

# THE IMPACTS OF DISASTER ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (ICH): LONG TERM TRANSFORMATION CASE STUDY OF ICH IN MYANMAR

**Mya Mya Khin**  
University of Yangon

## **Introduction**

Myanmar has many experiences of disasters, such as those influenced by climate change, natural environmental change, deforestation, flood and droughts. This paper, focusing on human factors, highlights the relationship between local people and their environmental resources; particularly, how cultural development influences their intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The aim of this research is to describe the impacts of disasters on ICH in Myanmar. Specific objectives are: 1) to examine how the native people maintain, transmit and transform their ICH, 2) to explore how they tried to cope and adapt for their survivals and transform their tangible and intangible cultural heritage as their properties when they met disaster – natural disaster and manmade disaster – in their life and 3) to analyze local people's performativity for safeguarding strategies on their ICH.

Three cases were selected to discuss local people's performativity for safeguarding strategies on their ICH: Anauk Phwa Saw Village, located near Bagan in the Mandalay Region; Twentay, located in the Yangon Region; and Thidar Village, near Thidakonepyin in the Ayeyarwady Region of Myanmar.

## **Anauk Phwa Saw and its Residents' Knowledge about Cultivation**

### ***Background history of Anauk Phwa Saw***

The research in Anauk Phwa Saw Village took place in 2007, 2016 and 2017. Bagan is a famous place in Myanmar. Queen Phwa Saw is also well known from this area. She donated buildings such as the Sutaungpyae Pagoda, stone inscriptions, monasteries and Buddhist ordination halls, which are seen in the Sutaungpyae Pagoda's compound even today. She established the village of Phwa Saw and lived there with her followers, supporting the various needs of the pagoda, the Buddhist monks, and others. Later the village was divided during the period from 1970 to 1980 and became Ashae (East) Phwa Saw village and Anauk (West) Phwa Saw village. Anauk Phwa Saw is 3 miles from Nyaung-U and 1 mile east of New Bagan. Lying to its east is Ashae Phwa Saw and lying to its west is the Pagan-Nyaung-U road. Phayani, the Sutaungpyae Pagoda, the Shitmyathnar Pagoda, the Thamahtee monastery, the Thantithukha Dhamma house, a lacquer ware training school and a middle school can be found.

Big earthquakes damaged Anauk Phwa Saw in 1975 and again in 2016. There were no

catastrophic effects to the religious buildings except to the Phayani pagoda, which was restored by the Archaeology Department, Ministry of Culture. But local people suffer from the impact of climate change, affecting the productivity of soils for agriculture. They had to abandon their plots because they could not profit from cultivation. Some businessmen and wealthy persons bought the empty plots and fenced these lands. These are investments because some people saved their money by buying land or house or gold. People living in Anauk Phwa Saw village sold their cultivating lands and changed their livelihood. This change of livelihood and land-ownership is one of the main reasons to choose it as a study area.

There are 120 houses with a total population of 592 (male 272 and female 320) in 2017. Among them, 20 males and 30 females were selected as key respondents. Most of the informants were over 60 years-old since they are the ones who can explain the history of their village and the changes in their society.

### ***Natural hazards and ICH in the area***

One of the key informants explained that the soil became dry and lost its fertility year by year. The cultivators are not able to grow any plants on that kind of land. Thanks to the tourism campaign of Visit Myanmar Year (1996), business people started to come to invest their money for hotels and tourism. The ruling military government (from 1990 to 2010) also planned Anauk Phwa Saw village to be designated as a model village and managed to maintain Bamar's traditional living styles such as housing style, people's costume style and so on to act as a showcase or tourist attraction. The villagers had to keep their housing style as Bamar's traditional housing style. While one or two storied houses were allowed to be built in that village, they did not get a chance to construct modern concrete buildings in those days. When they wanted to repair or rebuild their houses, they had to get permission from the Ministry of Culture, and most villagers had to follow the government's instruction, although they did not like that program.

