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WOVEN BUDDHIST RIBBONS OF MYANMAR



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Ms Vanessa Elizabeth Chan Yuen Ying was accredited as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Singapore to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 2017. She was the Director-General of the International Organisations Directorate in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from January 2012 to June 2017. Ms Chan graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Law (Honours) from the University of Cambridge in 1988. She was a Visiting Research Fellow at NSC, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute in 2011.

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Daw Aye Khin's spectacles, tablets, and *sarsikyo*. Taken by the author.

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**Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre
ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute**

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614

TELEPHONE : (+65) 6778 0955

FAX : (+65) 6778 1735

WEB : <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/nalanda-sriwijaya-centre>

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Sarsikyo: Woven Buddhist Ribbons of Myanmar

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DEDICATION

For my sister, Isabel Clare Chan Yuen Ching (1973–2008), who did not live to know of more than the beginnings of this project, but would have been much amused by the speed with which it expanded.

EDITORS' NOTE

The sarsikyo are woven Buddhist dedicatory ribbons, an exceptional yet little-known product of Myanmar's religious heritage. This article narrates the author's personal interaction with the makers and users of the ribbons. We have purposely retained this one-to-one communication from the author's field research in villages and cities throughout Myanmar over the past eight years. One aspect of this oral tradition is embedded in the published references and personal communications to the author, the honorifics used within Myanmar, such as U or Daw (a man/woman elder or senior in social rank) and Ma (a younger woman) have been included throughout.

All dates cited are in the Gregorian calendar except for those suffixed by M.E. (Myanmar Era), to which 638 can be added to give the approximate Gregorian year. The placename Myanmar is used here to refer to the language and culture within which the ribbons were made, although in some cases, the term Burmese has been retained to refer specifically to that ethnic group.

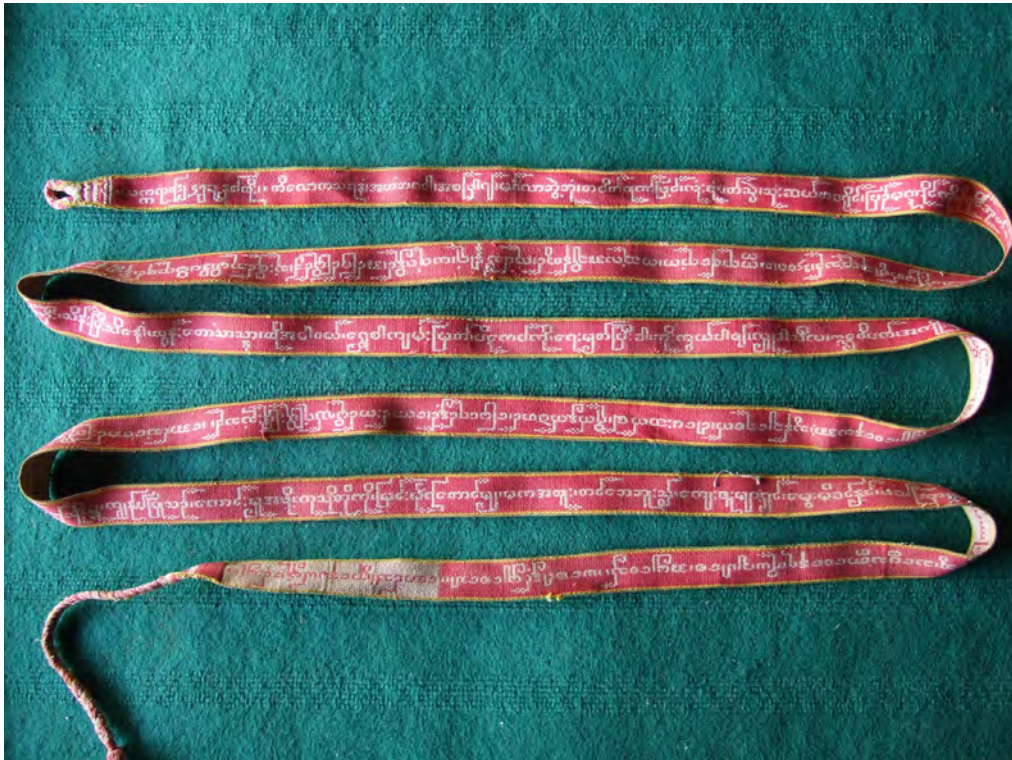
'Cat. No.' in this article refers to the catalogue numbers of Ms. Vanessa Chan's sarsikyo collection. Readers can have access to the images and original Myanmar texts of the ribbons via the online catalogue hosted at ISEAS library SeaLionPLUS portal (<https://sealionplus.iseas.edu.sg>).

INTRODUCTION: FORM AND PRODUCTION

S*arsikyo* ARE LENGTHY TABLET-WOVEN DEDICATORY RIBBONS used originally to secure palm-leaf manuscripts of the *Pitakas* or sacred Buddhist scriptures when the latter were donated to monasteries as works of merit. Some were woven only with geometric patterns or figural decorations, but the most significant ones bear extensive woven texts, often in poetic form. These ribbons, particularly the ones containing text, appear to be unique artifacts of Myanmar Buddhism. To the best of the author's knowledge they were not known or used in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet or India, though more research on this is needed. The texts of the ribbons were woven primarily by the Burmese ethnic majority in Burmese and Pali, but some are known to have been woven in Mon and Rakhine languages by the Buddhist Mon and Rakhine ethnic minorities and possibly also by at least some of the Shan, though the search for actual specimens of Shan-language *sarsikyo* is still ongoing.

The earliest known *sarsikyo* dates to the reign of King Tharlun-min (1629–1648).¹ The latest known specimen is in the author’s collection, dated according to the woven text to 1979. The weaving of *sarsikyo* had died out after the death of the last known professional weaver in Mandalay in 1994, until the technique was recreated in 2017 with funding by the author by the workshop of Mai Ni Ni Aung. This is a social enterprise dedicated to the preservation of traditional backstrap-weaving skills among the southern Chin ethnic minority in Rakhine State and their socio-economic uplift.² This revival—in which the author is an active partner—uses the traditional tablet-weaving methods, and similar Buddhist dedicatory messages woven into the text. However, they are now being sold in the Sonetu Heritage Textiles shop in Yangon in the form of short bracelets worn as an aid to meditation. Full length *sarsikyo* can also be commissioned, and have been given as official gifts to the President of Myanmar and the State Counsellor.

Fig. 1. *Sarsikyo* in full (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



1 At one time Dr. Thein Than Tun possessed this *sarsikyo* (personal communication). Mr. Thweep Rittinaphakorn, an independent scholar based in Bangkok, has shared photographs of a *sarsikyo* in his possession dated in text to the year 1134 Myanmar Era (1777 CE), the reign of King Bodawpaya.

2 The decline of *sarsikyo* production was heralded by the rise of printing presses. A royal proclamation of 15 August 1873, the Newspaper Press Act of 1873, included an article 11 mentioning that ‘Any publisher [including the newspaper publishers] might print the set of Pitakas and make it available in hundreds and thousands of copies entirely free of mistakes and omissions and at a comparatively low price for each set; perhaps a set formerly priced at Ks 10000 would be available at a quarter of it or even less and that would encourage more donors to buy them for monastery libraries and help the extension of the Buddha’s Religion.’ (Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma*, Part 9, p. 209–210)

Woven ribbons are commonly called *sarsikyo* (also spelled *sazigyo* or transliterated as *sa hsi: kyo*) (Myanmar Language Commission 1993). It is so used in this paper. According to local Myanmar scholars the most appropriate technical term would be *sar-htoke-kyo* or *pe-htoke-kyo*, limiting *sarsikyo* to the more ordinary thread used to tie the manuscript and its covers together *before* the wrapping with *pe-htoke-pa-wa* cloth and the final, more elaborate tying with *sa-htoke-kyo*. The words *sar-kyo* or *kyo-sar* were also used but regarded as vernacular rather than literary terms.

The multiplex nature of *sarsikyo* as text and textile makes research complex. As text, they require mastery of Burmese literature and scripts ancient and modern, Burmese (and possibly Mon and Rakhine) poetic forms and Buddhist and Burmese scripture. As textile artefacts, knowledge of Myanmar tablet-weaving, spinning and dyeing practices is necessary to understand them. Their use and significance require knowledge of Myanmar practices, folklore and symbolism as well as Myanmar history and social anthropology. Knowledge of both Pali and Burmese is essential, and some knowledge of Mon and Rakhine and possibly various Shan languages is helpful too. The author has a limited knowledge of these languages, and the expertise needed to make full sense of *sarsikyo* would draw on several areas of knowledge. The aim of this paper is to stimulate the interest of scholars of Myanmar history, art and culture in what has been a little-known area of textile studies and a virtually unknown area of the country's literature. This preliminary study will hopefully trigger further research into the various fields of scholarship encompassed by these unique artefacts.

This article refers to and was originally conceived as an introduction to the following documents:

- The sole previous compilation of *sarsikyo* texts put together by the late Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi using her collection (Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi 1993), and its (currently unpublished) English translation by U Hla Thaung, commissioned by the author.
- Translations of *sarsikyo* texts into modern Myanmar and English from the collection of the author by three Myanmar language scholars (U Kyaw Nyunt, Daw Mar Lay, Assistant Professor Ko Myat Soe) and the author. Items from this collection are referred to here with the number of the online catalogue (Cat. No.) that can be consulted through the ISEAS Library online portal SeaLionPLUS. These examples are taken from the first 190 artefacts collected by the author between 2008 and 2010. The primary criterion for collection was the legibility of the woven text as well as the presence of singular features such as explicit dates and decorative elements. All the texts are in Myanmar script and language, and all but one are *sarsikyo* woven either to wrap palm-leaf manuscripts or *kammawa*, i.e. extracts from the Piṭakas for ceremonial use that were normally written on sheets of lacquered fabric. The exception is a ribbon whose text identifies it as a *ka-ban-kyo* or monk's girdle (Cat. No. 188). A comprehensive survey of *sarsikyo* with respect to style, material, age, language, geographical origin and historical and sociological information would require the study of many more specimens.

This paper is divided into three parts and an appendix: (1) *Sarsikyo* classification; (2) The production and regional distribution of *sarsikyo*; (3) *Sarsikyo* texts. The appendix contains notes on the technique and equipment of tablet weavers in Mandalay and in Shwe Yin

Mar village, and a 1994 *Sarsikyo Weaving Manual* of the Saunders Weaving School. This school was founded in Amarapura in 1914 by Mr. L.H. Saunders, then the Judicial Commissioner of Upper Burma under the United Kingdom's colonial regime in the present state of Myanmar (see Appendix 1). This is the only known local written account of *sarsikyo* weaving technique.

Future publications by the author plan to cover related aspects of the Buddhist culture in which the ribbons were created and used, such as the making and use of *pe-sar*, a palm-leaf manuscript bundle. Further translations of *sarsikyo* from the author's and other private collections in Myanmar and abroad may be published in the future for the benefit of scholars in the fields of Myanmar literature, history and textiles. Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's work is the only book-length publication in Myanmar of *sarsikyo* texts, and regrettably, most of the original *sarsikyo* that she used are now unavailable. This paper also incorporates much further research since 1993 kindly shared by her son, Dr. Ye Myint.

The material in this paper is largely based on enquiries about *sarsikyo* and their associated arts, conducted between 2010 and 2017 in selected locations in Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing and Magwe Divisions and Kyaingtong in eastern Shan State, Taunggyi and Inya Lake in southern Shan State, Theinni (Hsenwi), Hsipaw and Lashio in northern Shan State, and Sittwe and Mrauk-U in Rakhine State. Due to lack of time, it was impossible to visit Mon State or Tanintharyi Region, though Dr. Ye Mying has pursued enquiries in Thaton. Further research could fruitfully be conducted in those two areas, as well as in Shan State, Rakhine and the Central Dry Zone, and among the Palaung ethnic minority. Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's collection of published texts is of primary importance as she had the advantage of conducting several decades of research in a period when there were professional *sarsikyo* weavers still alive (Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi 1993). Furthermore, her compilation is the only known publication of any quantity of Rakhine and Mon-language *sarsikyo*. She also had access to a unique *pe-sar* that recorded a collection of *sarsikyo* texts composed by the scholar-monk Dhammasariya U Zagara for various members of the Mandalay court. U Zagara, a monk at Thingazar Monastery in Mandalay, was known for poetry and believed to have been an assistant of the renowned senior abbot, the Thingazar Sayadaw (1815–86). This is a rare case of the composer of a *sarsikyo* text being identified. The original document, formerly in the collection of the late Dr. Maung Maung Tin of the Myanmar Historical Commission, has now disappeared, making Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's book the only known record of its contents.

The *sarsikyo* has served functional, social and religious purposes:

1. It secured the covered and wrapped bundle of manuscript leaves.
2. Its text publicly recorded the donor's name.
3. Its donation as part of the manuscript bundle was a deed of merit that increased the donor's likelihood of achieving better future existences and eventually Nibbāna.

Sarsikyo were accessories, not items created for their own sake. They cannot be separated from the documents with which they were associated. These documents were initially *pe-sar* or palm-leaf manuscripts; after the production of *pe-sar* died out they were used to secure *kammawa*. Thus, while more research is needed to confirm this, it seems that when *pe-sar* use ended, *sarsikyo* survived because they were also being used for *kammawa*. Prior to that, they would have been used for both *kammawa* and *pe-sar* at the same

time, although immediate evidence for this is difficult to find. Shan *pe-sar* are still used in Thailand, but the ones in Kyaingtung never seem to have been associated with *sarsikyo*. The last professional weavers of *sarsikyo* worked for the *kammawa*-writing businesses.

The *pe-sar* for which *sarsikyo* were woven appear to have been either scriptures or documents dealing with the Pali language. One example was woven for a manuscript entitled 'Eight Documents on Pali Grammar' and another accompanied a commentary on Pali documents (Cat. Nos. 3, 8). They were also used for ancillary but still religiously-connected purposes such as to tie up donations of monks' necessities, or in the form of hanging *sar-tagon*, (banners hung in temples, either inside near the altars, or outside on special poles) to publicise a donation. There is no evidence that *sarsikyo* ribbons meant specifically for wrapping rather than hanging ever had an independent existence as artefacts separate from *pe-sar* or *kammawa*. There is also no indication that *sarsikyo* were ever used to tie up palm-leaf manuscripts of a non-religious nature, such as chronicles or astrological, medical or botanical texts.

As *sarsikyo* were accessory to other items, they were largely disregarded by their monastic recipients; they were not specifically preserved or valued once received. For this reason, it is virtually impossible to find a *pe-sar* that is still secured by its original *sarsikyo*. A *pe-sar* in use would be re-tied using any *sarsikyo* that happened to be handy, or indeed, any piece of string available; spare *sarsikyo* might otherwise be ignored, discarded, sold or recycled for other uses. The author observed one without text in use in a monastery near Magwe as a laundry line; another had been marked with ink on the back at one-foot intervals for use as a tape measure (Cat. No. 176). The author also has what seems to be part of a *sarsikyo* or *ka-ban-kyo* without text that was converted into a belt supporting silver elements probably from one of the non-Buddhist ethnic minorities.

I: SARSIKYO CLASSIFICATION

At this stage in the study of *sarsikyo*, it is not possible to create separate classifications for *sarsikyo* as textiles and as text. A future classification would incorporate colour, style and ornamentation as a textile and explicit and implicit information derived from the text. This part therefore serves as an introduction to the forms and weaving of *sarsikyo*, followed by a tentative temporal classification by width and style. Finally, the threads and dye colours used for *sarsikyo* are summarised.

