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Department of Higher Education
Yangon University of Distance Education**

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Contents	Page
Patriotic Pride from U Latt's Novel, "Sabae Bin"	1-4
<i>Kyu Kyu Thin</i>	
Creation of characters in Kantkaw a novel of Linkar Yi Kyaw	5-9
<i>Khin San Wint</i>	
Author Khin Khin Htoo's Creative Skill of Writing a Story " Ku Kuu"	10-15
<i>Kyin Thar Myint</i>	
A Stylistic Analysis of the poem "the road not taken" by Robert Frost	16-22
<i>Nyo Me Kyaw Swa</i>	
The Effectiveness of Critical Thinking on Students in Classroom	22-26
<i>Amy Thet</i>	
Making Education Accessible: an investigation of an integrated English teaching-learning system in first year online class at Yangon University of Distance Education	26-33
<i>Ei Shwe Cin Pyone</i>	
A Geographical Study on Spatial Distribution Pattern of Health Care Centres in Sanchaung Township	33-39
<i>Myo Myo Khine, Win Pa Pa Myo, Min Oo, Kaythi Soe</i>	
A Study of Crop-Climate Relationship in Hlegu Township	39-45
<i>Win Pa Pa Myo, Myo Myo Khine</i>	
How to Organize Data for Presentation	46-50
<i>Yee Yee Myint, Myint Myint Win</i>	
A Geographical Study on Open University in New Zealand	50-54
<i>Myint Myint Win, Yee Yee Myint</i>	
Royal Administrative Practices in Konbaung Period (1752-1885)	54-60
<i>Yin Yin Nwe</i>	
Pyidawtha Programme (1952-1960)	60-69
<i>Zaw Naing Myint</i>	
The Role of Saya San in Myanmar Politics (1930-1931)	70-76
<i>Hlaing Hlaing Nyunt</i>	
A Study of the Floral Arabesque Patterns in Myanmar Traditional Paintings	76-81
<i>Hla Hla Nwe</i>	
A Study on Job Stress of Office Staff from Yangon University of Distance Education	82-86
<i>Khin Ya Mone, Ma Aye, Theint Thiri Zan</i>	
A study on the job satisfaction of the teaching staff in Yangon University of Distance Education	86-91
<i>Theint Thiri Zan, Thiri Hlaing, Ma Aye</i>	
A study on the work motivation of the teaching staff in Yangon University of Distance Education	91-96
<i>Ma Aye, Khin Ya Mone, Theint Thiri Zan</i>	
A study of Aristotle's Golden mean	97-101
<i>Nwe Nwe Oo</i>	
A Study of Legal Thought of John Austin	102-109
<i>Aye Aye Cho</i>	
A study of the concept of "good will" in Kantian philosophy from the Myanmar philosophical thought	109-115
<i>Moe Aye Theint</i>	
The Term "Pāragū" in the Buddhist Scriptures	115-121
<i>Theingi Cho</i>	
Arāḍa's Teaching from the Buddhacarita	122-126
<i>Pa Pa Aung</i>	
The Merit of Donating Four Material Requisites	126-131
<i>Marlar Oo</i>	
The Benefits of Workers under the Workmen's Compensation Act in Myanmar	131-135
<i>Khin Mar Thein</i>	

