

Hair Symbolism at Set Set Yo Village, Ngathayouk Township, Nyaung U District

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Abstract

Hair is a part of the body, but it can also be seen as a vehicle to explain the history of society, beliefs, ideas, value and identity. This research aims to examine how the symbolism of hair functions at the Set Set Yo village, Ngathayouk Township, Mandalay Region. The research questions this paper examines are about how community revivals affect the symbolism of hair and how this relates to broader issues of community development. The research method is qualitative research with participant observation and it was conducted from 2015 to 2020. The research subjects are the village heads, village elders, children and the abbots. The hair symbolism of Set Set Yo village expresses the various meanings and various values to the villagers. It is also a mark that the old value of *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* and village institution are renewed and strengthened in the new context.

Introduction

Hair is a part of the human body and it can be changed by human desire. In some societies, hair is shaped by religion, values or traditions. Furthermore hair is an overt expression of a person's age, gender and status in some societies. Hair style is a way to persuade people's interest but the study on the hair style is relatively rare in Myanmar. According to the historical records, in Myanmar there were about 55 numbers of different hair styles during the *Bagan* dynasty (849 to 1297). But In the *Konbaung* dynasty (1752 to 1885) only seven numbers of different hair styles were left. Those hair styles were mostly concerned with women who were living in the royal palace. But a traditional hair style called *Sanyit Wine* (ဆံရစ်ပိုင်း) or *Yaung Pae Suu* (ရောင်ပေဆူး) hair style was worn by the common people without gender differences. This had mostly disappeared after the colonial period (1885). Before the introduction of formal education (western education), monastic education was very important in Myanmar society and the children who were studying at monasteries usually wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*. Therefore, *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hairstyle became a kind of symbol of monastic education. Furthermore it is also different from "*Bo kay*" (ပုခင်ကေ), cropped hair. "*Bo*" means "Westerner" and "*Kay*" are different hair styles. In other words, *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style is the symbol of colonized natives and "*Bo kay*" indicated being non-native and association with western civilization. In western culture, the head hair of woman should be long and the head hair of the man should be short.

Literature review

Hairstyles as a "representation of self" were an integral part of the generation, maintenance and structuring of Egyptian society (Geoffrey John Tassie, 2008). Female beauty, including long and luxuriant black head hair, is marital currency in India. The bride's beauty, like her level of education, translates into her dowry; the marriage of a beautiful daughter will cost her family less than if she is unattractive (Barbara D. Miller, 1998). Hair is an object of

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intense elaboration and preoccupation in almost all societies. (Deborah Pergament, 1999). As Patrick Olivelle argues;

“Just like language, hair symbolism imposes its own grammar on the individuals in a given period of a given society; an individual is unable to produce an entirely new symbolic value of hair from his or her own subjective consciousness and still be able to communicate with the rest of that society” (Patrick Olivelle, 1998:12).

Anthony Synnott also pointed out that hair is a physiological phenomenon, but it is also a social one: a symbol of the self and of group identity, and an important mode of self-expression and communication (Anthony Synnott, 1987). Therefore we can say that hair seems to be a kind of word or symbol to communicate to others with a variety of socially significant meanings. In other words, the study of hair and hair style is mostly concerned with human relationships and not just material entities.

Research aim, research questions and methodology

This research will examine how hair symbolism functions in the researched community. The research questions are: how do community revivals affect hair symbolism and how does this relate to broader issues of community development. The research method is qualitative research with participant observation. This research was conducted from 2015 to 2020. The research subjects are the village heads, village elders, children and the abbots. The research area is Set Set Yo village, Ngathayouk Township, Mandalay Region and it is far from Nyaung U about 26 miles. Set Set Yo village is situated in the dry zone and its basic economy is agriculture. The village area is 35 acres. It was established with four households' siblings in 1902, all of which were Bamar nationals having ties of kindred with each other. The population of Set Set Yo is 865, the households, 177 (village administrative data, 2020).