Form and weaving

The *sarsikyo* is typically a flat, strongly-woven ribbon measuring from 2 to over 7 metres long and from 1 to 4 centimetres wide, woven in a double-faced warp technique with warp-twining used for the selvedge. One end is a tightly braided loop and the other tapers to a long cord or string. The text is woven horizontally along the length of the ribbon. Letter heights vary from 0.25 cm in late *sarsikyo* woven with fine machine-spun thread to 0.9 cm in the earlier examples using hand-spun thread. True mastery of the skill requires the ability to weave the text in round-looking not square letters. Weavers who have not mastered the weaving of round letters are not considered fully formed *sarsikyo* weavers.

Sarsikyo were usually woven from cotton thread, though in the later colonial period silk and possibly synthetic thread were also used. A specimen from Inle Lake woven without text may be made of lotus fibre though this needs to be confirmed by analysis of

the thread. The cotton thread was originally hand-spun, but from the middle of the 19th century, machine-spun thread from the United Kingdom, India or elsewhere in the British Empire was used. The Flying Wheel brand with a factory in South Okkalapa in Yangon was considered the best. Royal or noble commissions could include gold or silver threads. These have largely been destroyed to extract the precious metal (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). U Binnyasara of Sittwe, Rakhine State told Daw Mi Mi Gyi that he had seen an example in which the metal thread had clearly been extracted from the *sarsikyo*, leaving a readable trace where the metal thread had spelled out the text. Based on the examples in her book, references to *sarsikyo* from non-royal or high-ranking donors being ‘golden’ or ‘made of velvet’ are metaphorical rather than literal descriptions, intended to emphasise the high symbolic value and preciousness of the *sarsikyo* (Mi Mi Gyi 1993).

Fig. 2. Palm-leaf manuscript wrapped in cloth and tied with animal-hair *sarsikyo* without text
(Credit: Vanessa Chan)



The Bargayar Monastery collection of palm-leaf manuscripts in Amarapura (a monastic and scholarly collection now maintained by the state) contains several ribbons, without text, woven out of animal-hair fibre. Most are bright orange though one is striped. Both the Bargayar collection and that of the Salay Museum south of Bagan also contain a few somewhat matted and unusually coloured golden-brown animal-hair fibre specimens without text. The author’s collection includes both the bright orange and the golden-brown variety that microscopic examination confirmed as animal-hair, probably goat or sheep. Felt production in Mandalay during the Konbaung period supplied material for the stiff ceremonial garments of the court known for their elaborate winged hems. Wool would therefore have been available for *sarsikyo* as well (Tampawaddy U Win Maung, personal communication).³ These *sarsikyo* are rare and may be limited to Central Myanmar.

While tablet-woven text ribbons are known elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the technique was used to a unique extent in Myanmar (Collingwood 1982). This may have been a relatively recent development. The Myanmar script is notorious for its emphasis on the circularity of its letters, so that successful transposition onto the essentially square grid of warp and weft needs considerable skill. As far as the author is aware, few if any *sarsikyo* use a square style of lettering rather than a round one or, more accurately, the illusion of a round one achieved by weaving straight diagonal lines (Staudigel 2001; 2008). This sug-

³ Tmaampawaddy U Win Maung is the name by which he is known; he lives in Amarapura. Tampawaddy or Tampadipa was one of the ancient names of Bagan.

gests that once the technique of slanting lines was discovered, it spread rapidly. The round letter text may have displaced what was presumably an original square-lettered technique; more research is needed to confirm this.

An extraordinary specimen on display in the National Museum in Yangon is a triumph of the weaver's virtuosity: it is woven with a *double* line of text (see Fig. 3). It unfortunately does not include the date or the weaver's name or location; someone with that degree of skill might have been sufficiently well-known that no identification would have been necessary. The *sarsikyo* has white text on a red background. It is 396 cm long and 3.6 cm wide; its loop and string are broken. It contains 20 words in a sequence 30 cm long, and the letters are 0.5 cm high (see below for the text and possible date). The author has an incomplete *sarsikyo* in the same double-line technique, which has been confirmed from its text to be from the same donation; it was probably made by the same weaver. Mr. Thweep Rittinaphakorn has recently shared a photograph of another double-line *sarsikyo* in his possession, which is from a completely different donation. Based on observable differences in style it is also by a different weaver, indicating that use of this specific technique was not unique to a single individual.

Fig. 3. Double-line *sarsikyo* (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



Cost

The donation of a palm-leaf manuscript to a monastery was historically always a significant act and considered a major act of merit:

It was more costly to copy and donate a set of palm-leaf manuscripts than to build a monument or building in the Bagan Period. A set of palm-leaf scriptures cost up to 3000 ticals of silver to copy at this time.⁴

4 U Thaw Kaung (2008: 77) citing Than Tun, 'Religious Buildings In Burma A.D.1000-1300'.

The cost of a *sarsikyo* was probably only a small proportion of the overall cost of an entire set of Pitakas, although the known texts indicate they often accompanied substantial donations including rest-houses, monasteries and other large undertakings. By the end of their production in the 1970s they were being included without separate charge in the cost of a set of *kammawa*. It is difficult to assess the cost of *sarsikyo* over time due to changes in government, currency and inflation, and variations in the locations, clients and complexities of the *sarsikyo*. This can be seen in the examples below:

- A *sarsikyo* dated 1248 M.E. (1886) cost 5 *kyat* for 220 words in 40 verses with a weaving time of seven days.
- Another dated 1885 also cost 5 *kyat* for only 21 words.

As these examples were produced just after the fall of Mandalay and the dethronement of the King, a situation of extreme social disorder, the weaver and donor might have rushed the order (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication).

The author's collection contains other *sarsikyo* that refer to their price:

- Cat. No. 146, dated 1260 ME (1898), cost 4 *kyat*.
- Cat. No. 38, undated, cost 3 *kyat*.
- A very long *sarsikyo*, dated 1252 M.E. (1890), with nearly 100 verses cost 8 *kyat* and 3 *ma'* (75 *pya*). (Cat. No. 22)

Cat. No. 22 is cited in full below. The contents can be divided into three sections. The first lists the cost of various donations and the familial relationships, with praise for the character of each. In the main section, the donors wish to be reborn as future Buddhas and for all mankind to escape the suffering of life to a celestial rebirth. The ribbon concludes with a record of the date according to the lunar month and day (often astrologically important). Almost as a postscript, the cost of weaving the ribbon is given: a mere 8 *kyat* and 75 *pya* compared with the 960 *kyat* total for the other expenses.

(Cat. No. 22)

May success be with us! We have been looking for a chance to make another donation out of our good will.

We, monastery-builders Ko Yoe and Ma Min Zan, our daughter Ma Ngwe Zin, our son-in-law Mg Tha Hmat, who won our daughter's love, our first granddaughter Ma Me Yin, who gives pleasure to us all equally, Ko Pho Aung, who constantly makes arduous efforts in doing good deeds, and Ma Me O, who has a heart of gold and speaks sweetly, now have the chance to make another donation of the Pitakas of the Buddha.

The cost of building a monastery for donation by our grandparents was 500 *kyat*. The cost to us of building a monastery was 500 *kyat*. The cost to us for a ceremony of the Nine Deities was 50 *kyat*. We paid 100 *kyat* for silk, satin and velvet robes, and 50 *kyat* for a *Kathein* donation in accordance with the wise scriptures. We did not stop with these fine deeds but did more. We paid 50 *kyat* for a clean, cement floor for the monastery, and paid 150 *kyat* to donate a copy of the sacred sermons preached by the Buddha. To copy the two texts

with the nine *kammawa* selections from the glorious Vinaya cost 60 *kyat*. The total of all our expenses was 960 *kyat*.

We share our great merit with our parents, teachers, and relatives. May our meritorious voices resound and echo everywhere on earth! If we receive the Buddha's prophecy that we will be future Buddhas ourselves, may we have the eight preconditions for the fulfillment of the prophecy and certainly, completely and quickly accomplish the good deed of the five kinds of relinquishment in our future existences! May we prevent all living creatures from drowning in the maelstrom of the four torturing causes throughout the 31 planes of existence and help them to reach the bank of Nibbana called *kheima*! May we receive what we wish from among the four rewards.

This deed was finished on the 13th, the waxing day of the month of Thadingyut (Dhadin:gyu'), 1252 M.E. (1890 CE), Friday. May this help us to achieve *nibbana*. The cost of the woven ribbon was 8 *kyat* and 3 *ma* (75 *pya*).

In 2011, the weaver Ma Mar Lar from Shwe Yin Mar Village charged about 60,000 *kyat* for a *sarsikyo* with 15 verses in square text. From the information obtained by the families of the last weavers in Mandalay, it was clearly the lack of demand that eventually made weaving *sarsikyo* uneconomic as a profession.

Sarsikyo with text were used, as far as is known, only for donations of documents or items with a religious connection. Manuscripts on secular subjects could have been tied up with text-free *sarsikyo*, specimens of which are also common from all periods and styles. While the Pitakas were in general use in monasteries and were considered major donations, manuscripts on secular subjects would have been considered minor donations and would have been donated according to the interests of the monastery (U Win Maung, Tampawaddy, personal communication). The monks of the Sasana University of Mandalay suggested that whether the *sarsikyo* had text largely depended on the wishes and budget of the donor (personal communication to the author). In the absence of any *sarsikyo* with text stating that it was made for a manuscript of an entirely secular nature, the issue remains open.

Fig. 4. *Sarsikyo* bundle donated to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, by Yedaw Sayadaw in 2010 (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



Date

Trying to date *sarsikyo* is a complex and unsatisfactory business. It is generally accepted among Myanmar scholars that *sarsikyo* from the 17th century could be found. Even if *sarsikyo* were produced earlier than this, they would probably not have survived until now, leaving open the origins of *sarsikyo* for future research.

Some *sarsikyo* have the date included in the text, usually in Myanmar numerals and Myanmar Era dating, but occasionally in Arabic numerals according to the Gregorian calendar. One unpublished specimen has the date spelled out in text. Some of those with dates also include the day of the month before or after the full moon and the day of the week. Among the specimens published here, the *sarsikyo* with explicit dates, always given in the Myanmar Era, date from after the 1885 fall of Mandalay and the annexation and occupation by the British. Specimens dating from the era of the monarchy do not have explicit dates, but refer directly or indirectly to the monarch in question. Some mention the title of the donor if he or she had official status. When the title was unique to the person or reign, an approximate date can be assigned. Dr. Thein Than Tun claimed to have had in his possession a *sarsikyo* dateable from textual evidence to the reign of King Tharlun-min (1629–1648) (personal communication). The earliest dateable *sarsikyo* from the author's collection, among those that are translated, is probably that of Cat no. 76. The donor, a female court official, is called by her title 'royal nurse-maid and wife of the *Atwin Wun Min Mingyi Maha Min Hla Minkyo*'. Her husband's title is unique and dateable to the reign of King Bagan 1208–1214 M.E. (1846–1852) (Cat. No. 76).

Similarly, a *sarsikyo* 1.7 cm wide beginning with the phrase 'This world/eon is Bada..', recording a donation by the minister *Akyi Daw Mingyi Maha Min Hla Min Gaung*, can be dated to the mid-19th century. According to the chronicles of the Konbaung era, the minister's post and title were awarded on the 9th day of the waxing moon of the month of Tabaung 1208 M.E. (1846), during the reign of King Thayawaddy (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). More subtle clues in the text of the ribbons may also indicate the date. The double-lined *sarsikyo* in the Yangon Museum reads:

According to ancient literature, Buddhist monks were the guide to the world, and respected by Rome and Greece. (We) pay our respects to the monks. Amount is a hundred [this may be either the cost of the *sarsikyo* or the number of monks to whom the donation was made]. For the ordination of (our) son and the ear-piercing ceremony of (our) daughter, (we) donated to the monks three sets of robes including girdles and a hundred sets of dark, earthenware monks' bowls. (We) also donated food including the finest meat curry to monks and to all who came from east, west, north and south in the town of Ar Lar Kap Pa. (We) have already donated mansions and lakes for the public welfare. For these meritorious deeds of the manuscript donor, done out of respect, may (we) in future lives be freed from the four nether worlds, the three disasters, the eight unfavourable environments, and the five enemies; (we) pray for the prize of being among the first to be enlightened with the four noble truths and the five kinds of wisdom and the fulfilment of the fifteen duties before Arimettaya, the future Buddha, when He achieves enlightenment under the Gan Gaw tree. May all Brahman deities, for this merit [break; the last words were commonly 'say *sadu*.'] (Translated by Dr. Ye Myint and the author).

The surprising mention of Greece and Rome in the text above probably refers to a famous poem by the poet Than Gyo U Kyaw Hla of Maungthaung, a village adjacent to Arlarkappa, Sagaing region. The poem commemorated a debate between King Mindon and a monk, reminiscent of a similar debate at the court of the renowned Greco-Buddhist King Milinda.

Arlakappa is adjacent to Shwe Yin Mar village in Sagaing Region (22.043999° N, 95.498336° E). Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's grandmother was a donor to the pagoda there, which is attributed to the 12th century Bagan King Kyanzittha. The commercial production of tablet-woven *ka-ban-kyo* and *thabeik-kyo* ribbons without text were documented during the author's 2011 field survey (Figs. 5–8). The weavers' looms consisted of two short posts fastened to short boards, which are kept in place by large stone weights. The posts were driven directly into the ground, allowing very long warps to be strung without undue expenditure of wood. As in the global technique, square cards or tablets were strung together on the warp with either S or Z stringing, or in Myanmar terms, left or right-handed stringing. According to the Shwe Yin Mar weavers, for plain ribbons, the average size of a pack of tablets was 30, but they could vary from 24 to 36 tablets. Each tablet had four holes, one at each corner. The more tablets, the wider the finished length of ribbon, with the upper limit in width determined by the size of the weaver's hands.⁵

Fig. 5. Traditional *ka-ban-kyo* weavers from Shwe Yin Mar village (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



Fig. 6. Traditional method of tablet-weaving monks' girdles and carrying straps for monks' bowls in Shwe Yin Mar village (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



5 The Appendix contains further information on their technique and materials.

Fig. 7. Tablet weaver of *ka-ban-kyo* in Shwe Yin Mar Village–beater and tablets (Credit Vanessa Chan)



Fig. 8. Tablet-weaving loom, Mahargandayone Monastery (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



The Yangon Museum double-lined *sarsikyo* is unusual in having a date indicated in the text corroborated by evidence from fieldwork. Most *sarsikyo* have no indications of their date (or place) of production in the text; this highlights the nature of *sarsikyo* as a physical object, not merely as a vehicle for a text. The type and size of thread, size and style of the ribbon, the text and any ornaments and the dye and colours all affect the assignation of an approximate date. The harshness of the climate and the enthusiasm of the local vermin, together with the general indifference towards the care of *sarsikyo*, make the condition of the ribbon no guide to its age. Especially among the specimens woven from handspun thread, mere decrepitude can give the impression of the greatest antiquity to a relatively recent piece of work.

The limitations of the medium, both technical and social, also need to be borne in mind, especially in respect of the artistic style or ‘handwriting’ of the weaver. It is likely that most weavers followed a text written out for them. ‘Error marks’ that look like proof-reading marks are woven into some specimens, pointing to spelling mistakes. They may

be an indicator that at least some weavers were illiterate, since the weaving process does not allow subsequent insertion of error marks. They must have been woven in deliberately, most likely because the weaver was copying a text where the scribe had made a spelling mistake and then corrected it, using the error mark. Had the weaver been able to read, she would have simply woven the correct text from the start (Weavers of Mai Ni Ni Aung's workshop, personal communication).

