ground toddy tree is more tasteful and more thick. In the areas far from water, one myu-o of toddy sap produces 15 ticals of jaggery. Toddy sap yielding from Ginge village is more watery than that of other villages and so one myu-o of toddy sap yields only 10 ticals of palm sugar.²⁵

²⁰ Interview at 11:00 am, 12.8.2018, with U Aung Chin, 65 years of age, Ku village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

²¹ Interview at 1:00 pm, 12.8.2018, with U San Aung, a toddy climber, 46 years of age, Kunsai village, Myingyan Township

²² U Kyin U, *Badeithar Thahinmyar* (Variety songs; Miscellaneous Songs), Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press, January 1964, p.118 (Henceforth: Kyin U, 1964)

²³ Lin Thu, 1989, 54-55

²⁴ Interview at 4:00 pm, 2.9.2018, with U Soe Lwin, 50 years of age, Phetyin village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

²⁵ Interview at 5:00 pm, 21.11.2017, with U Toe Aung, a toddy climber, 56 years of age, Ginge village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

Toddy workers have to take a rest from works of toddy-climbing and toddy-cutting as from "end of Tawthalin and waxing of Thadingyut" till the end of "Pyartho" in one-year period. After taking a rest for about four months so, they have to make preparations to restart toddy work at the beginning of waxing of Dabodwe.²⁶ Before doing toddy work, toddy workers have to make toddy-palm preparation. In doing so, they have to face pains or sufferings such as being cut by toddy frond edge and being cut by knife. They have to make preparations in advance of about 6 months such as cutting the dried fronds and unnecessary fronds, making yindaung (portable ladder to climb a toddy palm) and yinzwe (small ladder fixed to the upper part of a toddy palm tree) and fixing yinzwes to toddy trees thoroughly, five or six tree, per day. After preparing so, they have to accept and take toddy sap for 8 months per year from waxing of Dabodwe till mid-Thadingyut.²⁷ The season capable of accepting toddy sap or the time of doing toddy work is divided into htan-pho-u (first male toddy), hnyat (clamping), thinu (young fruit), thiyint (maturing fruit), apwet²⁸ and ati²⁹, depending on the season of time of yielding "htan-no khain" (bunch of spadixes of a male toddy-palm from which the sap is tapped) from male toddy tree and time of yielding "htan-thi-khain" (bunch of toddy fruits) from female toddy tree.³⁰ In tapping toddy sap so, toddy workers have to carry out difficultly, bearing pain at the risk of life.

In carrying out to get toddy sap from htan-pho-nu (tender male toddy), toddy climber has to do difficultly in order not to have slip-up and bungle apart from the risk of his life. It is usual to come out yit-khain³¹ and hnyat-khain³² separately according to the nature in male toddy tree. If the small fingers of toddy bunch are wounded by the knife and handled roughly by toddy worker, they will be broken and ruined. If they are broken

²⁶ Kyi Win, 2013, 35

²⁷ Interview at 9:00 am, 29.9.2019 with U San Thein, a toddy climber, 56 years of Age, Hteinpan Ywathit, village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

²⁸ Season of tapping toddy sap from both male toddy and female toddy trees in Thadingyut and Dazaungmon

²⁹ Season of tapping toddy sap from both male toddy and female toddy trees in Nadaw and Pyartho

³⁰ Sein Tin, 1969, 51

³¹ Toddy bunch which has to be made a light circular cut with the knife in male toddy tree

³² Toddy bunch or htan-khain (bunch of toddy spadixes or fruits?) which has to be clamped with the tongs or clamp

so, toddy sap cannot be tapped, and so toddy workers have to face trouble of failing to get toddy sap.³³

Toddy workers have to face difficulties also in making a light circular cut to toddy and cutting the htan-pho-nu (tender male toddy). In cutting the htan-pho-nu, knife strokes are needed to be accurate. It is a discipline to be thought and carried out in order to arrive at middle point.³⁴ Toddy workers also have to face trouble of decrease in getting the hta-yei-cho (sap from toddy-palm spathe) from toddy trees yielding much toddy sap because htan-pho-nu (tender male toddy) cannot withstand the adverse effects of weather, and because of such factors as blowing of monsoon violently, heating of the sun intensely and blowing of hot wind according to weather condition of up-country region or anyar-deisa.³⁵ Throughout toddy season, hnyat-yarhi (clamping season) is the most tired and the season of withstanding the adverse effects of heat at the most. It is usual to choose the time of yielding flowers in full from the htan-khain-chaung to clamp toddy.³⁶ It may be said that toddy-clamping is the relaying art or discipline to be done practically. In clamping with htan-hnyat³⁷ (toddy tongs or clamp), toddy-clamping method and clamping style play an important role. The hnyat-tok³⁸ (clamp tie) "needing wound" or anar-lo³⁹ has to be cut at once because it cannot yield htan-yei-cho (sap from toddy-palm spathe) at all. If the strong wind blows with 45 mile rate, climbing must not be done. If it blows with 40 mile rate toddy worker can climb toddy tree, take off or fix myu-os (earthen pots used for collection of toddy sap) and cut toddy, and so he is busy and has to suffer mental stress. He has to be anxious about falling from the tree as the toddy tree is swaying.⁴⁰ The life and work of toddy workers are found to be difficult and harsh.

