

# Weaving Industry of Precolonial Myanmar

Soe Soe Khaing<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The people of Myanmar knew the art of weaving since the beginning of urbanization in the first Millennium A.D. From that time on under monarchical rule the people of Myanmar produced various textile fabrics. In rural some areas as almost all of the houses kept hand looms to produce cloth for household use. The art of weaving dominated the life of people. The kings also organized the group of crown weavers. This paper discusses the weaving industry of precolonial Myanmar. In doing so, primary sources and reliable works are explored and interpreted to yield new information.

**Keywords** : Textile fabrics, hand looms

## Introduction

Main Purpose of this paper is to study the weaving of traditional Myanmar. Nowadays, weaving cloth with hand looms in rural areas are extremely rare in Myanmar. This Paper sheds light on the style of hand-loom weaving and economic and social life of weavers. In doing so, an effort is made to discover reliable sources to complete the paper. Myanmar knew the art of weaving since the days of Pyu city-states (Myint Aung: 1960, 61). The Chinese account of *Old Tang Chronicle* mentions that the clothes of Pyu were made up of cotton. Pys wore these cloth wrapped around the waist. The bronze figures of dancers and musicians excavated at Sriksetra are draped in saris and short nether garment (Fraser-Lu: 1994, 252). During Bagan Period the various inscriptions reveal the terms relating to the art and occupation of weaving. The words *chi-the* and *cho-win-the* mention the yarn-spinners and *pu-chi-the* and *yan-the* refer to the weaver (Than Tun: 2002, 205). The word *phyin*-coarse cloth and *pa-so*-male nether garment also emerged in Bagan period (Mya Ketu: 1960, 64). The Saw Hla Win Pagoda inscription reveals that the donor of pagoda offered four pieces of *phyins kha-si*- nether garment and a horse form Buddha image maker and two pieces of *pu-chi-phyins*- coarse cotton *kha-si* and a horse for mason (Saw Hla Win Inscription). However some researchers attributed that the weavers of Bagan Period were not acquainted with the technique of dyeing (Mya Ketu: 1960, 65). The mural paintings of cave pagodas and temples (Than Tun and U Aye Myint: 2011, 116, 189) shed light on the development of weaving industry in Bagan Period.

The weaving industry continued to develop in succeeding dynasties. Although the evidence of the cultivation of cotton in Bagan Period was still obscure, the historical evidence and literary pieces of Inwa period clarified that the cotton became the major crop of dry cultivation in Central Myanmar (Ohn Kyi: 2004, 10). A poem written by Shin Maharahtasara, renowned learned monk of Inwa period, reveals the art of weaving flourished in Inwa period and the term cotton ginning, spinning, weaving and dyeing are mentioned in the poem (Hlaing Win Swe: 1977, 43). According to this poem, it is known that the weavers of Inwa period used natural dyes in variety of colour such as yellow, blue, red, etc. During Taungoo period, the method of weaving and dyeing was developed by the advent of Siamese weavers who were taken by King Tabinshwethi as war captives in 1560. When king Bayinnaung defeated Ayudhaya in 1563, the war captives, including those who well-versed in the art of dyeing were brought to Hanthawaddy (Kala: 2006; 314-15). During Nyaung-yan period, *let-pan le-silk*-cotton thread and cotton became the raw materials to weave *phyin-zin* coarse fabric with stripe, *phyin-pa*-thin fabric, *kha-tha*- coarse fabric with fine textile, imported from India (Mya Ketu; 1960, 65-66) *tha-lu*-imported thin cotton fabric, *paso-phyu*- white nether garment, *ni-pa-hte*-dyed fabric, etc. The imported fabric penetrated into Myanmar since Taungoo period. The expensive foreign fabric

such as *kadiba*, Arabic derivative word of *quadifa* (Tha Myat: 1960, 84) were imported from Hyderabad by European merchants

---

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Dr, Department of History, Sagaing University of Education (Fraser-Lu: 1994, 253). However only the royalties, officials and wealthy persons could afford to wear such expensive imported fabric. The commoners of rural areas were able to use cheap home-spun fabrics.

