

Critical Study of Wall Painting in Yesagyo Township

Tin Lin Phyo*

Abstract

Ancient paintings of Myanmar, according to the findings of this paper emphasized on the wall-paintings of pagodas in Yesagyo region, can be deemed of very high standard. It can roughly be claimed that the quality of ancient Myanmar paintings, especially paintings from Bagan and Kongbaung periods, can compete with or at least to be on a par with any ancient paintings from Southeast Asia region. This paper is mainly about to study and classify the ancient wall-paintings of Yesagyo region, which vary from Bagan (1044 to 1287), Ava (1364–1555), and Kongbaung (1752–1885) periods, particularly from the distinctive painting styles of each periods and the gradual and periodical changes in those paintings found in Yesagyo region. By studying the ancient wall paintings, the way the culture of Myanmar and the attire of ancient Myanmar people evolved in different ancient dynasties mentioned before can generally be understood. It is also found out that the ancient wall paintings of Bagan and Kongbaung eras are superior and predominant. It can be stated that ancient wall paintings found in the pagodas of Yesagyo region were drawn not only to be used as decoration on the walls but also to educate the folks about the Buddhism, to become familiar with the teachings of the Buddha, and to honor, venerate, revere and worship the Buddha.

Key Words – Wall painting, Bagan, Ava, Kongbaung, Dressing customs, Buddhism

Introduction

Yesagyo township is a township of Pakokku District in the Magway Region of central Myanmar. Yesagyo It is located at the intersection of latitude 12°30' North latitude and 95° 13' East longitude. It is situated on the western bank of Chindwin River. Yesagyo is the easternmost township of Magway Region. The Chindwin River and then the Irrawaddy form the eastern boundary of the township except for a small area on the eastern side of the Chindwin directly across from the town of Yesagyo,¹ which was formerly an island in the Chindwin.² Yesagyo Township is bounded by the following townships.³

1. Salinyi Township, Sagaing region, to the north;
2. Chaung-U Township and Myaung Township of Sagaing Region, to the northeast;
3. Myingyan Township and Taungtha Township of Mandalay Region to the southeast;
4. Pakokku Township to the southwest; and

* Lecturer, Dr. Department of Oriental Studies, Yadanabon University.

¹ "Magway Division, Myanmar" map ID: MIMU270v01, creation date:15 Jul 2010, Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU)

² "Burma 1:250,000 topographic map, Series U542, NF 46-12, Myingyin" U.S. Army Map Service, August 1960

³ "Myanmar States/Divisions & Townships Overview Map" Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU)

5. [Myaing Township](#) to the west.

Yesagy Township had incessantly existed as a major city in subsequent historical periods, from Bagan to Konbaung–Yadanabon era. There are archaeologically recorded almost about 333 numbers of ancient monuments in vicinity of Yesagy area. It can be classified into the followings; Stupa, Temple, Umin (Cave), Monastery, Ordination hall, Library, Lake, Pond and Brick mound. In this paper, only the wall paintings found in Yesagy township stupas are described. The paintings on these walls were not for decoration but used as tools to communicate the teachings of Buddha as they could be easily understood and remembered.⁴ The mural paintings show religious subjects, most often the *Jāataka* stories of Buddha’s life stories and stories of his previous lives, which often present pictorial elucidations of various Buddhist principles. Therefore, the mural of Yesagy Township is nice-looking work that contains treasured evidence about the historical setting and local background. There is evidence following the Bagan period, that ancient people settled in Yesagy Township. Ancient stupas from the late Bagan period starting in the 13th and 14th century CE can be seen today. Following the Bagan period, the majority of the stupas are from the 17th, 18th and 19th century CE.⁵