This research paper will firstly describe an overview of the traditional hair styles of the village, and then the revitalization of the hairstyles will be illustrated to find out the links between traditional hair style and the village. After that the impacts of traditional hairstyle and development of the village will be explored. How hair symbolism motivates the community will then be discussed. Finally it will offer some conclusions about what the hair symbolism of Set Set Yo village expresses about the various meanings and various values of the villagers.

Traditional hair style at Set Set YoVillage

In Myanmar, there is a saying that “the glory of the women is the hair bun and the glory of the man is the upper arm”. In other words, Myanmar women should have long hair and man should be strong and stout. But both men and women had long hair in the past. According to interviews with the local people, it is understood that the hair style of the children is changed as follows. When a baby is born, the hair of the baby is shaved. Then the hair at his or her fontanelle will be kept to be long and it will stay like this until the child is one or two years old. It is called *Ooson Phoke* (ခွံနံးဖုတ်), forelock (see figure-1). When the hair of the *Ooson Phoke* is longer, it is cut into a hair style that is called *Khwetmhauk* (ခွက်မော့က်), meaning bowl-shape (see figure-2). At three years old, the locks of hair are gathered atop in a tuft and tied with a strand of pink wool or a ribbon. This is known as *Kyaktaung See* (ကြက်တောင်စည်း) (see figure-3) which is like a shuttle cock. That is also the sign that the child with *Kyaktaung See* is free from breast feeding and he or she can play with other elders. From 9 years to 10 years old the hair of the *Kyaktaung See* grows longer and longer. The girls keep *Sanyit Wine* (ဆံရစ်ပိုင်) (see figure 5) and the boys, *Yaung Pae Suu* (ရောင်ပေစူး) (see figure 4). This is a style of hairdo with a top knot

and a circular fringe. *Sanyit Wine* for the girls and *Yaung Pae Suu* for the boys are the same form but the names are different. It is also the age when they will go to school; mostly, in the past, the children went to the monastery for education. Then at the fifteen years old, the girls changed their hair style called *Sahtauk* (ဆံထောက်) (see figure-6). That is also the sign of an adolescent. The fringe of *Sahtauk* is longer than *Sanyit Wine*. When the girl is married the hair style is changed over from *Sahtauk* of an adolescent girl to that of a woman whose long tresses are gathered in a bun. It is called *Sahtauk Thein* (ဆံထောက်သိမ်း) and it indicates the time of transition from adolescence to womanhood. The boys who wear the *Yaung Pae Suu* remove their top knot when they enter in to the novice hood. From the stage of *Kyaktaung See* it will take time to cut the hair, to put the oil in it, to comb the hair, to wash and to dry the hair.



Figure 1 *Ooson Phoke* (ဦးစွန်းဖုတ်), forelock



Figure 2 *Khwetmhauk* (ခွက်မှောက်)



Figure 3 *Kyaktaung See* (ကြက်တောင်စည်း)



Figure 4 *Yaung Pae Suu* for the boys



Figure 5 *Sanyit Wine* for the girls



Figure 6 *Sahtauk* of an adolescent girl

Revitalization of the hairstyle

To maintain the traditional hair style, the monastery of Set Set Yo is the main pillar to support it. The former abbot (U Narahda, 77 years old) (see figure 7) who passed away in 2016 tried to keep and maintain the hair style of the village. According to interviews with him in 2015, he said that he arrived at Set Set Yo Village in 1950 as a young monk and he saw many children with *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*. Some elder males also wore *Yaung-Htone*, (ရောင်ထုံး) topknots (see figure 8). At that time the abbot named U Nandawontha, who preceded him, also tried to maintain the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style of the children and most of the village children came and studied monastic education. Two monastic students from the northern and southern parts of the village had to take duties to bring the meals from the village households. For breakfast ten households of the village were assigned for cooking. For lunch, one household regularly cooks the rice and the monastic students have to go around for curry-alkms in the village. Day by day the monastic students who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* decrease, because the people from the surrounding villages are also changing their hair style into the modern style (short hair) and the people from Set Set Yo village have also begun to change to the short hair style. Furthermore, in 1972, formal education was started at the village primary school⁵ which was near the monastery and most of the children removed their *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* when they went to the formal school. The abbot U Narahda was concerned with keeping this hair style at the village. Because of the fear of losing traditions, he tried to maintain the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style among the monastic students who live in monastery and to see typical Myanmar children for the younger generation. He persuaded the parents and children who are interested in this hairstyle and encouraged them by providing the coconut oil and shampoo to the children to keep *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*.

