

TK Conference on Reading 2012



ROLE OF MYANMAR LIBRARIES IN KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT
AND
ACTIVITIES OF MYANMAR BOOK AID AND PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

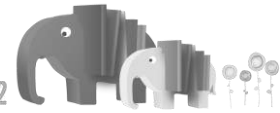
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ROLE OF MYANMAR LIBRARIES IN KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITIES OF MYANMAR BOOK AID AND PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung

One of the last countries opened up to the world, Myanmar is facing many challenges to develop its human resources. In order to improve human resource development, our current government has made changes and improvements, but many challenges remain. Our ministries of Education and Health along with INGOs and NGOs will play major roles in making these changes.

This paper will emphasize the following topics;

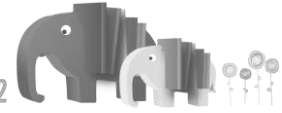
1. Role of Myanmar libraries in human resource development
2. Current education policy on knowledge development
3. Challenges in promotion of knowledge development
4. Activities of our two foundations, Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation and Nargis Library Recovery, in helping library development.

1. Role of Myanmar Libraries in Human Resource Development

Myanmar's history of libraries extends back to the ancient Bagan dynasty (11th-13th century A.D). Most libraries then were related to pagodas and monasteries and were known as "Pitika-taik". Their collections were of palm leaf or paper folded manuscripts.

Modern libraries were developed during the British colonial period and four types can be found in Myanmar:

- 1.) National Libraries and branches
- 2.) Academic Libraries



- 3.) Public Libraries
- 4.) Special Libraries

1.) National Library

The National Library was founded in 1952 after taking over the collection of the Bernard Free Library, founded in 1883 by Sir Charles Edward Bernard, the Lt. Governor of Burma. It is now under the Ministry of Culture. However, the library has not received proper attention by successive governments. Even a proper building was not constructed by the government as it has been moving from one building to another. Therefore, many users today are more familiar with the Universities Central Library than the National Library in Myanmar. Even though it has a good collection of rare books on Myanmar, very few people use them. There is a legal depository requirement for all the local publication; consequently it has a nearly complete collection of local publications. However, because of budget deficits and improper buildings since 1962, this library remains unattractive among locals, scholars and officials. A new National Library is being built in our new capital, Nay Pyi Daw, due to open in 2013, over (700,000) books have been collected in Yangon's and Nay Pyi Daw's National Libraries. They are considered to be reference libraries, so no borrowing is permitted. Branches of the National Library are in all seven States: Mon, Shan, Rakhine, Kachin, Chin, Kayah, and Kayein, and they are also connected to their State Museums. We also have branches in the (7) Greater Regions of Myanmar, such as Yangon, Mandalay and Ayeyarwaddy.

Our National Library offers library training courses and a Diploma course which started in 2010. Moreover, digitized versions old texts are shared with the digital collections among State and Greater Divisional libraries. At present, a new National Library Act is being drafted and will be passed by Parliament this year. It has received grants from ASEAN COCI to digitize all their rare books.



2.) Academic Libraries

Among our academic libraries, Rangoon University Library was the first and earliest founded in 1927, it is now a research and reference library. It once was reputed to have best collection in Southeast Asia of historical and cultural materials. Destroyed during the Second World War, it was afterwards renovated and reopened in 1951, then reorganized as the Universities' Central Library (UCL) in 1964 according to a new education system.

During the military Socialist Government era (1962-1988), new libraries were developed in the Yangon University. The faculty of Yangon University was divided into Institutes e.g. Institute of Medicine, Yangon Institute of Technology, each with academic libraries. Due to financial constraints, only a few new foreign books were bought. Severe budget cuts in education retarded growth of these libraries as new books and journals could not be purchased. After 1988 when even less emphasis was given to education, our library development was stifled. During this period, new university libraries were built in different states and divisions, they were stocked with few books, funds were not allocated. However during this current 2012-13 budget year, our library budgets have been increased doubled, a sign the current government values more highly on our educational development.