It is not known whether weavers generally favoured a particular style of script, or whether they would vary it according to the preference of the donor (there is no technical reason why they could not). Analysis of the script style, as opposed to spelling and text, would probably be most usefully done in consultation with an expert in tablet-weaving to distinguish between features that result from the weaver's own skill and aesthetic preferences, and those that result from the technical limitations of the medium. Research into local preferences and variations in spelling and script would be useful. Comparison with writing specimens in other media will also be necessary, especially for orthographic comparison. Changes in the way that the ampersand (&) was written/woven are reflected in both *pe-sar* and *sarsikyo* and can be used as a rough indicator of date (Dr. Thein Than Tun, personal communication). The orthography of the double-line *sarsikyo* described above omits the *au'ka myit* (tonal dot under the letter to indicate the creaky tone) and the *wi' sa pauk* (tonal mark resembling a colon that indicates an even tone) which may also assist in its dating (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication).

Width

Sarsikyo are divided here into three types according to their width, which corresponds roughly with their style, materials, and date. Width and date overlap as will other classifications, such as by script style; colour; weaving style, quantity and nature of the ornament; the various techniques used to weave the string and loop; and the dyes. Classification of *sarsikyo* by their texts will be more relevant to scholars of language, literature and religion, but for purposes of dating, they should also consider these other elements of a *sarsikyo*. Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi classified her *sarsikyo* by their texts, but without describing their appearance (1993), making the present classification a new undertaking.

(a) Wide = circa late 18th to mid-19th century

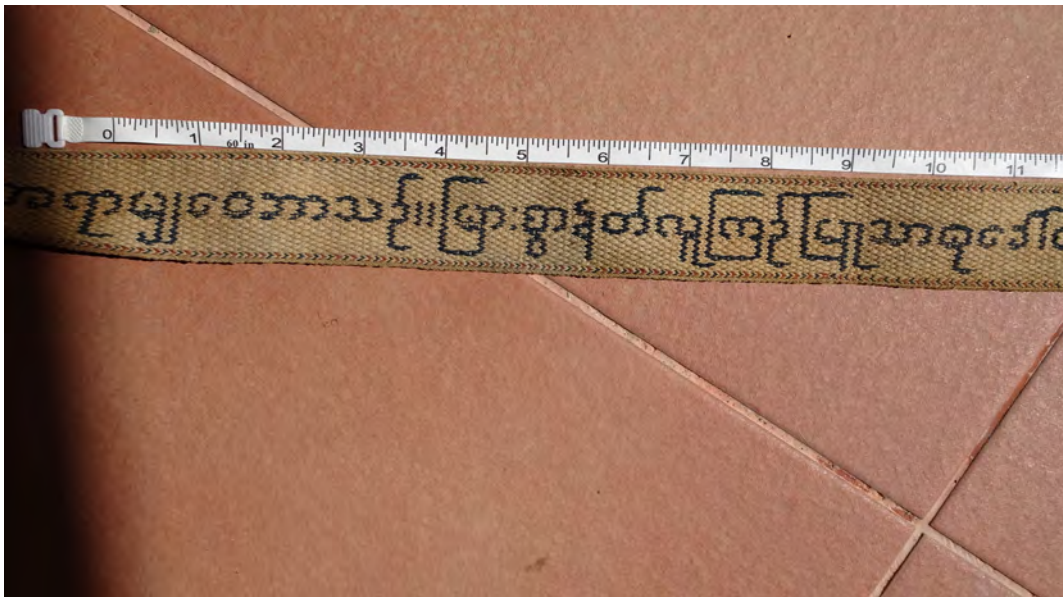
Greater width and handspun thread are attributes that tend to go together and indicate an earlier date of weaving. Earlier *sarsikyo* are *circa* 2.7 cm to 4 cm wide and usually less than 3 metres long. They are woven from thick, hand-spun cotton thread with little non-textual decoration. They usually have a brown or blue ground, woven with simple geometric patterns. When script appears, it is in white and tends to be large and relatively simple in style due to the bulk of the threads, while being already round in shape and not necessarily crude in execution (Cat. Nos. 24, 26 and 27).

Ornaments, when they appear, are usually geometric forms or patterns, though plants, animals, stupas and *nat* figures are seen, usually in a quite large and simplified style. It is probable that such *sarsikyo* date from *circa* the late 18th to the mid-19th century. Machine-spun thread started appearing in Myanmar by the mid-19th century (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). However, there was a long period of overlap between the two types, and narrow *sarsikyo* can be found being produced alongside those made

of handspun thread. Almost every white-on-blue *sarsikyo* known is wide, is woven of hand-spun thread, is simple in style and has minimal ornament. There is only one narrow, machine-spun white-on-blue specimen in the author's collection; it is also the only one that the author has seen (Cat. 76). Like the earlier, handspun specimens, and like the far more common red *sarsikyo* of similar style, it has no ornaments. It may have been black originally, and have faded slightly to dark blue.

White-on-red *sarsikyo* woven from handspun thread are considered by dealers to be slightly later in date than the blue specimens and more common. There are also hand-spun *sarsikyo* with yellow text on red backgrounds, and rarely, yellow texts on green backgrounds. Two unpublished *sarsikyo* have also been found by the author with blue text on a white background. These were both woven in Salay and may reflect either the idiosyncrasies of the weaver (they were collected together, at Inle Lake), or a more general local preference. Closer examination of the specimens by an experienced tablet-weaver should reveal whether they are by the same person. Regardless of colour, the text in all *sarsikyo* woven of handspun thread is simple in style, often occupying the full width or almost the full width of the ribbon. Ornaments, if any, are usually simple geometric decorations and occasional discrete shapes and animal figures, some so simplified as to be unidentifiable. Red handspun *sarsikyo* generally have more ornaments than blue ones.

Fig. 9. Rare blue on white *sarsikyo* from Salay (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



(b) Medium = circa mid-nineteenth to early 20th century

The second style of *sarsikyo* is of middling width, from 1.5 to 2.5 cm wide, and almost all are woven of machine-spun thread, though handspun examples exist. They have solid-colour grounds, almost all red with white texts and ornaments. These are by far the most common kind of *sarsikyo* and may be considered the default mode. A specific variety is plain red with green selvages, but most have either white or red selvages, resulting in a ribbon of solid red in the latter case. In those *sarsikyo* texts in Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's book that refer to their weaving methods, the *sarsikyo* are all referred to as being red and white (1993).

A much less common variety is green with yellow text and ornaments. The green colour has often faded in these specimens, leading to great difficulties in reading and transcribing the text. All the silk *sarsikyo* with text seen by the author have been of this yellow-on-green variety, though this may be coincidental. Silk *sarsikyo* were made in other colours including a brilliant magenta (Ralph Isaacs, photograph shown to the author). The author also has in her collection a green silk *sarsikyo* (faded almost to yellow) without text and a yellow-on-green *sarsikyo* woven in cotton.

The tendency is for *sarsikyo* with plain backgrounds, especially the red ones, to have a great deal of text, and to not have much ornament of any kind beyond foliate decorations to the letters. However, very brief *sarsikyo* with merely either the date, the donors' names or a stock poem can also appear in this mode; the length of the text does not necessarily correspond with the length of the ribbon. The text can cover almost the full width of the ribbon, or it can run in a central narrow band down the ribbon. The letter height of the text is usually from 1.4 cm to 1.6 cm. According to Daw Khin Mar's testimony about her mother Daw Nyein's work, plain-background, middling-width, machinespun-thread *sarsikyo* can be considered to have been made from the late 19th century right up to the late 20th century).

There is also a noticeable group of middling-width *sarsikyo* that were woven in multiple stripes, mostly in colour combinations of pink and green, red and green and red and pink. These last tend to be particularly difficult to read even when the dye has not faded, due to the lack of contrast; this indicates that legibility was not high on the list of the donors' or weavers' priorities. These may represent an intermediate stage between the plain-background *sarsikyo* and the very narrow, multi-coloured, striped ones that reflect the last stage of professional *sarsikyo* style. Until more specimens from this group with dates can be found, this conclusion is speculative.

(c) *Narrow = circa early to late 20th century*

Narrow-width *sarsikyo* are usually from 1 to 1.4 cm wide. The letter height can be as small as 0.25 cm, but is usually around 0.3–0.4 cm. They are almost always in what is known among Myanmar scholars and dealers as 'Mandalay style': multi-coloured stripes running the length of the ribbon and a plethora of finely-detailed ornaments sometimes making the text almost illegible especially where the background colour has faded. They date from the early to late 20th century, probably associated primarily with weavers for *kammawa*. The stripes are often in very bright colours (purple, pink, green, turquoise, dark blue, light blue, red, yellow and orange, in various combinations) indicating synthetic dyes. One of the green dyes used seems particularly fugitive (this is a technical term for a dye that tends to fade), and where it forms the central stripe it has often faded almost to white, making the white text woven against it almost illegible. Some of these can be deciphered by reading them from the back, in a mirror.

While vivid and unusual colour combinations occur, there are also narrow *sarsikyo* woven of handspun thread and plain, red-background ones in machine-spun thread. There are numerous variations within the common categories. Further examination of *sarsikyo* collated with the information from their texts is necessary to identify how these differences in style reflect regional and temporal variations.

Fig. 10. Later style *sarsikyo* in full (Source: Vanessa Chan)

Handspun or machine-spun thread

The most reliable indicators that a *sarsikyo* was produced in the later period is the use of imported, machine-spun thread (used in British-controlled Myanmar after about 1850) and synthetic dye to make them; the later became common around the beginning of the 20th century. The difference between the wide, handspun specimens and the narrow, ‘Mandalay-style’ specimens is obvious. However, specimens of the middling width category can be ambiguous in their classification, since to the naked eye—and even with some degree of magnification—it is not always easy to tell a thick, machine-spun thread from a fine, hand-spun one, especially if the cotton was of good quality and the spinner was skilled. Handspun cotton fibres were twisted into yarn by rolling against the spinner’s thigh or arm, thus producing tightly, twisted thread (Mai Ni Ni Aung, personal communication). The most straightforward way to distinguish handspun from machine-spun thread is by touch. A *sarsikyo* woven from machine-spun thread will, to the careful and practiced hand, feel smoother and harder than an equally well-woven specimen made of hand-spun thread, simply because of the greater uniformity of the machine-made thread. However, if the fabric is worn or damaged, this test is not completely reliable.

Text

The quantity of text on *sarsikyo* varies from hardly any (name of donors, date, stock verses) to enormously long texts of more than 100 verses. When in verse form, each verse is normally four to five words long, with varying rhyme schemes. The later *sarsikyo* tended to be in prose and convey straightforward information about the donors and, occasionally, weavers. *Sarsikyo* without text seem to have followed the same development as those with text, from wide ones made of handspun thread and woven in simple stripes or repeating patterns, to narrow, brightly coloured ones made of machine-made thread with delicate

ornaments. Completely plain red *sarsikyo*, with neither text, ornament nor pattern, are sometimes found, and can be of both hand-spun and machine-spun thread. These may have been made to secure donations of monks' necessities (U Win Maung (Tampawaddy), personal communication). This is plausible although two *sarsikyo* texts state that they were woven to tie up donations of monks' necessities, so obviously non-textual *sarsikyo* were not the only ones used for this purpose (Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi 1993).

As with the correlation between text and style noted above, further study is needed to link styles, regions and era, to determine whether a *sarsikyo* is anomalous or simply a little-known style.

Dyes

Laboratory analysis is necessary to ascertain the dyes used for making *sarsikyo*. In general, the earliest dyes were the natural ones in use for other textiles in Myanmar.

Blue, Brown and Green: The blue was obtained from indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*) and the brown was probably from *htanaung* (*Acacia leucophloea*), while for green, yellow-dyed thread it was boiled with twigs of the indigo plant (Hardiman 1901; Singer 1993). Comparison of *sarsikyo* and modern textiles dyed with natural dyes shows that various shades of blue from light to dark were probably produced by indigo (Myanmar Yanant Textile).

Yellow and Orange: The chipped or powdered heartwood of the *pein-ne* or jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) was and is used to dye monks' robes yellow to brownish orange, although today a synthetic dye is used, unless a donor of robes specifies and pays for the more expensive natural dye. It may well also have been used for *sarsikyo*. Sappanwood (*Caesalpinia sappan*), native to the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, produces a deep yellow to red and brown range and may also be a possible candidate (Cannon 2003). Yellow was also obtained by boiling thread in water with crushed saffron bulbs (Hardiman 1901). Orange was produced by rubbing seeds of *thidin* (*Bixa orellana*) together in water mixed with soap-sand. The white thread was then boiled in the resultant orange-coloured liquid. The Saunders Weaving Institute confirms this and states that *thidin* was the first dye used for monks' robes in Myanmar. Since the annatto tree is a native of South America and therefore cannot pre-date the discovery of the Americas by Europeans, this seems unlikely. Furthermore, the Myanmar tradition is that monks' robes were originally dyed with jackfruit or *pein-ne*, as noted above. Orange is a rare colour in which to find *sarsikyo*, and except when obviously derived from a synthetic dye is usually in fact a faded red.

Their recipes for orange are:

- (a) Pound the seeds and squeeze out liquid 5 times. With cotton, dye first 100% with 50% tea-leaves boiled in water. No need for silk. Fix with 4% alum mid-way through the process.
- (b) Pound the seeds and squeeze out liquid 5 times. Dye with this liquid + 100% boiled bark of the than tree (*Terminalia oliveri*) + 25% turmeric. Fix with 4% alum mid-way through the process.

Beige: The bark of the jackfruit tree or pounded leaves of the teak tree may also be used, but the resulting colour is a rather nondescript and uninspiring beige. The leaves of

the *banda* or Indian Almond (*Terminalia cattapa*) produce a light, greenish yellow (Saunders Weaving School, example shown to the author).

Red-brown: The red-brown colour could have been produced by several plants, including cutch or *shar*, a powder made from the chipped heartwood of *Acacia catechu*, a tall, deciduous tree found in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India (Cannon 2002). Other options were *yone*, the bark of *Anogeissus acuminata*; *hpalan*, the bark of *Bauhinia racemosa*; and *thidin* or annatto, produced from the seeds of *Bixa orellana*. (Saunders Weaving Institute, Amarapura, personal communication to the author). According to U Zotika, the Deputy Principal at Paung Daw Oo Monastic Education High School (Mandalay), the crushed fresh leaves of the teak tree produce a red stain commonly used to mark the first page of a paper text, but it is not known how lasting this is or whether it was used for textiles or *sarsikyo* (U Zotika, personal communication).

True red (*a-ni*) was usually obtained from boiling powdered stick-lac (*cheik*) together with soap in hot water (Hardiman 1901, Saunders Weaving Institute). One recipe specifies:

(a) Pound 130% *cheik* and soak in water. Mix cotton with 100% water obtained from boiling rice. No need for the rice-water for silk. Boil-dye the thread and 130% boiled tamarind leaves (*Tamarindus indica*)

(b) Pound 130% *cheik* and soak in water. Mix cotton with 100% water obtained from boiling rice. No need for the rice-water for silk. Dye with *cheik* liquid. Fix with 4% alum mid-way during the process. (Saunders Weaving Institute, personal communication).

Stick-lac or lac made from the secretions of insects of the genus *Laccifer* and others was used as a general fabric-dye and to colour sealing-wax. In contrast, the red of Myanmar and Chinese lacquerware usually came and still comes occasionally from vermilion also known as cinnabar, a (toxic) mercury compound. A different shade of red (*panyin*) was obtained as follows:

The ripe *zi-thi* (*Zizyphus jujuba*) is soaked in water until it is loose in its skin. It is then well-kneaded, and the water drained off. The white silk thread is soaked in the drained off liquor, which contains both mucilage and an acid, for a day of twelve hours, Safflower is meanwhile soaked in water and kneaded or crushed with the hand. The thread, after soaking in the *zi-thi* water, is dipped and stirred about in the liquor obtained from the safflower until the required shade of red is obtained. Several washings or dippings in this liquor take place. (Hardiman, 1901)

Dyestuffs would reasonably be expected to vary from area to area, depending on what was easily available locally. However, it also seems logical to assume that in the royal cities all dyestuffs known in Myanmar, whether locally produced or imported, would have been available.