Contents	Page
Study on the Humanitarian Intervention under International Law <i>Nu Nu Win</i>	136-141
A Study on the Quality of Fried Edible Oil (Palm Oil) <i>Thazin Lwin, Myo Pa Pa Oo, Nyi Nyi</i>	142-148
New Ceramer Coating Based on Titanium-resorcinol Copolymer with Blown Seed Oils <i>Yu Yu Myo, Nwe Ni Win, Thazin Win</i>	149-156
A Study on Antioxidant Activity of Edible Green Leaves of Brassica Juncea Linn. (Mom-Hnyin-Sein) <i>Ohmar Ko, Thuzar Win, Hnin Yee Lwin</i>	156-161
Microcontroller controlled four-digit timer <i>Lei Lei Aung, Myo Nandar Mon, Khin Phyu Win, Moh Moh</i>	161-166
Study On Current-Voltage Characteristics of Znte Electroplated Film Under Illumination <i>Myo Nandar Mon, Thi Thi Win, Lei Lei Aung, Moh Moh</i>	166-172
Effect of Heat Treatment on Optical Properties of Cd-doped ZnO Thin Film <i>Su Thaw Tar Wint, Myo Myint Aung, Moh Moh</i>	173-175
Radon concentration in soil samples from different layers of the underground of Bago University campus <i>Thi Thi Win, Myo Nandar Mon, Aye Aye Khine, Moh Moh</i>	176-180
A Study on Weakly Preopen and Weakly Preclosed Functions <i>Kaythi Khine, Nang Moe Moe Sam, Su Mya Sandy</i>	181-187
Functions and Their Graphical Representation <i>Ohmar Myint, Moe Moe San, Zar Chi Saint Saint Aung</i>	187-193
Trilinear and Quadrilinear Forms <i>Wai Wai Tun, Aye Aye Maw</i>	193-198
Prevalence and bionomics of <i>Aedes aegypti</i> (Linnaeus, 1762) larvae in high risk areas of Pazundaung Township, Yangon Region <i>Tin Mar Yi Htun</i>	198-204
Comparative study of helminthes parasitic eggs and larvae in goat from Magway Township <i>Nilar Win, Myat Thandar Swe, Thinzar Wint</i>	205-213
Endoparasites of anurans from north Dagon and Kamayut Townships <i>Pa Pa Han, Thuzar Moe, Phyo Ma Ma Lin, Aye Aye Maw</i>	213-218
Investigation of some invertebrates in Taungthaman Lake, Amarapura Township, Mandalay Division <i>Khin Than Htwe, Kathy Myint, Thin Thin Swe, Aye Kyi</i>	219-225
Antimicrobial activity of <i>Dolichandrone spathacea</i> (L.f.) k. Schum. Flowers <i>Moet Moet Khine, Tin Tin Nwe, Win Win Shwe, Mya Mya Win</i>	226-231
Five Selected Wild Medicinal Plants and Theirs' Uses <i>Mya Mya Win, Moet Moet Khine, Win Win Shwe</i>	232-237
The Comparison of the Yield from Non-Grafted and Grafted of Five Plants of Family Solanaceae <i>Win Win Shwe, Moet Moet Khine, Mya Mya win</i>	238-244
Silk Fabrics Factories in Amarapura <i>Win Thida, Ni Ni Win, Yu Lae Khaing</i>	245-251
A study on production of rubber in Myanmar (1996 - 97 to 2017- 2018) <i>Tin Tin Mya, Ni Ni Win, Thinzar Aung</i>	251-257
A Study on Factors Affecting the Exclusive Breastfeeding of Mothers in PYA-PON District <i>Khin Mar Kyi, May Zin Tun</i>	258-265
A Study on the Health Status and Physical Fitness of Elderly People at Home for the Aged (Hninzigone), Yangon <i>Hein Latt, Pyae Phyo Kyaw</i>	266-273
A Study on Mortality and Fertility levels of Myanmar and its Neighbouring Countries <i>Ni Ni Win, Thinn Thinn Aung, Thinzar Aung</i>	273-280

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A Study of the Floral Arabesque Patterns in Myanmar Traditional Paintings

Hla Hla Nwe*

Abstract

The floral arabesque patterns have come through different ages in the history of Myanmar traditional designs and art paintings from Pyu Period to date. The mural paintings became remarkably popularized in the Bagan Period, and different painting styles were known in later periods – painting on palm leaf in the Inwa Period, and collage painting and mosaic art in Konbaung Period and so on. Relying on these documents, this research paper presents the knowledge of the floral arabesque patterns of Myanmar traditional paintings in a fresh way from the perspective of a historian.

