

Adorable Customs and Traditions of Myanmar Women

Introduction

Over the years Myanmar women have cherished and preserved the good customs and traditions. The actions Myanmar women did and the good traditions and customs they cherished and preserved may clearly be seen in the literature written over the ages. This paper attempts to illustrate how Myanmar women cherished and preserved the lovable customs and traditions over time.

Customs and Traditions over Time

From the beginning of Myanmar writings it can distinctly be seen that Myanmar women have enjoyed equality and have stood together on equal grounds with men. In the earliest dated Myanmar stone inscription called the Yaza Kumara inscription, (The Mya Zaydi stone inscription AD 1112) the names of the Great King Kyansitha and Queen Tiri-Lawka Watanthaka Dewi were found together. The title read, the flower that could be worn in the three Lawka's (worlds), this attributed the lovable qualities of the queen. The great King Kyansitha, loved the queen so much that he also gave precious stones, jewellery and three villages of slaves. This was recorded in the stone inscription. This is the recorded role of the wife by the husband.

Myanmar women of the Bagan period were devout Buddhists, as such they were tranquil, gentle and polite. They accepted and practised the customs and traditions of Buddhist teachings. The wife of the great Maha Thaynarpati Ananda Thura, built great pagodas and monasteries with great generosity. A women by the name of Saw Min Lat built pagodas and monasteries and prayed for nirvana, away from ageing, dying, to a pleasant concluding of body and soul, nirvana. The daughter of Nyaung Yan Gyi three days after her husband Kingathu's death, donated all the personal to the three yadanas (the Buddha, Buddha's teachings, and Buddha's disciples). The wishes of Theingathu's daughter for her good deeds were for "fellowmen to see one another without a word of anger or hatred but only through the eyes of love". She prayed for nirvana, a state without greed, anger and ignorance. This shows the influence of religious teaching, on the development of gentleness, tranquility and love in Myanmar women.

Also in administration, the women in equal footing with the men can be found as *Kalans*, *Thanlyins* and judges. The minister Asalapisi, in donating slaves to Buddha, said "these slaves do not come from my parents nor from the parents of my husband". These words prove that the minister Asalapisi was a woman. There were woman ministers in the Bagan period.

Women have preserved the tradition and customs over periods. In the late Bagan period, the Queens known as Min Waing Phwa Saw, Yazathu Phwa Saw, Thitmahti Phwa Saw (Phwa Saw indicating scholarly and skilled) emerged. These queens were helpful to their husbands, in the affairs of the kingdom. They were wise and powerful.

From King Nga Zee Shin Kyaw Swa's (owner of five white elephants) wife, Queen and master of the Southern Palace, Crowned Queen of Successive Five Kings, Star of Royalty and Central Court, Shin Bo Me and Shin Saw Pu, daughter of Hantharwaddy King Yazardirit, to Konbaung King Mindon's Queen Setkya Devi held key positions, thus prestigious positions for Myanmar women.

In literature and academic fields, from the Thanbyin Princess of the Bagan period, who had the quality and high standard to even teach the Sangha's to Mi Phyu, Mi Nyo, Queen Zin Me, Ya Za Datu Kalya, Yawai Shin Htwe, Taungdwin Shin Nyein Mei, Me Khway, Shin Min, Thakhin Minmi, Khin Sone, Anaunk Nan, Ma Mya Galay and Hlaing Htaik Khaung Tin to Ma Mi wife of the governor, born in Thonze who composed the epistles in the colonial period, composed good works, preserving the literary and traditional customs. After gaining Independence, the strength of women writers became more and more developed.

Myanmar women in succession have respectfully practised traditional customs based on Buddha's teachings such as being religious, helping her husband, preserving modesty, practising the rules of conduct for women.

Clothes and Hair Styles of Myanmar Women

The descriptions of Pyu women's dress from Chinese records serve as the earliest reference of Myanmar women's dress. The married women knotted their hair at the top of their head and wore ornaments of silver and pearl. They wore blue silk longyi and draped silk shawls. When they walked they held fans. The performers wore red cotton clothes and bracelets and anklets made of gold and jewels. They strung flowers and knotted their hair using soft feathers. (Han Lin Hmaw Zar references). We know that Pyu dancers wore skull caps and, if females they wore a peak on the head. They wore hair clips, hairpins and ornamental ear-plugs with jewellery, and also traditional head bands like turbans, pearl studded belts wrapped around their waists, and wore longyi's with drawstrings.

