

Title	Historical Value of Parabaik and Pei
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Publication Type	Local Publication
Publisher (Journal name, issue no., page no etc.)	Meiktila University, Research Journal, Vol.IV, No.1, 2013
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Historical Value of *Parabaik* and *Pei*

Moe Moe Oo¹

Abstract

Parabaiks and Palm Leaf Manuscripts are important in the rich and old tradition and cultural history of Southeast Asia. Many documents reflected the socio-economic situation and Buddhist text of ancient Myanmar. These sources are like a treasure-trove for historians. We hope that this *Parabaik* and Palm leaf will advance the study of the early modern history of Myanmar, as well as that of the whole Southeast Asian region, and will also contribute to the preservation of a valuable cultural heritage in Myanmar.

Key Words: cultural heritage, preservation

Introduction

Myanmar Manuscripts are an attempt to deal with the socio-economic life of the people during the Kon-baung period. There are many books both published and unpublished in the forms of research journal and thesis. Some of them are selected as follows:

Bailey, Jane, Terry, **Some Burmese Painting of the 17th Century and Later**. *Artibus Asiae*, Vol.38, pt 4 (1976), p.267-86; Vol.40, pt.1 (1978), p41-61; Vol.41 pt.1 (1979), pt-63. Meech-pekarik, Pratapaditya pal

Buddhist book illuminations. New Yourk, Paris; Hong Kong, New Delhi: Ravi Kumar, 1899, 339p.biblog.

Duroiselle, Charles. **The pageant of king Mindon leaving his palace**. *Memoris of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no.27 (Calcutta, 1925)

Herbet, Patricia. **The Life of the Buddha**. London: British Library Publications, 1993; San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2005.

The marking of a collection Myanmar Manuscript in the British Library, *British Library Journal*. Vol.15, no-1, 1989

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Some scholar did not pay much attention to the importance of the historical value of Myanmar Manuscripts. This is one of the reasons why we choose to paper this work. This work is chosen as an attempt to portray the Historical Value of Manuscript. We can, however, guess their historical conditions by trickling such questionnaires.

What is Myanmar manuscript?
Where can I get the manuscript?
Since when did they emerge?
How many colors?
How many sizes?
How to fold?
How to use?
How to preserve?

The social, economic, administrative, and religious conditions of the *Parabaik* and Palm Leaf can be studied in Kon-baung Period. They are shed light on the life of previous generations. So the National Commission for the preservation of Traditional Manuscripts was organized for the cultural heritage and manuscript erosion.

***Parabaik* Manuscript**

Myanmar research paper is based on the primary source materials, comprising those of stone inscription, stone carving, bronze bell, wall paintings, photos and contemporary records of various business transactions made among the rural people on white and black *parabaik*² (folded book) and *pei* (palm leaf manuscript). Among them I would like to discuss the historical documents of *Parabaik* and *Pei*.

Parabaik was in use six hundred years ago or even earlier. Obviously the name is not Myanmar the paper is the product of Maing Kaing (Mong Kung latitude 21° 38' N and longitude 97°

² Photo-(1), (a) http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/96_41.jpg

(b) http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/107_41.jpg

25 E, Hsi Paw State) and therefore it is of Shan origin perhaps.³ Black *Parabaik* have been used since about the 14th century, but the material is said not to last more than 150 years.⁴

A soap stone is used to write white words on its blackened surface. Usually the 'scroll' is about 4 to 8 feet long and 1 foot 6 inches wide and folded fanwise into four to eight folds; the longest one would have sixty four folds. For illuminated manuscript a white *parabaik* is used.⁵

Parabaiks are made of mulberry paper or bamboo pulp. The Myanmar Manuscripts were often used with the base tending to be cloth⁶ or other fine natural fiber.⁷ White *parabaiks* are written in black ink on an uncolored surface; black *parabaiks*, those darkened with a powdered charcoal mixture, are written with a limestone or chalk pencil on a black surface. The white *parabaiks* often bear beautifully illustrated Buddhist and other texts. Research has found that black *parabaiks* were sometimes used to produce early drafts.⁸

The paper is easily destroyed in humid weather and they early survived after half a century.⁹ *Parabaik* were widely used to record both official and private documents up to the end of 19th century, when western paper was ordinarily adopted in Myanmar. This folding manuscript or *parabaik* illustrates the King and Queen of Burma inspecting the military and taking part in other courtly activities. The ceremonies illustrated in the five folios here are: the touring of the Royal Barge;¹⁰ an elephant procession;¹¹ a polo