According to a key informant, General Khin Nyunt also directed them to wear Bamar's traditional dresses and hair style. Most mothers did not want their children to wear traditional hair style and clothing style, because when they went to school, other children from other villages made jokes about their children as being old-fashioned. Besides, Bamar's traditional hair style is not suited to modern clothing. They wanted their children to wear beautiful and modern fashions like the other children. They also wanted to build their houses with modern styles by using concrete and decorated with colors.

There were 590 acres for cultivation in 2007: 46 acres for peanut, 150 acres for sesame, 15 acres for cotton, 45 acres for mung bean (*pe:naù/pe:di:sein:*), 10 acres for pigeon seed (*pe:zin:ngoun*) and 314 acres for millet. These represent the main crops of that village. Their main livestock animals were cows, goats, and chickens. However, their cultivated areas totaled only 60 acres in 2016. Some had sold their cultivated lands and began other businesses. Some people saved their money in the banks, three persons bought cars to be rented for tourists, 15 persons invested in lacquer ware workshops and four persons bought oil machines to produce peanut oil (Khin 2017).

In 2017, their main crops were beans, pigeon seed (*pe:zin:ngoun*), cow pea (*pe:lun:*), horse gram (*pe:bi zá*), mung bean (*pe:naù*), *hsu:bou* (a kind of vegetable with a strong odor), groundnut, sesame, corn and millet. There are also cultivated tamarind trees, cotton plants, a medium-sized tree providing edible leaves and flower buds (*me:za li*), jujube trees (*zi:bin*), thorny trees with whitish bark growing in dry regions (*hta nau:*), lead trees (*aweija*) and Gandara trees. Their main livestock animals are cows, goats, and pigs. Dogs are also raised to work as guard dogs.

According to the laws governing the protection and preservation of the cultural heritage region (1998), Bagan is a cultural heritage zone, in which Phwa Saw village also lies within. If Bagan is designated as a world heritage site, then we should consider the basic economic situation of the residents of that area. The primary economy of residents is based on cultivation, which is also regarded as ICH for these people. If they turned their farm lands into modern hotels, motels, inns and restaurants, questions would arise on how to maintain and transmit their agricultural ICH, and how to maintain and produce their staple foods and their related traditional beliefs, customs and practices. In particular, there are questions about who has responsibility to control, maintain and preserve their local economy based on cultivation and what kinds of research are necessary to preserve the cultivation technology as part of their cultural heritage.

Most people have now sold their farm lands and changed their livelihoods. With the changes in infrastructure, they also accepted the changes of their lifestyle and livelihood. Policies of the central government affected their livelihoods and lifestyles or their socio-economic and socio-cultural changes.

## **Twentay and its Pottery**

### ***Background history of Twentay***

Twentay is a town 20 miles from the southwest edge of Yangon. The Hlaing River is on its west. It includes the Twentay canal, which is the longest manmade canal in Myanmar (22 miles), connecting the Yangon River and the Ayeyarwady River. There are 220 Villages, 65 Village Tracts and 8 urban wards in the Twentay Township of the Yangon Region. Twentay is famous in Myanmar for its pottery, especially in the south. Twentay and Twentay-ware cannot be separated from each other. The local people's economy is based on fishing, farming and pottery production.

The oldest pottery in Myanmar was found in the Padah-lin Caves, a late Hoabinhian site, in the area between Nyaunggyat and Yebok villages in Ywa-Ngan township, Taunggyi district, Southern Shan State that date to 11,000 years ago. The corded earthenware culture of the Neolithic age (6000–4000 years ago) has been found in various places within the great basin of the Chindwin and Ayeyarwady Rivers (Myo 2003). Myo and his group discovered the oldest kiln at Kangyikone, a village beside a creek named the Kyaukphyasan, which is about 2 miles southeast of Twentay. After reporting their findings to the Department of Archaeology, they started to excavate the site in 1999 and 2002 and concluded that the Twentay pottery existed as early as the 7th century AD.

