

## A STUDY ON THE TRADITIONAL BAMAR TURBAN

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### Abstract

Traditional cultural expression is used for any form of artistic and literary expression and they are transmitted from one generation to the next such kind of handmade textiles, paintings, stories, legends, ceremonies, music, songs and dance. The traditional cultures are shared experiences which are handed down from generation to generation and those are preserved at the level of a nation or community and transcend borders. Because of her geographical situation, Myanmar culture had been influenced by its neighbors India and China. Myanmar culture has been mostly influenced by the Buddhism. It is said that wearing headdress came from Indian culture in which practiced in ancient time to Myanmar. This research paper will give somewhat contribute knowledge of the making traditional turban to the progeny of Myanmar.

**Keywords:** *Headbands, Paper Turban, Headrest, Base Cotton Cloth, Collegian Tying, Ba Maw Tying*

### Introduction

Tradition means a behaviour or folk custom passed down within a society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Traditional cultural expression is used for any form of artistic and literary expression in which traditional culture and knowledge are embodied. Traditional cultural and knowledge are transmitted from one generation to the next such kind of handmade textiles, paintings, stories, legends, ceremonies, music, songs and dance. It is also known that traditional cultures share experiences which are handed down from generation to generation and those are preserved at the level of a nation or community and transcend borders.

Because of her geographical situation, Myanmar culture has been influenced by its neighbours India and China. After trading contacts with India, Myanmar accepted the Indian culture. Like that it is said that wearing headdress came from Indian culture and was practiced in ancient time in Myanmar. It is found that the typical garment of Myanmar is the Indian lungi or sarong which are worn by both male and female. It is also known that clothing in India has being changed in the different ethnicity, geography, climate and cultural traditions of the people of each region of India.

The Indian turban is worn in many regions of the country with various styles and designs. It is said that wearing headdress is aimed to signify a common ideology or interest and symbol of faith representing values such kind of honor, valor and spiritually among others. After trading contacts with India, Myanmar adopted the Indian culture, literature, art, architecture, and clothing.

The turban, Baunghtok (in Myanmar) is the headdress of men and it is national costume for hair extensions and accessories. The wearing turban was practiced in Bagan period. From Bagan period to present day, headgear is the symbol of Myanmar cultural heritage for men. It can be found that Yawdaunk village; Shwetaung township of Pyay district produces frame made of cane for the headgear and exports them to Yangon and Mandalay.

Shwetaung township is situated the west of Bago region and 170 miles from Yangon. It is also known that Shwetaung is the largest township of Pyay district and it includes Kyeethe, Nyaungsayay, and Tayokehmaw administrative unit of forty-five village groups and 295 villages. The Yawdaunk village lies three miles from Shwetaung, and composes of 400 houses. It is based on the agricultural based economy and U Mya Aung who was the headdress artisan made his works

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in 1920. It is over a hundred years because his son U Tint Lwin continued his father's works. It is also known that circular cane headrests have been sold for making Myanmar turbans to Yangon and Mandalay. Concerning with the Bamar turban, there are a little books and research papers in Myanmar. In doing this research, researcher have studied the books and research papers concerned with Dress of Myanmar ( Shwe Gaing Tha), Ancient Myanmar Cloths (Mg Pasogyan) Traditional Myanmar Customs (Sinphyukyuan Aung Thein). Moreover, researcher also studied the Mauntkyetthaye turban handicraft business of Yawdaunt Village researched by History Department of Pyay University.

### Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this paper are to expose the traditional Myanmar culture, to know how and what the processes of making headgear or Burma turban, and to preserve the traditional culture of Myanmar. It is also aimed to know the headgear is related to Myanmar cultural art, to be worth of headdress business and to be valued the cultural art of the headgears to the new generations.

### Beginning of Burma Turban

Burma turban is the headdress of men and it would have been worn as personal adornment from the king to common people. It is said that headgear is called turban; U yit in Myanmar because head is winded with the scarf. Some scholars assume that the practice of wearing turban was taken from the Indian culture. The reason is that turban has worn in India since ancient time and the chronicles said that distributing of the Buddha's relics, the Brahman Dawna hid them in his turban.<sup>1</sup>

It is said that Myanmar men had worn the turban since then in Bagan Period; queen Dragon was one of King Pyusawhti queens and the ministers who were the guards of queen wore the turban and the courtiers took the sample of their turban and thus the wearing turban began in Bagan period. In the reign of King Kyansittha, king and ministers wore the golden headdress that looks like rhinoceros' horn. The rhinoceros' horn turban can be seen on the wall paintings of Pahtothamyar temple. Bagan mural painting indicates that, king and high rank officers wore the crown and common people wore the turbans. Their turban wearing can be studied in these painting. It can be assumed that dresses of Bagan period would have been the same as the Pyu period. In Bagan period, Myanmar culture had been influenced mostly by the Indian culture.<sup>2</sup>