³³ Interview at 4:00 pm, 10.8.2018 with Ko Nyo Win, a toddy climber, 44 years of age, Kyaukpyok village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

³⁴ Lin Thu, 1986, 61-62

³⁵ Lin Thu, 1986, 62

³⁶ Interview at 2:30 pm, 19.8.2018, with U Soe Myint, a toddy climber, 47 years of age, Ywar Thit village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

³⁷ See photo (4)

³⁸ Htan-sa collected and tied up into a bundle with htan-gyaw (length of bark stripped from a palmyra frond) after toddy-clamping

³⁹ There is no yielding of htan-yei-cho due to lessening of wound while preparing the fruit stalk of male toddy (htan-pho) for sap collection and bruising the fruit stalk of female toddy (htan-ma) to make the sap flow

⁴⁰ Interview at 12:30 pm, 17.11.2017, with U Tar Gyi, a toddy climber, 49 years of age, Nabuaim Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

Only because there are toddy workers who carry out toddy work with regard to palmyra palm, the people get a chance to eat various snacks of Myanmar rural area having essence of the Myanmars concerned with toddy palm. Jaggery or palm sugar is an adorable commodity of the Myanmars like the rice. The htan-yi-cho (sap from toddy-palm spathe) can be tapped or extracted with two ways from male toddy tree as well as from female toddy tree. These methods are yaung⁴¹ and thi-yint.⁴² As it rains incessantly in mid-rainy season when the thi-yint (maturing fruit) is abundant, it is uneasy as for toddy workers to carry the toddy ladder from one tree to another. When preparing for carrying, toddy climber has to face trouble of slipping to step on the ladder as the clay is attaching to his feet. In putting the htan-thi-khain (bunch of toddy fruits) on the htan-let⁴³, toddy climber has to be careful in order not to fall, overbalancing forward in bending and taking it underneath. Toddy climbers beat or bruise thi-yint (maturing fruit) only the sayar-khain⁴⁴ (the first fruit stalk of a palmyra palm). Toddy workers have to face troubles of failing to yield toddy sap from htan-khain-chaung (stalk of toddy bunch) if handling and beating the tip or topmost part is wounded. Waxing of Nayon, end of Kason, 45 days after htan-htu (bruising the fruit stalk of a palmyra palm to make the sap flow), is the time of cutting the htan-sa (toddy bunch which has been prepared).⁴⁵ If it is not safe, toddy workers have to face trouble of dryness of the surface due to the adverse effects of the wind and the sun. If the method is incorrect in jabbing at and putting down the thi-yints (maturing fruits), toddy workers may sweat, being tired. In stabbing the thi-yint with the knife, toddy workers without skill face difficulty, and it may cause danger even to human life. As the strength is exerted in stabbing the thi-yint (maturing fruit) with the knife, some toddy workers have to face death falling from toddy tree because their hands are being stabbed with the loss of balance, and some toddy climbers become disabled persons.⁴⁶

The female toddy trees differ in output of toddy sap one year and another depending on weather condition, and so toddy climbers have to face problem on decrease in getting toddy sap. Toddy sap can be obtained from waxing of Nayon to waxing of

⁴¹ Carrying out the thi-nu (young fruit)

⁴² Carrying out the thi-yint (maturing fruit)

⁴³ The stem of the toddy-palm leaf, toddy-palm leaf or frond, frond which bark or fibre between patkhwar and toddy leaf is not peeled

⁴⁴ The fruit stalk which comes out firstly from the bunch of toddy fruits

⁴⁵ Lin Thu, 1986, 118

⁴⁶ Interview at 12:00 noon, 11.8.2019, with U Aung Chin, a toddy climber, 65 year of age, Ku Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

Thadingyut. Throughout the toddy season, the time of female toddy-palm is the easiest.⁴⁷ At the time of female palmyra palm, toddy workers have to climb toddy trees, facing troubles taking risk without fearing the wind.