### ***Hazards and ICH in the Area***

According to recent interviews conducted in 2018, some owners of pottery factories continue their business with the aid of INGOs and NGOs. One of their main products is water jars, which are in need in the Ayeyarwady region and in Rakhine State after Cyclone Nargis (2008). They produce water jars by putting filters to purify water and sent them to their customers after the disaster. There are some pottery shops in Twentay that buy pots from Kyaukmyaung, Shwebo and other places. They sell both products of Twentay and other regions.

Leslie White said that technology creates cultural development (Moore 2004). Some scholars have discussed culture's influence on the environment and also how the environment influences culture. Some emphasize the dialogic interplay of environment and human culture. In this case study, the technology has changed the environmental situation. The government constructed the Twentay canal to connect Yangon city and the Ayeyarwady delta. Because of this canal, some parts of the Ayeyarwady landscape and local people's economy or livelihood were changed. The effects of this canal on Twentay pottery have been observed.

During my visit in August 2018, the factory owners told me that their big difficulty is to get the raw material (clay) for making pottery, which is dug near the Twentay canal. After the canal was completed, the potters had to stop digging clay because of the decision by the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation. This decision affected the owners' ability to maintain, preserve and distribute traditional Twentay pottery. They need land for their pottery. They preferred the clay near the Twentay canal, but illegally obtaining it is dangerous as they might be arrested by the authorities from the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

Some scholars, archaeologists, and historians value the local and national culture as something that should be protected, maintained and transmitted for future generations. The state and regional governments also pay attention to their own cultural heritage and now have started to conduct research concerned with natural and cultural heritage of their local areas. In particular, the Yangon regional government has organized scholars, keepers of traditional knowledge, and skilled practitioners to collaborate in this research.

### **Thidar Konepyin and Its ICH**

#### ***Background history of Thidar village***

The village is located in Yeykyi Township and the Ngathaingchaung Sub Township of the Ayeyarwady Region. On its east is the Pathein – Monywa Road and the Thidar Creek. On its west is the Ngawun River, the Pathein River and the Raking Mountain ranges. Its north is bounded by the Thidar creek, forest and mountains. The Ngathaingchaung – Gwa Road marks its south. There are 95 villages and 14 village tracts. Its total area is 75.25 square miles. Transportation here is based on waterways and roads. The population is 2,205 (1,015 males and 1,190 females) in 650 households (Survey, 2018). Key respondents for the study included 10 pagoda trustees, three shamans, one researcher and one leader of a local social organization, having rich knowledge of

the study area, its history, and local strategies for continuing their livelihood.

Thida Konepyin was built by King Wahthudatta in AD 174. It can be regarded as an ancient city or even possibly as a small state. It was renamed in 1623 Kyaityathi during the reigns of King Nandabaya and Queen Thupabar Deiwi. They were regarded by their people as a good ruler with clean governance. After they passed away in 1637, people continued to believe that they still protect and look after their people, and called them Thidar Maunghnyitma (Maunghnyitma means brother and sister). They built three pagodas: Myatheintan in 1627, Shwedanu and Shwekuni during the 14 years from 1623 to 1637 (Nyo 2016).

This village area was under the control of the colonial government in 1852. Its color code changed from black (1962 to 1973) to brown area (1973 to 1975) and finally white after 1975<sup>1</sup>. The village has a long history and a variety of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The local residents explained that there are ruins of city walls, pagodas, monasteries, shrines and historical documents there. However, the area is not particularly famous in Myanmar history.

### **Hazards and ICH in the area**

There were very few effects of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 because the local residents believe that they are under the protection of the Buddha, his Dhamma law, and his Sangha community. They also believe their early king and queen of the 1600s still protect them.

The Myatheintan pagoda had been overgrown with bushes when U Lwin Pyay, who was living in Letpanpin Village, cleared the overgrowth and restored the pagoda in 1869. The religious specialist Daw Thidar (*natkadaw* in Myanmar, shaman in English) told the villagers that the King and Queen existed in their village and pointed out their places, and said that even though the royals had passed away, their spirits are still alive and continue to protect the villagers. Since 1871 when the villagers went to seek the king and queen, they found them and started to pay respect to the Thidar Maunghnyitma (king and queen). The shrines were constructed near the Myatheintan pagoda and their statues were placed there. People believe that *Natkadaw* Daw Thidar also became a spirit for this village after she passed away. A shrine for her was built by the U Sarnan and Daw Kyam family in 1916, and her statue was sent to her shrine by Ye Aung in 1962.