From the pictures of Medaw Maya in Bagan Ananda who wore a chain, ornamental ear-plugs, bracelets, armbands and waist ornaments, we can assume that the queens of the Bagan Period had similar dress styles. The women from Bagan wore thin longyis with drawstrings and some were painted with various colours and patterns. When knotting the hair, they

beautified the hair with the knots, jeweled lentos, jeweled frontlets and hair clips, hairpins and plaited their hair. The 55 kinds of knotted hair from the classic choral song of Yawai Shin Htwe of the Inwa period can be said to be the hair styles of Bagan women. The names of hair styles (knotting hair) Myeikphyu, Myeikso, Myeikluk, Sule' are found widely in late Myanmar literature so that they can be assumed as the useful styles of knotting hair.

The dress of Myanmar women have changed since the Bagan Period. They cut their hair when they were in sorrow. They did their hair with their remaining hair from which the Bya-Pa-San hair-do descended and Myeik Phyu, Myeik So, Myeik Luk, Sule', Ya Kin, Lone Tin, Myeik Yit were the seven styles of hair which had origins since King Bodaw Phaya of Konbaung Period. "Pu Pone Htone", the hair-do clumsily done by Ah Nauk Nan Ma Mya Gale when she was annoyed, "Mya Sabei Ngone" "La Lei Yone" hair styles from U Kyawt's Sone Nanthar Myaing Sha Pon Taw, all these hair styles have adopted to the B.A Zadone hair styles which university students did during the colonial period. However keeping their hair long has been valued ever since recorded history.

Similarly, the design, texture and appearance of Myanmar Women's dress (jacket and longyi) changed with the times. Women's wear was made beautiful with linen, silk, woven

with silver and gold threads and beautiful designs. We can get references from frescos and Parabaiks (palm leaf inscriptions).

Myanmar women mainly valued the dress produced from their own looms. They also wore foreign-made clothes imported by ships. Women's wear such as "Phyin, Kayin, Thindaing, Htenyee, Yahte" can also be seen in Myanmar vocabulary. Furthermore, it was found that Myanmar women also draped shawls. Expressions such as green jacket with red spots, dark red and green shawl can be seen in Myanmar Literature. Although there were differences in styles according to the periods, the main dress of Myanmar women was essentially longyi and eingyi, which they dressed with modesty.

Virtue of Myanmar Women

Good virtue is one of the characteristics cherished, loved and valued by Myanmar women. There are five qualities of women: beauty, wealth, relatives, children and virtue.

As Myanmar women grew up under the influence of religion they were disciplined in self control and trained to follow the teachings of moral conduct since young. Throughout their lives, they have the responsibility to make their family happy, taking the role of daughter, sister and friend, practise discipline and self control, while they go forward with their careers and their lives. As Myanmar society does not accept

those who do not value virtue, there were always serious consequences for it. Thus Myanmar women always try to be virtuous, without swaying throughout their lives.

Myanmar women grow up under the control of their parents since young. So they try to be virtuous in accordance the teachings of their parents. Myanmar women's virtue can be seen, from Inwa period writer, Shin Maha Thila Wun Tha's, Taungdwin Myo Bwe (verse). A young woman who did not want to elope with her lover said under the guidance of my parents always having virtuous soul, couldn't elope with you.

Myanmar women's value, loving kindness and loyalty. In a type of verse composed during the Bagan Period, a young woman conveyed her attitude, to her lover as "My love to you always be forever. All with my heart, I will preserve my virtue." This verse shows firmness, loving kindness and loyalty of Myanmar women.

Married women, under the guidance of their husbands, try to preserve their virtue and try to become good housewives. In the Inwa period Shin Maha Rahta Thara's "Satu Damma Thara Ko Hkan Pyoh", the wife of a Brahmin, who retired to the jungle to live as a recluse, said "My noble husband, no ordinary one. Always try to teach me, to be a good wife.

Husband as well as teacher.” This kind of verse is a model for Myanmar women.

The saying “A good woman should wear only one flower” has two meanings. On the surface level, it means wearing one flower can make a woman beautiful. On the underlying level, it means to have only one husband and be loyal to him throughout her life. This saying conveys Myanmar women’s loyalty and resolution. The above saying of the women of Brahmin caste also stresses the love of the couple. It is like a dried magnolia flower, kept in a box for a long period of time, but which doesn’t lose its fragrance.

Buddha’s teachings and references steer Myanmar women to preserve their virtue. The four noble, loyal and virtuous women (Amaya, Keinayi, Madi, Thanbula) were the ideal examples of Myanmar women. These four ideal women always remind Myanmar women to preserve their virtue.

