

Written and Oral Transmission of Burmese Classical Songs

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Introduction

This article details the written and oral transmission of Burmese classical songs or *thachingyi* (great song),⁽¹⁾ specifically those for voice and harp (*saung gauk*).

Over one thousand songs have been listed under the category of *thachingyi*. Their song texts have been transcribed, but their melodies and instrumentation have been transmitted orally. As the melodies of several of these songs have been lost, less than half continue to be played today. The musician reputed to have the largest repertoire can play approximately 400 songs.⁽²⁾ The majority of other musicians play a selection from the 169 songs featured in *Naingandaw mu maha gita* (The national version of *maha gita*, hereafter *NAIN*), the national compilation of song texts.⁽³⁾ There have been attempts to transcribe this music, however, none of these has been effective, apart from the notations of the distinguished instrumentalist, U Myint Maung (1937–2001).

In this article, I will begin by examining the role of written materials in transmission. I will then describe how the music is relayed orally and discuss the factors that enable oral

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transmission. Finally, I will discuss how to approach the standardization of Burmese classical songs.

The data for this article were obtained from palm-leaf manuscripts (*pe*) of songs that I collected from the National Library of Myanmar, the Universities' Central Library, and the Universities Historical Research Centre. I have also utilized published song anthologies.

This article is also based on my participant observation. I studied *thachingyi* singing and harp at Yangon University of Culture (now called the National University of Arts and Culture, Yangon, hereafter YUC) for two years, from 1999–2001. Since 2007, I have been studying the harp with U Myint Maung's wife, Daw Khin May, for approximately one month per year. At YUC, I was trained orally; Daw Khin May also teaches me orally, but she occasionally uses notations that were written by U Myint Maung to remind herself of the music.

I . Written Transmission

1.1. Song anthologies

Canonicity of song texts

Up to the early 20th century, song texts were recorded on palm-leaf manuscripts and paper manuscripts (*parabaik*).⁽⁴⁾ From the end of the 19th century, 12 different anthologies were published which extended to several editions.⁽⁵⁾ The prefaces written for these anthologies explain how and why they were compiled. Based on this information, it appears that the purposes for which song texts are transcribed are: (1) to preserve song texts, (2) to create an authority for learning and memorization, and (3) to standardize song variants.⁽⁶⁾ We can recognize that song texts are strongly normative in song transmission.

It is reputed that the oldest song anthology available today is *Monywe Hsayadaw shei ti-gyek than zu* (Monywe Hsayadaw's old songs, hereafter *MONYWE*),⁽⁷⁾ which was edited by Monywa Hsayadaw (1766–1834) circa 1788.⁽⁸⁾ It comprised 166 sets of song texts. The preface of this manuscript describes Yandameik Kyaw Zwa, who was a finance officer for the crown prince, asked Monywa Hsayadaw to collect songs such as *kyo* genre.⁽⁹⁾ He wished to study these songs in order to be capable of answering the crown prince's questions.⁽¹⁰⁾ Monywa Hsayadaw told him that he would collect such songs in his spare time, but would not be able to gather all of them, however, he would write down all of the songs that he could collect.⁽¹¹⁾ We can see from this case that song texts are the authority for song study.

Myawadi Mingyi U Sa (1766–1853; hereafter U Sa) edited his anthology⁽¹²⁾ in 1849. In the preface of this manuscript, crown prince Mindon, who was king from 1852–78, ordered U Sa to record his literary works, which he composed between 25 and 83 years of age, as Mindon desired to hear them.

Thachin gaunzin pouk-yei hmat-su daw (A list of the number of song titles, hereafter *TITLES*)⁽¹³⁾ is the first historical source to organize songs by their genres. Its preface explains that it was edited on the orders of King Mindon on May 23, 1870.⁽¹⁴⁾ He wished to transcribe songs that were transmitted from generation to generation, in order to maintain their form and ensure that they would not disappear. In this manuscript, the titles, or the first

lines of the song texts of 1062 songs are listed under 27 genres. All the songs without specific genre descriptions, which include the songs in *U Sa's Anthology*, are categorized within certain genres.