Synthetic dyes, with their superior colour range and ease of use, gradually replaced natural ones after their introduction in the colonial era. Hardiman noted at the beginning of the twentieth century that synthetic dyes were already replacing natural ones in the silk industry throughout Myanmar. It seems reasonable to suppose that this would also have been the case for the cotton industry, and therefore the thread used for *sarsikyo*.

The *ka-ban-kyo* weavers in Shwe Yin Mar (at the time of research in 2011 before they ceased production) did their own dyeing, using synthetic dyes, and synthetic fibre thread, which is less expensive, more durable and easier to clean than cotton. The monastic *ka-ban-kyo* weavers in Amarapura also use synthetic thread.

Iconography: Ornaments and figural motifs or images of sarsikyo

Sarsikyo are read from left to right beginning from the loop end. The sequence of images and text can be interpreted to represent the approach to the platform symbolised by its guardian lions/*chinthe*, then the beings with whom merit is to be shared, then through the text both the donation itself and the act of donating are specified. The final images after the end of the text, the gong, bell, earth-goddess and *tagon-daing* would then be interpreted to reflect the successful completion of the donation, the sharing of the merit and the calling of the earth and celestial beings to witness (Isaacs 2014).

Late-stage *sarsikyo*, especially the narrow, longitudinally-striped, multi-coloured 'Mandalay style,' can be read as summarising the entire process of donation (Isaacs 2014). Not all *sarsikyo* carry all the elements of the programme, and earlier *sarsikyo* do not seem to be standardised in their iconography. Since there are now no living professional weavers of *sarsikyo* from earlier generations, their interpretation of each image is unknown. However, the commonly understood significance of various motifs means that even ribbons without text can communicate intent, while striped or geometrically patterned ones are enigmatic.

All the wide handspun *sarsikyo* without text have various geometric patterns woven into them. It is unknown whether these had significance beyond local custom and the whim of the weaver. While most indigo-dyed, handspun *sarsikyo* are without decoration other than text, basic motifs such as the combination of nine dots in geometric or floral shapes, usually interpreted as such as the *nawarat* or Nine Jewels, are seen along with other geometric designs, animals, plants and an empty throne.

Motifs appear to have begun as developments of the geometric patterns used in what are classified here as the earliest, textless *sarsikyo*. They are less common in early indigo-or red-dyed handspun and plain red and white machine-spun thread *sarsikyo*, the latter being often notably text-heavy. There was then a gradual increase in complexity to approach what has been interpreted as a full-fledged iconographic programme on the multi-coloured striped *sarsikyo*. The increased technical capacity of the weavers and the use of machine-spun thread and synthetic dyes were also significant in the evolution of *sarsikyo* decoration. The complex decorative flourishes added to individual letters of the script follow a similar course of development. To the best of the author's knowledge these are symbolically neutral.

The earlier, more geometric ornaments such as the thunderbolt and diamond recall Tibetan tablet-woven ribbons as seen in Staudigel (2001; 2008). With the geometric ornaments, it is always difficult to determine whether the geometric ornaments are chosen for cultural significance or because they are easy to weave. For instance, the diamond-in-diamond pattern in some *sarsikyo* is also seen in the woven bamboo walls of rural houses all over contemporary Myanmar. It may be significant, or it may simply be an easy, attractive pattern. By the time obviously identifiable images appear, they have significance beyond mere decoration and differences reflect different regions (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). The question of regional styles, however, needs the examination of a larger

sample of *sarsikyo*. Each discrete motif may stand for a class of beings with its inclusion in a *sarsikyo* allowing the merit accrued by the donation to be shared with the beings represented by each motif (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). Merit is increased by being shared widely and accepted freely, usually by saying ‘*sadu*’ or ‘well done!’ upon making a donation. The motifs in a *sarsikyo* thus reflect the donor’s desire to share merit with all visible and invisible beings near and far. Here follows a list of common *sarsikyo* motifs:

(i) *Wathondari*,⁶ the Earth Goddess and Nat figures

At the moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment, when threatened by Mara, the Lord of Illusion, the Buddha called on the Earth Goddess to witness his Enlightenment. She wrung out her hair wet with the water of the Buddha’s many donations from His past existences and washed Mara and his followers away. Thus, the image of Wathondari appears in *sarsikyo* as a witness to the donation. This image always comes at the end of the *sarsikyo* usually just before the image of the *tagon-daing* or banner-pole.

On older *sarsikyo* the name of Wathondari tended to be incorporated into the text (Cat. No. 21 and Cat. No. 27, both blue, and Cat. No. 36, red). In later examples, the goddess is not mentioned in the text but appears as a figure holding long tresses of hair. She is also sometimes called to witness in later *sarsikyo* (Cat. No. 52 for a *kammawa* and Cat. No. 173). The text and English translation of Cat. No. 52 is given below:

- The first verse notes the donation of the lacquered manuscript, a silk and satin wrapping and the *sarsikyo* for the *kammawa* texts.
- The donor wishes to attain Nibbāna and to quickly be released from rebirths.
- The closing section shares merits with family members and all beings, hoping that the world will reverberate in witnessing the good deed.

(Cat. No. 52)⁷

We copy the selected text of *kammawa* preached by Lord Buddha, highest among the three kinds of being, and donate the the lacquered manuscript wrapped in the silk and satin scarf and girdled with the velvet⁸ wrapping ribbon.

As a result of this meritorious deed of donation, may we be completely free from all unwanted bad sensations and happenings including the absence of peace and good deeds. May we receive what we desire in torrents, and as if by the surge of high-tide! We wish for the great reward of quickly attaining the auspicious ground of Nibbāna, without return to the cycle of rebirths and any plane of existence occupied by the three kinds of being!

May our merit be equally heard and shared by our parents and grandparents, and all beings eligible for Nibbāna living in the three worlds! May the earth shake itself with echoes and vibrations to praise and witness our meritorious donation and say ‘Well done!’ ‘Well done!’ ‘Well done!’

6 Also Vasondre, Wasondre, Wathoundera, Wasondari, Wathoundarei, and other variants.

7 The beginning of this *sarsikyo* was cut off but re-stitched. In the part joined, the *pada* preceding ‘စညောတြိညာဒါစတြိယထနဿ ခြင်္သေ့တို့စတုရနဿတြိနဿ’ is missing.

8 This *sarsikyo* is made of cotton. The reference to velvet is probably a metaphorical allusion to its spiritual value.

A different form of invoking the earth is to call on it to shake in acknowledgement of the donation (Cat. Nos. 3, 183, and 189). Cat no. 99 invokes both the earth goddess and Yama, King of Hell (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication to the author).

Nat figures usually appear in a pair at the foot of the *tagon-daing*, presumably as guardians and witnesses. Independent *nat* figures are uncommon, and may represent *Thagya-min* (the Vedic god Sakka or Indra), the King of *Nats*.

Fig. 11. The earth goddess Wathondari wringing out her hair with a gong and antler striker below
(Credit: Vanessa Chan)



(ii) Banner-poles (*tagon-daing*), gongs and bells, drums.

Gong, bell and *tagon-daing* are all considered symbols of donation. When a donation is made, gongs or bells are struck to let the spirits and invisible beings know that the donation has been accomplished. The *tagon-daing* that stands on the pagoda platform lets faraway beings also know that a donation has been made. Images of bells, gongs and the *tagon-daing* surmounted by a *hti* (umbrella to signify its sacredness) with one or two *sar-tagon* or *tagon-lone* hanging from it are often shown at the end of a *sarsikyo* almost always with the *tagon-daing* as the final image. The bell is usually shown hanging from a stand with the traditional deer antler striker placed below it, (some rural temples still have antler strikers). The gong hangs from its stand with a hammer below it. One ribbon has what appears to be a drum and beater (Cat. No. 136). Like the gong and bell, this seems to signify the announcement of the donation. Often a sacred *hinnthar* bird (a mythologized Brahminy Duck) stands on top of the gong and bell stands and the *tagon-daing*. The *tagon-daing* can have two *nat* figures or simply a low fence at the base.

Fig. 12. *Tagon-daing* (banner-pole) with *hinnthar* and *nats* at the base (Source: Vanessa Chan)



Gongs, bells and *tagon-daing* are always woven along the length of the ribbon so that they can only be ‘read’ with the ribbon hanging vertically. This is probably a consequence of their size, and weavers often take advantage of the available length to make the *tagon-daing* enormously long. The most recent known professionally-woven *sarsikyo* has a truncated, stumpy *tagon-daing* rather resembling a fire-hydrant, suggesting that Daw Nyein, the weaver, misjudged the length of her warp (ISEAS 2018, Cat. No. 161)

(iii) *Zoomorphic motifs*

The numerous zoomorphic motifs in *sarsikyo* may reflect the sharing of the merit of the donation with all creatures and spirits, including animals all over the universe. Animal motifs in earlier *sarsikyo* appear as discrete images, sometimes in front of the main body of the text. In later *sarsikyo* with a more fully developed and standardised symbolic programme, they can also function as markers, bracketing or interspersed among the text verses.

Common mythical and actual zoomorphic motifs may be interpreted as creatures of the air, forest and trees, underground and water:⁹

- *Chinthe or mythical lions and actual lions*: independent motif; also appear as text markers, bracketing verses; possibly signify guardianship; *chinthe* may be distinguished from the lion by a feathery rather than single-tufted tail; may also represent forest creatures.
- *Galon (the garuda), keinnari/keinnara or mythical creatures with human head and bird body*: independent motifs, may represent creatures of the air.
- *Elephants, with and without tusks*: royal creatures, symbolising two of the days of the astrological week.
- *Peacock and a mythical hinnthar bird*: independent motifs with lines of the tail all same length for a peacock, while longer to shorter slanted lines are used for *hinnthar*, although this distinction is not always made. In the modern *sarsikyo* woven in 2017 as the author’s official gift for State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the new motif of the Fighting Peacock was deliberately included as a reference to the National League for Democracy, whose emblem it is.
- *Dog*: domesticated animals of the donors’ household included in the sharing of merit; distinguished by having pricked ears and curly tail.
- *Mythical pyinzarupa, composite of five different animals*: rare and of obscure origin, representing guardianship, protection.
- *Mythical manuthiha, with human head and two lions’ bodies*: probably signifies guardianship, since it is used on pagoda approaches.
- *Parrots*: usually appear not discretely but in pairs as text markers, woven horizontally along the length of the ribbon bracketing sections of verse. They may represent creatures of the air. As parrots can talk, they may also signify speech; some are woven with lines emanating from beaks like streamers or sounds.

⁹ Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication.

- *Fish and frogs*: usually woven in pairs as text markers, bracketing verses of text; may represent speech, due to the noise of their croaking. The bubbles emitted by some fish may be considered a metaphor for speech (Isaacs, personal communication). Fish that are themselves within brackets may also represent a netted catch or wealth (Dr. Thein Than Tun, personal communication).
- *Snake and naga*: may be considered guardians of Buddhism.¹⁰
- *Lizard, gecko*: may represent arboreal animals or domestic animals, since lizards also live in houses. They are more common in earlier *sarsikyo* than in later ones.
- *Stag*: may represent forest creatures or be an indirect reference to the First Sermon of the Buddha in the Deer Park in Varanasi.
- *Mythical hinnthar bird (a mythologised Brahminy Duck)*: usually associated with bells, gongs and *tagon-daing*; may represent creatures of the air and celestial creatures. It may also refer to a previous life of the Buddha as King of the *Hinnthar* birds.
- *Peacock*: symbol of the Konbaung Dynasty; sharing of merit with the King and Queen (Cat. No. 3).
- *Horse*: may represent domesticated animals; it may also represent the Buddha's Great Departure from royal life.

Individual animal images in machine-spun *sarsikyo* are almost always vertically woven across the width of the ribbon. In earlier, handspun *sarsikyo*, the images are larger, and those of elongated animals like geckoes and snakes are often methodically spread out along the length of the *sarsikyo*. These reptiles are usually found in early, white-on-blue specimens and are rarely seen in later *sarsikyo*. The images are usually woven with the bodies oriented leftwards, though occasionally images are found that are oriented towards the right. In the case of *chinthe* and stags, the figures may be looking forwards or backwards. It is unknown whether there is any significance to either the orientation of the body or the direction of gaze.

(iv) Throne

The Myanmar-style throne platform is usually depicted as empty, with or without a *hti* or royal umbrella above it. Images that look like thrones without *hti* may actually represent drums or offering-stands, or when read horizontally, as simplified thunderbolts. The only Buddha image woven into a ribbon known to the author is the Mon *sar-tagon* mentioned above. This may be due to Thai influence along the eastern border areas.¹¹ Staudigel (2001; 2008) and Isaacs (2014) consider the empty throne a symbol of the Buddha. The throne motif may also have political significance for *sarsikyo* woven after the 1885 British conquest and occupation of Upper Burma, or have been a symbol of sharing merit with the dethroned King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat.¹²

¹⁰ Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication.

¹¹ U Thaw Kaung, personal communication.

¹² Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication

(v) *Geometric and floral ornaments*

These are usually built up out of several smaller picture elements, typically square but sometimes round. They can be single or multiple flowerheads, diamonds, checkerboards, columns, X-shapes and lobed squares. Zig-zag lines, arrowheads and diamond shapes are also used to build up geometric figures. The significance of these shapes is unknown, though any pattern with nine elements is commonly seen as a reference to the nine gems of astrological significance.

(vi) *Trees and plants*

Trees and foliage generally represent the Bo-tree, and indirectly the Buddha. Rice-stalks, both drooping and upright, and *pa-de-tha-bin*, probably represent wealth and generosity. The *pa-de-tha-bin* is a mythical tree of plenty bearing every item that human beings require. It also refers to the goods stands offered to monasteries during the *Kathein* festival that marks the end of the rainy season, when offerings of monks' necessities and general goods are made to monasteries. There are also images of the *shwe pan-kine/ngwe pan-kine*, the gold or silver bush or flowers in a container that was set before the throne in royal times as part of the regalia and is now offered in front of Buddha images. The golden bush or flower offering may, depending on the context, represent either royalty itself or the act of offering.

(vii) *Offering stands and vessels, wheeled vehicles*

Offering vessels can be *hsun-ok* bowls, with or without stands, or *kalat* trays on stands. The offering stands are multi-branched with small vessels on them. All represent both the act of offering and the offering itself. Wheeled vehicles with tiered (*pyatthat*) roofs occur, though not very often. They may represent the model floats in which donations of gold leaf are placed when stupas are being re-gilded: the floats are put on wires, and drawn up with pulleys to the stupa where the gilders are working (Isaacs, personal communication). The images of the vehicles usually contain an animal or bird. Isaacs suggests that a peacock or lion in the vehicle refers to pre-colonial coinage of the 19th century; the gold coin was stamped with a lion, and the silver coin with a peacock (Isaacs 2014; Cat. No. 146 refers to peacock coins). It is unknown whether there is a connection between the wheeled floats and the images of mythical animals (representing the animals of the sacred Mt Meru) still used in Thai royal cremations.

