

Challenges on Traditional Textile Weaving in Myanmar

Thein Lwin

1. Introduction

2. Background History of Textile in Myanmar

3. Government Policy on Myanmar Arts and Crafts

3.1 The Role of Arts and Crafts in Myanmar

3.2 Preservation and Promotion of Myanmar Textile

(a) The Role of Ministry of Cooperatives

(b) The Role of Ministry of Culture

4. Challenges for Textiles Weaving in Myanmar

4.1 Traditional ways and their challenges

4.2 Innovations and their challenges

4.3 Textile Industries in Myanmar and Their Products, Markets

5. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Myanmar is a land with rich natural resources such as big forests and mineral ores. The mainstay economy is agricultural production and the government is carrying out the development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well. There is nearly a hundred percent use of natural things and handicrafts still remaining in our country. The developed countries utilize only the hi-tech products and they have almost on utilization of handicrafts and natural products. As for the developing country like ours it is found that there are still utilization of natural products and handicrafts. One of the most popular handicraft activities in Myanmar is the traditional weaving.

2. Brief History of Textile in Myanmar

According to historical record, Myanmar Textile Industry has lasted over thousands of years. Ancient mural-painting, Palm-leaf writings and literatures indicate that the weaving industry thrived in the Bagan, Inwa and Amarapura eras.

Wall painting of ancient pagodas, antique wood carvings and sculptures manifest the high quality of apparel woven by means of traditional weaving gears. Traditional weaving gears are hand operated, but it is possible to produce all brilliant textile wears and clothes.

3. Government Policy on Myanmar Arts and Crafts

Myanmar people are very familiar with cultivation and uses of handicrafts as well as highly skill in crafts to be part of their traditional knowledge and folklore. The crafts products are useful in daily life of people in Myanmar. Some products are popular in urbanization and appreciation to the tourists and also adopted for souvenir of our country. Our government has explored idea and strategies for the development of Myanmar Arts and Crafts especially for crafts products to promote the ecotourism in the region.

3.1. The Role of Arts and Crafts in Myanmar

Crafts play an important economic role in developing countries. It is characteristic of countries in south and East Asia that large sections of the rural population are involved in making crafts. In the predominantly agrarian- based economy, crafts constitute an important income generating activity for the farmers during the off-season periods. Women may also be employed in craft making on a full and part-time basis. Crafts provide employment opportunities for both men and women. As a matter of policy, national government normally provides substantive support for the craft men and the craft industry. The type and level of support, the provision of facilities, the creation of

protective and promotional policies and programs, however, depend to a large extent on the national development policy, strategy and direction.

In order to promote the craft industries in Myanmar, the craft exhibitions, sale rooms opening and craft market festivals are held under the guidance of the Ministry of Co-operatives. The objectives of them are aimed to promote crafts trading locally and internationally and boosting the craft productions. The various crafts industries put on display their products and some sell their products under contracts. The government is giving priority to the promotion of craft industries with participation of local and foreign investors.

3.2 Preservation and Promotion of Myanmar Textile

Traditional weaving skills were passed on from one generation to another within the family line. Myanmar Government is trying its best to preserve and promote Myanmar traditional textile and revive local weavers so the government established the Ministry of Co-operatives.

(a) The Role of Ministry of Co-operatives

Ministry of Co-operative has been formed aiming at laying down policies for contributing towards national economic development through undertaking business by like-minded persons collectively and for flourishing socio-economic activities broadly through enlivening co-operative principles. Under the Ministry of Co-operatives, there are three departments namely the Co-operative Department, the Cottage Industries Department and the Co-operative Export and Import Enterprise.

Among them, the aims and objectives of Cottage Industries Department is as follows:

1. to supervise cottage industries according to Cottage Industries Promotion Law and carry out promotion activities for these industries.

2. to monitor weaving schools in States and Divisions, and Lacquer ware Technology College, Bagan.
3. to provide technical services to Industrial cooperatives, and cottage industries and handicraft enterprises from private sector.

Training School and their Perspective : Saunders Weaving Institute (Amarapura)

The Government founded the Saunder's Weaving Institute in 1914 under the Department of Cottage Industries, Ministry of Cooperatives. It trains the students Power loom weaving practice, Chemical dyeing and screen- printing as well as traditional resist dyeing techniques.

The aim of the Institute is as follows:

1. To know about the knowledge of weaving technology.
2. To bring up the skillful weavers and technicians.
3. To maintain and develop the racial and traditional weaving knowledge.
4. To train the knowledge of weaving by using modern-technique and equipment.
5. To research for developing the weaving technology.

According to aims of Institute, the following courses are being taught in practical and lecture.

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Textile Technology | 1 years course |
| 2. Traditional weaving | 6 months course |
| 3. Tapestry | 3 months course |

Weaving schools in States and Divisions: In addition, 14 weaving schools in States and Division are established under the Cottage Industries Department to preserve the traditional weaving through regular formal training courses.

The education system for textile corresponds with the goals of art education .The vocational education trainings is an integral part of human resource development and is one

of the major ways of improving the ability to society and to future self-development of the weaver.