Speculative Hypothesis about Paints in Bagan Period through Pāḷi Literature

Yesagy is known to be an ancient city where the Buddhism greatly flourished since Bagan period. With the flourishing condition of the Buddhism, many Buddhist monuments such as temples, pagodas, monasteries and other religious buildings are abundant in and around Yesagy region. Bagan period styled paintings in Yesagy region are the twenty-eight Buddha images, and the images of the Buddha. Although the original colors of these colorful paintings are now damaged and faded as a result of the exposure to strong sun, rain and light, the colors such as red, black and yellow can mostly be seen in these temples. It can be speculated that there would be various colors like red, yellow, blue or green used in murals in Bagan period. In Bagan era, the paints or dyes for wall-painting could be produced from natural soil, barks and trees, and metal or chemical elements. In Attarāga sutta of *Dāna Vagga, Samyutta Nikāya*,⁶ it is stated that painters or artisan used dyes, turmeric, indigo, and pink to paint images of men and women on plank, wall, and cloth. According to this, it could be assumed that in Yesagy region of Bagan period there would be paintings drawn on planks, walls and cloth. Pāḷi literature stated how dyes and paints used for robes and applied on the walls of monasteries were obtained from natural elements. There are six different types of dyes mentioned in *Cīvarakkhandhaka, Mahāvagga* of Vinaya Pitaka.⁷ These

⁴ Wattana Boonjub, *The Study of Thai Traditional Architecture as a Resource for Contemporary Building Design in Thailand*, a Thesis for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, Program of Architectural Heritage Management and Tourism (International Program), Silpakorn University.P.20

⁵ Stupa No.90, Stupa No.95, Stupa No.122. near Pakkhangyi.

⁶ Sam, II. 325.

⁷ Vin. III. 426.

six kinds of dyes are dye from roots, dye from stems, dye from barks, dye from leaves, dye from flowers and dye from fruits.

Moreover, in *Senāsakkahandaka* of *Vinnaya Pitaka*, *Cūlavagga*,⁸ the Buddha allowed monks to paint the monasteries with such colors as white, black and red. As Yesagyo city is one of the ancient places of Bagan dynasty where Buddhism greatly prospered, there are many religious buildings and monuments in Yesagyo region. On the inner walls and ceilings of the ancient temples, there are many wall-paintings which are of the Buddhist themes. In Bagan-period wall paintings, most of the images and paintings are influenced by Pāli literature, especially from the *Jātaka* stories. As the inspiration for wall paintings is originated from the Buddhist literature, it can also be concluded that paints used in these paintings were obtained from the same natural stories elements mentioned earlier. The dyes stated in the Pāli literature could also be used in the wall-paintings of Bagan period murals.

In stone inscription No. 44 of Bagan Museum, the cost paid to the artisan was clearly mentioned. It is stated that fifty-four Tinn of rice, one “Tinn” is ancient standardization of rice measurement roughly equal to forty-six pounds, a piece of cotton cloth and a waistband or a cloth used to tie at the waist of a garment are given as the painting fee to the artist.⁹ In stone inscription donated by Min Amata Ṇanapyitsi, the donor stated the name of the painter and the cost of the wall painting. In line No. 43 and 44 of this stone slab, the facts such as that the painter’s name was called Cittarabici, and the painter was paid an elephant, a horse and cloth are imprinted.¹⁰

Bagan Ear (c. 1044 – 1287) Style Wall Painting

The murals can be found in groups of smaller temples, as well as stupas and cave-temples.¹¹ Murals such as these date back as far as the Bagan period (c. 1044 – 1287). Most murals of this type are in Bagan but it is possible to find others in different parts of the central zone. The murals cover many traditional Buddhist topics, including Buddhist biography.¹² India influences can be seen in Bagan murals and flower patterns lay the main role.¹³ The artists were particularly good at line drawing and oil and tempera together with fresco were popular. Most of the paintings depict the 550 *Jātakas* (Buddha stories).

⁸ Vi. III. 269.

⁹ “ထိုဝုလိ အကတလိနုးစိး ဆိယုရိယုစိ လးံအု” Bagan Museum Inscription No. 44.

¹⁰ “ပန္နိ သဆာ စိတိရာစိစညု ဝေလဆတ္တိငုး ဝ စိး ဂျမငုး ဝစိး ခဆိ ဖိဋ္ဌယု ၂စံပု ပန္နိ င မ်ကုးဥာ စိ” Bagan Museum Inscription No. 60.