Our Universities Central Library (UCL) has the best collection in Myanmar of rare and ancient manuscript collections in the form of Palm Leafs and Paper Folded Manuscripts. Microfilm and digital projects funded from abroad, along with conservation support, have preserved them in good condition. UCL also has exchange programmes with (12) overseas universities libraries and hence has the best collection in the country.

Apart from UCL, there are currently (164) academic libraries. They are under (13) different ministries, such as the University of Medicine, Science and Technology Universities, etc.. The funds for state-run libraries come from the respective ministry's budget which is very low. For example, our annual National Library budget is only about Kyat four million (about US\$ 5,000 annually). For lack of funding, keeps these libraries buy very few foreign



language books. In fact, many libraries rely entirely on donations, which prevent our libraries from subscribing to online databases or online eBook resources. However, the current government is finally emphasizing the importance of online libraries. We hope donors will help us gain access to these expensive online databases.

Because of lack of new books in State libraries, most readers rely on private libraries such as the British Council Library and the American Center Library. Most State Libraries have had to develop their collections from donations by NGOs, INGOs and visiting scholars.

3.) Public Libraries

According to the statistics of Ministry of Information, there are over (50,000) public libraries all over the country; however most of these are merely pitiful village libraries. However, we have no proper audit or accounting of active libraries. The Ministry of Information is working to promote reading habits among children and new library development. In May 2010, they formed an NGO called “Myanmar Library Foundation” to help the ministry in library development and promote reading habits among adults also. Myanmar Library Foundation’s job is to survey the country, to construct new libraries and promote reading habits among citizens. Awareness is being gained about various media as the Foundation gathers famous authors and even film actors to serve on the Foundation’s board. Meanwhile, public libraries are being built and literary talks are designed to help promote reading habits among citizens throughout Myanmar.

Apart from these government-public libraries, there are a number of private libraries which are very successful, especially the British Council Library, the American Centre Library in Yangon & Jefferson Centre in Mandalay, in addition to small private libraries in smaller cities, such as Saya Zaw Gyi Library in Pyarpon & Insein’s Dr. Chit Maung Library. Many of Myanmar’s 1,800 monastic schools have libraries as well. Poor students normally go to these monastic schools and these libraries require much help.



4.) Special Libraries

Myanmar has special libraries as follows:

1. Department of Medical Research (both Upper and Lower Myanmar)
2. Library under Department of Promotion and Propagation of Religion
3. Library under Public Affairs Commission
4. Traditional Medicine Library
5. Library at Central Research Organization

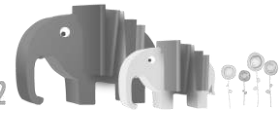
In addition to these four types of libraries, Myanmar Library Science Course which is administered by the Ministry of Education generates qualified librarians. Moreover, Myanmar Library Association (a local NGO), also plays a crucial role in training of qualified librarians.

Myanmar Library Science Course

Even though there are many challenges, Myanmar still has over 800 qualified professionally trained librarians who graduated from our Myanmar Library Science Course, founded in 1974 by Dr. U Thaw Kaung. At present, these courses are conducted in all major universities of Myanmar and award the Diploma, B.A, M.A and PhD in Library Science. These librarians are qualified to work either in university or school libraries. Some of them are even working in overseas UN organizations and Library of Congress.

Myanmar Library Association

Myanmar Library Association is a local NGO under the sponsorship of Ministry of Culture; it plays a crucial role in continuous training of the librarians in Myanmar. It was founded as a local NGO in 1994 by Dr. U Thaw Kaung also. Its purpose is to conduct training courses for librarians, to share information and stimulate public awareness about the role of libraries and librarians. It conducts library training courses every 3 months. Anybody can enroll in these courses and basic training is given for new local librarians. Each course lasts



for two weeks, and occasionally foreign librarians give talks and offer training to librarians. Since it is an NGO, it has more flexibility in linkage with foreign organizations.