During the reign of King Narathihapate, Oak Hla Nge who was a son of scholar Yazathingyan said to the king that he served his service till to decay his hair, after taking off his turban. Then he showed the king how the hair thus fallen was full of lice. He told the king about the victory at Missagiri and that his hair was in such a state because he had served his minister without attending to his own personal needs. The king was very pleased and asked the maids to clean Ok Hla Nge's hair. The king also gave ample rewards to Ok Hla Nge. Thus the word "Oo Swe San Mye" came from this story.<sup>3</sup>

It is said that wearing turban would be popular in Inwa period. The reason is that common and poor people wore the turban even though they dressed poor cloth. It can be studied in the poems of that time; ယုတ်တူပုဂံလှည့် ငှက်ခွေဆွဲဆွဲ ချီတက်၊ (Eshav). In the folk song of paddy farmer, it was composed that style of her man. ယုတ်တူပုဂံလှည့် ချီတက်၊ (Eshav). According to Hluttaw records, king's counselors of Innwa period might wear the

<sup>1</sup> Mg Pasogyan, Ancient Myanmar Cloths, Sarpaybeikman Press, 1983, P- 10(Henceforth, Mg Pasogyan, Ancient Myanmar Cloths)

<sup>2</sup> Shwekaingthar, Dresses of Myanmar, P-12-13

<sup>3</sup> Myanmar Encyclopedia, Volume II, Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press, 1990, P-315

white turban and hold the fan when they attended to the Hluttaw. It is also known that the white turban referred to purity of mind and fan referred to peace.<sup>1</sup>

In the wearing turban, king, princes and counselors wore the distinctive fillet; they did not cover their top-knot of hair. And the common people covered their top-knot with turban. During the time of Mingyiswasawke, he occupied Rakhine and appointed Saw Mongyi as the administrative head. Saw Mongyi offered his turban to Mingyiswasawke. As the advice of Minister Min Yaza, he did not wear Ex-King Saw Mongyi turban and then he made and wore same kind of turban decorated with precious gems.<sup>2</sup>

The inscription dated in 793 Myanmar Era (AD- 589) described that each of village head had been given the cloth turban by the king. Maniyadanapon and Myanmar chronicles depicted that Myanmar and Rakhine kings wore the headgears and the turbans had been adorned with gold, ruby, diamond, nine gems and emerald. It is said that turban of king, princes and brothers was the single show off in the back of head and adorned with silver stars. The proud of turban meant honesty and truthfulness. It is also known that the turban of Ministers was the double show off. Myanmar kings paid attention to the turban and thus they set up separate hall to store the distinctive fillet, crown and the crested headdress. But there was no separate service group for it.<sup>3</sup>

It can be found that king's turban was adorned with precious stones and the poets composed such kind of what an excellent of king's headdress. "aAmitawm eO&w rswcwpqif nlewobwn)) jpebw f rrwg rsuics, hAmitawm)). It is said that ministers wore white turban and they uncovered their top-knot hair with white cloth thus it was called rolled head band. In the late Konbaung period, Myanmar turban had been made with export cloth. In the reign of King Mindon, town officer of Saw Myo composed the scenes of royal ploughing ceremony. "yblwlv, lueoitrn jriteEh naequl ptoVajy:avh jrivluluem acgitay:rtw&mauseh xtvl, Oacdav:)). ausw&m acgitaygi t, (the hundred birds of turban) was the silk turban cloth painted with a hundred birds and it was famous in the late Konbaung period.

In a song of awaiting lover, Ma Myakalay who was one of the queens composed that her lover would have been worn turban "He, wearing silk headband will come in the evening "aerbre qiaAmitawm alyoreh mceveayg)). It can be assumed that princes and men would have been bought silk stole in which imported from Arab traders via Pathein. At that time, Pathein was the important port of trade between Myanmar and foreign countries. The cloth came from Pathein had been called Pathein cloth, Patheinhte in Myanmar. The princes and commoners loved them and wore proudly.<sup>4</sup>

In the colonial period, cropped hair was popular among Bamar men, the cutting cropped hair was difficult firstly for the young men and later it was popular in Myanmar. During the colonial period, the cropped hair was very popular and men's wearing top-knot was disappeared gradually in Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> It is said that top-knot worn by Bamar men had been replaced the wearing turban and it is called way of tying. The use of turban has declined dramatically during the British Period. It is only worn in official ceremonies, and social functions such as weddings.