Key words: Kanote, Myanmar traditional paintings

Introduction

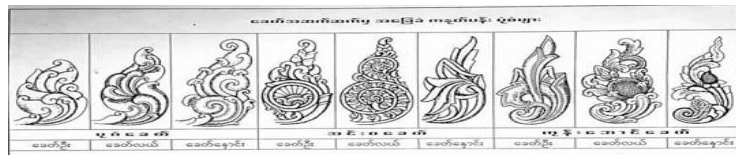
This research paper focuses significant characteristics of the floral arabesque patterns from Myanmar traditional paintings. In the mural paintings of the Bagan temples, the floral arabesque patterns played an essential role from the ceilings to the floors of the buildings with the Buddha’s life-stories or Jatakas as the main subject of painting. ‘Kanote’ or floral arabesque are artificial elements commonly found in Myanmar handicraft and designs ranging from paintings and sculptures through masonry to smith. As its derivation suggests, ‘Kanote motifs’ resemble the different floral patterns of lotus purported to be decorations to the artistic works. These floral arabesque patterns are the basic of Myanmar traditional paintings; in murals, in parabaik, in sap paintings, in mosaic paintings and so on.

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The word ‘Kanote’ is probably a corrupt derivative of Pali ‘Kumuda, then Kamuda, then Kanuda and finally Kanote meaning ‘tendrils of lotus flowers’.¹ It has been thousands of years since Kanote or the floral arabesque patterns were introduced to the works of traditional arts and crafts in Myanmar.² Ancient Pyu people were aware of Kanote motifs – as can be seen in a lot of evidence from the Period such as decorative of the floral arabesque designs on the bronze bell excavated together with the figurines of musicians and dancers near Payamar Stupa, Old Sri Ksetra,³ and terracotta votive tablets of AD 8th Century found in Muhtaw village, Old Sri Ksetra.⁴

In Bagan Period, the art of drawing Kanote patterns was called ‘tankyit-yay’ or ‘tankyit-nwe’ and was used to add decorations to the temples. According to the etymologists, the art of Kanote patterns came to be known as ‘Chupan/chunwe’ in Inwa Period and ‘Thazinkhwe/thazinpan’ in Konbaung Period.⁵



The Myanmar Dictionary defines ‘Kanote’ as ‘traditional art style of depicting convoluted lotus stems, buds, blossoms, etc.’⁶ The terms ‘Kanote’, ‘Chupan/chunwe’, and ‘Thazinkhwe/thazinpan’ are therefore synonymous with all referring in their own way to floral arabesque patterns.

According to the researchers, the origin of ‘Kanote’ could have been India since Indian temples dating from some thousand years ago were found with numerous examples of such floral motifs.⁷ King Asoka had a lot of Buddhist buildings constructed in his life-time and had these motifs carved out in the gateways and facades of his buildings. It was around a thousand years ago that these floral motifs made their way into Myanmar, especially in the Bagan Period,⁸ at once carrying marks of Indian influence and adapting them beautifully into Myanmar characteristics.

Drawing upon the fact that Myanmar Kanote is sometimes referred to as ‘Thai-style floral motifs’, Saya Zawgyi once points out in his article ‘*Kanote Designs of Bagan Period*’ that the Thai language has a counterpart of Myanmar ‘Kanote’, which is ‘khanat’ meaning ‘floral designs’.⁹ However, we should not forget that Myanmar ‘Kanote’ had been found in Pyu and Bagan Periods and long before the contacts between Myanmar and Thailand were started.

As Myanmar tradition calls for Kanote in the context of flowers, any flowers can be placed in the designs as fillers or peripheral drawings beside



¹ Min Naing, U, *Introduction of Culture*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1990. P 163. (Naing, Culture)

² Min Naing, U, *Myanmar Traditional Kanote* article, Working People Daily, (2.4.1989), P 8. (Naing, Traditional Kanote).

³ New Light of Myanmar, *Artefacts of Pyu Period*, (15.1.1967), P 15-16.

⁴ Thar(Archaeology), Mg, *Sri Ksetra's terracotta Buddhist tablets* article, New Light of Myanmar, (15.1.1967), P 15-16.

⁵ U Min Naing, *Culture*, P – 159.