2. Current Education Policy on Knowledge Development

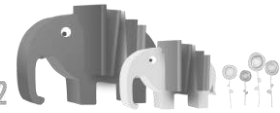
As I mentioned earlier, the current government is making many changes and improvements on knowledge development. As of 31st March 2012, the current government celebrated its first anniversary and noted the followings changes in knowledge development.

2.1 Education budget has been raised from 2.4% in 2010-11 to 4.7% in 2011-12 . Total of Kyat 310,401 Millions (US\$ 340 Millions) in 2011-12 has been raised to Kyat 617,214 Millions (US\$ 740 Millions) in 2012-13 fiscal year. This increment is almost double of last year. Everyone welcomes this improvement; however, this budget is still low compared with other countries in Southeast Asia. According to our economists, a developing country like Myanmar should have at least 14-20% of the total budget allotted to the education sector.

2.2 Private School Law has been passed. With this law, private schools can open and students can attend these schools and sit for government exams. Previously, students had to attend state schools to make their attendance official, then also attend these private schools for real study. No longer is it necessary to attend a state school.

2.3 At the higher education level, one more year has been introduced. Previously, university students attended only three years to get a degree. Under the new system, they must study for four years to get a degree, which is the international standard, a welcome change.

2.4 Salaries of teachers working in rural and remote areas were increased two-folds since April'12. Under the present scheme, most teachers are getting about US\$ 60 per month, but even this low pay is not guaranteed to every teacher.



2.5 English proficiency skills have improved. At present, TOEFL-like test is a prerequisite for all the MA and PhD students.

2.6 Openness is improving as we link up with overseas universities from the West, for instance, a John's Hopkins University program will reopen (JHU had a center from 1955-1962). Moreover, foreign professors are returning to teach at our universities. At present, one German professor is teaching at the Geography Department in the Yangon University.

2.7 There are plans to get online education via internet. However, the country will need tremendous help from outside as the budget will not pay for expensive online databases.

2.8 More state scholars will be sent abroad as the government is giving more attention on linkages with western world.

2.9 More openness in the parliament can be seen nowadays as Members of Parliament are raising questions about education, most of which have been answered by the Minister of Education.

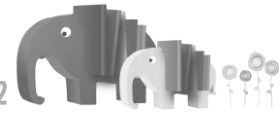
3. Challenges in Promotion of Knowledge Development

Even though Myanmar has an official 95% literacy rate and various efforts were made on library development, we have so many challenges in promotion of readership in our libraries.

3.1) Due to development of technology (ICT), many students are spending their time on internet chatting or playing computer games. They are not developing reading skills.

3.2) Because of low funding, very few libraries are equipped with quality books. Most books in Myanmar libraries are outdated or damaged.

3.3) Due to our tough examination system, students do not have time to read or study extracurricular materials. Most of the students are fully occupied with exam



preparation; they have to attend schools while also attending private tuitions until very late night, so they have no time to read for pleasure.

3.4) Lack of electricity in rural areas makes rural libraries inefficient. Most rural people only have free time at night, so readership will be increased if our electricity becomes more reliable. (* 70% of total population is living in rural area)

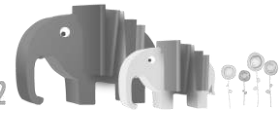
3.5) Poverty (currently 26%) is another important factor which keeps students from finishing their education. Most villagers should pass the 4th Standard but we have a very high percentage of dropouts as families need children at home to work. At present, eight million students are attending primary, middle and high schools all over the country but only 400,000 students are attending at universities. In other words, only 5% of students attain a university education which in itself is very problematic, still.

3.6) Even though a library may be properly set up, it often fails to run properly due to lack of a proper library board.