In 1922, university students attended their class in wearing turban and it is known as style of tying; silk head cloth worn by collegians. The collegians style of tying was ready made and thus

<sup>1</sup> Shwekaingthar, *Dresses of Myanmar*, P-12-13

<sup>2</sup> Aung Thein (Sinphyukyuan), *Traditional Myanmar Customs*, Yangon, Sarpaybeikman Press, 1990, P-330(Henceforth Aung Thein(Sinphyukyuan), *Traditional Myanmar Customs*)

<sup>3</sup> Mg Pasogyar, *Ancient Myanmar Cloths*, P-18-19

<sup>4</sup> Shwekaingthar, *Ancient Myanmar Dresses*, P-58

<sup>5</sup> Shwekaingthar, *Ancient Myanmar Dress*, P-10-11

it was easy to buy in the markets. Among the style of tying, *Dr. Ba Maw who was the first Myanmar Premier invented his own style of tying; he did not line with the front eye and switched to the right.*<sup>1</sup>



*Ba Maw invented the own style of tying*

In 1936, meeting of Thakhins was held in Phyarpon and U Mya Din told his easy way to wearing turban with paper headband. U Mya Din was the first Myanmar turban practitioner and one of the members of Dobamar Asiayone. In 1937, the comedians Danpauk and Hnuahtgyi from Layberty Ma Mya Yin Anyeint advertised the paper cloth turban and thus many orders had been received within few days. However, there was difficult to get the head size, and pattern in making turban. Moreover, paper turbans were no neat and short duration. Therefore the manufacture of paper turban was faded in this time.<sup>2</sup>

### **Process of Making Burma Turban**

After getting public suggestion, cane framed turban or kettle bell started in 1939-40 onwards. The reason is that paper framed turban felt hot and stuffy because there was no air out. In Myanmar, the role of cane is as important as bamboo in building houses, boats, carts, rafts, stick for driving draught animals, baskets, and packing. It can be found that the canes are tall, and have perennial grasses wit flexible, woody stalks and more specifically from the palm.<sup>3</sup>



Cane plant in Myanmar

<sup>1</sup> See figure I

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Trade, History of Myanmar Turban, Yangon, Shwesin Press, 1987, P- 6-7 (Henceforth History of Myanmar Turban)

<sup>3</sup> See figure II

It grows in plain and wet land throughout Myanmar. Cane is used for a variety of artistic and practical purposes such kind of weaving baskets, chairs, for beds of different sizes for children and adult, cupboards, tables of different shapes and sizes and walking sticks.<sup>1</sup>

Myanmar, there are two kinds of rattan and they are the useful cane and unusable cane. The useful canes are egg cane (Kyet-U Kyein), Ye Kyein, red cane, white cane, Kyeinhmwwe and YamahtaKyein.<sup>2</sup> The useful canes are used in weaving baskets, tables and chairs and lamp shade. In Myanmar, Kyet-U Kyein is soft, beautiful color, and having spaces of the node. The cane from Khantee, Sagaing Region is called KhanteeKyein and it is used in producing cane frame or cane headrest for Bamar turban. It is said that Kyet-U Kyein grows in Kachin and Shan States. It is produced in these states.<sup>3</sup>



The map of Kyet-U Kyein product in Myanmar

In Yaw Daunt village, the canes from Khantee have being used for cane frame. Firstly, they have bought canes, choosing canes, chopping canes, doing filigree work and making cane frame.<sup>4</sup> It is also known that three classes of cane headrest and they are the special class, first class and second class. The special class headrest costs 1200 kyats, 800 kyats for the first class and 600 kyats for the second class. The wages for weaving cane frame are 400 kyats for thick pattern and 300 kyats for medium and 200 kyats for thin frame. A person can do the three to ten cane frames per day. It is also known that cane frames for Bamar turban have being produced in Yaw Daunt village, Shwetaung township of Bago Region.

It can be learnt that there are three steps in manufacturing cane kettle bells for Burma turban. The first stage is that base cane frame would have been stuck with the coarse paper made from MaingKaing. When MaingKaing paper dried, the second MaingKaing paper had been stuck

<sup>1</sup> Myanmar Encyclopedia, Vol I, p-193

<sup>2</sup> Ibid P-193

<sup>3</sup> See figure I, Myanmar Encyclopedia, Vol I, p-193

<sup>4</sup> See figure III

The Process of Cane Frame, Yaw Daunt Village, Personal Interview

on it. After frequently sticking MaingKaing paper, it would have been dried in the sun or dried in open fireplace in the raining season. Then the base cane headrest has been taken off from MaingKaing paper and it would have been stuck with the white cloth.<sup>1</sup>

The second step is that cane frame and MaingKaing paper frame would have been fixed by sewing. To firm the cane frame, the glue would be applied on it. It is said that doubled frame does not need to apply glue and single frame does need to apply the glue. The third step is that folding of headgear as the sizes, and colors. Generally, they would have been folded as the head size from 21 ½ inches to 23½ inches for adult and 18 inches for the children. Sometimes the cane frames have been made as the special order of 24½ inches or 25½ inches for big head.<sup>2</sup>



Process of making turban

In the folding of headband, there are triangle system, and rabbit's ear method. It is said that triangle system folding is mostly used in today. Besides that, there are turban tying and collegians style tying. The colors of Burma turbans are pink, light green, light orange, buff color and the colors in which ordered by the customers. In former days, wearing Burma turban did not follow to put down to the right or left side and they wore as they like.