The evidence of Konbaung Period reveals that the weaving industry was divided into weaving group of palace and the weaving domestic industries of rural areas. Although the kings appointed weavers as the separate servicemen, the formation of these servicemen were not known exactly. Anyway the weaving industry of Myanmar reached its apex in the time of pre-colonial era, primarily in Konbaung Period. During that time cotton cultivation had increased and the surplus crops were exported to China (Khin Maung Nyunt: 2004, 63-64). In addition, the tropical forests of Myanmar provided numerous species for natural dyes. Some of these dyes, like sappan, were exported to India (Fraser-Lu: 1994, 254).

### **Crown Weavers**

The crown weavers of Konbaung Period not only produced exquisite home-spun fabrics but also modified imported textile for the royalties. For example *shwe-ye paso* - male sarong interwoven with silver threads, *paleik- acheik paso*- male nether garment woven with wavy pattern, *kawng-ton acheik paos* - male nether garment woven with wavy pattern, etc (Nan-hmu, Nan-Ya: 6-8) were supposed to be modified by the crown weavers. The garments and clothing of royalties were interwoven with gold and silver threads. Myanmar kings were accustomed to give the court- produced fabrics to the diplomats as the gifts of friendship. They also awarded fine clothing and nether garments to the court officials. (Maung Maung Tin: 2004, 75). These clothings were supposed to be the home-spun products. However King Badon given red woolen cloths to Chinese envoys who visited to the court of Amarapura. The exquisite and valuable fabrics interwoven with gold and silver threads were supposed to be produced only for the royalty.

During King Badon's reign, the crown weavers were organized into separate group under *yet-kan-gaung*- chief of crown weavers. On October 11, 1811, the king issued an order to the servicemen of weaving department to work in their original group known as *yet-kan-daw* crown weaving department (ROB VII: 1988, 638). The king usually prohibited his servicemen from movement to the other groups. It is interesting to note that the princes had their own weavers. Some of the weavers were assigned to serve the princes as the household retainers (Toe Hla: 2004, 53). When some princes married, the king allowed them to keep the weavers of his own.

### **The Arrival of Manipuri Weavers**

The advent of Manipuri war captives in Myanmar society Konbaung Period strengthened the weaving industry of Myanmar. Whenever they subdued Manipur, Kings of early Konbaung period brought thousands of Manipuri captives including weavers, to Myanmar. King Alaungmintaya and Hsinbyushin ordered Maipuri weavers to settle in Ywa-bein and Pauk-khaung near Pyay and Inwa. They introduced the art of weaving clothing with over 100 looms and silk-worm breeding (Shwe Tun: 2006, 120). During King Badon's reign, the Manipuri weavers were brought again into Myanmar. They became *lun-ya-gyaw acheik* weavers in Amarapura. King Bagyidaw, the successor of King Badon, gave special favour to the Manipuri

acheik weaves and allowed them to live in their own community in Amarapura. The head weaver of Manipuri community, named *Linzin- Akkabat*, was awarded by the King for his flowers craftsmanship in weaving lun-ya-gyaw acheiks (Maung Paso Gyan: 1975, 18-19). Amarapura along with Inwa and Sagaing, became the center of weaving industry. The settlements of weavers in Amarapura during King Badon and King Bagyidaw's reign were: Amaik-su, Lay-zu, Oh-taw, Ye-twin-Nyinaung, Myo-ma(Amarapura), Leik-san-khun, Shwe Kyet-yet, Shwe- gè, Nge-doe, Ashe Hsin- taing, Anauk Hsin- taing, Tadalay, Let-tha-ma-zu, Bagyi-zu, Ponna-zu, Myin-zu, Ye-gyi-pauk, Tat-Kyi, and Yet-Kan- taw (Interview, U Mya Thuang, 2016).