Maha gita meidani kyan (The earth of *maha gita*)⁽¹⁵⁾ is the oldest published anthology that was published in 1881.⁽¹⁶⁾ The palm-leaf manuscript of this anthology⁽¹⁷⁾ does not have a preface; however, its published version does include one. The preface explains that, because there were errors and ambiguous meanings in these song texts, they were edited by an advocate U Yauk in Pyi City. The preface states that this was to improve conformance with the song manuscripts that were owned by supporters of Buddhist temples.⁽¹⁸⁾

Thabba gitekkama pakatani kyan (Anthology of all the songs, hereafter *THABBA*)⁽¹⁹⁾ is the latest and largest song anthology on palm-leaf manuscript. Wekmasut Wundauk (1845–1940)⁽²⁰⁾ edited this collection under the orders of Thibaw, the local lord (*sobwa*). There are no records of the original editing date as only the manuscript date, 1917, is mentioned.⁽²¹⁾ The preface to this volume mentions that songs and poems composed by past intellectuals now contain erroneous descriptions and mismatches between each verse or each song. This, the preface states, has destroyed the composers' intended meaning Therefore, Wekmasut Wundauk transcribed songs with an effort not to include errors⁽²²⁾ We can see from this preface that this manuscript was also compiled in order to standardize song text variations. It includes 946 songs.

Gita wi thaw dhani kyan (Anthology of purified songs)⁽²³⁾ and *Maha gita paung gyouk ci* (Anthology of *maha gita*)⁽²⁴⁾ are also representative published anthologies. U Htun Yee, a researcher of old manuscripts, stated that these anthologies were compiled, not from palm-leaf and paper manuscripts, but from oral sources.⁽²⁵⁾ We can therefore assume that the song texts had been transmitted orally in some locations.

From 1954–61, the Ministry of Culture published three volumes of *NAIN*, which standardizes various song texts. In the preface to the first volume, it is mentioned that the song texts and playing style of *thachingyi* vary, so the *NAIN* editors' intention was to unify them.⁽²⁶⁾ At this point, 169 songs' texts were standardized in this anthology, which is used in performing arts schools, at the YUC, and by musicians. We can still see various performing styles for the same song today, despite this standardization of song texts.

As mentioned above, song texts have been transcribed in the interests of preservation, for study purpose, and variant standardization. Song texts increase their level of canonicity through documentation, which controls not only the manner in which they are sung, but also the way in which they are played using instruments.

Functions of genre classification

As previously noted, since 1870, song anthologies have been compiled by categorizing songs by genre. There are five aspects that constitute a genre: (1) tuning systems, (2) rhythmic patterns, (3) melodies frequently used in a certain genre, (4) a prelude that is fixed according to a certain genre and, in some cases, (5) a postlude. Some genres are defined by the content of their song texts, but otherwise genre definition is not perfectly clear, and many songs exist that are exceptions to their genres.

Many songs have been categorized into different genres in different anthologies. For

example, the song “*Lei pyi laun dhi hnin*” in *U Sa’s Anthology* (1849)⁽²⁷⁾ is described as follows: “The harpist, Maung Hkwe, asked [U Sa] to [write the song] so Mingyi [U Sa] wrote it at Oukkalapa.”⁽²⁸⁾ In that anthology there are no genre definitions for this song. In contrast, this song is categorized as *yodaya* in *TITLES*⁽²⁹⁾ and as *patpyo* in *THABBA*.⁽³⁰⁾ There are many such differences amongst song anthologies. These differences decrease with successive publications but they are not completely eliminated.

Even in *NAIN*, some songs are classified into two genres. For example, three songs entitled “*Wut tau youn*” are classified as both *kyo* and *bwe* genres⁽³¹⁾ and can be played as either. The texts and melodies of these songs are identical, but the preludes and rhythmic patterns differ according to genre.