One day, he brought the children who wore *Sanyit Wine* to visit the *Zaycho*⁶ market in Mandalay. The people from *Zaycho* market paid a lot of attention to the children and took photos. Therefore, the abbot and children could not go out from the market easily because a lot of people were observing them as a precious staff and taking photos. Then the photos of the children were shown at the hotels and most of the tourists came and visited Set Set Yo village to observe the children who wore *Sanyit Wine*. The abbot explained the consequences of keeping *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style to the villagers--explaining that the tourists who saw the photos of the children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* at the hotels were interested in the children and wanted to see and visited Set Set Yo. Therefore the traditional hair style should be maintained for younger generation and visitors, he argued.

In the religious ceremonies of *Gawsagan*⁷, the abbots usually bring the village children to hold their alms bowls or curry-dishes and trays while they go around the village for alms. At that time, only the abbot from Set Set Yo monastery can accompany the children who wore *Yaung Pae Suu*. The abbot U Narahda said proudly that everyone knows that the abbot accompanies with the monastic student worn *Yaung Pae Suu* is from Set Set Yo Village (see figure - 9). By this way *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* becomes a kind of symbol of Set Set Yo Village and it is also the pride of the abbot. The abbot U Narahda gave much favor to the village children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style by giving good meals, pocket money and light duty of the monastery. The children who cut the hair in "*Bo Kay*" were

⁵ the school was moved to another place in 1989

⁶ the big open market in Mandalay

⁷ It is an area where the monasteries have the religious or social responsibilities to participate in any activities of that area

given punishment such as by cleaning dog's dung, sweeping, feeding dogs etc. In 2015, there are 15 children (four girls and 11 boys) who wore *Yaung Pae Suu*. According to observation in the field work for this study, the linkage among the monastery, village children, the village primary school and villagers could be studied. At 6:00 am, children, mostly those who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style, took the empty *Soonchaik* (ဆွမ်းချိုင့် lunch box) from the monastery and went to the households which had the duty to provide the meal to the monastery. Then at 10:00 am children gathered the *Soonchaik* from the village households and brought them back to the monastery. Then monks had lunch at 11:00 am and while the monks were having their lunch some village children were sitting in front of the dining table in line (see figure 10). The monks set aside a meal for the village children who were sitting in front of their dining table. The reason for the children sitting outside was so that they could be counted. Then the eldest one wearing *Yaung Pae Suu* prepared the meal for the village children who were sitting in front of the dining table in line (see figure - 11). Most of the children were wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style. In addition, there is the summer school during the summer holidays. The village children use to learn the Buddha-teaching and civic education (ယဉ်ကျေးငြိမ်းသာတန်း) from the monk (see figure 12). The children also play at the monastery compound. To do the activities of the students at the monastery the village primary school schedule was created. At Set Set Yo village, the village primary school starts at 8:00 am and the school break is at 10:00 am. Then the school starts again at 12:00 pm until 3:30pm. The school schedule is managed to support the time of collecting meal boxes from the villagers and sending to the monastery by the children who are attending the school. In this way the abbot gets the food from the villagers through the children who wear the the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*. The abbot also gives food and Buddha teaching for village children as well as providing the playing ground in monastery compound. One of the villagers Mr. A who is 82 years old said that he also wore *Yaung Pae Suu* before he became novice. When he was 17 years old, he entered into the novitiate and he had to remove his hair to be a novice. At that time his lock was about two feet and three inches long. He continued that now he encourages his grandchildren to keep *Yaung Pae Suu* and he also gives his grandchildren one thousand *kyats* (0.7 \$) for wearing *Yaung Pae Suu*. One of the village women, 43 years old, who has a boy-child said that her son also wears the *Yaung Pae Suu*. She also wore *Sanyit Wine* and *Sahtauk* (ဆံထောက်) before she married. The abbot also encouraged her to help keeping *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style of the children and she also encouraged her son to keep *Yaung Pae Suu*. According to the interview with the head of the village about 46 years old there are 42 children who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style at the village in 2018. Then he said proudly that the village has been maintained the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style for over one hundred year. According to the interviewing and doing observation it can be understood that *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style was revitalized by the village abbots and it was accepted by the villagers. In 2015, there were only 15 children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style but in 2018, it increased to 42 children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style. What are the benefits for keeping *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style? It will be discussed in next sections.