⁶ The Myanmar Dictionary, Ministry of Education, Board of Myanmar, 1991.

⁷ Yin Hlaing (Pinyinmamyain), Mg, *Myanmar Kanote Motifs*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1991. (Henceforth; Mg Yin Hlaing, Myanmar Kanote)

⁸ Zawgyi, *Kanote Designs of Bagan Period* article, Yangon, Payphyuehlar Magazine, 1985, April, P 103. (Henceforth; Zawgyi, Kanote of Bagan)

⁹ Zawgyi, *Kanote of Bagan*, P 104.

and between the figures.¹ For the sake of appreciation of Myanmar art, we should dwell a little upon the nature of Myanmar paintings. Artifice is the salient feature of Myanmar art.² By means of artifice with the help of Kanote motifs, the artists 'create and materialize' the mythical animals like dragons, garudas, kumbhandas, yakshas, flying elephants and horses, sphinxes, pancarupas, and kinnaras.³ The leogryphs placed in front of the temples' gateways may not resemble living lions in their true sense, but with the help of Kanotes or floral arabesque patterns, stiffness becomes soft and roughness becomes flexible, thus making the statues pleasant-looking.⁴ As its derivation suggests, 'Kanote motifs' resemble the different floral patterns purported to be decorations to the Myanmar artistic works and the floral arabesque patterns form an integral part of Myanmar art and designs.

Kanotes designs or floral arabesque patterns have come through different ages in the history of Myanmar floral design and art from during the reign of Myanmar kings to date. With the expansion of maturity of art, the Myanmar people have used Kanote patterns in everything around them from the royal regalia of the kings and queens to the daily utensils of the commoners' homes. So, some information give on the different features of Kanote motifs on Myanmar traditional paintings can be studied according to the medium they are seen in.

Kanote designs in Mural Paintings

The mural paintings or Myanmar ancient art paintings was unique and originated in the Bagan Period. In the mural paintings of the Bagan temples, the Kanote or floral arabesque patterns became significantly popularized as the main subject of wall painting. Although floral motifs was derived from that of the Indian, Myanmar took on own characteristics and style even at the early Bagan Period. The reason for it is that religion was being the dominant theme of the Bagan mural paintings and most of the frescos on the wall were depicting life stories of Buddha. In the Phayathousu Temple of Minnanthu village, Bagan, the ceilings were full of Kanote designs among which the squares have the Buddha images in Dhammacakka mudra and the corner squares have the images of the Chief Disciples.⁵

In Old Bagan, the plain Kanote patterns executed in elaborate detail on their varied styles are found on the ceilings of almost every temples.⁶ In most Bagan temples, the demarcation lines below the ceilings have also been drawn in Kanote patterns with Buddha figures and animal figures like parrots, hamsa, peacocks, deer, ogres, elephants and lions.



The Phayathonsu Temple of Minnanthu village has one peculiar description of the Buddha in the Parileyyaka forest in which the Buddha is drawn seated like on a chair with a lotus flower under his feet and the Parileyyaka elephant is standing next to him while a monkey is offering honeycomb in the Buddha's bowl.⁷ The spaces between the figures have been taken up by the Kanote designs, making the painting more attractive and appealing.

In the mural paintings of Apaiyadanar, Phayathonsu, Gubyuakgyi and

¹ U Min Naing, *Traditional Kanote*, P 8.

² Mg Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar Kanote*, P 15.

³ Thinkhar, *Kanote, nari, kapi, gazar* article, Sitpyan Magazine, October, 1989, P 36.

⁴ U Min Naing, *Traditional Kanote*, P 8.

⁵ Mg Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar Kanote*, P 53.

⁶ Than Tun and Aye Myint, U, *Ancient Myanmar Designs*, Yangon, I Group Press, 2011, P 103.