Genre definitions and the genre classification of songs are less certain. It would be more appropriate to say that genre classification is an interpretation of playing style. Deiwaeinda U Maung Maung Gyi (1855–1933) was the last court harpist to believe that *thachingan* genre should not be played slowly or at a leisurely pace.⁽³²⁾ The famous singer Daw So Mya Aye Kyi (1891–1967) stated that teachers in past decades claimed that *thachingan* is hovering, *patpyo* is sweet, and *mon* and *yodaya* are lengthened.⁽³³⁾ All of these factors make it clear that genre is an interpretation of playing style.⁽³⁴⁾

It follows from the above discussion that song anthologies have conveyed information regarding playing style by indicating the genre classification of certain songs. There are exceptions to this rule, but genre classification can roughly indicate a song’s tuning system, prelude, rhythmic pattern, and playing style, and can potentially standardize the playing style of songs that have an unsettled style. Therefore, song anthologies, which transcribe only song texts, inform us not only of these texts, but also of their playing styles.

1.2. Musical notations

Attempts at creating notations

Singing and instrumental playing-styles have traditionally been transmitted orally, but there have been attempts to transcribe the music. The notations that I have collected were written between 1938 and 2005.

A Burmese classical song has two parts: the vocal and the instrumental parts. Most notations only transcribe the instrumental part, using a numbering method for each tone along with staff notation. In 1952, *Classical Burmese Music*,⁽³⁵⁾ which includes three *kyo* song notations, was published. Its preface states: “This is the preliminary attempt made by the Ministry of Union Culture to record and publish Classical Burmese Music in staff notation.... It is the intention of the Ministry to cover in this way the whole range of the Burmese Classical Music trod by the traditional players.”⁽³⁶⁾ These notations are intended for the piano, supervised by U Hpo Lat, and transcribed by Estonian Buddhist High Priest, Frederick W. A. Lustig.

In 1960, the Ministry of Union Culture published three books of harp notations.⁽³⁷⁾ In its preface, it stated:

The aim and object of the Ministry of Union Culture is to explore every possible avenue for the preservation of archaic or traditional Burmese Songs in their original

essence both in tune and style and to standardize them as authenticated Burmese Classical Songs for the interest and benefit of the general public The notation of tunes for the aforesaid thirteen (Kyo) songs is not explicitly meant for the piano but as a source of foundation to facilitate the manipulation of Burmese Musical Instruments

The Ministry of Union Culture is endeavoring its level best to continue to publish all Burmese Classical Songs standardized under its authority and record them in the archives of the Union Government.”⁽³⁸⁾

These notations were transcribed by U Bha Thant (1912–1987), a distinguished instrumentalist who taught musical transcription to U Myint Maung.

In 2004, 13 basic *kyo* song notations were published, again by the Ministry of Union Culture.⁽³⁹⁾ These notations were transcribed by musicologist U Than Aye and harpist U Hlaing Win Maung, both of whom were teaching at YUC at that time. Shoon Myain published notations from 2001–2005, these included 61 *thachingyi* songs.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Interestingly, he attempted to transcribe not only the instrumental parts, but also the vocal melodies, although he only transcribed these melodies for certain songs.

When I studied at YUC, notation was not used for instrumental instruction, however, teachers occasionally found notations useful because they can be presented as visual aids. There are several students who use notation to remember songs, however, the notations they use are for simple songs only, so most musicians are capable of memorizing them. I have encountered experienced musicians who use these notations for research, but apart from the notations of U Myint Maung, not for transmission. For musicians, oral transmission is more effective than using notation.

U Myint Maung’s notations

U Myint Maung created a number of notations of *thachingyi*. These notations are used, especially by his wife, Daw Khin May, and their pupils, to effectively transmit and memorize songs. Daw Khin May said that U Myint Maung became interested in notation after he met American ethnomusicologist Judith Becker. After studying musical transcription with U Bha Thant for the year of 1962, U Myint Maung began to transcribe voraciously. He created several hundred notations that are not distributed and are only used by his wife and pupils. U Myint Maung was an influential teacher and musician, and some of his pupils have also become famous musicians, such as Daw Yi Yi Thant, who is a distinguished singer and harpist. Therefore, the musicians who use his notations are worthy of note.