(viii) *Roofs, finials and arrowheads (without shafts)*

Tiered (*pyatthat*) roofs are a symbol of rank. These are usually found as brackets for sections of text, oriented horizontally so that while reading the text they appear to be lying sideways. They may be understood as both sheltering the text, and emphasising its importance. Arrowheads are also used as brackets, especially in older *sarsikyo*, most notably the broad type woven of hand-spun thread. They may point in either direction, depending on whether they are functioning as a pair of brackets or as pointers to a section of text. One *sarsikyo* has a pair of pointing naturalistic hands with shirt-cuffs (Cat. No. 34). Another not included in the catalog has the same naturalistic style of hands and the date in Arabic and Myanmar numerals.

(ix) Hti

Hti are both umbrellas and the topmost element of stupas. They signify high rank, royalty or divinity, and are usually found over images of the earth goddess, over thrones, and on top of *tagon-daing*. Free-standing *hti* are less common but can be found in both early and later *sarsikyo*, usually at the end of the ribbon but sometimes the front. At the end of the ribbon, they would probably signify the celestial beings who witness and applaud the donation, and at the beginning they might represent the temple with its stupa to which the offering is being brought.

One ribbon has a free-standing European-style umbrella with a curved handle (Cat. No. 75). Since it accompanies an unusual image of a ceremonial fan on a throne, and the text refers to ‘the two absolute monarchs’ (i.e. Thibaw and Supayalat), this may be a political commentary on the British conquest and occupation of Myanmar. This is similar to the use of images in cartoons and paintings of this era but is not stated further in the text translation, as seen below:

- The text opens with a wish that all beings who may attain Nibbāna shall hear the teachings of the Buddha.
- This is followed by a description of the donation of palm-leaf manuscripts wrapped with the red and white *sarsikyo*.
- After recognising many future rebirths with a hope that these will be good ones, the ribbon concludes by sharing merits with all beings with the specific note on the two absolute monarchs mentioned above.

(Cat. No. 75)

May we succeed! The Buddha, unrivalled in majesty among the three kinds of persons, highest in the three worlds, infinite in attributes, preached the three Piṭakas to all beings eligible for Nibbāna in His sacred voice perfect with the eight attributes.

The original texts of the three sacred Piṭakas are copied onto palm-leaves, wrapped in the scarf and girdled with the red and white ribbon on which the words of my wishes have been specially woven. I faithfully donate these palm-leaf manuscripts of the Piṭakas.

As a result of this donation, in my future existences in the long cycle of rebirths may I be free from the four nether worlds and attain each of the six celestial planes of existence. If I have to go up and down between the abodes of mankind and those of celestial beings, may I be a good human being in the abode of mankind, and a good deity in the abode of celestial beings, and then may I peacefully attain Nibbāna in my last existence!

I share the merit that I gain from this donation with my parents and teachers, to whom I owe great gratitude, the two absolute monarchs, all of my ancestors and relatives, and the many beings eligible for Nibbāna in the thirty-one planes of existence. May they all gain the merit that I share with them and be stable in peace! The donation of the Piṭakas is a noble deed. May all human beings and deities say ‘Well done!’

(x) Ornamentation of Text Letters

It is extremely common for all except for the earliest and simplest *sarsikyo* to have decorations on their lettering. They range from simple flourishes from the stems of letters, in the earlier specimens of hand-spun thread, to delicate foliate motifs (the most commonly seen) and in the later phase extremely large, detailed and elaborate decorations often covering the entire upper and lower range of the text of the ribbon. In their most virtuosic renditions, tiny flowers and birds can be found scattered among the words. These appear to be the only pictorial elements in *sarsikyo* that might be said to be purely ornamental. The stripes commonly found at the beginning and end of the ribbon probably originated as a technical feature, to help to stabilise the ribbon before the weaving of more complex patterns further along (Weavers of the Saunders Weaving School, personal communication).

(xi) Others

Some images remain unidentified or unidentifiable. Even for those with a tentative identification, the possible significance is frequently obscure. For instance, the final motif on one ribbon could either be a kneeling water-buffalo, or a guinea pig/hamster, representing one of the days of the astrological week. Another has a symbol resembling a swastika; the donor (also probably the weaver) was a member of a *Dhamma*-study and protection association (Cat. Nos. 43 and 18).

II: SARSIKYO PRODUCTION AND REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION

Based on the texts referred to in this paper and elsewhere, the weaving of *sarsikyo* was concentrated in Central Myanmar but was known in Rakhine and Mon States, southern Shan State around Inle Lake and in the villages of what are now the Yangon and Ayeyarwady Regions.

With the primary concentration of weavers in Central Myanmar, weavers adapted to demand. During World War II, for example, Shwe Yin Mar villagers wove sword-belts with the name, rank and serial number of the officer for the Japanese Army (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication, and Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's notes from a 1970s interview with Shwe Yin Mar villagers). The present-day villagers were not aware of this when interviewed by the author in 2011. At that time, the knowledge of *sarsikyo* weaving was completely lost in Shwe Yin Mar apart from one weaver who taught herself how to make basic *sarsikyo* with square letters after unravelling a specimen and analysing its structure. This weaver, a woman in her thirties named Ma Mar Lar, confirmed that her mother, from whom she learned tablet-weaving, did not know how to weave *sarsikyo*. This account was repeated throughout the Mandalay area in 2011, with no professional *sarsikyo* weavers located. Daw Hsint, the last known *sarsikyo* weaver in Monywa-Kywe Mon Village, in Sagaing Region, who was also known to the scholars Noel Singer Jr and Tampawaddy Win Maung, died in the 1950s or 1960s according to her great-niece Daw San San (73 years old in 2011) and the Saunders Weaving School. Daw Hsint was unmarried; Daw San San told the author that Daw Hsint had not taught her skills to any member of her family. The last weaver in Mandalay, Daw Nyein, also died without passing down her skills to her daughters.

Sarsikyo weaving was probably also known to monks, especially of the Shwe-yin sect, who make their own *ka-ban-kyo*. According to U Binyananda, of the Shwegyin Am-

arapura Maha Gandar Yone monastery, the monks there were taught tablet-weaving by two Palaung monks from Shan State, so that they could make their own *ka-ban-kyo* and *tha-beik-kyo*. The two monks, now deceased, reportedly also knew how to weave *sarsikyo* but did not teach it to their students, possibly as they had no use for it. In Theinni, Sayadaw U Wisera of the Myolair Kyaung informed the author that the Palaung had also practiced tablet-weaving, including the making of *sarsikyo*. The Shan *pe-sar saya* or palm-leaf writing master, Nan Jiang Nang Lao, of Kyaingtung, told the author that the Palaung used *pe-sar*; this suggests that further investigation of *sarsikyo* among the Palaung is merited. It is also possible that knowledge of *sarsikyo* spread among the Palaung from Palaung monasteries in Mandalay, which would have been familiar with *sarsikyo* through donations. *Sarsikyo* woven in any of the Shan languages are presently unknown, although enquiries continue. One collection of Burmese language *sarsikyo* collected in the Inle and Taungyi region of Shan State is held by Dr. Thein Than Tun but remains unpublished due to his ill health. Enquiries by the author in 2011 in the Shan Mayangone Monastery in Yangon and numerous monasteries in Kyaingtong in eastern Shan State were also fruitless. The Sayadaw Patanda Khimanzara of Wat Zheng Jin monastery in Kyaingtong, aged 85 in 2011, on being shown a *sarsikyo* by the author, responded that he had never before seen one. This was also the response received from U Win Din, a Gone-Shan (Kheun) scholar engaged in digitising monastic libraries in Kyaingtong, and at 18 of the 48 monasteries in Kyaingtong visited by the author: (1) Mahamyatmuni Pagoda; (2) Wat Ho Khone; (3) Wat Inn; (4) Wat Zom Khum; (5) Wat Zom Mai; (6) Wat Zheng Kum; (7) Wat Yang Gone; (8) Wat Zheng Jin; (9) Was Gong Mu Kham; (10) Was Thud Zom Shi Re; (11) Wat Kay Min; (12) Wat Mon Sang; (13) Wat Ba Daeng; (14) Wat Wor Hay; (15) Wat Nong Kam; (16) Wat Ho Kat; (17) Wat Zhaeng Kam and (18) Wat Tu Ya. A *sayadaw* in Kyaingtong remarked that *sarsikyo* could not have been woven in the area as until very recently most Shan women were illiterate. Before the colonial era, most Myanmar women also seem to have been illiterate and *sarsikyo* were certainly woven then. A woven script is just a pattern which an illiterate weaver could do with a weaving diagram, or if sufficiently skilled, by copying a written text by eye directly. Further investigation in northern and southern Shan State is warranted, given the considerable cultural and linguistic differences among the various Shan groups.

Mon and Rakhine *sarsikyo*, to which Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi devotes a chapter each in her 1993 book, need to be studied by scholars of these languages and cultures. Dr. Ye Myint found some of the Mon specimens mentioned by Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi in the Thaton Museum but investigations in monasteries in Mawlamyine and Dawei may also be fruitful. The Rakhine *sarsikyo* collected by U Binnyasara in Sittwe have disappeared, but a video of his collection exists. Investigation in Sittwe and other Rakhine monasteries may also discover further examples of Rakhine *sarsikyo*, particularly among weavers in Myauk-U and its environs, as it was the last seat of the Rakhine kings before conquest by Myanmar in the 18th century. Brief enquiries in Rakhine in May 2010 found only weavers of Chin textiles using a backstrap loom or Burmese full frame looms.

As the above sections note, there is some possibility that *sarsikyo* were made in regions outside Central Myanmar, but more research is needed. In Central Myanmar, the making of palm-leaf *pe-sar* gradually fell into disuse with the introduction of printed paper books in the early to mid-19th century. The production of *pe-sar* had probably virtually ceased by the 1930s at the latest. According to the *Taik-oke Sayadaw* in Mandalay, the Venerable U Ein-a-ka Pandita (aged 89 in 2011), throughout his entire monastic career, which began in Mandalay in 1936 when he was fifteen, he did not remember a donation

of *pe-sar*. Thus, understanding the social context of *sarsikyo* weaving in this era involves drawing upon research conducted and published in that era, the texts of surviving *sarsikyo* and such information as may emerge in the future from *pe-sar*, *parabaik* and possibly even *sarsikyo*. References to *sarsikyo* exist in colonial scholarship but are generally cursory and unhelpful. Even Sir George Scott in his detailed account in *The Burman: His Life and Notions* thought *sarsikyo* were either knitted or crocheted. Apparently basing his comparison on Berlin woolwork, he also thought that the texts might be embroidered. Garters with texts were knitted in nineteenth century Europe, so the mistake is not quite as peculiar as it seems.

After *pe-sar* donations came to an end, *sarsikyo* continued in use for a time. Professional production of *sarsikyo* continued until almost the end of the 20th century and in fact reached a high level of perfection, detail and elaboration of both script and decorative images (the ‘Mandalay’ style). *Sarsikyo* survived because their primary use changed from being wrapping-ribbons for *pe-sar* to being wrapping-ribbons for *kammawa* (commonly known to writers in English as *kammavaca*). Based on interviews with the last surviving families of *kammawa* writers in Mandalay, *sarsikyo* weaving became very closely connected to the *kammawa* making business. Sadly, it is just a few years too late to find practising weavers of *sarsikyo*, or, as they may also be called, *kammawa-kyo*.

Until 2011, the only formally trained weavers of *sarsikyo* were Daw Thein Htay and her surviving students from the Saunders Weaving School, The Saunders Weaving School has now added *sarsikyo* weaving to its curriculum, and in 2013 with funding by the author, sent one of its teachers to train weavers from Sonetu Heritage Textiles, the workshop of Mai Ni Ni Aung in Minbya Township, Rakhine State. After various vicissitudes, ten weavers were trained and regular commercial sale of *sarsikyo* in the form of bracelet meditation aids began at the end of 2017.

Fig. 13. Sarsikyo weavers from the workshop of Mai Ni Ni Aung (Source: Mai Ni Ni Aung)



Tablet weaving and sarsikyo

There has been some interest outside Myanmar in *sarsikyo* as textiles, thanks to Northern Europe's tablet-weaving tradition. Scherman's 1913 study, sadly not translated from the German, gives a unique eye-witness account of Myanmar tablet-weavers (Collingwood 1982). This may be the only research on *sarsikyo* weavers who wove for *pe-sar*. A manual of weaving diagrams for motifs used in Myanmar and Tibetan tablet-weaving has been produced by Staudigel, whose mother was prominent in the early twentieth rediscovery of European tablet-weaving techniques (2001; 2008). Singer (1993) mentions *sarsikyo* connection with *kammawa*, and Isaacs has published a very useful article in *Textiles of Burma* (2003) and the first longer study of *sarsikyo* in English (*Sazigyo, Burmese Manuscript Binding Tapes' Woven Miniatures of Buddhist Art*, Silkworm Books, Thailand, 2014). Isaacs spells the term phonetically, according to its English pronunciation.

Basics of tablet weaving

Tablet weaving is ancient and widespread. Staudigel (2001; 2008) dates the earliest examples to the late Neolithic while Collingwood (1982) gives the first example found in Germany from the 6th century BCE and the earliest known Asian example from 750–900 found in Fort Miran, Xinjiang. Within the last hundred and twenty years, tablet weaving has been actively practiced in areas as far apart as Slovakia, the Caucasus in the 1890s, Morocco and Algeria, Darjeeling, Tibet, Myanmar, and Indonesia.

Tablet weaving is a method of weaving narrow ribbons or tapes using flat cards or tablets. The basic, universal technique is for a series of long threads (the warp) to be strung under tension in parallel, usually by a long beam of wood with pegs inserted at either end. A varying number (usually 24 to 50) of normally square tablets is threaded onto the warp in a pack through holes at the corner of each tablet. Only one thread passes through each hole. Depending on the direction of the threading from right to left or vice versa, the tablet is described as either S or Z-threaded, or in Myanmar terminology, right or left-threaded. Either way, the enforced gap from the insertion of the card among the warp threads creates the shed, the gap through which the weft thread is introduced to create the ribbon. A quarter turn of the tablets forwards or backwards, either together or individually, separates the warp threads, forming a new shed. The weft thread is slipped in at right angles to the warp and forced towards the near end of the warp (nearest to the weaver), usually with a solid wooden beater. The tablets are then turned again in the same direction and the process is repeated, so that eventually a tightly-woven ribbon appears. Since the leading edge of the weft, the fell, moves constantly away from the weaver, the weaver must periodically slide the tablets along the warp threads towards the far end (and move themselves as well, depending on the size of the loom).

Each tablet with the threads can be manipulated separately from the others, giving great flexibility in the formation of complex patterns. It is even possible to twist warp threads around laterally, so that they act temporarily as weft threads. The fundamental limitation of tablets is that they are turned directly by the weaver. The width of the ribbon woven therefore depends on the size of the pack that an individual weaver can handle, which in turn depends on the size of their hands and the thickness of the pack and the tablets. The tablet-weaving technique is therefore specialised to produce long, narrow ribbons.

The flexibility of the tablet-weaving technique allows the creation of intricate patterns, including woven script. Tablet-woven script is known from England, Greece, Tunis, Iran, Turkey, India, Sulawesi and Myanmar. Examples from Iran include a silk ribbon with Koranic verses in the Historical Museum in Berne, and a Greek one from Collingwood's collection (1982).

Tablet weaving in Myanmar

It is not known how long tablet weaving has been practiced in Myanmar. Until at least 2011, the technique was still being used in Shwe Yin Mar village in Myinmu, Central Myanmar to make reins, saddle-girths, *ka-ban-kyo* (monks' girdles) and *tha-beik-kyo* (carrying-cords for monks' alms-bowls). It was also used to make *sarsikyo*, originally for *pe-sar* manuscripts, and until at least 1979, for *kammawa*.