⁷ Kyin Pann (Myinkapar), Mg, *Nandapyinnya Temple of Bagan*, Yangon, Aungtagon Press, 2014, P 92. (Henceforth; Mg Kyin Pann, Nandapyinnya)

Nandapyinnya temples of Bagan, the Bodhisatta from the Mahayana Buddhism and the gods from Tantric Buddhism can be observed.¹

The painting in the interior wall near the southern window of Nandapyinnya Temple of Bagan is of a Tantric god putting his right arm around a goddess and talking with her. In front of him is another goddess with a gesture of paying homage.² The canopy of a tree forms the halo with Kanote designs supporting the depiction.

There are ancient wall paintings available in and around Sagaing. Scholars date them as belonging to the Inwa Period. The Pitakataik or library building of Ywathit village, Sagaing, shows examples of Inwa Period mural paintings. Remarkably, the paintings on the walls depict Mahosadha Jataka in which King Pancalayit, Kevutta Brahmin and the 101 kings are on the march,³ but Kanote designs are not much observed.

The Min-ye Monastery of Kanmyint village in Chaungoo Township, Monywa District, which has portraits of King Korabya and Punnaka, the Ogre playing dice with that of the Throne Umbrella Goddess is a good example of Myanmar mural paintings in Konbaung Period.⁴ The rest wall painting was faded feature by the lack of proper maintenance.



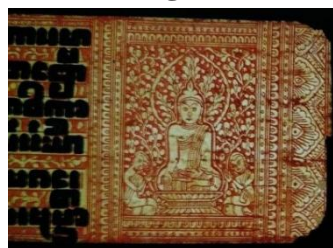
Similarly, the rest-house of the Shwe Tant-Tit Pagoda, Kwun Village, Pakokku Township, Magway Region has beautiful pictures of the Buddha's Renunciation Scene and His Conquest over Mara as the best examples of mural paintings in Colonial Period.⁵ These paintings, however, show the growing use of perspectives of Western style and the decline in the use of Myanmar Kanote designs.

Kanote designs in Parabaik Paintings

In the Periods following Bagan, the construction of temples declined and, consequently, mural paintings declined. Parabaik paintings became popular starting from Inwa Period, and reached their peak in Amarapura and Later Konbaung Periods.⁶ However, the royal costumes and ceremonies were the main themes of these paintings, which normally didn't allow the detailed installation of Kanote designs as had been done before.



Kanote designs in Palm-Leaf Paintings



According to the History of Myanmar Writings, palm-leaves were widely used in Inwa Period. It was more difficult to draw sketches on palm-leaves by using the stylus than just write letters. However, the Kammavaca writings (Buddhist Ritual Scriptures) may have had colorful drawings of the Buddha images flanking the six-line texts and the floral arabesque patterns interspersed between the lines, as suggested by a 27-inch long palm-leaf found from the Ontonpin Monastery of Beikmanma Village, Myaing Township, Magway Region.⁷ It is described in detail by the article on palm-leaf paintings by Aung Pye Nyo (Old-Fields).

¹ Zawgyi, Mahayana Pictures of Bagan Period article, Zawgyi's Selected Writings, Yangon, Thin Press, 2013, P 484.

² Mg Kyin Pann, Nandapyinnya, P 101-102.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/bonkyaw/post>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/kaungminwai/post>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/mg htutaung/post>

⁶ Kyaw Win (MA), Mg, *Parabaik Paintings* article, Yangon, Ngwetaye Magazine, 1989. August, P 33.

⁷ Aung Pye Nyo (Old-Fields), *Myanmar Palm-leaf Paintings* article, Yangon, Ngwetaye Magazine, 1990. September, P 45.

Traditionally, when Myanmar babies were born, their nativities were recorded on the toddy palm-leaves beautifully designed with Kanote patterns.¹ Astrological diagrams surrounding the horoscopes had Kanote motifs, which are worth studying too.

Kanote designs in Cloth-Paintings



In the history of Myanmar art, cloth-paintings can also be found. One piece of cloth bearing paintings from the 12th Century was found by the Archaeological Department in a broken arm of the Buddha Statue in Temple No. 315, Bagan.² Another piece of cloth found by a mason called U Doe in Temple 2159, Bagan is now among the exhibits in the National Museum, Naypyitaw. The Ngapechaung Monastery of Inle, too, has an example of cloth-paintings from Amarapura Period. According to the evidence available so far, there are no remarkable floral arabesque

patterns found in cloth-paintings.