¹¹ Late Burmese Wall Paintings, 1.

¹² Late Burmese Wall Paintings, 3.

¹³ U Myo Nyunt ပိဋကတုေတတ္တာ နံရံခေးေရးပနုးခိ (Bagan Wall Paintings from Pitaka), Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology and National Museum, 2011. P.15.

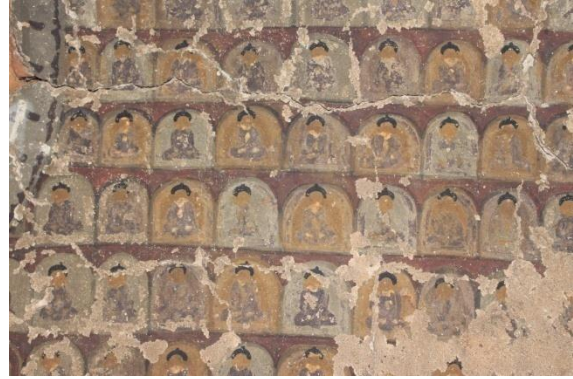


Figure 1, 2 : Temple no. (78) Bagan Era Style, and temple no.(82) Bagan Era Style 28 Buddhas

Table 1 Bagan era style stupas

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Painting composition | Painting Condition |
|-------|--------------|----------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Bagan | Stupa No. 90 | Near Thet Ywa Village | Late Bagan, 28 Buddha | Half good |
| | Stupa No. 95 | Northern part of Pakkhangyi | Late Bagan, The whole were depicted 28 Buddha | Lower part destroy |
| | Stupa No. 82 | Western part of Thet ywa village | The whole were depicted 28 Buddha | Destroy |

Ava-era (1364–1555) Style Wall Painting

The costumes of Ava era differ considerably from those of Bagan period in that they are more Chinese than India. People wear garments with long sleeves worn loosely round the body and parted in front. Men wear headdresses while women wear tall topknots.¹⁴ In drawing the pictures of man and woman, the eye and the eyebrow are drawn with black ink, and the eyelid, nose and mouth are painted with red color ink. In dressing, the man wore short-sleeved green upper garment which is about knee-length and patterned *Paso* or nether garment with a protruding flap formed in tying *Paso*.

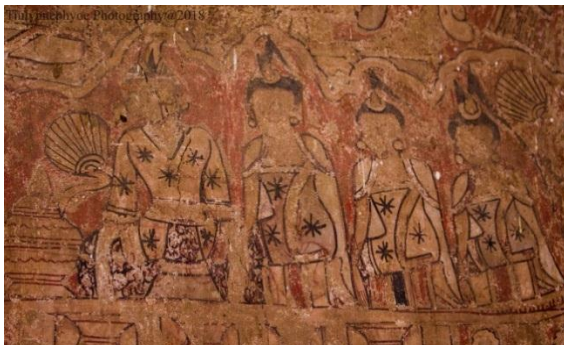


Figure 2: Stupa No. 202 Pakkhangyi



Figure 3: Pakkhangyi Stupa no. 227.

¹⁴Ancient Myanmar Design, 268.

Table 2 : Stupa of Ava Era

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Design | Painting Condition |
|-----|---------------|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| | Stupa No. 202 | Pakkhangyi | Mahosadha jataka | |
| | Stupa No.46 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha image | |
| | Stupa No.45 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Vidhura and Vessantara jataka, | Gold painting the Buddha image |
| | Stupa No.119 | Near Thet-Ywa village | | Destroy |

Ava paintings began representing the community life of the publics, and only red and green paints were mostly used in the paintings.

Nyaungyan (second Ava era) (1600–1752) Painting style stupas

It can be said that the kings in Nyaungyan and Kongbaung periods placed emphasis on the purity of the Order and the attempts were made to clarify and be systematic about the Buddhist literature, the decoration and the murals in the Buddhist monuments. However, it is hard to categorize the murals drawn after 18th century and in the 19th century. The era of the wall-paintings cannot be decided if there are no specific dates about the wall-paintings. Thus, Alexandar Green, an historian and a scholar from British Museum, tried to group the paintings found in Nyaungyan period into four categories. French scholar Christophe Munier Gaillard, whose Myanmar name was U Kyaw Aye, classified the Myanmar Buddhist murals into eight groups in order to specify the different types of murals. These eight groups are as follows; proto- Nyaungyan, Nyaungyan archaic, Nyaungyan early classic , Nyaungyan late classic, Nyaungyan final I, Nyaung final II, proto-Kongbaung, Anadian or Kongbaung I, and Kongbaung II.