After U Myint Maung passed away, Daw Khin May began to teach the harp as she had studied at the Mandalay State School of Music and Drama with her husband. She also refers to U Myint Maung’s notations whenever she forgets some phrases. She teaches without notation to children or beginners, however, she uses notation if her pupil is already capable of reading it or if they are unable to come to her house frequently. She especially uses notation with her advanced pupils. Some of these pupils study songs independently with notation and then come to her house to be examined. We can see that, amongst U Myint

Maung and Daw Khin May's pupils, notation is used effectively, but the pupils are encouraged to eventually memorize the songs. Daw Khin May usually teach her pupils by oral, referring notations only to check her memory or to adopt U Myint Maung's arrangements.

Does using notation lead to a standardization of song variants? If the 13 basic *kyo* songs are taught without notations, we can only see certain variants. This is because these songs are simple and their recordings are popular. Yet, even in these *kyo* songs, there are variations of the same melodies. Numerous melodies are common to many songs but the instrumental styles of them are different. Thus, even for beginners who have studied a number of songs, it is difficult to consistently play one song in the same style.

U Myint Maung also created different notations each time he transcribed a song. Daw Khin May said that U Myint Maung created different notations for different pupils depending on their skill. I acquired the copy of his notations and found that it contained many variations of the same songs. Moreover, he wrote different notations for harp than for bamboo xylophone (*pattala*) or other instruments. His pupils did not consistently play completely in accordance with his transcriptions. Indeed, Daw Khin May unintentionally taught me two different versions of the "*Hman ya wei*" *patpyo* in 2008 and 2009. U Than Oo, my harp teacher at YUC, was a pupil of U Myint Maung. Therefore, he is capable of reading notation and has many notations written by U Myint Maung. However, he did not use notations to teach me, only referring to them to check his memory. In *thachingyi*, there are many melodies that have numerous instrumental variations so, in performance, these variations may appear at random. Thus, the variants of a song are not standardized immediately.

II. Oral Transmission

2.1. Transmission of singing

Ordinarily, the use of notation is unpopular; even if teachers or musicians use notations, the major style of transmission is oral. Song texts are referred when study or sing songs, however their melodies and singing styles are transmitted orally.

Singing is transmitted through a student's imitation of a teacher. After the teacher sings one phrase, the student imitates it. Singing is accompanied by a *si* (*cymbal*) in the right hand and a *wa* (*castanet*) in the left hand. Complicated intonations can be mastered with the rhythms of the *si* and *wa*. When I learned singing from my teacher at YUC, she taught me to write the signs for *si* (∨) and *wa* (×) above the song texts in *NAIN*. However, an experienced player is capable of recognizing immediately when a certain phrase begins with *si* or *wa* without looking at such symbols. Certain musicians occasionally criticize this method because it is not traditional, and because they can generally recall melodies simply by seeing song texts. In other words, the student should be able to sing and memorize melodies so that they can recall them only through the song texts.

There are fewer variants of vocal melodies than instrumental parts, but intonations do differ slightly depending on the individual singer.⁽⁴¹⁾ In addition, teachers teach according to

the student's skill level. If a student cannot sing sufficiently high for a certain phrase, the teacher may have him or her sing a song an octave lower for that phrase. If a student cannot sing complicated intonations, the teacher will teach him or her a simple intonation. Therefore, we can see that singing style is flexible and adaptable to a singer's ability.

2.2. Transmission of instrumental parts

Instrumental parts are transmitted in the same fashion as singing, through imitation of the teacher. For example, in the case of the harp, the teacher instructs the student how to play on the same or opposite side of the harp that is held by the student. The student then imitates the movement of the teacher's fingers. After the student manages to play and memorize one phrase, the teacher moves on to the next phrase. Students imitate by hearing and by seeing the fingering. This method is called "*lek that thin de*," or "teach by laying hand on hand." When students are accustomed to this method, they can begin to imitate by hearing the sounds only. The harp is played mostly with two fingers, the right forefinger and the thumb, so students should learn to distinguish which sounds are played with which finger.