³ Dr.Than Tun, *Parabaik*, Hand Note, 1973, p.9 (Henceforth Than Tun, 1973)

⁴ <http://www.library.cornell.edu/preservation/parabaik/pdocu.htm>

⁵ Than Tun, 1973, 11

⁶ Photo-(2), <http://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/1236.html>

⁷ Photo(3)http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/109_41.jpg

⁸ <http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Post/342134>

⁹ Dr.Than Tun, 1973, 11

¹⁰ Photo-(4), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

¹¹ Photo-(5), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

match;¹² a performance with musicians and dancers;¹³ and a royal procession with the King and Queen.¹⁴

Some administrative records-such as royal commands, royal court instructions, reports from local officials to the central government, lawsuits and court decisions, and tax returns or census rolls of ordinary people and crown officials, are also included in them.¹⁵ The documents found in them cover a range of concerns, from government affairs to the social life of ordinary people from the end of the 18th to the middle of the 19th century.¹⁶

As black *Parabaik* was utilized as a notebook or for writing drafts, a single *Parabaik* often contains various different kinds of documents, such as diplomatic relation and ¹⁷ for missionary works,¹⁸ *jataka*,¹⁹ pharmaceutical and medical practice,²⁰ poetry and other literature, cosmology,²¹ astrological²², and so on. The *parabaiks* are a rich source material on costume,²³ martial arts,²⁴

¹² Photo-(6), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

¹³ Photo-(7), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

¹⁴ Photo-(8), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

¹⁵ Dr.Moe Moe Oo, “ Myanmar parabaiks”, Seoul, The Granite Tower Press, *Korea University Magazine*, No.390, March 2006, p.44 (Henceforth Moe Moe Oo, 2006)

¹⁶ <http://taweb.aichi-u.ac.jp/DMSEH/Introduction.html>

¹⁷ Photos(9)<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?slug=konbaung&style=43&offset=15>

¹⁸ Photo(10),<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?slug=konbaung&style=43&offset=15>

¹⁹ Photo(11),<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?slug=konbaung&style=43&offset=30>,

²⁰ Photo(12),http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig10.shtml,

²¹ Photo(13)http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig11.shtml,

²² Photo-(14), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O63683/manuscript-parabaik/>

²³ Photo-(15), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/style/konbaung/43/>, costume

²⁴ photo(16),<http://antiqueburma.blogspot.com/2009/06/manuscriptparabaik.html>, martial

construction of monastery,²⁵ architecture design,²⁶ public entertainments,²⁷ royal performance,²⁸ tattoo design,²⁹ graphic design,³⁰ money lending, contracts, inheritance and religious affairs of Myanmar.

The *Thet-kayits* are the most reliable and useful documents for the study of Myanmar social and economic life. They throw light upon several dimensions of the Kon-baung (Pre-colonial) society. Generally speaking, all *parabaik* are similar although they were made in different parts of Myanmar. They classified into seven types: chronologies, names and address of the involved parties, reasons for seeking loans, detailed property descriptions (land, slaves, buildings, jewelry, orchards, etc.) Pledge or sold, loans or prices in silver with the description of its quality, detailed terms of agreement, and witnesses including assayer weighed, draftsman, and scribe.³¹

The *Thet-kayits* had no signatures of the contracting parties. To date, there have been no instances reflecting fraud or related legal cases. Through the *Thet-kayits* that reveal the different social status groups and the use of different qualities of lump silver currencies, readers might receive a broader perspective of the socio-economic patterns of the period under study.³²

The *parabaik* serve as precious and reliable sources. In a word, Myanmar *parabaik* is an old style book in Myanmar. These are many primary source materials in the form of *parabaik*. These sources are like a treasure-trove for historians. The *parabaik* tell of the lands and its effects on the urban society. Many *parabaik* shed

²⁵Photo(17)http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig12.shtml.

²⁶Photo (18) <http://www.superstock.com/stock-photos-images/1890-89924>

²⁷Photo(19),<http://antiqueburma.blogspot.com/2009/06/manuscriptparabaik.html>

²⁸Photo (20) <http://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/1236.html>

²⁹Photo-(21), <http://www.tribaltrappings.com/ATW204.php>

³⁰Photo(22),<http://blogs.princeton.edu/graphicarts/2009/02/burmese.html>

³¹ Moe Moe Oo, 2006, p.44

³² Moe Moe Oo, 2006, p.44

light on the life of previous generations. Some economic activities are reflected in these *parabaik* as well. *Thek-kayits* (loans and mortgage deeds) can also take the form of *parabaik*.