After tapping the thi-yint-yei (juice of maturing fruit), some toddy workers tap apwet-yei and ati-yei.⁴⁸ As it is not the time of toddy season, they have to face difficulty on decreases in getting toddy sap in the years of bad weather. Toddy workers do not carry out the apwet-yei and ati-yei (toddy sap obtained through cutting not at toddy time), laying great emphasis on them. Toddy workers cook toddy sap to get jaggery (brown sugar, palm sugar) tapping toddy sap only for eight months of toddy season. Toddy worker has income only for eight months. As he has no income in the remaining months, he is poor and his living standard is low. The calloused hands of toddy climbers are like taukt⁴⁹ (gecko; tucktoo) and their palms are rough in competition with the surface of toddy tree. The life of toddy workers is pitiful to see.

In order to make yield of toddy sap regular, toddy workers have to cut spadix or fruit stalk of palmyra palm, climbing toddy tree one time in the morning and one time in the evening. If toddy climber cannot cut climbing toddy tree because of illness or various matters, he has to ask other toddy worker to do cutting. If the latter cannot cut in order to level in thickness and thinness, yield of toddy sap can cease for a while, and sometimes output of toddy sap can stop.⁵⁰ As toddy worker gets no right to go to the relatives and for some village affairs, toddy work is said to be a work of sweipyat-myopyat (losing touch with the relatives). In rainy season, the htan-yei-khar or htayigar (fermented drink made from the toddy sap) pot is covered with toddy leaf to prevent rain water from getting in.⁵¹

Toddy work cannot be done only by a toddy worker. The myu-o collectors and jaggery makers also have to take part in this work. Toddy work is carried out as family occupation or business. The myu-o collector also has to face troubles like toddy climber. Even before daybreak, the myu-o collector has to reach near a pile of myu-os (earthen

⁴⁷ Interview at 3:00 pm, 19.8.2018, with U San Thein, a toddy climber, 63 years of age, Hteinpan Ywarthit Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

⁴⁸ Toddy sap obtained through cutting not at toddy time

⁴⁹ Interview at 2:30 pm, 19.8.2018, with U Soe Myint, toddy climber, 47 years of age, Ywarthit Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

⁵⁰ Maung Maung Phyu, *Nwei-u karla Myuhtathaw.akhar* (when misting in spring), Yangon, Hla Maw Literature, 1967, p.311 (Henceforth: Maung Maung Phyu, 1967)

⁵¹ Interview at 11:00 am, 12.8.2018, with Ma Kyi Myint, 57 years of age, Lethit Village, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region

pots for the toddy sap collection) earlier than toddy worker. The myu-o collector has to bake the myu-os in order to be free from danger of insects capable of making toddy sap sour.⁵²

As the toddy workers have to climb toddy tree in time, they do not fail to climb despite raining together with strong wind. On account of this, the myu-o collector also has to go to work together with toddy climber. Only if myu-o collector is the wife of toddy climber, it will be more proper, and the work will make progress. Jaggery maker plays an essential part in toddy work. The wife of toddy worker usually cooks toddy sap to get palm sugar.⁵³ Although toddy worker and his family face troubles and has to carry out the work with pouring sweat, their income is scant, and so their living standard is also low.

Conclusion

The toddy-palm fossils were found through excavation in the upcountry region in the central Myanmar. Toddy workers continued to do toddy work in posterity. The process of making to get palm sugar from toddy-palm tree is in detail, and it is skillful and artful. Besides, toddy work is very dangerous. On account of adverse effects of weather and due to unskillfulness in toddy work, it is difficult to get toddy sap fully. Most of toddy worker family did not have toddy forest of their own. Mostly, the number of toddy workers who own toddy forest is small. Paying thisarkha (rent for climbing toddy trees) to toddy owners, toddy climbers had to climb toddy trees. Therefore, the life of toddy workers is found to have no benefit. Despite doing his work at the risk of life, the life of toddy workers is hard and poor.

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⁵² See Photo (5)

⁵³ See Photo (6)

Photo (1)

Climbing and Cutting Toddy Fruits and Toddy Leaves



Photo (2)

Dar (knife chopper)



Photo (3)

Kalaing (length of wood wedged in between fronds to provide a seat for one dressing the crown of a palmyra palm)



Photo (4)
Htan-hnyat



Photo (5)
To bake the myu-o



Photo (6)

The wife of toddy worker toddy sap



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