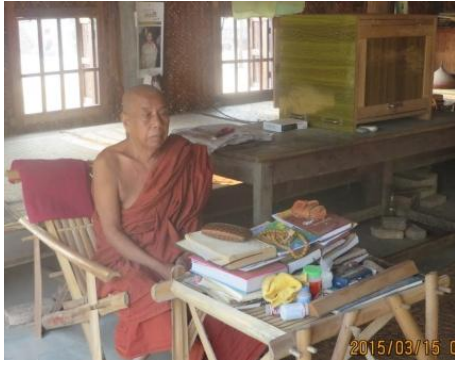


Figure 7 The abbot U Narahda



Figure 8 *Yaung-Htone*, (ရောင်ထုံး)



Figure 9 The monastic student to follow the abbot



Figure 10 Siting for lunch



Figure 11 Preparing the lunch



Figure 12 Teaching at summer school



Figure 13 Signboard of *Yaung Pae Suu*

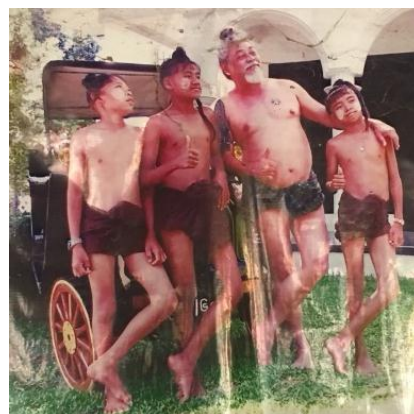


Figure 14 Mr. Kyaw Thu & *Yaung Pae Suu*

Sanyit Wine or Yaung Pae Suu hair style and community development

The abbot U Narhada mentioned that it is because of the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair styles that most of the tourists visit Set Set Yo village. Set Set Yo village is situated in a remote area and it is far from any city. Transportation is also very difficult and the tourists could not use public transportation in the past easily to go to the Set Set Yo village. *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair styles are seen as exotic culture for the tourists who came and visited Bagan, a Myanmar ancient city, and they tried to come specifically to see them. As a result, it has become one of the top tourist destinations in upper Myanmar.

In 2015, December, Mr. Kyaw Thu, a famous actor, director and a philanthropist, came and requested to shoot a film near Shwe Hlaing⁸ with the children who wore the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* from Set Set Yo village through Mr. Aung Naing⁹. The abbot U Narhada did not agree to bring village children to the shooting at a different village and the abbot replied that if they shoot the film at the Set Set Yo village the children can participate in that shooting. Then Mr. Kyaw Thu came and did shooting with the village children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* at the Set Set Yo village. After that Set Set Yo village became more famous than in the past and it becomes a place to attract the visitors not only from Myanmar but also from other countries. Mr. Kyaw Thu also brought the children who wore the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* to Mandalay *Thyngyan* in 2017 and there are over 50 members in the Thangyat group named "*Cheik*"(ချီဝဲHook). The *Sanyit Wine* (wearing now-obsolete traditional Myanmar hair style) group from Set Set Yo village from Nyaung-U district also participated. The signboard picture of *Yaung Pae Suu*-children with the famous actor Mr. Kyaw Thu and the saying that "Not to be disappeared your tradition because of you" are found in the village (see figure 13, 14).

The head of the village also mentioned that because of the effort of village abbots the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style has been maintained for many years and the foreigners also come and visit Set Set Yo. He continued that in 2016, after Mr. Kyaw Thu, a philanthropist did shooting film at the village with village children who wore *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style, Set Set Yo was now more famous and many people came and visit than the past years. In 2017, many tourist companies advertised *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* of Set Set Yo as a tourist attraction. He also mentioned that because of the network of Mr. Kyaw Thu, repairing the dam, digging tube well, getting electricity and establishing nursery school at Set Set Yo have been part of the new development of the village.