The Thidatkonepyin daytha (region in English) is a 393 years old city and the old walls and gates to the city and the palace can still be seen today. The Myatheintan pagoda festival is the most famous one in this area and it is celebrated three times a year: in *Tapaung* (March), then in *Kason* (May), and finally in *Tawthalinn* (September). The pagoda festivals in *Tapaung* (March) and *Kason* (May) are called *Kone Pwe* (Kone is land and Pwe is festival), and the one in *Thawthalinn* (September) is called *Yey Pwe*

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1 Black means that the area was under the control of anti-government leaders. Brown means that the area was under the control of both the government and the anti-government. White means that that area was under the control of Government forces.

(Yey is water).

When they conduct the pagoda festivals, they also celebrate traditional entertainment such as *Zat Pwe*, cane ball matches, *Piekyawchin*, volleyball, soccer, rowing and *Nat Pwe* (spirit worshipping) and others. There is no conflict, fighting, or quarrelling during festivals because of the protection of the Thidar Maunghnyitma and the Amay Thidar. Most villagers are also strong believers in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. So in the Myatheintan Pagoda compound, the villagers have donated 162 bronze inscriptions for a Dhamma Zayti (pagoda) since 1914. These are the Buddha teachings known as the three Vinaya (Buddhist ethics) reproduced on the bronze tablets. These inscriptions were stored in a building Bidakataik, but they were stolen by a thief. They had been buried under the Thidar creek and one day discovered by children who were playing in the water. Eventually the villagers restored them to the same building.

After finding the bronze tablets, they secured them against thievery by mounting them into the foundations within the concrete walls. The upper parts were secured by iron bars. They needed a knowledgeable person of Buddhist teaching, especially for to arrange the three Vinaya tablets in sequence. One of the tablets is stored in the pagoda trustee office to show a sample to the scholars. One was brought by a representative of military to inform the government about the treasured words and then this one was stored in Military History Museum in Yangon. But now the villagers want this tablet to be returned, to restore it in their pagoda with other tablets.

Thidakonepyin has long history that has been influenced by political situations in those days. People living in this area also have interesting worldviews. Why the residents rely on the Thidar Maunghnyitma former king and queen for their socio-economic situation; or why they celebrate pagoda festival three times in a year; or why they value the bronze Buddhist tablets are derived from the local people's perception of their cultural heritage (tangible and intangible). Climate change and natural hazards can crush their lives and property in a short time, but they can restore their lives again and again. However, the manmade disasters of violence or corruption are more dangerous for them.

## Conclusion

This paper explored impacts of disaster on ICH by looking at case studies in order to understand the long term transformation of ICH in Myanmar.

At Anauk Phwa Saw, the local people are faced with climate change and cannot continue their cultivation in the same way as before. Almost everybody has abandoned their farming and sold their lands in order to adjust their livelihoods. Is this the right response for them? Who will take responsibility for worsening the quality of life? And how can local residents protect their village which is rich in tradition? How best can they promote their traditional village way of life while raising their living standard? These questions will require further research in this area.

In the case of Twentay pottery, we learned several things that are necessary for

managing the protection and preservation of traditional ICH in Myanmar, including access to the raw material for pottery, marketing, and sustainable forms of development by the owners and the potters. Organizations like the Myanmar Ceramic Society, the Myanmar Pottery Society, the regional government, the national government and its Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, INGOS, NGOs and international experts are also important to protect against the effects of both natural and manmade disasters.

In Thidar village, manmade disaster is the main threat for maintaining, preserving and transmitting villagers' ICH: in particular, their need for good, transparent government free from corruption, cooperation between residents and government officials, the belief system and habits of behavior that raise their socio-economic conditions.

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