Nowadays, they keep it mainly to the right side and Rakhine people hold it to left side. It is said that the cloth in which 27" in length and 44" width would have been cut for three turbans and thus a roll of cotton cloth in which 50 yards in length, and 44 yards width would have been cut for 125 turbans of various sizes. In the cutting of cloth, the spine of cloth is important for stretching.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Trade, History of Myanmar Turban, P-15-16

<sup>2</sup> (a) See figure IV, Ministry of Trade, History of Myanmar Turban, appendix

(b) Personal Interview with U Tun Lin, Myanmar Turban Business

<sup>3</sup> History of Myanmar Turban, P-17



The long or short of headgear would have been made as the customers' order. In ancient time, there were some different among the sizes of headgears and they were the banyan leaf for king, ministers for neem leaf, soldiers for mango leaf, 3 inches for wealthy person and 1.5 inches for rich man. At the present day, shape of neem leaf has been mostly ordered. It is also known that the headgear is important to match with the dresses of man. Bamar turbans have been produced to be more modernized patterns as the customer's desire.<sup>1</sup>

In 1936-1937, U Mya Din started making the paper headband but they were no longer development because of short term duration and untidy one. After 1948, U Mya Din produced cane headrest turbans with names of Men's Grace Turban, Success and Auspiciousness turban and, Bamar Glory Turban (armilusuba&acqitaygit? atnir\*Vmacqitaygit? Armilusuba&acqitaygit in Myanmar) and each day, he sold the forty turbans.

In 1978, he manufactured Bamar turbans with the names of Maung Tin Maung, Bamar Glory, MaungSoe Moe and Kyaington. U Tin Maung works for Bamar turbans in Bogoke Market in Yangon and the names of his orders are Maung Tin Maung Bamar Glory Turban, Bamar Glory Turban, Kyaington Store Turban, Aung Win Win Turban, Maung Soe Moe Turban and Aung Company Turban (Mandalay).<sup>2</sup> At the present day, Aung Turban Company and Mya Silk House (Mandalay) carry out the turban business.

In 2008, private turban business came out in Yangon and Mandalay. Tun Lin Bamar Turban Business in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region works out Bamar turbans business to the whole of Myanmar. In Tun Lin Bamar Turban, there are two kinds of turbans and they are Burma turban and folding turban.



Burma turban and folding turban.

It is said that the folded turban had been made for the lawyers in 2008-2009. The folded turbans are easy to bring and cheap one thus it grows in the market. It is also known that silk folded turban in package costs 10000 kyats, made of foreign silk costs 12000 kyats and local cloth costs for 6500 kyats. There are the total numbers of 5000 Burma turbans distribute yearly in Myanmar. The benefits of wearing turban are give hair cleaning, good smelling, protecting the sunlight, air and mist, and having protection strength.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maung Zaniya, Myanmar Artistic Dictionary, Yangon, Aung Press, 1969, P- 148  
(Henceforth Maung Zaniya, Myanmar Artistic Dictionary)

<sup>2</sup> History of Myanmar Turban, P-17-18

<sup>3</sup> Personal Interview with Tun Lin Myanmar Turban Business (10-5-2020)

## **Conclusion**

The wearing turban had been practiced since the ancient time of Myanmar king and the turban has been worn as male ornament. In Myanmar, there are totally 135 national races and among them Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah and Chins and Rakhine wear the headdress as their traditional ways and styles. There are some different styles of the winding, tying, and holding headband. In the former days, the head was wrapped with the cloth and when the times change, Bamar men have being worn the readymade turbans. At the present time, the turbans have been worn as national pride in the ceremonies that held at home and abroad. The turbans are worn by the president, parliament representatives, judges, lawyers, members of pagodas' trusteeship, and artists. Besides, Burma turban is the bridegroom adornment in wedding reception.

Burma turban is the one of the national dress of man and thus men those who served or lived in abroad wear Bamar turban. It is one of Myanmar prides in wearing turban from Pyu period to present day. In 2008, private turban business came out in Yangon and Mandalay. At the present day, Aung Turban Company and Mya Silk House (Mandalay) and Tun Lin Bamar turban business carry out the turban business. The making turban is a small industry and not great profit one. However, it need to encourage and preserve as the cultural legacy of Myanmar. It can be assumed that the preservation process is responsible to all of Myanmar.

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