(b)The Role of Ministry of Culture

Culture represents the most important basic for the existence of nation and it is as instrument to build the nation. As cultural heritage has high value for keeping the tradition and spirit of the people. Myanmar people are very much oriented to the cultural preservation and dissemination of Myanmar culture.

Objectives for National Heritage Preservation and Promotion has been laid down for the sake of preservation and dissemination of Myanmar cultural heritage as follows.

1. to explore and preserve cultural heritage like ancient pagodas, stone inscription, manuscripts and parabeiks, ancient monuments and its decorative styles.
2. to sustain, disseminate and revive Myanmar literature, music, theatrical performances in Myanmar style.
3. to preserve, sustain and develop Myanmar arts and crafts in Myanmar traditional style
4. to wear Myanmar dress in accordance with traditional culture
5. to nature the youths/younger Myanmar generation to be well behaved bodily and verbally in accordance with the teaching of religion, teachers and parents.

To fulfill the objectives of the national policies of culture, Ministry of Culture was establish in 1952 to study and explore for preservation of Myanmar culture and to carry out the various cultural affairs .

In order to preserve and promote the Myanmar traditional textile and wearing Myanmar dress, Myanmar traditional costume Exhibition and other related exhibitions are

organized by the Ministry of Culture. And to preserve, sustain and develop Myanmar arts and crafts in Myanmar traditional style, National Universities of Arts and Culture and State Schools of Fine Arts are established under the Department of Fine Arts, Ministry of Culture and provide the crafts education as education centers for craftsmanship.

4. Challenges for Textiles Weaving in Myanmar

4.1 Traditional ways and their challenges

Myanmar traditional weaving has lasted over thousand of years. Ancient mural paintings, palm-leaf manuscripts and literature indicate that the weaving industry has thrived since Bagan Era. Myanmar people of olden days usually produced wearing apparels themselves with traditional hand-loom. Since the 19th century, local workshops have been developed that especially produced lun- taya acheik longyi (over-hundred-shuttle acheik). Both the weft and warp are pure silk threads and from over a hundred to two hundred shuttles are used according to the design to be worked on. The weaving takes days and the fabric is thus expensive. But in the villages, cotton is used and design modified to produce cheaper version.

The traditional weaving process such as picking cotton sprout, ginning cotton, carding and fluffing cotton, spinning cotton into thread, dyeing, starching, winding threads into skeins, preparing the wrap for weaving and finally weaving cloth was widely practiced by Myanmar woman. Hand looms, spinning and reeling machines is left for the scholars. They also used traditional dyeing from natural materials including barks, leaves, flowers, fruits, roots, and tubers, by pounding and mixing of those.

But today, only few people know about the natural dyeing process. Nowadays, textile market become wider and wider with increase of population. The more textile industries appear and the more bales of cotton yarns and chemical dyes are being used. Now, natural dyeing and hand make fabrics are almost disappear.

Traditional textile of Myanmar ethnic group: The Union of Myanmar is a Union of many nationalities: over 100 national groups. The main ethnic groups are Kachin, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhind and Shan. The national races of Myanmar have their own traditional attires and costumes and unique style. The designs used by our indigenous tribes on what is called gyapkhout hund-loom(backstrap loom) Textiles made by ethnic groups are in high demand in Myanmar.

One of the hottest trends in Myanmar fashion these days is wearing traditional textiles tailored into special-occasion dresses. Fabrics, which are based on the textiles made by Myanmar ethnic groups, are usually made of densely woven cotton or cotton-silk solid-colour blends embroidered with contrasting colour.

Handmade textiles are more expensive because it takes more time to make them, and because the designs are so unique. Some, in fact, are not only traditional textiles but also ethnic souvenirs and they remain more popular for making special-occasion dresses. The market for dresses made using traditional textiles is hotter than the market for fabric alone. Traditional textile makers need to pay more attention to the quality of their product and need to improve in quality by looking for ways to make the coloured dyes more permanent as the market is now attracting more foreign customers.

Myanmar traditional hand weaving technology is, in fact a national treasure, a legacy handed down from generation to generation. Handmade items are either wholly or partly linked to art. Buyers always value woven materials. The State is continuously trying to let the spirit of loving traditional weaving be ingrained in the minds of indigenous people.

4.2 Innovations and their challenges

Power loom weaving has been practiced from the time of establishment of the Saunder Weaving Institute at Amarapura. Chemical dyeing and screen –printing as well as traditional resist dyeing techniques have also been introduced. There are many weaving

industries in Amarapura and cities of States and Divisions. They produce various kind of longyi (sarong), fine cotton fabric or silk in several designs using traditional hand looms as well as power looms in every weaving centres of the nation.

Myanmar people prefer buying traditional textiles made by machine looms and then having them made it into a dress and can wear them in all season. Myanmar fashion is still very traditional and most girls and boys still wear Myanmar traditional dress. The textiles with Myanmar traditional designs are in high demand as Myanmar people love to wear Myanmar traditional dress. Textiles from machine looms are cheaper than handmade, and they can be worn every day. Some handmade textiles are really expensive, but they are nice for special occasions, such as weddings and traditional ceremonies.