Village Children and Sanyit Wine or Yaung Pae Suu hair style

The number of children in the village is 100 and the children who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style are 42 of them and mostly they are at the primary school. The voices of the children who wear the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style are not the same concerned with their experiences. Some like to wear it and some do not.

The child 7 years old who wore *Kyaktaung See* said,

"I like to wear the Yaung Pae Suu because when I wear Yaung Pae Suu the abbot gives me pocket money. The tourists also will take me picture and they also will give me the snacks and money. If I don't wear I will not get such pocket money and snacks."

⁸ A small village 45 minutes far from Set Set Yo village by car

⁹ Current village head(in 2015 December he was not yet village head)

His mother is 43 years old and when she was young she also wore *Sanyit Wine* and she also studied Buddha-teaching at the monastery. She encourages her son to wear *Yaung Pae Suu*. She also pointed out that wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* is good not only for the monastery but also for the village. The child, 13 years old said that he wore *Yaung Pae Suu* at five years old and his parents dressed his hair. Then the abbot cared his hair and he likes to wear *Yaung Pae Suu*. Now everyday he is going to high school of Phalankan village from Set Set Yo village.

The one who does not wear *Yaung Pae Suu* said that he does not like *Yaung Pae Suu* because he is too busy to make the hair knot. He added that his house is quite far from the monastery and he cannot come to the monastery every day to make the knot by the abbot. His mother also does not encourage wearing the *Yaung Pae Suu* because she is busy with house work and she does not have time for dressing his hair. In addition, his mother said that because of *Yaung Pae Suu* her son will not do the study very well.

Among the village children some are very willing to wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* as they like to wear it or they believe that it will give some benefits to them. Some parents also encourage the children to keep *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* and some do not. The hair is cut by the abbot or their parents. The elders who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* also use to cut the hair. The control of hair, by cutting, washing, grooming, making the knot on the head indicates the meaning of participation in the monastic activities and village development activities.

Discussion

Hair is a part of body and although it is cut, it can grow. Hair is an object of intense elaboration and preoccupation in almost all societies (Deborah Pergament, 1999). Set Set Yo village, which is situated in remote area, is trying to preserve the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style. The *Sanyit Wine* for girl and *Yaung Pae Suu* for boy, both are the same long hair styles. Therefore the Anthony Synnott's idea that 'opposite sexes have opposite hair' (Anthony Synnott, 1987) in other words the classical pattern: Men = short hair / Women = long hair cannot be matched in this community. The *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style was originally practiced at the village for many years and it was revitalized by the village senior monks. Before 1971, most of the village children went to the monastery for their education. Therefore most of the village people over 60 years have ever kept *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* when they were children. And then the number of people who like to wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* was decreased. It was difficult to maintain *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style without any support from the village monastery. The monks also would like to maintain their tradition which was going religious ceremony with typical monastic students. For this reason nurturing monastic students who wear *Yaung Pae Suu* will be the pride of the abbot. Therefore whenever the abbot has the relationship with religious ceremonies of *Gawsagan* the typical monastic students who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* is a vehicle to express his pride or his value. Even though the abbot does not wear *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style he will get the prestige attached to nurturing typical monastic students.

In South Asia traditions, control of hair by cutting, grooming, binding, enclosing in a turban, or other means indicates an individual's participation in social structures within a publicly defined role and that individual's submission to social control (Patrick Olivelle, 1998). At Set Set Yo village, the control of hair, by cutting, washing, grooming, making the knot on the head also indicates the individual's participation in village social structures and individual's submission to social control. Therefore it is also the enculturation process at this community.

Some parents and children like to keep *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* because to some extent they will get satisfaction through receiving some snacks or donation, taking photos with visitors and so on. The children who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* will get special chances than others who do not wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*. In addition wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* is telling that they are preserving the ancient hair style to others. The primary school administrator also managed the school schedule to provide the maintaining this hair style. By this way the Set Set Yo village children wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* are different from other children who are not wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu*. Because of the village children wearing *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* Set Set Yo village becomes famous and *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style produces the attraction to other. In the colonial context *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style would be considered as a practice of anti-colonialism and at present the hair symbol express the meaning to communicate the people, not only insiders but also outsiders.