Similarly, writings from Myanmar literature showing women’s faults are only to remind Myanmar women to beware of those faults, and avoid them. In the 550 Nipat, Maha Kunala Zat there were examples of women’s faults: The Maga Dewa new verse states “there are women who are bad, without simplicity, full of cunning.” These sayings are general statements about bad women. However, as they warn women from committing bad deeds, they in one way or another help promote Myanmar women to be virtuous.

Traditions of Modesty

To be ashamed and afraid of sinning and exposing one's self are the two things which guard the world. Myanmar women have been ashamed and afraid to expose one's self and of sinning from the early days. Parents have also taught their children to be ashamed and afraid of sinning. There are sayings, "You can't give gold for women's modesty", "Behave with decorum". These sayings show Myanmar women's modesty.

Salin Sayadaw U Hle's "Ditarawarda Pyo Thami Teachings" also teaches women to be ashamed and afraid to do something bad. In this verse, "Don't undress yourself, in front of your father. Beautify yourself, not to be seen by anybody." This verse shows in detail how to beautify oneself, ie. not to do so in front of one's father.

To be shy as a sister in secret things and to be modest are included as the qualities of good women and noble women in the book of morals and ethics (Lawka Niti).

In Myanmar society, women who do not behave well were criticized. When person who does not speak politely but does so loudly in a rude, the blame is put on the mother's wickedness and use of vulgar language as stated in the Lawka Niti. According to the Hitaw Padetha Kyan, the causes of adultery is taking part in frivolities, staying and laughing with

men, visiting houses, visiting towns alone and associating with women of questionable character. These are the causes which lead to losing one's values as good women.

Myanmar women's styles and clothes expressed above are sufficient, adequate and modest. The differences between the customs of Western and Eastern styles of women's wear should be noted. Western styles focus on the women's body and on clothes that enhance the body and sexuality. The styles of Eastern women's wear focus on clothes that express modesty and feminineness instead of sexuality. The beauty of Myanmar women is dressing modestly.

This is how Myanmar women have been preserving their modesty through the ages.

Moral Codes of Myanmar Women

In Myanmar society, moral codes in **Theinghalaw Warda Thote** are abided obediently and strongly. These moral codes are composed as poems by **Thingazar Sayadaw** and they are recited and used by Myanmar people. Just as there are codes of conduct for parents, children, teachers, pupils, husbands, wives, friends, masters, slaves, the Sangha and layman so also there are codes of conduct for Myanmar women.

Myanmar women as daughters look after, feed parents, inherit from them, donate from them after death and preserve

their parents' prestige. Similarly, when they become wives they do housework, systematically, preserve properties, avoid adultery, look after relatives and are not to be lazy.

The instructions for Myanmar women to become model wives can be found in Myanmar literature. In “Mahathudathana Thote Pali”, 6 moral codes for noble wives were enumerated: Waking up before their husbands, going to bed later than their husbands, following their husband's lead, always soothing and satisfying the husband, always saying sweet things, and shunning other men even mentally.

In expressing the qualities of noble wives, there are wives like daughters, wives like sisters, wives like friends, and wives like slaves.

The moral code of Myanmar women, is that they support their husbands and vice versa. Sayings “earn and save income” and “Share work equally” shows that husband and wife face difficulties in life together, “Husband cherishes his wife as a daughter, as a sister, as a friend and the wife also values and admires her husband as prince charming.

In Myanmar society, the attitude of men towards women are reflected by the use of the words “Ahmi, Mi Mi, Ahma, Ma Ma, May, Mae” traditionally to address women. “Ahmi, Mi Mi, May, Mae” means a mother and the words

“Ahma, Ma Ma” express the sisterly and brotherly respect that each has for the other. Similarly, women called men “Ko, Mg” showing respect as elder brothers or younger brothers. This was how men and women traditionally showed respect to one another.

Myanmar Women look after their husbands just as they look after their parents when they were young. They share housework and duties with their husbands, hand in hand when they become housewives. When they get children, they bring them up systematically, preventing them from doing bad things, making them do good things, cultivating them to be educated, providing them investment and marrying them off as good parents should.

This was how Myanmar women abided by the traditional moral codes.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Myanmar women were always raised to be ashamed and afraid of sinning and exposing oneself, the two things that guard the world, which preserve the virtue and moral code of Myanmar women. The traditions which Myanmar people have cherished through the periods are obvious.

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