Myanmar Palm Leaf Manuscripts

The talipot palm is native of Ceylon and the Malabar Coast;³³ brought to Surinam by the East-Indian immigrants. Palm Leaf manuscripts are produced from palmyra or talipot palms. Palm trees serve man's needs in so many ways in Myanmar. They are also an endearing feature in the backdrop on the Myanmar landscape.

The earliest manuscript found in Myanmar was in the 5th century Khin Ba mound at Thayekhittaya. It was inscribed with excerpts from the *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* (two of the three parts of the Pali *Tipitika*) on 20 gold leaves.³⁴ The use of palm leaves as material on which to write was already recorded in the 15th century B.C. From at least the classical Bagan period (11th to 13th centuries) specially processed leaves from the palmyra and talipot palms were employed as material on which a scribe inscribed with the stylus horizontal lines³⁵ from Buddhist texts, plus other treatises. The leaves were rubbed with oil, earth and soot to preserve them and darken the script.

The leaves, once collected, were placed between two boards to secure them; bamboo rods or string were passed through two holes bored at the center. Size and decoration varied. Different periods and different cultures produced their own distinctive rendering of the palm leaf style.³⁶

The average size of a Palm leaf Manuscript is 18 inches long and 3 inches wide. Both sides of the leaves is used. The recto (Wam) and verso (Kyaw) is always mentioned with the page. Each page has eight to twelve lines, though the has nine. The pages are mentioned as ka, k , ki, ki, ku, **ku**, ke, **kai**, ko, kau, kamk, **k** :

³³ <http://www.lexic.us/definition-of/talipot>

³⁴ Photo(23), http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/index.shtml,

³⁵ Photo-(24), <http://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/581.html>

³⁶ Photo(25), http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/106_41.jpg

when any work or record is used from a Palm Leaf Manuscript, the reference is usually given as KA WAM:7 meaning KA Recto line 7. The name of the work (Title) and the author is given either in the foreword (at the beginning) or in the Colophon (at the end) which also given the date in Annoy Buddhist (Thathana Hnit) or Sakkaraj (Myanmar Hnit). Add 1182 to AD to get Sakkaraj and add 638 to Sakkaraj to get A.D. To get the Christian dates, use the **One Thousand Year Calender** (A.D.1104-2000) compiled by Than Tun. For analogy with world events or used the Christian Calendar. A student of Myanmar history is might have some necessary to edit some Myanmar Manuscripts.³⁷

Usually palm leaves were used to write religious works. *Kammavaca* are volumes consisting of one, five or nine extracts from the Theravadin *Vinaya*, each relating to specific ceremonies associated with monks.³⁸ The earliest *Kammavaca* which date from the Pagan period (1004-1287) consisted of relatively plain folios made of palm leaves, either incised with a stylus or written in ink. Decoration became more elaborate from the 14th century onwards and by the 17th century. By the second half of the 19th century, the lines of script on the folio increased to six or seven and sheets of brass or copper³⁹ were introduced as folios.⁴⁰ *Thetkayit Khwe* (Ta Kyaung sa) is another important for administrative record.

Generally speaking, all palm leaves were similar although they were produced in different parts of Myanmar.⁴¹ According to evidences, they mostly consisted of nine parts as follows: ancient mathematics techniques, astrology and astronomy,⁴² Buddhist literature, formation of crown service group, indigenous medicine, military tactical formations,⁴³ royal orders, traditional arts and

³⁷ Dr.Than Tun, *Palm Leaf Manuscript*, Hand Note, 1973, p.7-8

³⁸ http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/105_41.jpg

³⁹ Photo(26),http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig2.shtml,

⁴⁰ Photo-(27), <http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Post/342134>

⁴¹ Photo(28),http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/41/105_41.jpg

⁴² Photo(29),http://www.flickr.com/photos/rheeza_hernandez/1484632524/

⁴³ Photo(30),http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig6.shtml,

architecture and yoga. We can study the non-religious works. Only rarely were diagrams or drawing inscribed on the cover while the donor or author's name and the date appeared at the end.

Other cultures that used palm leaf manuscripts, even until recent times, include Cambodia, Ceylon, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam. Myanmar Buddhist writings in Southeast Asia were created on palm leaf manuscripts.⁴⁴

According to a recent survey, there are more than a hundred thousand unpublished palm leaf manuscripts on various aspects of traditional Myanmar knowledge in Pali. Given the great intellectual vitality of the Myanmar mind and Myanmar's culture, there was a high regard for inherited knowledge, which today survives only among specially trained scholars.