Instrumentalists are also required to be capable of singing. When I studied at YUC, I was required to master the vocal part of a certain song before I learned the harp accompaniment. If I forgot the instrumental part, my teachers instructed me to remember it by singing. Vocal melodies are not always identical to the instrumental parts, but musicians should play in order to accompany singing, as song melodies are the foundation for the parts played by the instruments.

Recording, which can be secondary to orality, is also used. YUC created several recordings and provided me with them to allow me to learn at home. Before the annual performing arts contest begins, cassettes containing the compulsory songs are sold. Most musicians learn with a teacher, but they use the cassettes to memorize or recall their music. At present, it does not seem that recording will immediately lead to standardization. Recordings for students are usually created by their teachers, and store-bought cassettes are not used very frequently for study. I have encountered certain amateur singers who have studied with cassettes only, but this is not the most popular way to study. I have noticed in the past two years, from 2013–2014, some pupils of Daw Khin May record songs using their smartphones, which are currently easily obtainable, and use these recordings to help them remember their studied music.

Oral learning requires considerable time on the part of both the teacher and the student. Students study at teachers' homes, staying there for an unlimited time while the teacher instructs them. The students also practice independently. Thus, recordings can be used effectively but are not the only option.

2.3. What enables oral transmission?

Why has transmission been pursued using an apparently insecure method? There are four factors that enable oral transmission: the presence of song texts, *alaik* or melody patterns, *bazat-hsaing* or mouth-music, and physical memorization. As I have mentioned before, song texts, their melodies, and singing style dictate instrumental style. Here, I will

consider the three remaining points mentioned above, namely, *alaik*, *bazat-hsaing*, and physical memorization.

***Alaik*: Common melodies**

Thachingyi songs are composed using many common melodies, which are called *alaik*. Students should memorize all melodies when they begin to study a song; after they have mastered one song, it is easier for them to study the next song because it may include the same melodies. Although another song may include new melodies, those melodies will also be used in other songs, which, again, makes it easier for the students to study those songs. Of course, songs become progressively difficult as the student continues to study, but the segments that they have already mastered make it easier for them to acquire new songs. In this way, students accumulate knowledge of, and techniques for, the melodies that are used in *thachingyi*.

When we study *thachingyi* singing and instrumental style, we are frequently said by teachers “this phrase is the same as A’s *alaik*.” “A” indicates a part of the song text of another song. After we have mastered that song, we can recall the melodies and instrumental part just by referring to its song text. A teacher is not required to play that phrase in order to teach it. Instead, a teacher only needs to say, “this phrase is A’s *alaik*.” This means that that phrase can be sung using the melody that has previously been studied.

In addition, there are numerous songs with titles including the word *alaik*. For example, the song title “*Bazin taun than alaik kyo chin* (“Sound of dragonflies’ wings” *alaik kyo* song)” implies that this song uses the “*Bazin taun than*” song’s whole melodies. I have discovered approximately 111 *alaik* songs in the *kyo* genre which, in itself, contains approximately 513 songs. These songs’ titles can convey the full melodic information without any notation. A new song is indicated by its relationship with other songs, and this is one of the elements that enables oral transmission.

For instruments, there are a number of patterns for one melody. After we learn one pattern for melody “X” in song “A,” we usually learn another pattern for melody “X” in song “B.” After we have learned several patterns for melody “X,” it becomes rather difficult for us to continually play the same instrumental pattern for this melody. There is room for further investigation, but it may be true that this is the foundation of improvisation in Burmese music. I, myself, found it difficult to play a fixed pattern for one song after I had studied many songs, as my fingers unintentionally played various patterns for certain melodies. The standardization of playing styles as expected by those who use notations and recordings has not been completely achieved. *Thachingyi* has many common melodies and various instrumental patterns for each of them, so it may appear to be random, even if the musician does not intend it to be.

***Bazat-hsaing*: Mouth-music**

The manner of transmitting instrumental parts into words is called *bazat-hsaing*, or mouth-music. *Bazat-hsaing* indicates the tone, chord, and rhythm of a song by its relationship with the tonic. For example, on the harp, the tonic is called *tya*, one upper string is called *tei*, and the other upper string is called *tyo*. The string one octave below the

tonic is called *shin*. *Bazat-hsaing* is similar to solmization for western music.