Moreover, Nyaungyan-period gold paintings in the temples of Yesagyo region are spectacular and unusual. These gold mural paintings can be found in Ma U village and Pakhangyi. In most of the gold mural paintings, the backdrop of the Buddha statue is particularly decorated with gold mural paintings while other paintings on the inner walls of the temple are painted with ordinary colors. The twenty-eight images of the Buddha are usually painted with gold mural paintings and other images from Jataka tales are painted in usual ordinary color. The gold mural paintings can somehow reflect the devotion of the people in that region about the Buddhism and the economic status of these people.



Figure2: Stupa Mahu village stupa Figure2: Stupa No. 45 Pakkhangyi, Nyaung yan style

In the late Nyangyan and early Konbaung dynasties, wall paintings were at the time involved in religious and popular literary development, as is evident in the details and structures of the wall. The details of the murals, where the captions also relate to the images, are reflected in poetry and prose.¹⁵ The wall paintings are similarly rhetorical as they encourage particular actions, as can be shown by the features like the narrative structure and the choice of scenes.¹⁶



Figure 4: Wall paintings with foreign soldiers temple no. 51.

Figure 4: Foreign Artists in Pakkhangyi temple no. 227

The murals taught about Buddhism and the way it functioned in the society, as well as providing religious goals. During the 18th century these murals became the accepted way of decorating a temple: there were three key themes: “merit and its acquisition, protection and sources of power, and enlightenment”.¹⁷

Table 3 Nyaung and Early Kanboun Style Painting

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Design | Painting Condition |
|---------------|--------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Nyaungyan Era | Stupa No.209 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Jataka | Good |
| | Stupa No.227 | Pakkhangyi | Depicted hell, | |
| | Stupa No.51 | Pakkhangyi | Vessantara jataka, | Inter wall and |

¹⁵ *Late Burmese Wall Paintings*, 22.

¹⁶ *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. 72-95.

¹⁷ Michael Satow, “Tradition: The Power of Constraint,” *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, P.144.

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Design | Painting Condition |
|-----|--------------------------|------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| | (Phaya Ni) | | Candakumara, mahosadha, Janaka, Foreign scolder | under of the wall were destroy |
| | Stupa No. 48 (Phaya Net) | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Buddha's foot prints | Good |
| | Stupa No.209 | Pakkhangyi | | |
| | Stupa No.219 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Jataka, Buddha's foot prints | Good |
| | Stupa No.227 | Thet Ywa village | 28 Buddha and Buddha rain retreat | Good |
| | Stupa No.300 | Thet Ywa village | 28 Buddha, Jataka, Buddha rain retreat and social custom | Good |
| | Stupa No.304 | Thet Ywa village | 28 Buddha, Jataka | Good |
| | Stupa No. 46 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddhas, Jataka and social custom | Good |
| | Stupa No. | Ma-U village | 28 Buddha, Jataka | Good |

These Buddha images are depicted with close reference to *Buddhavamsa*, the fourteenth *Pāḷi* scripture of *Khuddaka Nikāya*. It can be generally stated that the pictures of the twenty-eight pagodas drawn without ink scripts as captions are the paintings from the periods of Bagan and Ava. Those wall paintings which indicated the names of the Buddhas and the trees under which they became Buddha are the artworks of *Nyaungyan* and *Kongbaung* periods.