It is equally unclear how and when the technique of weaving text began in Myanmar as the earliest specimens are not dated and textiles rarely survive for long in the climate. The author has not come across any *sarsikyo* earlier than the 18th century. The technique might have been transmitted from Northern India, Tibet, or Northern Thailand where items of like nature are found. Tablet-woven ribbons with image but not text were used in Tibet as 'book-bands', ribbons used to tie loose sheets of text together between wooden boards (Staudigel 2001; 2008; and private communication).

It is possible, given the current knowledge of tablet-weaving, that the weaving of text could have been invented independently several times. To the author's knowledge, at least one young monk in Amarapura familiar with the weaving of *ka-ban-kyo*, but without previous knowledge of *sarsikyo*, independently invented the idea of weaving text in square letters (the logical intermediate step towards the rounded letters of *sarsikyo*) into the ribbon. He has now disrobed and his whereabouts are presently unknown.

Looking outside Myanmar for comparisons, short, tablet-woven textual labels attached to palm-leaf manuscripts in the royal library at Wat Pho in Bangkok function as an accession tag, stating the title of the text, the number of volumes and the name of the donor (Isaacs, personal communication). The script of these labels is Mon and the language is Khnum, a Mon-Khmer language (Dr. Ye Myint and colleagues, personal communication). Tablet-woven ribbons from Laos have also been noted (Collingwood 1982).

Tablet-weaving in Darjeeling uses a weaver-tensioned warp, that is, a backstrap technique with the warp strung between the weaver's body and a fixed point (Collingwood 1982). This technique is not known to have been used by Myanmar tablet-weavers, at least within the last century, though earlier weavers might have adapted the backstrap technique for tablet-weaving. Backstrap weaving is still used in Myanmar, notably among the Chin and Shan, to create intricate and elegant textiles of very fine quality. The Chin do not use tablets and are thus able to create much wider textiles (Fraser 2005; Mai Ni Ni Aung, personal communication).

IV: SANSIKYO COMMON TEXTUAL ELEMENTS

Donor names

An in-depth consideration of the literary, linguistic, historical and religious value of the *sarsikyo* texts presented here requires much further research. Some of the *sarsikyo* texts

are common religious formulas and expressions. Others include just the date or the donor's name. Some give the donor's entire career in royal service with minimal religious content. There does not appear to be any relationship between the extent of the text and the quantity and type of ornamentation. The texts of Cat Nos. 30, 45, 46, 47, 55, and 60 lack donor names while Cat. Nos. 63, 68, 69, 93, 104, 136, 137, and 147 have donor names. This can be seen in the two translated texts below.

In Cat. No. 45, the short text praises and thanks the Buddha for his many years of teaching others until he reached Nibbāna at the age of 80. It then records the copying of teachings onto palm-leaf manuscripts and concludes by wishing for quick release from rebirths for the donor.

(Cat. No. 45)

May we succeed! The Buddha, highest among the three kinds of persons, preached sermons including *damase'kja* to beings eligible for Nibbāna, for the whole of His 45 years of Buddhahood from the age of 35 when He became Lord Buddha the unrivalled in the three worlds until He attained Nibbāna at the age of 80. The text of the sermons preached by Lord Buddha is copied onto palm leaves and donated. As a result of this donation, may we quickly attain Nibbāna where the cycle of rebirths ceases!

Cat. No. 147 follows a similar pattern to Cat. No. 45. The text praises and thanks the Buddha and records the copying of texts onto palm-leaf sheets. It ends by naming the donor and his wife and the name of their hometown.

(Cat. No. 147)

May we be successful! The Buddha, highest among the three kinds of persons, preached sermons including *damase'kja* to beings eligible for Nibbāna, for the whole of His 45 years of Buddhahood from the age of 35 when He became Lord Buddha the unrivalled in the three worlds until He attained Nibbāna at the age of 80. The text of the sermons preached by Lord Buddha is copied onto palm leaves and donated. As a result of this donation, may we quickly attain Nibbāna where the cycle of rebirths ceases! This is the good deed done by U Lu Gji: and his wife, donors of palm-leaf manuscripts, living in the town of Pjun tan za.

Religious texts and wishes

Cat. Nos. 151, 160 (minus the last clause) and 168 are essentially the same text, wishing for Nibbāna with minor variations, but are not part of a single set:

(Cat. No. 160)

The Buddha, highest among the three kinds of persons, preached sermons including *Dammasetkya* to beings eligible for Nibbāna, for the whole of His 45 years of Buddhahood from the age of 35 when He became Lord Buddha the unrivalled in the three worlds until He attained Nibbāna at the age of 80. The text of the sermons preached by Lord Buddha is copied onto palm leaves and

donated. As a result of this donation, may we quickly attain Nibbāna where the cycle of rebirths ceases.

The formula *Aung Yat Shwe Pyi...* at the beginning of the text, wishing for an auspicious rebirth, is widespread throughout Myanmar (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication):

(Cat. No. 82)

In order to attain Nibbāna, the place of victory where the cycle of rebirths ceases, I have put onto palm leaves and donated the corpus of sermons preached by the Buddha, highest among human beings, gods and Brahmas, so as to help to perpetuate the sacred sermons. The bundle of manuscript palm leaves is wrapped in the scarf and tied with the golden ribbon coloured in white and yellow, on which the text is woven. I donate the whole bundle with bliss. As a result of this donation may I in the cycle of rebirths avoid the four nether worlds and attain only the celestial abodes, where I may grandly and joyfully dwell in a shining golden palace! May I be unlike other celestial beings in being eligible to achieve Nibbāna when I am in the presence of Arimetta Buddha! May I, as I wish, attain Nibbāna, the only way to be free of the cycle of rebirths!

Numerous examples of this poem are found in this collection. The monk U Binnyasara from Sittwe sent Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi a *sarsikyo* with the same text in Rakhine (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). The ribbon dates from approximately 1200 M.E. (1838). It was thick handspun thread, with white text on a blue background, 3 m long, 5 cm wide and with 0.5 cm letter height, woven in Rakhine script. U Binnyasara informed Dar Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi that it was woven by Rakhine people in Pauk Taw.

The earliest appearance of this poem in the collection is on a *sarsikyo* dated 1199 M.E. (1837), third day of the waning moon of Tazaungmon, which was donated by Maung Ngon and his spouse Mat Ta Ya. Two others were dated 1210 M.E. (1848) on the fifth day of the waxing moon of the first Waso month and the tenth day of the waning moon of the first Waso month (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication). It is not known whether *sarsikyo* weavers maintained a stock, possibly of such common texts as the above, or whether they wove exclusively to order, as the later *kammawa-kyo* weavers did.

The 'last' sarsikyo (Cat. No. 161)

The 'last' *sarsikyo* known is a good specimen of end-period, Mandalay-style ribbon with a central dark green stripe bordered with narrow, bright pink, blue and turquoise lines. Commissioned from Mogok, it also highlights Mandalay as a centre of *sarsikyo* production. The information in the text proved invaluable in locating the last traces of professional *sarsikyo* weaving in Mandalay. The text gives the date of weaving (1979 CE), and the names and addresses both donors and the weaver, ending with that of the donor:

This woven ribbon is the handiwork of Daw Khin Thein, daughter of Sayagyi U Sein, the *kammawa* master of Mandalay.

The donors, U Oh and his wife Daw Htway, their son U San Win, their daughter Daw Thein Mya, and their grand-daughter Ma Kyi Kyi Myint, were from an old and then-

wealthy *family* in Shansu Quarter, Mogok. The *sarsikyo* was dedicated to the (now deceased) Sayadaw Ashin Nandarkar Eik Wuntha, then the senior monk of the Paya Ngar Su Kyaung, Mogok Myo Monastery.

Enquiries in the Kammawadan quarter of Mandalay, which was once the centre of *kammawa* writing, revealed that Daw Khin Thein died in 2004 at the age of 80. However, according to U Maung Maung Tint and Daw Tin Tin Oo, the proprietors of one of the four remaining businesses selling *kammawa* in the area, Daw Khin Thein had not in fact been the actual weaver of the *sarsikyo*. As the owner of a *kammawa* business, she had sub-contracted the work out to a weaver in Mandalay, Daw Nyein, the last known professional weaver of *sarsikyo* in Mandalay, who died in 1994 at the age of 88. As recounted to the author by Daw Nyein's daughters, she could not support herself by weaving *sarsikyo* full time. When not weaving, Daw Nyein sold groceries and jam; she wove at home, only weaving *sarsikyo*. Her customers were few, usually one or two a month at most, and sometimes only one in three or four months. She usually worked on commissions from the *kammawa* shops in the area, such as Daw Khin Thein or U Kyin Naing's firms, rather than working for the customer directly.

According to her daughter Daw Khin Mar, Daw Nyein used the text supplied by the customer, though she did not use a weaving diagram. She bought the thread ready-made, in the colours specified in the commission. Her loom was a 1.8-meter plank; her tablets were made of leather and her *le-kha* or beater was teak. All her equipment was bought ready-made. She made *sarsikyo* in cotton most often with white script against a red or black background (Cat. No. 161 is blue, green, turquoise, pink and magenta). The author has not seen an example with a black background. It took her four or five days, or a week at most to finish one *sarsikyo*. In 1980, a *sarsikyo* cost 40 *kyat*; by 2011 this was *circa* 40,000–50,000 *kyat* which at 820 *kyat* to the US dollar is roughly fifty dollars, a not insubstantial amount.

Daw Nyein had learned the skill of *sarsikyo* weaving from her mother but did not teach her daughters. By the time of her death, she was, as far as the *kammawa*-writing community knew, the only weaver of *sarsikyo* in Mandalay. She took commissions from anyone who wanted to hire her; occasionally she and another weaver called Daw Kyawt also sub-contracted work from a weaver called Daw Aye Khin, the second cousin of U Bo, a *kammawa sayagyi*, or senior *kammawa* writer, whose descendants are the only practicing writers of traditional *kammawa* remaining in Mandalay. Daw Aye Khin's parents, U Oh and Daw Ngwe, were also *kammawa* writers. Daw Aye Khin only wove *sarsikyo* as an adjunct to the family *kammawa* business. She did not do contract work for outsiders. Her husband wrote *kammawa*, and she supplied the *sarsikyo* to tie them up. The workshop produced 10–15 *kammawa* per month, but not all customers for *kammawa* wanted *sarsikyo* as well. Daw Nyein was brought in to assist if the volume of work was too great for Daw Aye Khin to manage alone. Daw Aye Khin did not weave full time and a *sarsikyo* might take from a week to ten days to two or three months to weave, at a rate of five to six inches a day, for a *sarsikyo* of three yards.¹³

Daw Aye Khin chose her colours as she pleased, unless the customer expressed a preference, and was fond of the combination of pink and green. The customer would supply the text for her to weave, usually using modern Burmese prose rather than the poetic

¹³ *Kammawa*-writers Daw Khin Win May and U Aye Gyi, daughter and son-in-law of U Bo, personal communication.

form used in older *sarsikyo*. Unfortunately, Daw Aye Khin never, to her family's knowledge, kept a record of the texts that she wove. Her daughter Daw Tin Tin Win did not learn how to weave *sarsikyo*, but had in her possession her mother's tablets, and a *sarsikyo* woven by Daw Aye Khin in 1965; the donor had mistakenly ordered two so Daw Aye Khin kept the extra one. The donor was one Daw Shwe An and her children and grandchildren, from Thuyethamein (a Mon name). Daw Tin Tin Win's daughter Khin Myo Kywe learned to write *kammawa* and now works with Daw Khin Win May.

Fig. 14. Daw Aye Khin's spectacles, tablets and *sarsikyo* (Credit: Vanessa Chan)



Daw Khin Win May noted specifically that Daw Aye Khin could weave ornamental motifs rather than just painting the patterns on top of the ribbon (Daw Khin Win May, personal communication). This is the first reference to such a practice in the production of *sarsikyo* and might reflect a decline in the skills of the industry. However, the author has not come across any such painted *sarsikyo*. The author has seen in a monastery in Salay a *sarsikyo* upon which the names of the donor family had been embroidered, rather amateurishly, but it is unknown whether the embroidery was done by the weaver or by one of the donor family itself. Otherwise, neither Daw Mi Mi Gyi nor Dr. Ye Myint nor the author have so far come across a *sarsikyo* where the text and motifs were anything but integral parts to the textile.

It is likely that weaving *sarsikyo* was always a home-based industry as *ka-ban-kyo* weaving was, with *sarsikyo* being woven to order for specific donations. There is no evidence so far of collective workshop or factory-based production. While most weavers were probably women, male weavers were also known. The author saw a green, silk *sarsikyo* dating from 1910, in the Kaba Aye Paya Buddhist Art Museum in Yangon, that

referred to the weaver's grandfather as having helped to finish the weaving. The late poet Professor Min Thu Wun was well acquainted with a male weaver, U Nyo, who may have been the same weaver who worked with Daw Thein Htay (see Appendix) and who is said to have died in the 1970s.¹⁴ According to Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi, Professor Min Thu Wun commissioned U Nyo to weave the text of his famous poem, 'Thapyenno' (the name of the flower of *Eugenia* spp) into two *sarsikyo*. The family of Min Thu Wun was unaware of this and was unable to find either *sarsikyo* or any reference to them in his papers. Min Thu Wun's research in fact inspired Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's own inquiry into *sarsikyo* and the two consulted extensively during the preparation of her book. There was no correspondence with Min Thu Wun, since they lived in the same neighbourhood and could consult each other in person; documentation of their research is therefore regrettably absent (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication to author). There may be more information in Min Thu Wun's diaries and papers.

Sarsikyo in sets

Donations of large documents such as the Pitakas, requiring several volumes, logically required several *sarsikyo*. Sets of identical *sarsikyo* from the same donation do exist, and some are represented in the ISEAS Library collection. Their texts should be distinguished from the stock texts mentioned above, being detailed and specific, and commissioned by named donors. The texts of Cat. Nos. 14, 15 and 17 are identical; all were donated by the Queen from Theinni, who had the title *Thu Thiri Kalyadewi*, and was one of the two daughters of the Shan *Sawbwa* of Theinni given to King Mindon as consorts. The translations of two of these are given below.

Cat. No. 14 contains three sections:

- The opening verses record the auspiciousness of the royal city of Mandalay and the lineage of the Shan donor and her parents.
- In the middle section, the donor proclaims her purity and that of the palm-leaf manuscripts being donated. These are likened to traditional image of the rabbit seen on the face of the luminous full-moon.
- The prayers close with a colourful wish for a quick attainment of Nibbāna acknowledged by all humans, spirits and celestial beings.

(Cat. No. 14)

May all know of this auspiciousness! The king who has established his new palace in the city of Mandalay, by right of his descent from the Sun, is the lord of the noble lords of ten thousand universes. In the palace of Man Yadanapon Naypyidaw, I received the love and kindness of the king, the chief queen, and eighty thousand ladies-in-waiting. My father is the noble and prosperous Shan chief of Theinni, the lord of one hundred and one kings of royal regalia, who enjoys the throne of Shwe Haw in the city of Theinni in the territory of

¹⁴ However, Min Thu Wun's son, U Htin Kyaw, President of Myanmar from March 2016 to March 2018 informed the author that to the best of his knowledge the weaver who worked with Min Thu Wun was an elderly woman.

Thiwi.rahta. He is a ruler and possessor of the town named Thoun:ze and a large number of other towns, villages, and satellite territories. I am a beloved daughter cherished like a ruby by my father, the Shan chief entitled *Thiwi. Rahta. Mahawuntha. Pawara. Theihta. Thu.dama.Raza*, well known all over the territory by my mother, his right hand, called *Maha Deiwi* with the title of *Shwe* (Gold), and by my grandmother.