Teachers teach instruments with *bazat-hsaing* even if the student is unfamiliar with this method so, therefore, the student is introduced to this system gradually. It is possible to use *bazat-hsaing* to teach from remote areas. When students forget or make mistakes while practicing independently, the teacher can teach using *bazat-hsaing* while she does other work. *Bazat-hsaing* is also common between instruments, so *pattala* players can teach certain songs to harp players using *bazat-hsaing*.

Bazat-hsaing is quite common, but there are some variations amongst musicians. My teacher, Daw Khin May, used *bazat-hsaing* in our lessons and commented that her *bazat-hsaing* may be somewhat different from that of other musicians, because she sings as she pleases. She said her pupils understand her method, so it is not a problem. *Bazat-hsaing* is an extremely convenient teaching method as it allows her to teach while doing her housekeeping, without using notation.

When I studied at YUC, if I forgot some phrases while practicing the harp by myself, any teacher who was in the vicinity could teach me by singing *bazat-hsaing*. They did not need to use any references such as notation. Moreover, they were not required to play an instrument to show certain phrases to me. Occasionally, my singing teacher, who cannot play any instrument, taught me harp using *bazat-hsaing*. She said she remembered the *bazat-hsaing* phrases because she had heard them frequently.

Bazat-hsaing is not written down for the purpose of study, but we can observe its text in some songs. For example, the first song for *thachingyi* learners, “*Htan tya tei shin*” *kyo* song, includes *bazat-hsaing* text in its first and last sections. Two manuscripts include considerable *bazat-hsaing* text namely, *MONYWE* and *TITLES*. There are 55 *bazat-hsaing* texts in *MONYWE*.

For example, *MONYWE* includes three songs entitled (1) “‘Lion king enters golden cave’ *achin-yo* (traditional song)”;⁽⁴²⁾ (2) “‘Lion king enters golden cave’ *achin-yo* (traditional song)”;⁽⁴³⁾ and (3) “‘Lion king enters golden cave’ *achin laik* (song’s *alaik*).”⁽⁴⁴⁾ The entire text of (1) is in *bazat-hsaing* form; it indicates only the musical patterns of the instrument. The title of (2) is the same as that of (1), but (2) has song text. It is likely that (1) and (2) have the same melody, as there is no reason to record *bazat-hsaing* texts except to transmit the song music. The word *laik* in (3) is identical to *alaik*. This implies that this song uses the melody of the song “Lion king enters golden cave.” I have not yet reconstructed music from this *bazat-hsaing* text of (1), but it may convey the music of (2) and (3). There are 25 such combinations in this manuscript.

There remain 29 *bazat-hsaing* texts without such combinations. For example, there are two songs, “The sound of a female *nat*’s panpipe,”⁽⁴⁵⁾ and “‘Jambos fruits falling’ song,”⁽⁴⁶⁾ but there are no songs with song texts that have the same title. We can be reasonably certain that songs with these titles existed, however, their song texts were not recorded or they were lost.

As previously explained, *TITLES* is a list of song titles. *Thachingyi* songs are usually referred to by the first lines of their song texts instead of their titles, because many songs have no titles originally. In this section of the *kyo* song list, there are 28 *bazat-hsaing* styles of the first lines of the songs and there are 26 cases in which the song is continued by the

phrase “*its alaik*.” For example, the list includes the titles of songs: (1) “Sound of banyan tree’s leaves, [it begins with the phrase] *hteí hta lei*.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Under that title, a description follows: (2) “*Its alaik*. When cold season comes, [it begins with the phrase] *htwei ta ra*.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ Another example is the song that is described as (3) “Giant tigress lapping water, [it begins with the phrase] *du hteí htan tya*,”⁽⁴⁹⁾ while the next song is described as: (4) “*Its alaik*. The time cold season comes.”⁽⁵⁰⁾

In song (1)’s title, the phrase “*hteí hta lei*” is *bazat-hsaing* form. In song (3)’s title, “*du hteí htan tya*” also indicates *bazat-hsaing*. The presence of the phrase “*its alaik*” in (2) and (4)’s titles implies that these are the *alaik* of their respective songs, (1) and (3). Furthermore, they feature song texts. In this manuscript, there are 26 such combinations. Therefore, we can observe that *bazat-hsaing* texts are recorded in order to convey music. There remain six *bazat-hsaing* texts without such combinations. As previously mentioned in regard to *MONYWE*, songs with particular titles would exist whose song texts either were not recorded or were lost.