3.7) This year's education budget of 4.7% of the total government spending is very low compared with our neighboring countries, and most funds are being spent on construction of universities and colleges, very little investment is made on teacher training and library development. Therefore, in relation to budget, we are more interested in how the budget is going to be spent than how much budget is going to be allocated for education sector.

3.8) Lack of experienced teachers: UNICEF recently conducted a survey of over 200 primary schools in Myanmar and found many teachers use Rote Learning or one way of teaching, called "Chalk and Talk" or "Passive Learning". Questions are rarely asked and if asked they are normally closed questions rather than open questions. Teachers rarely recommend libraries to use also.

3.9) Very low teachers' salary: Myanmar teachers until this year were paid around Kyat 25,000 per month (about US\$ 30), among the lowest in the world, so to sustain



themselves they must give private tuition in extra school hours. In fact, too many teachers survive only through private tuition.

3.10) English proficiency skills are still very low.

3.11) Current average schooling is less than 4 years comparing with 10 years in neighboring countries, due to high dropout rates in our rural areas.

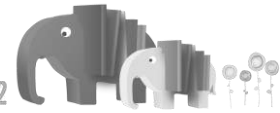
3.12) Teachers/Students Ratio: We have severe inequality in our teachers/students ratios. In the rural area, the ratio is 1:30, while in urban schools the ratio can be 1:70 or more, especially among our more famous schools.

4. Role of Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF) and Nargis Library Recovery Foundation(NLR) in Knowledge Development

1.) Brief History of MBAPF and NLR

Myanmar was hard hit by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 and over 130,000 people perished during the cyclone. Among the damage and destruction, over 2,000 libraries and schools were destroyed. MBAPF was contacted by friends of Myanmar around the world. One was Dr. John Badgley, a Burma specialist and retired curator from Cornell University Library who had surveyed our university and college libraries in 1987-88. Dr. Badgley searched for donors of books and in December, 2008, persuaded a large online book seller, Thrift Books, to donate a million books. Nargis Library Recovery (NLR) was formed after Nargis in USA with board members comprised of seven retired professors, businessmen and philanthropists. It gained tax exempt status as well as a license of exception to the severe US sanctions against Myanmar. MBAPF has been formed in Myanmar with a board comprising of senior librarians, businessmen and influential persons in 2002 to preserve books and assist libraries. Dr. Badgley and I serve on the boards of both organizations.

I would like to thank to my father Dr. U Thaw Kaung who gave us the guideline and advice on our foundation activities. As mentioned earlier, he is recognized as “Father of all



librarians” in Myanmar as he has vast knowledge, contacts and enthusiasm to help our country’s libraries. He founded Myanmar Library Science Course, Myanmar Library Association and worked as chief librarian for Universities Central Library for over 40 years. His works were recognized by many oversea organizations and hence won for Fukuoka Academic Prize in 2007, the first prize for a librarian in Asia. He acts as Chairman of our foundation also.

With combined efforts of NLR and MBAPF, funds for shipping of containers were obtained by NLR’s Board Members. Initially the American President Line donated container berths for 300,000 books and was targeted to cyclone-affected areas in the Delta; however we have expanded to cover the entire country with our activities.

2.) Mission Statement

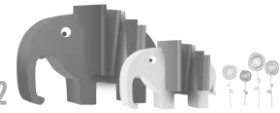
Foundation was formed with the following mission statements.

- Provide global knowledge throughout the country by distributing over a million books.
- Reconstruct over 2,000 libraries damaged by Cyclone Nargis.
- Equip libraries with not only books but desks and benches as well as laptops and shelves.
- Enhance community support via library reader workshops—to host workshop & follow-up training by professional librarians and teachers.

3.) Partner Donors

Currently, these donors are supporting our programme.