The Manipuri (Kathè) weavers settled in Tayoke-tan, Shwe-ge, Let-we Myaing-taing, Hsin-ka of Nge-do village tracts, Shwe-geun-htok-quarter of Amarapura downtown, Lay-zu quarter, Tha-nge-daw, let-pan-zin, Kyi-myin-daing and Tat-kyi villages (Hmattan: 1902, 56). The inhabitants of Amarapura, still believe that the art of 100 shuttle *achiek* weaving was bequeathed by the Manipuri weavers (Interview: Daw Khin San, 2016).

During mid- Konbaung Period, the occupations related with weaving industry also thrived. These occupations were manufacturing of silk yan, dyeing, embroidery, hand-sewing, tapestry, etc. During that time, *achok-taik*- department of sewing was established. The servicemen of *achok-taik* sewed outfits for the princes and princesses, white umbrella and robes for donation, fabric ceiling for ear-boring and hair-dressing ceremonies of royal children, and paper umbrellas, etc. In late Konbaung Period, the appointment of *achok-wun*- offer in-charge-of sewing department, *achok-taik-so* (ROB VIII: 1988, 54) - overseer of sewing department, *achok-su-sa-ye-clerk*, *achok-gaung-head* and *achok ahmudion*- servicemen of sewing department (Maung Maung Tin: 2004, 392). The king appointed Parses, Shans and Bamars tailors as the servicemen of *achok-taik* King Mindon offered some tailors to crown prince in his hair-dressing ceremony (ROB VI, 1987, 688). During the reign of king Badyidaw in 1844, the king gave *achiek-gaung-head* of crown tailors and six followers, *achok-taik* to crown prince in his hair-dressing ceremony (Parabaik 0022). During the reign of King Bagyidaw in 1844, the king gave *achok-gaung-head* of crown tailors and six followers, *achok* Nga Tha Lein Kun and ten followers, and other sixteen tailors, 48 weaves, *shwe-chi-hto* Nga Pe and eight followers to his daughter in ear-boring ceremony (ROB VIII: 1988, 688). During Late Konbaung Period, the formation of crown weaves and related servicemen groups and their salary and provisions can be seen as follows;

1. *Wint-thi* - spinner who produced cotton-yarn for crown weavers to produce towels, turbans, fabrics, etc.
2. *Achok-taik* - comprised of 38 Bamar, Shan and Kala servicemen to sew clothing and embroidered garments suitable to three season. The overseers U Gyi, U Ni, clerks U Kan Tha, U Bo Maung and key keeper U Kan Aye served at *achok-taik*. They were allotted 1140 kyats as monthly salary (Maung Maung Tin: 2005, 225)
3. *Yet-kan* factory - established in King Mindon's reign at Amarasankhaung Quarter, Mandalay. It was the first factory of weaving industry, and was installed with ginning machines, spinning wheels, cotton yarn machines, looms etc. However the fabrics produced by the factory were not as qualified as American products. Eight servicemen of weaving factory were allotted 215 baskets of paddy as monthly provision. "The products of this factory were donated to the monks, elders and given to servicemen and not sold the markets (Maung Maung Tin: 2005, 247- 48).

4. *Shwechi-hto* - embroidery group - this group was put under the charge of the officer of golden treasury. Twenty servicemen were allotted 330 baskets of paddy as monthly provision. (Toe Hla: 2004, 157).
5. *Kye-khat* - servicemen who had to adorn with sequins to the ceremonial dresses. Twenty servicemen were allotted 220 baskets of paddy monthly (Maung Maung Tin: 2005, 224)

In brief, the exquisite products of above servicemen can be seen on the *Kadaw* day- the day of paying homage to the king and other court ceremonies. The king, royalties, court officials, and the highest dignitaries of realm attended in full ceremonial dress, followed by colourful around of retainers. During the reigns of King Mindon and Thibaw, an Italian named Denegri introduced the jacquard loom he brought from France. His family was allowed to live in the palace. From 1873 to 1885, jacquard loom was used in the royal court of Mandalay (Laucian and Christine Sherman: 2014, 9-10).