Government continued to run the big textile mills and setup new factories. Cotton yarns could be produced locally and some portions were distributed to private owners. Only some percentage of yarns has to be imported. However shortage of raw materials is a constraint to the private entrepreneurs. This problem is presently taken into consideration and necessary measures are being arranged for more imports of yarns.

There is now an important role in the textile sector, played by foreign investors who came to Myanmar through channels opened by the State practicing the open market economic policy. They invest huge sums of money in establishing garment factories, producing garments, shirts and export quality products, selling items in local market at reasonable prices. They do not have raw material problem as it is brought in from abroad.

Modern technology is required to design intricate, multicolored and wavy pattern. In the very near future, computerized design making and maintaining ancient wavy patterns will be introduced now that there are computer controlled textile machineries are being introduced through various trade fairs and exhibitions held frequently.

The quality of machine-made fabric is improving. Assuring quality is also important when it comes to handmade fabrics, which vary greatly depending on the skill of the person who makes them and on the quality of the cotton used. With more attention paid to passing along these skills, both handmade and machine-loomed textiles will continue to enjoy a surge in popularity.

4.3. Textile Industries in Myanmar and Their Products , Markets

Private Sector: Today, every family does not have its own weaving looms as in former days, but weaving industries still can be seen scattered in almost every town and village.

There are many weaving industries in Amarapura and cities of States and Divisions. They produced various kind of longyi, fine cotton fabric or silk in several designs using traditional handlooms as well as power looms in every weaving centers of the nation. Myanmar weaving industry areas are known to customers for their peculiar quality and design. To mention specifically, Monywa is famous for its fluffy blankets, quilt, Mandalay for achaik longyis (intricate wavy-pattern longyi), silk cloths, Pakhoku for blankets (thick and warm). Wundwin, Shwedaung, Inma near Shwedaung especially for coarse, perforated cloth for mosquito net, longyi and cotton fabric, Mudon for achaik longyis, Amarapura for longyi and silk and cotton fabric, Shan and Kachhin States for hand-woven sling bags and longyi with their traditional unique design . Nylon, silk fabric factories and towel factories were also included in Myanmar textile sector. Hand made home utilities like blankets, towels, bed sheets, table clothes and napkins are widely used.

Government Sector : Myanmar Textile Industries (MTI) is one of the six state-owned Myanmar Industries under the Ministry of Industry (1), engaged in the production of variety of textile products from the public sector .Under MTI, there are altogether 28 factories at present. Those factories and mills consist of Spinning, Weaving and Finishing Factories,

Textile Mills, Garment Factories, Knitting Factories, Blanket Factories, Towel Factories, Sewing Thread Factory and Cotton-Wool and Bandages Factory. The main products of MTI are cotton yarn, polyester yarn, woven fabrics, bleached, dyed and printed fabrics, bleached and dyed yarn, gent's longyi, lace nylon and cotton mosquito netting, vest, sport shirts, socks, ready made garments, blankets, towels, curtains, bed sheeting, sewing thread, absorbent cotton, bandages and gauze, monk's robe, etc. The products of the Myanmar Textile Industries with high quality and fair prices are being distributed to the grass-root level throughout the country.

Domestically made fabrics and clothing have become increasingly popular in the Myanmar market. Myanmar-made cotton clothes have become the latest fashion trend among girls and the number of customers who wear locally made cotton clothes has increased recently. Textile Mart, which sells fabrics produced in Myanmar and abroad, agreed that domestically made cotton clothes are becoming more popular in Myanmar and traditional clothing were also increasing, especially during times of special occasions like graduations, weddings and traditional festivals and the number of people who wear Myanmar – made clothing is increasing. Domestic pure cotton is becoming popular with tourists and local people.

5. Conclusion

Myanmar has taken initiatives for “one village one product” strategy to promote its cultural industries and produced handicrafts are being distributed to meet the demand. Our traditional weaving heritage is attractive and lively but dying out.

We should promote textile sector both traditional and modern textile to meet strong commercial international needs with particular emphasis on design and quality, as well as the environmental dimension in clothing and textile trade., and textile industry should be given priority as it is the best source of job opportunities for women and girls. And also preserve

and revive our traditional textile as it is our cultural heritage. We need to examine creating alternative product lines to meet such challenges. These and other challenges related to marketing create a large area for common and concerted action in the ASEAN region.

We have to explore market to introduce our traditional product at least within ASEAN. And we should preserve and promote our traditional textile and disseminate and share technology by promoting cooperation program.

At the end of the 2nd Textile Symposium, Myanmar would like to recommend that respective traditional textile would be wisely preserved that would mainly focused on the technical and cultural value and research and development joint training programs for modernization at national and regional levels should be prior.

Mr. Thein Lwin (MA, Myanmar Language and Literature; Post Graduate Diploma in Archaeology P.G.D.A.) is Principal at the Field School of Archaeology (Pyay), Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library, Ministry of Culture.
DCICOCI@mptmail.net.mm; m.myanmarculture@gmail.com