1. Thrifts Books, U.S.A
2. Opportunity Foundation, Thailand
3. American President Line, U.S.A
4. University of Washington Library Gift Programme, U.S.A



5. Cornell University Library Gift Programme, U.S.A
6. Institute of Southeast Asia, Singapore
7. National Library of Australia, Australia
8. United Nation Women's Guild of Vienna
9. Montana Library Association
10. World Vision, Myanmar

4.) Current Activities of NLR and MBAPF

- Sorting books by subject and donate to needy libraries.. Currently, over 750 libraries have received over 500,000 books from the foundation. 400,000 books are in English and 100,000 books are in Myanmar language.
- Funds raised by selling 30% of English books to buy new Myanmar language books for those libraries in towns & villages where English levels are low. These funds are raised through Book-Buffets arranged by Myanmar Book Centre's staff.
- Select libraries for reconstruction and repair. We constructed a library/community centre in Thin Kan Gon village in Lutputta Township with assistance from UNWA, and over thirty village libraries funded by World Vision in Bogale Township. Numerous student-managed libraries exist because of our book donations, and even funds for renting space in some instances.
- Library Training Course: With support from Myanmar Library Association, we are able to give training to village librarians. Training on "How to run a small library" has become very popular among our librarians.
- Library Readers' Programme: With the support from volunteer from UK Australia and the USA, we are promoting English language proficiency skills such as presentation, negotiation, communication and debate skills trainings in communities, both in small cities as well as Mandalay and Yangon.
- Teachers Training Workshops: As mentioned earlier, lack of experienced teachers with proper teaching skills is one of the major challenges in Myanmar. In 2011, three



teachers training workshops were conducted by Sue Simpson from USA and Gayle Holmes from Australia in Bogalay, Mandalay and Yangon. They created very dynamic workshops on effective use of simple reading books as well as how to plan lessons and be creative in the classroom. Their workshop methods are new for Myanmar teachers and who thoroughly enjoyed the training. They already are being used in their classes. Responses to Library Readers workshops has been very good, so more workshops will be conducted within 2012 and in the future, if we can secure additional funding.

5.) Type of Books

Donation from Thrift Books consists of wide area of subjects such as Children Books (Kids to Teen Readers), Self Development Books, Reference Books, Fiction and Non-fiction and Higher Academic books. Most are used books still in good condition and usable in Myanmar. At present, we have imported 600,000 books and another 400,000 books are yet to be imported. These books are appreciated by the urban libraries, community centres and school libraries receiving them. The CEO of Thrift Book visited Myanmar and has agreed to donation another million of books in the future.

Other university libraries donated academic and reference books. Two US University Libraries have gift programmes and were willing to join in our project: Cornell University Library and University of Washington State Library; additionally, the Institute of Southeast Asia in Singapore and the University of Canberra, as well as private scholars around the world have contributed books to our project. They are especially valuable for our university libraries which have been scarcely funded.

As mentioned earlier, 30% of donated books are sold, with permission from donors. The purpose of selling these books is to raise funds to buy Myanmar language books. Our books are sold in book fairs called “Book-Buffets” where customers buy bags, which they fill as full as they can. These are exciting events for people in cities where English language books are in demand, but very hard to find. Our motto is “Right Books to Right



People” so that Myanmar language books can be purchased with funds we raise, then donated to rural libraries.

6.) Partners

In order to run effective operation in library development, MBAPF partners with many other local NGO, INGO and local volunteers. We partner with World Vision, Tharapar Library, Active Youth, Kanbawza Youth and other local NGO to get effective distribution of our books. We also partner with Community Service from International Schools which are active in volunteerism. Distribution of the books, usage of books, teachers training workshops, and library readers’ programmes are assisted by these NGO and INGO volunteers.

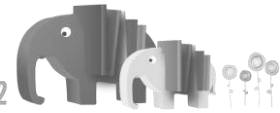
We also partner with influential persons and monks in library development; examples being Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw and Venerable Dhammapiya Sayadaw, who support our foundation activities. Because of their help, more people are aware of our activities. Moreover, these Sayadaws emphasize in their preaching the value of reading.

Finally, our key and most important partner is Nargis Library Recovery Foundation based in USA. They have been a continuous supporter and donated most of the books, which enables us to run our foundation activity smoothly.