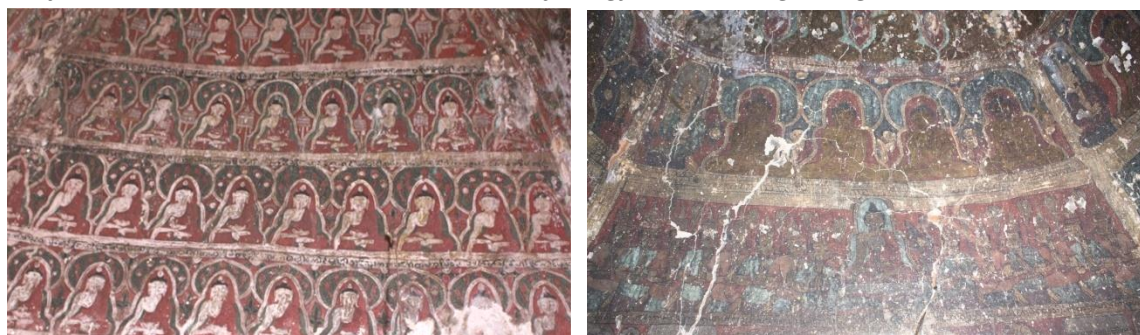


Figure 5, 6: Temple no. (209) Nyaungyan era Style and temple no. (209), Early Kongbaung



Figure 7, 8: Temple no. (227) Nyaungyan era style and temple no. (304), Early Nyaungyan era style

Konboun (1752–1885) Style Wall Painting

In one pagoda in the compound of Madhau pagoda situated in Ma U village, north of Yesagyo region, there are unusual mural paintings. Instead of drawing the twenty-eight Buddha in the usual upper case of the wall paintings, some arahats from the eighty Athiti are drawn. The monks are also drawn together with Bodhi tree and the throne. In the drawing of the heads, it is found out that the arahats are not bald, or with shaving heads, and there are also Mani Jewel and Katu Malar in the paintings. The only difference of these paintings with the twenty-eight Buddha images is the drawing of the monks holding fans. Thus, these paintings are not the images of the Buddha but these are the monks, arahats, as there are also the names of the monks under the wall-paintings. However, drawing the monks in the form of the Buddha was quite extraordinary.

In the early Konbaung period (17th century), the paintings are noticeable of the transition from Myanmar old-style flat painting to western styles using perspective and tones. Blue was charitably used and the pictures recorded the lifestyles, performing and parts of that era.

Table 4 Early Konbaung and Late Konbaung Style Painting

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Design | Condition |
|---|------------------------------|----------------------------|---|-----------|
| Konbaung | Stupa No.108 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Vessantara jataka | Good |
| | Stupa No.209 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha and Life of the Buddha | Good |
| | Stupa No.173 (Lokahmanku) | Western part of Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha and Jataka Story | Good |
| | Stupa No. 139 | Sinchaung Village | 28 Buddha, Jataka, Niraya (hell) | Good |
| | Stupa No. 144 (Ngayon-phaya) | Sinchaung Village | Late Konbaung Style perspective Lanscape | |
| 27 February 1789 (King Badon) ¹⁸ | Shin Pin Pwint Lan temple | Sinkyoo Village | Mahosadha, Nemi, Suvannasama, Vessantara Jataka and 101 kinds of race | Good |

¹⁸ The Wall Painting of the Shinpin Pwit Lan Temple, 80.

| Ear | Stupa name | Location | Design | Condition |
|----------|-------------------------------------|------------|--|-----------|
| | | | and social custom | |
| | Shwe Pwint Lin Pagoda ¹⁹ | Pakokku | Universe, Mount. Meru, Heaven, Buddha's Rain retreat | Good |
| Konbaung | Stupa No.108 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha, Vessantara jataka | |
| | Stupa No.209 | Pakkhangyi | 28 Buddha and Life of the Buddha | |



Figure 5: Late Nyaung Style at Shwe U Min Monastery, Thetywa village; Stupa no.300

These paintings can also be found at the Sin-Chaung Village, Ngaryon pagoda. The paintings mark the transition from Myanmar traditional flat painting to western styles of perspectives and tones. Blue was generously used and the paintings recorded the life styles, entertainment and scenery of that era.²⁰

Mural painting of Amarapura era can be found in Pakokku, near Thihoshin pagoda and Shwe-Tan-Tit pagoda. The scenes in these paintings were not drawn in perspective, but in a bird's eye view. Most of these paintings represent the life styles and social events of this age and includes activities such as paying homage to the pagoda, keeping Sabbath, pilgrims traveling in carts and boats, people giving alms to monks, and children playing. Blue was the main color in these paintings.