The *bazat-hsaing* that I have mentioned above is for *kyo* songs. Also, note that *bazat-hsaing* only indicates the instrumental part. *Kyo* songs are simpler than other genres and their melodies and instrumental parts mostly coincide. Thus, we can see that these *bazat-hsaing* texts convey their melodies and instrumental styles. We may say that *bazat-hsaing* texts in *MONYWE* and *TITLES* were transcribed to record songs’ music as today’s notations. *Bazat-hsaing* is not written down today to record music, so musicians remember it by ear and it is used to teach instrumental parts orally.

Physical memorization of fingering

As regards harp, *bazat-hsaing* is connected with fingering. When we study the harp, the sound is always indicated by *bazat-hsaing* or locations of strings by our teacher, rather than pitch. Most Burmese instruments are played with two implements, or objects, such as the right forefinger and thumb in harp playing, or the right and left stick in *pattala* playing. Therefore, harp fingering can be substitute for two sticks of *pattala*. To the best of my knowledge, after U Myint Maung began to use other fingers, such as the right middle, fourth, and fifth, to play the harp, several other musicians also began to use these fingers. When I studied at YUC, they generally did not use the other three digits, but Daw Khin May instructed me to use these fingers with certain phrases. This usage is limited to specific phrases. Middle, fourth and fifth fingers are used instead of forefingers to play smoothly, so there are no playing style using more than three fingers of right hand simultaneously.

The limited fingering restricts possible instrumental patterns. In other words, there are regulations on fingering for harp players. Both in Yangon and Mandalay, I have been frequently instructed to memorize fingering. Teachers have consistently informed me that *thachingyi* should not be memorized intellectually, but by rote, through fingering. Musicians should practice until they are capable of playing automatically without thinking. The connection between physical memorization and transmission requires further consideration, but we can assert that diligent practice and physical memorization enable oral transmission.

Conclusion

Burmese classical songs, which is called *thachingyi*, have been transmitted through both oral and written materials. As written materials, song texts have been recorded in order to preserve song texts, to create an authority for learning and memorizing songs, and to standardize song variants. As I have indicated, song texts are strongly normative in song transmission. The latest standardization of song texts was completed for 169 songs in *NAIN* in 1961, albeit other song texts remain in various forms in various anthologies. Another function of song anthologies is genre definition which, while not always clear, conveys a certain amount of information regarding playing style.

From the 20th century onwards, there have been some attempts at transcribing music. However, with the exception of U Myint Maung's works, notation has not been used effectively to transmit music, as oral transmission is more effective and easier. U Myint Maung's notations are used effectively by his former pupils to learn and memorize music. However, the main method of transmission is oral also for them and notations are used secondarily to oral. U Myint Maung's notations are not distributed, so many of musicians have no access to it. Nonetheless, we must look more carefully at the future influence of this phenomenon, because many of U Myint Maung and Daw Khin May's pupils are now influential musicians and teachers. In fact, when I forget the harp parts and cannot reconstruct it from recordings, I can recall them using these notations.

Oral transmission has been accomplished through the imitation of teachers by students and by using *bazat-hsaing*. Common melodies and the confined fingering caused by instrument construction enable this transmission. Even if teachers or students use notation, these two methods are precede to notations. Oral transmission may seem inefficient, however, this learning style, which involves imitating teachers, connecting *bazat-hsaing* with fingering, and memorizing various melodic patterns, enables musicians to memorize music. This method also helps musicians play without any notation, as can often be seen. This subject is too extensive to be treated here in detail, but such memorization leads to improvisation during performance. Hard practice and memorization allow musicians to perform freely while playing music.