The actor Mr. Kyaw Thu also used the children who wear *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style in his philanthropic activities. He also tried to improve the Set Set Yo village by repairing the dam, digging tube well, getting electricity and establishing nursery school, through his social network. Therefore we can say that *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style motivated the village development. In other words, *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* produces a meaning to communicate outsiders for the development of the village.

Conclusion

In this research, the hair symbolism of Set Set Yo village is examined. The hair style has been maintained for many years and it is now revitalized by the village senior abbots and villagers. To preserve the *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* hair style, the children and parents have many difficulties because of cutting, washing and dressing the hair. Children could not dress their hair themselves. So they will need the help of their elders, mothers, aunts or abbots. It means that the hair symbol cannot be produced by the individual and the community accepts and practices it continuously over space and time. The hair symbolism of Set Set Yo village expresses the various meanings and various values to the villagers. The pride for the abbot, the tourist attraction, the vehicle of enculturation process, the motivation of the development are found in the hair symbolism of Set Set Yo village. It is also a mark that the old value of *Sanyit Wine* or *Yaung Pae Suu* and village institution are renewed and strengthen in the new context.

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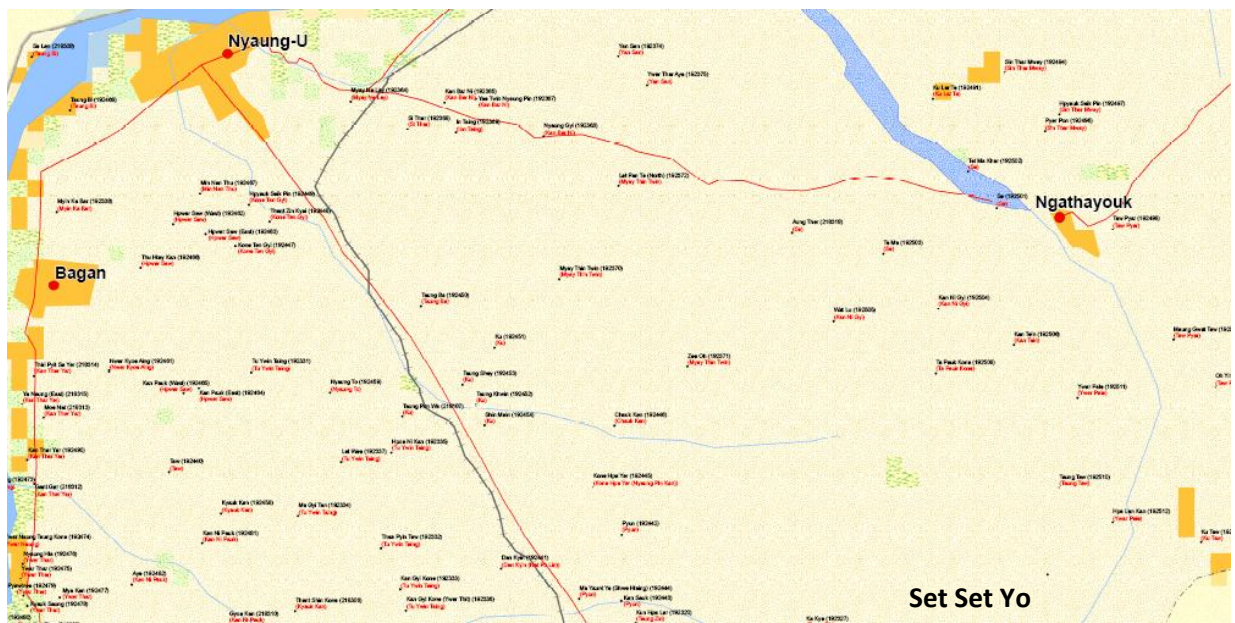


Figure 15 the location of the Set Set Yo Village in Nyaung U District (source- Myanmar Information Management Unit)