¹⁹ ဝေဠုဆက္ကကုပ္ပမန္တပနုးခိီ ၊ ၁၈၈

²⁰ http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5e/



Figure 6: Late Konbaung style Perspective painting at Sin-chaung Village Stupa No. 144



Figure 7: Late Konbaung Style Painting near Thihoshin Pagoda , Pakokku

Conclusion

The devotees were brought into the Buddhist community by the murals, which also brought them into contact with “Buddha’s field of merit” and expressed the key religious and social practices of the time.²¹ But the most popular subjects were Buddha's Past lives, the *Gautama* Buddha’s life story, the *Jakata* stories as well as stories of the Buddha’s previous lives. The main subjects in these temples are descriptions of the representations of the twenty-eight Buddhas of the Past, the life of *Gautama* Buddha, and the ten great *Jātaka* stories, drawings of the Buddha's footprint, the *Bodhi* tree under which the Buddha sat to attain enlightenment. The varied styles of

²¹ Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan, "Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression," in *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, ed. Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan Surrey: Ashgate, 2006), 2-3. Matthew Liebmann, The Innovative Materiality of Revitalization Movements: Lessons from the Pueblo Revolt of 1680," *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 3 (2008): P.361.

wall paintings ranging from Ava and Nyaungyan to Kongbaung periods discovered in the ancient temples of Yesagyo region indicate that the leader or king and citizens of respective ancient times devoted to and supported Buddhism for the flourishing of Buddhism. These wall paintings once aided to spread and communicate the moral and ethical lessons from Buddha's life stories to the commoners and they are now to be viewed as the national heritage of the country as the wall paintings of the ancient temples can be defined as the treasure chest to explore the culture, traditions, and customs of ancient Myanmar.

References

- Alexandra Green, (2018) *Buddhist Visual Culture, Rhetoric and Narrative in Late Burmese Wall Paintings*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong.
- Buddhavaṃsa Pāḷi, Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti Piṭakam*, (1960) Department of Religious Affairs, Yangon, Myanmar.
- Aung Kyaing, U. (2018), *ဝေဇ္ဇာသက္ကတပုဂ္ဂိုလ်နန္ဒပန်းခဲ*, Mudita Press, Yangon, Myanmar,
- Buddhadatta, A.P. Mahāthera, (1960), *Buddhavaṃsa Aṭṭhakathā*, Department of Religious Affairs Press, Yangon, Myanmar.
- Carirāpiṭaka, (1956), Department of Religious Affairs Press, Yangon, Myanmar.
- Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan, (2006), "Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression," in *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, ed. Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan Surrey: Ashgate, 2-3. Matthew Liebmann, The Innovative Materiality of Revitalization Movements: Lessons from the Pueblo Revolt of 1680," *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 3 (2008)
- Michael Satow, (2012), "Tradition: The Power of Constraint," *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Myo Nyunt, U. (2011). *ပိဋကတော်လှော်ခန်းဆေးရေးပန်းခဲ* (*Bagan Wall Paintings from Pitaka*), Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology and National Museum press.
- Pierre Bourdieu, (1977)., "Outline of a Theory of Practice" , Cambridge University Press.
- Toe Toe Win, Dr., (2019), The Wall Painting of the Shinpin Pwit Lan Temple in Sinkyo Village, Pakokku University Research Journal Vol.10,
- Than Tun, Dr. and Aye Myint, U, (2011), *Ancient Myanmar Design*, iGroup Press Co.,Ltd. Thailand.
- Wattana Boonjub, *The Study of Thai Traditional Architecture as a Resource for Contemporary Building Design in Thailand*, a Thesis for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, Program of Architectural Heritage Management and Tourism (International Program), Silpakorn University.
- Online web base - http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5e/