The weaving business of the palace seemed to be thrived till the end of monarchical days. However the weaving industry ran by the home looms of rural areas gradually on the wane. The decline of the weaving industry of Upper Myanmar was brought about by the influx of foreign textile since mid-Konbaung period. Another reason from the decline of home looms in rural areas was created by the outbreak of Myingun-Myinkhondaing rebellion of 1866. The cultivation of cotton also decreased due to the movement of the people from the war-torn areas of Upper Myanmar to the British Myanmar.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are also extended to Dr Saw Pyone Naing, Rector and Dr Myat Myat Thaw, Pro Rector from Sagaing University of Education for permitting to publish this research paper.

### **Bibliography**

#### **Primary Source (Myanmar)**

*Nan-hmu Nan-ya Asin-daza Mya* (Palace Regalia and Costumes), Htun Yee (comp), Yangon, Sein Pan Myaing Press (Type Surtip)

Parabaik 0022, Parabaik MS, No 0022, Ludu Library Collection Mandalay

*Saw Hla Win Pagoda Inscription, Bagan* Than Tun and U Aye Myint:2011, *Ancient Myanmar Designs*, Bangkok, Group Press Co-Ltd.

#### **Secondary Source (Myanmar)**

Hlaing Win Swe, "Myanmar Yetkan Lethmu Pyinnya" (The Art of Weaving), *Ngwe Ta Yee Magazine*, No.201, 1977  
Hmat-tan, 1982: *Amarapura Myone Hmatta* (Amarapura Township Record), Amarapura Township Burma Socialist Programme Party.

Kala, U:2006, *Maha Yazawingyi* (The Great Chronicle), Volume II, Yangoon, Yabyay Publishing House (Reprint)

Maung Maung Tin, U: 2004, *Konbaungzet Maha Yazawindaw-gyi* (The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty), Yangon, Yabyay Publishing House, Volume III

Maung Paso Gyan: 1975, *Myanmar, Yoe-yar Yet-kan Lok-ngan*" (Myanmar Traditional Weaving), *Ngwe Ta Yee Magazine*, No.185, November.

Mya Ke Tu: 1960, *Myanmar Awit-a-sa* (Myanmar Costumes), *Yinkyehmu (Culture) Magazine*, Vol.III, pt vii, April

Ohn Kyi, Daw: 2004, *Tet-nwe Kyaung Kyauk-Sa Le-la-chet* (A Study on Tetnwekyauung Inscription: 1442 AD), *Papers written by Daw Ohn Kyi: Member of Myanmar Historical Commission*, Yangon, Myanmar Historical Commission.

Shwer Tun, U:2006, *Lun-ya-kyaw Kyo-gyi-gyeik*. The Horizontal Wave-patterned Silk Cloth Weaving with 100-200 Shuttles), Yangon Sarpay Biman Press.

Than Tun: 2002, *Khit-haung Myanmar Yazawin* (Early History of Myanmar), Yangon, Inn Wa Publishing House (Third Impression)

That Myat, Thiripyanchi, U:1960, "Awit-a-the Mya-ei Khit-haung Khit-thit Waw-ha-ra-may". (The old and New Teams of Textile and Costume), *Yinkyelhmu (Culture) Magazine*

**Secondary Source (English)**

Fraser-Lu, Sylvia: 1994, *Burmese Craft: Past and Present*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press

Khin Maung Nyunt, Dr: 2004, "Burma's (Myanmar's) Cotton Trade under Burmese (Myanmar) King", *Selected Writings of Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt*, Yangon, Myanmar Historical Commission

Myint Aung: 1960, "Excavations at Hanlin", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol, III, pt.ii, December  
ROB VI, VII, VIII, 1987-88; *The Royal Orders of Burma (AD 1598-1885)*. Than Tun (Comp, Ed and Trans), Kyoto,  
Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

**Personal Interview**

U Mya Thaug, Age 14, Owner of Padamya Shwezin Slik Warehouse, Lay-zu Quarter, Amarapura, 9 January 2018

Daw Khin San, Age 69, A-hmeik-su Quarter, Amarapura, 16 June 2018