In the palace of *Man Yadanapon Naypyidaw*, I am granted the city of Kyaukpan with the title of *Shwe* (Gold) under the name of *Thu. Thiri. Kalja deiwi* as I am so loved by the king and the chief queen. I, who am a beautiful lady free from the six womanly flaws and having the five womanly qualities, am well aware of the truth of the cycle of existences impelled by the interaction of lust, deeds and consequences. Therefore, I donate these golden palm leaves that are as clear as the figure of the rabbit visible on the surface of the moon, on which I have had copied in Pali the sermon *Wi. mou' ti. ja'* as preached by the Buddha Himself.

For this donation, I wish to be a man in every future existence and to be free of every danger. I wish my virtue of knowledge to be as broad as the sky, the sea and the ocean. I wish to be widely known on the earth because of my knowledge. I wish to cross *samsara* on board the ship of the Eightfold Path *ma' gin shi' pa*: avoiding the whirlpools of *samsara* full of violent waves. I wish to escape from *samsara* and reach the shore of *nibbana* as soon as possible, stopping the cycle of rebirths just as the white tips of rolling waves stop when they reach the broad pearl-colored beach. All the humans, *nats* and Brahmas are requested to say 'Well done!' to my donation.

Cat. No. 10 was donated by her sister, the other Theinni Queen, the *Thu Thiri Yadana*. As seen below, the texts are all the same, except that the *Thu Thiri Kalyadewi* wished to be a man of wisdom in her future lives, and the *Thu Thiri Yadana* wished to attain Nibbāna.

(Cat. No. 10)

May all know of this auspiciousness! The king who has established his new palace in the city of Mandalay, by right of his descent from the Sun, is the lord of the noble lords of ten thousand universes. In the palace of *Man Yadanapon Naypyidaw*, I received the love and kindness of the king, the chief queen, and eighty thousand ladies-in-waiting. My father is the noble and prosperous Shan chief of Theinni, the lord of one hundred and one kings of royal regalia, who enjoys the throne of *Shwe Haw* in the city of Theinni in the territory of *Thiwi.rahta*. He is a ruler and possessor of the town named Thoun:ze and a large number of other towns, villages, and satellite territories. I am a beloved daughter cherished like a ruby by my father, the Shan chief with the title *Thiwi. Rahta. Mahawuntha. Pawara. Theihta. Thu.dama.Raza* well known all over the territory by my mother, his right hand, called *Maha Deiwi* with the title of *Shwe* (Gold), and by my grandmother.

In the palace of *Man Yadanapon Naypyidaw*, I am granted the city of Kyaukpan with the title of *Shwe* (Gold) under the name of *Thu. Thiri. Yadana* as I am so loved by the king and the chief queen. I, who am a beautiful lady free from the six womanly flaws and having the five womanly qualities, am well aware of the truth of the cycle of existences impelled by the interaction of lust, deeds and consequences. Therefore, I donate these golden palm leaves

that are as clear as the figure of the rabbit visible on the surface of the moon, on which I have had copied in Pali the sermon *Wi. mou' ti. ja'* as preached by the Buddha Himself.

As the consequence of this donation, I wish to attain Nibbāna as soon as possible by stopping the cycle of rebirths, just as the white tips of rolling waves end when they reach the broad pearl-coloured beach. All humans, *nat* and Brahmas are requested to say 'Well done!' to my donation.

The other significant set in the collection comprises Cat. Nos. 59, 88, 92, 98, 108, 118 and 122, which has a long and elaborate text. The same donors also donated Cat. No. 120 on a different occasion. However, sets are not always identical in appearance even if identical in text, indicating that either different weavers worked on the same set, or, equally likely, the weaver chose to vary the ornaments and colours in each *sarsikyo* of the set. An experienced tablet-weaver might be able to assess which case applies to any specific set of *sarsikyo*.

Information about donors

Given the cost of donating palm-leaf manuscripts or *kammawa*, donors had to be persons of property. Some of them, based on the listing of their donations, were extremely wealthy. In many cases, donors were officials of the royal or colonial governments.

In Cat. No. 33 the donor held, among many others, the office of Hpone-Gaung-Gyi, the Head of the Flotilla, stationed north of Mandalay. This is the first known reference to this title (Sein Maung U, personal communication). An extended annotation is included in my ISEAS Library catalogue. The long text of this ribbon contains four sections:

- The verses open by noting that the donation included all three books of the Pali canon. The donor wishes that all may hear news of the donation.
- The second and third sections recount the successes of the donor's career. These include his wisdom, his repair of an irrigation dam along with military victories and his position in the court. It concludes with his appointment as head of the flotilla, as noted above, and governorship of two distant cities in the kingdom.
- The text concludes with the wish that all in Zambudipa, the southernmost Great Island, may hear and praise the donation.

(Cat. No. 33)

May all the human and celestial beings hear and know the glorious deed of our donation of these three Pitakas! May the news of this donation echo all over the universe so that all human and celestial beings are aware of it!

I serve King Mindon, who is as powerful as *Se'kjawadei: man da' min:* and rules one hundred kings of the full regalia, who has built the new palace of *Man:janapoun* (Mandalay Yadanapon), which is of the same rank as *Ta wadein dha*. Accordingly I have both wisdom and martial prowess. As an *Athoun:sajei*: I gained a widespread reputation. When I was promoted to be a *Sajei:dogji*: clerical official my name reached far and wide. When I was promoted further to be *Lamain:wun* I supervised the repair of the ancient

irrigation dam on the *Tamou'sou*: lake. Then I served as both *Badin:babe:wun zu.twe:lje'* and *Pan:be:wun* simultaneously, and my accomplishments and high destiny increased my prospects; I was promoted to *Thando hsin'*, and was then generously granted the post of *Wun dau'* with the golden title as brilliant as lightning of *Min:gji:mahamin:hla.min:gaun*. I was appointed *Bougjou'* to *Mou:bje:* and second-in-command to *Mou: ne:*, and successfully suppressed rebellions there.

I was also appointed as Head of the Flotilla and commanding officer of the royal steamer of *Mja. nan: se' kja* with its extraordinary shape and machinery. I served as Mayor, first of *Bagan* and *Salei* alone, and then of the two far-off cities of *Mou: mei'* and *Mou:hlain:* as well.

I, a great minister whose title is *min:gji:mahamin:hla.min:gaun* and whose fame spreads all over the great island of *Zabudipa*, my beloved, virtuous and beautiful wife who has been helping me attain virtue for a continuous succession of our past existences in *samsāra*, our son *Maung Maung Gyi*, our daughter-in-law whom we love as our own daughter, and our young granddaughter together donate these complete palm-leaf manuscripts of the three Pitakas preached by the Buddha with a view to achieving the reward of *Nibbāna*. We ask all the three kinds of person to say 'Well done!' to our glorious donation!

Almost all donations came from nuclear families, and some extended families in consultation among the members. Single donors are few. Including the two queens mentioned above, women appear to slightly outnumber men among single donors, but this is not a conclusive finding. Donors were mostly married couples, but widows and their families are also represented.

There are one or two specimens such as Cat. No. 18 below that appear to have been donated by groups of persons who are not all immediate relatives, but fellow villagers, members of the extended family or of an association. ISEAS 2018 Cat. No. 18 contains three sections:

- The verses open by recording the donors by name and their Dhamma Protection Association.
- The second section notes the donation of palm-leaf texts with sections of the *Sutta*, sermons and *Vinaya*, rules for monks.
- The third section has the donors' wish to be re-born to listen to the sermons of the future Buddha and obtain *Nibbana*.
- It closes with a location, the name of the weaver and the date.

(Cat. No. 18)

This is the meritorious deed of *Ma Hnin Oo*, *Ma Nyunt*, *Ma May Yone* and *Ma Nyunt May*, all pupils of *Saya U San Yar* from the *wu' athin:* association of *Dama.re'khi.ta*. May success be with us! With a view to easily attaining the silvery shore of high *Nibbāna*, we donate these palm leaves on which are inscribed the teaching of the Buddha, highest among the three kinds of person. The Buddha preached the sermon of *Damase'* and the *wi.ni:*. We enthusiastically

cally donate these palm-leaves on which we have had the *kammawa* extracts of the *wi.ni*: copied. We do this meritorious deed of donation quickly and without hesitation, trusting in its benefit to our future existences.

By making this donation, may we be free from the dangers of the four nether worlds, the three catastrophes, and the eight unfavourable conditions. If we are destined for existences as human and celestial beings, may we be brilliant like Mahodhāda and possess the four types of wisdom. When the future Buddha Ari.mi'tei:ja. attains Buddhahood on the throne in the shade of the gan.go tree, may we listen with delight to His first sermon.

(The city of) Nyaung Gone—Ma Nyunt May—1274 M. E. (1912) month of Tawthalin.

Political content of sarsikyo texts

There are three unusual specimens in the collection that reveal strong anti-British sentiments. Cat. No. 16 refers to the fall of the Konbaung dynasty. It mentions the king and queen, Thibaw and Supayalat, and refers to them as the lords of the Myanmar people. Cat. Nos. 50 (dated 1910) and 62 make hostile references to British rule and its damage to the Buddhist Order. Since a weaver would hardly be likely to unilaterally make such statements, it can be assumed that they reflect the wishes and views of the donors. Given how difficult it would have been for the colonial regime's internal security apparatus to penetrate this format, *sarsikyo* would have been reasonably safe outlets for such views. These are the only negative sentiments or references that have so far been found expressed in *sarsikyo* texts. Looking at these texts and that of Cat. No. 18, which was donated in 1912 by a member of a religious study group, one can speculate that these *sarsikyo* embody the well-known path of supporting Buddhism as means of covert opposition to the colonial regime. Cat. No. 16 text below contains three sections:

- The text opens with a wish for success and peace shared by all.
- The main section recalls the sad dethronement of King Thibaw. In contrast are the flourishing villages around the sacred peak of Mt. Popa, the region of the donor.
- The ribbon concludes by naming the donor and family, their donation of palm-leaf manuscripts wrapped in silk and tied with the *sarsikyo*. As reward, U Shwe Mint, wishes for quick attainment of Nibbāna.

(Cat. No. 16)

May success be with us! May all the length and breadth of the country know this! May the whole universe be pleasant and peaceful!

The kings of the Konbaung dynasty, to whom the jewel of the swastika came, reigned in succession in the palace. During the reign of the 11th Konbaung king, unfortunately, the dynasty ended and lost its sovereignty by violence. In the absence of the king and the palace, the entire land of Myanmar has become pitch dark, as after the complete setting of the sun.

Although the sun of the Konbaung era has set, the city of Pin:ta:le: shines in the land like the rays of the sun, as brightly as the sapphire of kein-dara, and is surrounded like the ring-hole in the nose of a buffalo by 28 re-

gions including great and glorious Mount Popa. The village of Joun: bin zau' among close-knit villages west of Pin:ta^{le}: is a typical upland village keeping traditional customs.

There, the family of U Shwe Mint has donated the Pitakas preached by the Buddha copied onto palm leaves. I, U Shwe Myint, my wife, and my five sisters, who have been living here in this village for all our existences through successive generations enjoying the cumulative benefit of our past good deeds, and who will soon be addressed by the title of *Sadaga*, donate these palm-leaf manuscripts of the priceless *Dama bi.thama.ja*. sermon, out of our great generosity and benevolence, to sow merit like seeds for the benefit of our future existences. It is exactly copied in order not to leave anything out, and the manuscript is wrapped in the bright scarf and girdled with the woven ribbon. For this simple and sincere deed, may we all without exception attain Nibbāna smoothly and before others! As soon as this glorious and generous deed, our best chance to attain Nibbāna straight away, has been accomplished, we request all—our ancestors, parents, relatives, our king and queen who are the lords of the Myanmar people, princes and princesses, ministers, all the creatures in all the universes, and all three kinds of person—to say 'Well done! Well done! Well done!'

References to the donated documents

Apart from general references to the Pitakas and to *kammawa*, identification of the document being donated is not common among the *sarsikyo* in the collection. However, there are several examples of named Pali texts, including commentaries, which may give indications of what texts were known and popular at different times. Texts, especially *kammawa*, could be donated to named monks, as was the *ka-ban-kyo* in Cat. No. 188. In this case the dedicatory ribbon itself is the donation. Merit could also be shared with the dead (Cat. Nos. 1 and 2).

Devotion to the future Buddha Maitreya (Arimettaya) is very common in these texts. This element is generally assumed by scholars in Myanmar to reflect a Mahāyāna element in local Burmese practice. That *sarsikyo* were definitely a part of popular devotion, albeit within the higher income brackets, may affect this opinion. Myanmar scholars view much popular devotion as influenced by Mahayana, *nat* worship and other non-Theravada practices.

CONCLUSION

I hope that this preliminary study will lead to further endeavours in the study of *sarsikyo*. A vast quantity of information remains to be extracted from the texts themselves. Apart from collections made by scholars in Myanmar itself, large collections of texts are known to be available in Singapore, the United States, Thailand, Germany and France, and in the UK, where the Brighton Museum holds Ralph Isaacs' collection. It is hoped that this paper will serve its multiple intended purposes (appropriate to the multiplex nature of *sarsikyo*) as an introduction to *sarsikyo*, a stimulus to further enquiry, an encouragement to the protection and preservation of existing specimens within Myanmar, and an inspiration for the revival of *sarsikyo* weaving as a living profession.

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APPENDIX

*Shwe Yin Mar Tablet-weaving
and the Saunders Weaving Institute 1994 Workshop Notes:*

The author is unaware of written accounts in English or Burmese of *sarsikyo*-weaving technique contemporary with practicing professional weavers, or by the weavers themselves. Daw Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi (1993, Ch. 8) compiled a few *sarsikyo* texts that referred to technique, but without details. However, in 1994 a written description of the *sarsikyo* weaving process was made for a course in *sarsikyo* weaving by the Saunders Weaving Institute in Amarapura, conducted by Ma Thein Htay, then Assistant Lecturer at the Monywa Weaving School, Sagaing and in 2017, Principal at the same institution. At that time, the last known professional *sarsikyo* weaver in Mandalay, Daw Nyein had just died. Ma Thein Htay had been a student of the Institute and in 1992–1994 studied the technique of *sarsikyo* but without knowing of Daw Nyein. Ma Thein Htay's short course notes have not been published previously and so are reproduced here preceded by the author's fieldwork in a translation by Mai Ni Ni Aung, Dr. Ye Myint and the author:

Ma Thein Htay became interested in *sarsikyo* while working in the Monywa Weaving School in the early 1990s. With the encouragement of her Principal, U Thein Tan, she found Daw Hla Myint, the niece of Daw Hsint, the last weaver practicing in Monywa-Kywe Mon joint village, Kyaung-Oo Township who died possibly in the 1950s (Dr. Ye Myint, personal communication to the author following his 2011 telephone interview with Ma Thein Htay, then Principal of the Weaving School in Phalam, Chin State). U Thein Han's efforts resulted in a directive from the Ministry of Co-operatives to all weaving schools to teach *sarsikyo* technique. It seems unlikely, however, that schools outside the Mandalay Region would have been able to find a living weaver to teach the technique.

Daw Hla Myint was a tablet-weaver producing saddle-girths, a village craft at that time. According to Daw Thein Htay, the weavers worked in the compound of a monastery that is more than a hundred years old. Daw Hla Myint did not know how to weave *sarsikyo* but she introduced Ma Thein Htay to an elderly lady (83 in 1992) who had known Daw Hsint. With the help of another senior weaver named U Nyo, she managed to teach herself *sarsikyo* technique, aided by close examination of several of Daw Hsint's *sarsikyo*, which she found in the same monastery. This monastery in Monywa-Kywemon is also where she found the saddle-girth weavers. Notably, Daw Hsint signed her *sarsikyo* with her name. Daw Thein Htay said that Daw Hsint's *sarsikyo* were 152–183 cm long by 3.8 cm wide, which is quite broad for *sarsikyo* of that era.