Preservation

Parabaik and *Pei* have been the most popular writing material in Myanmar. Varying temperatures and humidity and insect destruction have not allowed the survival of early manuscripts. Most of the collections are in monasteries, libraries and historical institutes. Often, these places have no environmental controls and preservation programs to preserve the intellectual heritage of a rich and old culture.⁴⁵

Parabaik and Palm Leaf are scattered all over the country of Myanmar. They stored in *Sadaik* (lacquer box).⁴⁶ The condition of their preservation is poor, as they are exposed to insects, fire, flood, and high humidity. Cases in which locally preserved *Parabaik* have already been lost by the time researchers arrive to study them are too numerous to mention. Many valuable documents recorded on *Parabaik* are vanishing at every moment.

Furthermore, when *Parabaik* are used as historical source materials, their pages have to be turned by hand by every researcher in order to find the desired documents. Inevitably, the

⁴⁴ Dr.Moe Moe Oo, "Myanmar Palm-Leaf manuscript", Seoul, *Asia Research Network*, Vol:3, No.1 (Summer 2006), p.40

⁴⁵ <http://www.library.cornell.edu/preservation/parabaik/pmain.htm>

⁴⁶ Photo- (31), <http://www.webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q>

characters on the *Parabaik* will gradually fade, and their folds become fatigued and damaged. This is one of the biggest problems in the preservation of *Parabaik*.

The National Commission for the Preservation of Traditional Manuscripts (NCPTM) was organized in Myanmar in September 1994. The Commission has been engaged in making inventories of and microfilming both Palm Leaf manuscripts and *Parabaik* from throughout the country.

The Committee for Constructing a Database of Myanmar *Parabaik* Manuscripts (CCDMPM) has been set up to create a database of Myanmar Socio-Economic History documents at Aichi University, Toyohashi, Aichi, Japan.⁴⁷ Our project supports NCPTM programmes by constructing a database consisting of a JPEG file for each pair of facing pages, with paleographic information in this catalogue concerning each document found in the *Parabaik*. The reader may easily search out the relevant documents without having to touch any *Parabaik* manuscripts.⁴⁸

For preservation, libraries and archives are using substitution and reformatting. The methods of substitution being used are recopying by hand, typing, microfilming, photocopying, offset facsimile copies, printing in book form and digital reformatting.⁴⁹ The library is proud of her rich collection of rare and valuable ancient Myanmar palm-leaf⁵⁰ and *Parabaik*.⁵¹ Most of them are 100 years old and some of them are about 200 years old.⁵²

Myanmar Manuscripts are different historical periods and depicted in all manner as follows:

⁴⁷ Photo-(32), <http://taweb.aichi-u.ac.jp/DMSEH/Introduction.html>

⁴⁸ <http://taweb.aichi-u.ac.jp/DMSEH/Introduction.html>

⁴⁹ <http://www.library.cornell.edu/preservation/parabaik/pmain.htm>

⁵⁰ Photo(33), http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/34/95_34.jpg

⁵¹ Photo(34), http://www.nlm.gov.mm/images/library/images/34/94_34.jpg

⁵² http://www.nlm.gov.mm/index.php?option=com_library&view

Table-1 Comparative Study of *Parabaik* and *Pei*

Contrast	<i>Parabaik</i>	<i>Pei</i>
Location	Maing Kaing, His Paw, Northern Shan State	Ceylon and the Malabar Coast
Period	about 14th century, but the material is said not to last more than 150 years.	5th century Khin Ba mound at Thayekhittaya
Scroll	about 4 to 8 feet long and 1 foot 6 inches wide	18 inches long and 3 inches wide
Folds	About four to eight folds; the longest one would have sixty four folds	Bamboo rods or string were passed through two holes bored at the center
Classified	Seven Types	Nine Parts
Values	Political, Social, economic, Cultural and Religious matters	Social, Cultural, Military and Religious matters
Preservation	National Library, Universities of Central Library, Toyohashi, Aichi, JAPAN 2002	National Library, Universities of Central Library, Toyohashi, Aichi, JAPAN 2002

We can study the compare and contrast the historical value of Myanmar *Parabaik* and *Pei*

Conclusion

The *parabaik* and *pei* serve as precious and reliable sources. They provide us with some historical facts on social relationships, economic activities and administrative and religious matters. *Parabaik* and palm leaf are important in the rich and old tradition and cultural history of Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Maung Thinn, Rector of Meiktila University, who always encourages us to write papers. I am also grateful to U Kyaw Soe (Professor and Head, Department of History, Meiktila University), for his permission to do this work, Daw Khin Win Kyi (Professor, Department of History, Meiktila University), who allowed me to borrow rare notes required for this paper.