Our key challenge is to raise fund for shipping books, which costs over US\$ 6,000 for one 40’ container for shipping to Myanmar. American President Line donated the freight charges for our first six containers, subsequent shipping has been paid for by our board of directors.

7.) Donated Libraries

Careful selection of the libraries is a key factor in donating of our books. Reliability of the library, accountability and transparency of the donated libraries are considered key factors to be considered to donate. Moreover, presence of a strong library board and effective librarians are also important factors in success of a library. Supporting letter from



an influential person or a monk is necessary to get donated books. After donation, proper photographic evidence and also follow-up by a foundation staff is necessary. All the books must be stocked on open shelves. Equal access to the books must be given as well.

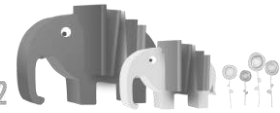
We have found two types of librarians: Some librarians are readers but do not want to share, they always protect their books. But, other librarians are good readers plus they are willing to share and offer good customer service. We prefer to deal with the latter type of the librarian because success can be gained with this type of librarian. A librarian should not only concentrate on books but also should be creative and should offer good customer service. Therefore, the role of efficient and effective librarians is very important in successful running of a good library.

We are donating our books to not only state run academic libraries, national library, special collection libraries, private libraries, monastic school libraries and but also to many village libraries. At present over 750 libraries have received our books. Even though we started with the aim of donating books to delta area where cyclone hit, we are able to donate to all the States and Divisions at present. Our foundation became one of the biggest private NGOs donating the highest numbers of books in Myanmar.

8.) Challenges

Our main challenge is raising fund for shipping books from USA to Myanmar. We have to thank to board members of Nargis Library Recovery, four of whom share the cost of shipping. Each 40' container (high cube) costs US\$ 6,000 from US to Myanmar. We are importing 3-4 containers a year. Each container has about 50,000 books. In other words, it costs only 0.12 Cent to ship a book from USA to Myanmar.

Storage was another challenge that we faced. MBAPF bought two empty containers to store books in our office compound in Yangon.



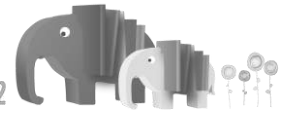
Other minor challenges are choosing the right libraries and creating accountability of each library. Sometimes, our donated books are not well used and they are kept in shelves under key. This is one of our major concerns in Myanmar society as librarians feel that the books are expensive and they cannot afford to lose them. We educate them to understand that we will replenish the stock if the books are kept by readers. We have to persuade the librarians to let the kids touch the books, feel the books and read the books whenever necessary. We need the kids to love the books.

Forming a legal NGO is another challenge for our foundation. Until now, no new NGOs are given permits to run officially by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Therefore, there are many organizations in Myanmar which are not recognized by the government. But, all these organizations including ours do not care and run their operations, de facto. In fact, all most domestic NGOs have full support from local communities as well as most ministries. For example, our MBAP Foundation has recognition and supporting letters from the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education.

Censorship is also another challenge for our Foundation. Because of my commercial company, Myanmar Book Centre, has been in the book trade for over 15 years, all the imports are done using our commercial company name.

9.) Future Goals

NLR and MBAPF have become the largest book donor in three years time. Apart from our foundation, Asia Foundation is the only another organization which also contribute English language books in Myanmar. If funding is available, we would like construct more libraries all over the country. Moreover, we continue to donate more Myanmar language books as they are more needed in village libraries. Current activities of teachers' training workshops and library reader's programme will be expanded.



Conclusion

We are honored to be part of a team, our two foundations help develop knowledge among my countrymen. My country will need a lot of human resources in the near future as we become more transparent and strive to meet international standards. That is why we are proud of what we are able to do now. We do hope that more foreign investment and assistance can flow into the country, we would like to partner with other foreign organizations or INGO interested in developing the education sector of Myanmar.