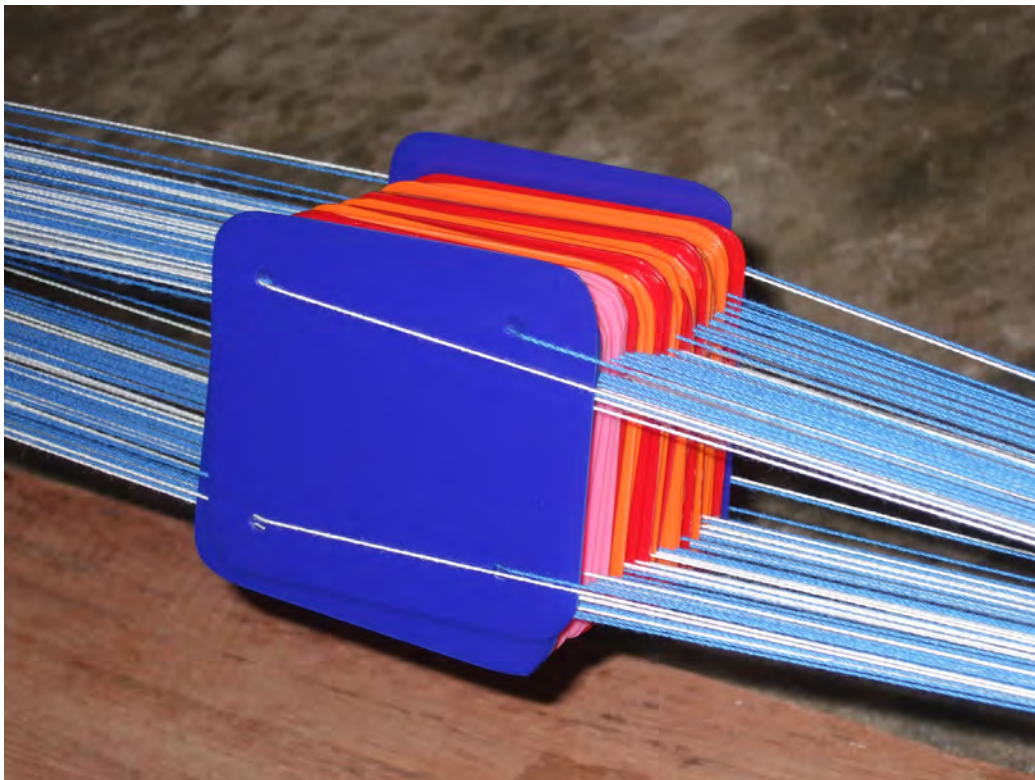
The terminology in Daw Thein Htay's paper is peculiar to her; as neither she nor U Thein Tan knew what the vocabulary of *sarsikyo* was, they had to invent their own. This was also before the publication of Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi's book, which she read subsequently. Thus, when they were trying to classify *sarsikyo*, a *sar-palwe kyo* is what is commonly referred to as a *sarsikyo*, and a *sar-tagon kyo* is a *sarsikyo* where a *tagon-daing* or banner-pole image appears.

As the course-notes below indicate, *sarsikyo* were woven on a tablet loom, usually constructed of a single beam of ironwood, with a circular warp stretched between two short wooden posts inserted into holes in the beam. This is also the style of loom used by *ka-ban-kyo* weavers in the Maha Gandar Yone Monastery in Amarapura. The length of the warp depends on the length of the ribbon to be woven.

Fig. 15. Sarsikyo weaving instructor Daw Run Nei Zing, Saunders Weaving Institute Amrapura
(Source: Vanessa Chan)



Fig. 16. Tablets strung on warp for sarsikyo (Source: Vanessa Chan)



In Mandalay, Daw Khin Khin Mar, daughter of the *sarsikyo* weaver Daw Nyein recalled that her mother in addition to the normal tablets also used a few tablets with five holes, four at the corners and one in the centre in quincunx pattern. The author subsequently acquired a similar set of tablets belonging to Daw Aye Khin, the other *sarsikyo* weaver in Mandalay at that time, from her descendants in Mandalay, and confirmed this account. Daw Khin Mar said that the quincunx tablets were used at the centre of the pack, with regular four-hole tablets on either side, which may be suggestive of Daw Nyein's possible technique, especially in relation to the later Mandalay styles of *sarsikyo* where the text runs in a discrete central line down the length of the ribbon, rather than filling its whole width. The Saunders' Weaving Institute weavers refer to this strip as 'the pearl', and call the warp-twined long edges of the ribbon 'the rope' or, literally, 'the ligament'.

According to Daw Khin Mar, Daw Nyein used many more tablets than the *ka-ban-kyo* weavers, up to 50. Dr. Ye Myint notes that the tablets were traditionally made of deer-skin. In Shwe Yin Mar they were either of plastic or ox-hide and ordered as needed from specialist manufacturers. The monks U Binyananda and U Kaweinda of Maha Gandar Yone Monastery in Amarapura make their own tablets out of thick cardboard (cigarette packets are considered particularly good). The Saunders Weaving Institute uses only tablets with four holes, and used to make its own out of ox-hide. The present tablet-weavers preferred plastic, which is lighter, longer-lasting, more stable, easier to handle and easier to keep clean. It also has the great advantage of coming in many thicknesses (making it more adaptable to weavers' hand-size) and colours. This allows a weaver to assign different colours to different colours of thread, thus making it easier to keep track of a complex, multi-coloured design. However, in Mai Ni Ni Aung's workshop, the only current producers of *sarsikyo* prefer ox-hide, which is softer and less likely to damage the yarn than plastic.

As with general tablet-weaving technique, the warp is separated by turning the cards either all together or in sections, depending on the design being woven; the weft is then slipped through by hand and packed tightly with a beater (*let-khat*) about a foot long and shaped roughly like a rectangular paddle with a handle. The beater is usually made from either *magyi-zi* (tamarind-wood), which is preferred because of its great strength, weight and density (this also makes it popular for kitchen use as chopping blocks). Another choice is *padauk* (*Pterocarpus indica*) one of the trees sold commercially as rosewood. Daw Nyein's beater was made of teak. A supporting wooden box was used by the weavers of the previously noted Shwe Yin Mar, Myinmu Township to help maintain tension along the warp and as a convenient place to store the beater when it is not in use. No Myanmar tablet-weavers were observed to use a comb to keep the warp threads separate, as is used in some other countries. In Shwe Yin Mar, weaving equipment generally was either handed down in the family or ordered from commercial suppliers. Neither the *ka-ban-kyo* weavers of Shwe Yin Mar nor the *sarsikyo* weavers of Mandalay grew their own cotton or spun their own thread.

According to Daw Thein Htay, there were *ka-ban-kyo* weavers in Monywa-Ky-wemon in the early 1990s, but enquiries in 2011 revealed no local knowledge of practicing weavers in the area other than those of Shwe Yin Mar who as of 2017 had given up tablet-weaving due to competition from cheaper Chinese products. The local monastery, attached to the ancient Shwe Yin Nar pagoda next to the village does not possess any *sarsikyo*.

The double-faced warp technique is necessary for *sarsikyo* bearing text or motifs. The same technique can also be used for *sarsikyo* without text, but a few specimens

without text were also woven using a single-faced warp. In Shwe Yin Mar, the villagers originally only used single-faced warp for their *ka-ban-kyo*. After the rediscovery of basic *sarsikyo* technique by the *ka-ban-kyo* weaver Ma Mar Lar, who unraveled some specimens and taught herself how to weave text (though only in square letters), they started making plain *ka-ban-kyo* using a double-faced warp, giving a significantly stronger ribbon. The Maha Gandar Yone and Saunders Institute weavers use the double-faced warp technique. Specific techniques are also needed to weave the cord and loop that terminate the ends of the ribbon, and the styles of these also vary. For instance, in the wider *sarsikyo* woven of handspun thread, it is not unknown for the string to be divided into two or three separate tails, since the width of the *sarsikyo* would otherwise create a very thick and unwieldy cord.

It is important to note that since the last professional *sarsikyo* weaver died in 1994, the present *sarsikyo* technique used by Mai Ni Ni Aung's workshop was recreated rather than directly transmitted. The Saunders Weaving School in Amarapura retained academic knowledge of the basic technique but did not itself produce *sarsikyo*. We also have no direct information about how the weavers themselves conceived of their work and its place in their society.

*The Saunders Weaving School Sarsikyo Workshop, 13 October 1994:
The Weaving of Sar-Palwe and Sar-Tagon Tapes*

Preface

The *sar-palwe-kyo* or tape is a traditional and rural Myanmar cultural artifact. It is a flat ribbon woven by traditional weaving techniques used to wrap the *sar-palwe*. In ancient days, in Myanmar monasteries, manuscripts were written on *pe*-leaves (palm-leaves). In order to keep them tidy and organised, they were wrapped with *sar-palwe*. *Sar-palwe* are packing cloths, made of cotton or silk strengthened with bamboo sticks and decorated with colorful patterns. The stacked palm-leaves were wrapped with the *sar-palwe* and then bound with the *sar-palwe kyo* tape so that they did not fall apart. *Sar-palwe* tapes are like wrapping ribbons for gifts and fancy hair ribbons used by women. The text woven on *sar-palwe* tapes is a mixture of Pali and Myanmar. It names the donors, invokes the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and refers to Buddhist teachings.

Sar-tagon tapes are similar to the *sar-tagon* and *tagon-koke-ka*, which are banners or hangings made with gold or silver paper that are found swinging gracefully in front of the enshrined image of the Buddha or in front of pagodas. *Sar-tagon* tapes have motifs of stupas, banners, hangings, holy birds, gongs and bells, decorated vases, and the name of the donor woven on the *kyo* or ribbon.

'Holding the Sar-palwe to the breast, following (Novice Son) to the Monastery' is a traditional song of Myanmar people, but very few know what *sar-palwe*, *sar-palwe kyo* and *sar-tagon kyo* are. They are truly Myanmar traditional rural artifacts, and examples of the art of traditional weaving, which the weaving schools have a duty to preserve, so as to ensure that knowledge of the craft does not diminish.

The apparatus required:

1. Two 2-foot bamboo poles with one end pointed
2. Two frame poles

3. 'Hsint' tablets
4. Spool Axle
5. Spool rack
6. Spool
7. Measuring tape or ruler
8. Scissors
9. Strut beam
10. Shuttle
11. Beater
12. Graph paper

Their use:

1. Two 2-foot bamboo poles each with one pointed end: used as fore and hind posts to support the required length of warp threads and ensure uniformity of tension.
2. Two frame poles: Used to separate and support warp threads according to the pattern.
3. 'HSINT' tablets: the most basic instrument. 2½ inch square tablets of smooth, thin, fine goat skin, with four holes at the corners to create the shed opening. From the four threads (of different colors) the weaver can control the pattern or the text by bringing the required pattern threads to the surface of the warp while the rest of the tablets weave the background.
4. Spool axle: Bamboo axle to reel the spool, in preparing warps according to the pattern design.
5. Spool rack: Wooden bar that holds the spools.
6. Spool: Small wooden cylinder on which a specific length of thread is reeled.
7. Measuring tape or ruler: For measuring desired breadth and length of the ribbon to be woven.
8. Scissors: Used for cutting, preparing the warp threads, and changing the colours threaded onto the tablets.
9. Strut Beam: Small supporting bar for the warp threads to cross, so as to stabilise the warps and ensure that they are at uniform tension.
10. Bobbin: Smooth bamboo rod of six inch long, on which weft threads are reeled.
11. Beater: Flat wooden blade used to force the weft threads close and tight.
12. Graph paper: For drawing of desired designs and patterns.

Preparation of Warp

1. First of all, on dry hard ground, embed one of the poles by its sharpened point to a depth of six inches. This will be the hind-pole.
2. Do the same for the other pole, which will be the fore-pole, at the distance required for the length of tape desired.
3. In between the fore and hind poles, erect the 'frame pole'.
4. Put the spools of coloured thread onto the spool rack in the order required by the pattern.
5. Insert one thread into each hole in the 'HSINT' tablet (i.e. string the tablet onto the warp). Each tablet carries four warp threads. The threads are gathered together and run around the hind pole. Draw the tablets to the frame pole, and leave one tablet at

- the outside right of the frame pole. Then pass the warp threads around the fore pole, leaving another tablet at the outside left of the frame pole. To maintain uniform tension in all the warp threads, they are supported by the frame bar and tied at the hind post.
6. Repeat the process until the desired width of the tape is reached, with each 'HSINT' tablet carrying four threads.

Tablet Adjustment

When the threaded tablets are in the prescribed order, the two frame poles are removed. The strut beam is then placed about 10 inches from the hind pole to allow for the separation of the tablets and uniformity of tension. The pattern is adjusted through manipulation of the tablet.

Weaving

In front of the frame bar, for the pattern to appear in succession, that is, to be repeated, the 'HSINT' tablets are turned towards the fore-post twice and then towards the hind-post twice. The weft thread is passed through the shed opening each time to create interlacement and then pressed [forcefully] with the beater [towards the weaver to create a tight weave]. The distance among any group of four warp threads depends on the thickness of the tablet. The combination of thick and thin yarn will make the design more defined.

The primary, basic technique for weaving *sa-palwei* tape produces horse-girths belts, sword belts, drum belts, monks' belts (*ka-ban-kyo*) and bowl-carrying belts (*thabeik-kyo*). By changing the colours [of the threads] and controlling the tablets, *sar-palwei kyo* and *sar-tagon kyo* can be woven. To achieve the desired pattern, the number of weft threads and the proposed length of the tape are considered: For example, if the number of threads making up the breadth is 144, 36 HSINT tablets are used: two tablets on each edge for the selvedge, making four altogether, and the remaining 32 in between the selvedge tablets. With these 32 tablets, considering design and colour, and the density of warp and weft density, the weaver starts weaving.

In this weaving method, there is no use of reed hooks, tapestry bobbins or the treadle. The 132323 [pattern] introduced to the wefts, the pressing of the treadle and making items like bags are different methods. In the double-faced tablet weaving technique, the pattern appears on both sides. For example, if the warp threads are the two colours of white and green, if the white is the background, the green will stand out distinctly on the surface.¹⁵

Rate of production

Using thick yarns for circular belts and monks' belts, a weaver can finish 54 inches per day. For artistic designs and text weaving as in *sa-tagon kyo* and *sa-palwei kyo*, 5 inches per day is possible.

¹⁵ Translators' note: The text is raised above the surface of the ribbon. The weaver may choose to weave it in reverse, so that the text is sunk below the front surface of the ribbon and raised on the back. Either way, a *sarsikyo* could be read by a literate blind person.

Prospects for increase in uses for HSINT tablet weaving

Since this technique does not use hooks to make tiny designs, it can be woven at a faster rate. There are prospects in the area of logo badges and labels for shirts and blankets. Moreover, it is part of the national heritage to weave *sar-palwei* and *sar-tagon* tapes.

Conclusion

Jacquard weaving is named in the honour of Jacquard. Likewise, in this paper, I have named the instruments and method HSINT tablets and HSINT weaving are so termed to honour Daw (Mother) Hsint. The highest appreciations go to teacher Mother HSINT who was my inspiration; to MonYwe villager Daw Hla Myint (Daw Hsint's niece), who demonstrated the saddle-girth weaving technique, and to Saya U Thein Tan for giving instructions that encouraged me to upgrade myself to become a *sar-palwe* weaver.

Ma Thein Htay

Assistant Teacher

Weaving High School (MonYwa, NWE/13-10-94)

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