Photos



Photo-(1) White and Black Folded Book



Photo-(2) Royal Barge Natured Fiber



Photo-(3), Cloth Design



Photo-(4), Royal Barge



Photo-(5) Elephant Procession



Photo-(6) Polo Match



Photo-(7) A performance with Musicians & Dancers

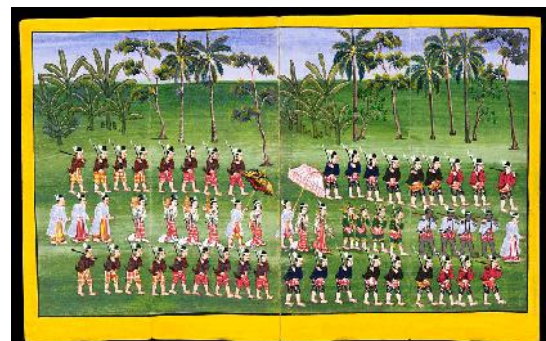


Photo-(8) Royal Procession with Queen and King



Photo-(9) Ambassador of the king of Burma seated



Photo-(10) Ambassador of the king of Burma holding the hand of Major Phayre with Major Phayre



Photo-(11) Jataka



Photo-(12) Medicine Manuscript



Photo-(13) Cosmological Map



Photo-(14) Astrology

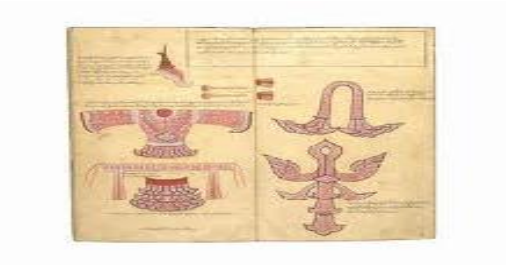


Photo-(15) Queen's Costume



Photo-(16) Martial Art

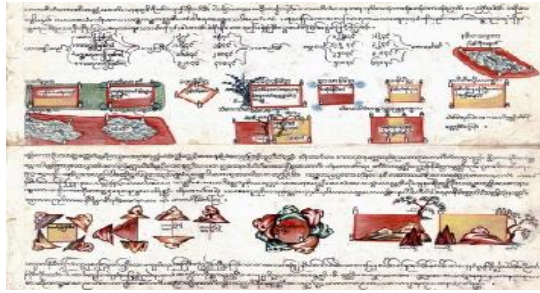


Photo-(17) Construction of Monastery

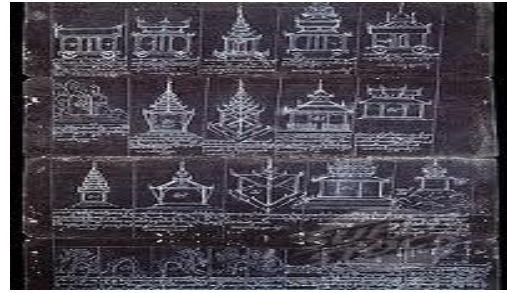


Photo-(18) Architecture Design



Photo-(19) Public Entertainment



Photo-(20) Village Entertainment



Photo-(21) Tattoo Design



Photo-(22) Graphic Design



Photo-(23) Pyu golden manuscript



Photo-(24) Stylus Horizontal lines

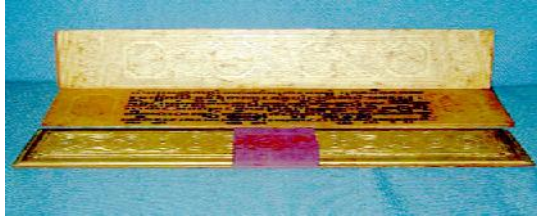


Photo-(25) gilt gold *kammavaca* manuscript



Photo-(26) gilt copper *kammavaca* manuscript



Photo-(27), Ta Kyaung sa



Photo-(28), Palm leaf Style



Photo-(29), Astrology & Astronomy, Zata



Photo- (30), military tactical formations



Photo- (31), Sadaik



Toyohashi, Aichi, JAPAN 2002

Photo-(32) Japan Preservation



Photo-(33), Preservation of Parabaik



Photo-(34), Preservation of Palm Leaf

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Dr.Than Tun, *Parabaik*, Hand Note, 1973

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<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?slug=konbaung&style=43&offset=30>,

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/style/konbaung/43/>, costume

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http://www.niu.edu/burma/publications/jbs/vol14/Lammerts_illustrations/fig12.shtml

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