Kanote designs on the Wooden Wall Painting

A very rare find of the paintings on the wooden walls is seen on the ceiling ruts of the Abhayasukha Sima Ordination Hall of Waya village, Yezagyo Township, Magway Region. Most probably from the 16th -17th Century, the painting is of a pair of the Buddha's Footprints surrounded by the drawings of Kanote designs, lotus flowers and a coiling Naga.³ The significant features of Kanote patterns have been appreciated in this wooden wall painting.



Kanote designs in collage paintings



For the ceremonies of different kinds in Konbaung Period, pieces of paper with drawings were combined to form decorative art of collage paintings or Sap panchi. Such paintings were very popular at the funerals of the Buddhist monks.⁴ Kanote designs played an important role in these paintings.

Kanote designs in Tapestry Paintings



According to the researchers of the inscriptions, tapestry painters were recorded in the Tinechutphaya, Shwekoncharphaya and Myasayti Stone Inscriptions of the Bagan Period.⁵ The best samples of tapestry paintings with Kanote floral motifs can be seen at the Manawramma Ontonpin Monastery of Beikmanma village, Myaing Township, Magway Region, and at the Shwegugyi Pagoda, Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region.

The mural paintings of Bagan temples indicate that the royal dresses must have had the tapestry works of art with Kanote designs, especially the headgears and arm-chains. The Nativity Scene of the Buddha in the Nandapanya Temple, Minanthu village, Bagan, shows how the Queens had used detail of the floral arabesque patterns on the dresses and ornaments bearing tapestry art.⁶



¹ Tin Ma Ma Khaing (Mantakkatho), *Designs of Horoscope*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1992, P 52.

² Khin Mg Nyunt, Dr, *A 12th century Cloth Painting from Ancient Bagan*, Myanmar Perspectives, Vol III, 1998, April, P 28-29.

³ [https://www.facebook.com/mhtutaung/post/Yezagyo-Township.\(5.5.2019\)](https://www.facebook.com/mhtutaung/post/Yezagyo-Township.(5.5.2019))

⁴ Aung Thein (Hsinphyukyun), *Introduction of Sap Panchi*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1982, P 27.

⁵ Aung Kyaing (Minbu), *Archaeological Designs of Bagan Period*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1985, P 149.

⁶ Thein Mg, U, *The Culture of Bagan Period*, Yangon, Zwe Press, 1956, P 99.

The princes as well as princesses and queens from the later periods also had such ornamental dresses decorated with the floral arabesque patterns, which are out of fashion these days.

Kanote designs in Mosaic Paintings

Mosaic art was among the forms of art popular in the times of Myanmar kings, found side by side with lacquerwares and sculptures. At the monasteries around Mandalay, a lot of different betel and alms-food containers and palm-leaf book chests bearing mosaic art are seen.¹ In the mosaic paintings Kanote patterns played an essential role and the main subject of painting.



Glass was used for paintings and cut into pieces to form art with the help of masonry. The floral arabesque patterns were among such figures as the Buddha images, gods and nagas decorating the pillars and walls.² Beautiful kinnari and human figures surrounded by Kanote patterns can still be found at Shweyanpye monastery, Nyaungshwe Township, Shan State.

Conclusion

As have been seen, the Kanote motifs on Myanmar traditional paintings have come through different ages from Pyu Period to date. With the creativity of the artists, they have been adapted and modified into different designs and patterns to suit the purpose of the art paintings. The stylistic effects of these designs range from stiffness to flexibility. The rise and fall of the tradition of the Kanote motifs on paintings, therefore, depends mainly on the users and their sense of adaptation. Today, the floral arabesque patterns on Myanmar traditional paintings can be seen in their grandeur and fullest extent of national pride showing the high skills in art paintings of Myanmar Culture Heritage History.

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¹ Mg Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar Kanote*, P 73.

² Ibid, P 77-8.