The compilation of song anthologies standardizes song texts so far, but performing styles have not been standardized entirely, as was anticipated with the advent of recordings and notations. At YUC, a standard version of music is taught, but it is only a portion of the vast *thachingyi* repertoire. At national competitions, several songs are played using the same versions to a certain extent, but they are not entirely identical. Therefore, we must more carefully examine whether the number of variants have decreased and standardization has truly occurred or not.

Notes

- (1) *Thachingyi* is also referred as *maha gita*. They indicate the same category of songs. *Thachingyi* is Burmese and *maha gita* is a word borrowed from Pali. I discussed about these terms in detail in my book. Inoue, Sayuri, *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*, Osaka: Osaka University Press, 2014, pp. 17–21.
- (2) U Htun Khin, a part-time professor at the National University of Arts and Culture, states that the pianist U Oun Maung could play over 400 songs (personal communication, Yangon, September 17, 2013).
- (3) Ministry of Culture, *Naingandaw mu maha gita* [National version of *maha gita*], Yangon: Ministry of Culture, vol. 1 (1954), vol. 2 (1957), and vol. 3 (1961). The bound version of these three volumes was first published in 1969.
- (4) Inoue, *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*, pp. 21–27.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp. 51–55.
- (6) I examined each palm-leaf manuscript preface. Inoue, *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*, pp. 28–50.
- (7) NL 3149, *Monywe hsayadaw shei ti-gyek than zu* [Monywe Hsayadaw's old songs]. U Myint Kyi states that Monywa Hsayadaw was the first person to compile a song anthology. Myint Kyi, *Myanma tei gita anu sapei thamain* [The history of Myanmar music literature], Yangon: Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 366.
- (8) Hla Htut, Sandaya, *Myanma gita yei-si-gyaun* [The stream of Myanmar songs], Yangon: Sa Chit Thu Sa-zin, 1996, p. 65. U Htun Yee, a scholar of old documents, claims that we can assume this palm-leaf manuscript was written circa Burmese year 1160–1170 (1798–1808), based on the career of Monywa Hsayadaw (personal communication, March 23, 2010).
- (9) Songs categorized as *thachingyi* are divided into several genres, such as *kyo*, *bwe*, *thachingan*, *patpyo*, *yodaya*, and *mon*. I discussed about genres as not being definite classification. Inoue, *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*.
- (10) NL 3149: dhe (w)–dhaw. (k).
- (11) *Ibid.*, dhaw (k)–dhaw. (w).
- (12) I examined three manuscripts that were transcribed in 1883 (UHRC pe465, Untitled), 1902 (UCL pe42332, *Myawadi Mingyi thachin luta yadu zat zaga zu* [Songs, *luta*, *yadu*, play composed by Myawadi Mingyi]), and n.d. (NL Kin351, *Myawadi Mingyi, min ahsehset yeitha hsethwin dhi sa-zu* [Myawadi Mingyi's works dedicated to kings]). The titles are not identical, however the contents are almost the same. Therefore, I have grouped these manuscripts under the same title as *U Sa's Anthology*, in the interest of simplicity.
- (13) NL Barnard1076, *Thachin ghaunzin pouk-yei hmat-su-daw* [A list of the number of song titles].
- (14) *Ibid.*, ka (w)–kaa (w).
- (15) Yauk, Sheinei U, *Maha gita meidani kyan* [The earth of *maha gita*], Yangon: Myanmar Pyi Alouk-thama-mya Pounhneik-taik, n.d.. The palm-leaf manuscript of this anthology is stored at Universities' Central Library. The call number is UCL pe11170.

- (16) Hla Shwe, Zagain, *Maha gita*, Yangon: Sapei Beiman, 1994, p. 10.
- (17) UCL pe11170. *Maha gita meidani gyan* [The earth of *maha gita*].
- (18) Yauk, *Maha gita meidani kyan*, p. 2.
- (19) NL 3149, *Thabba gitekkama pakathani gyan* [Anthology of all the songs].
- (20) Than Tun, ed., *Wekmasut Wundauk i neizin hmat tan, pahtama dwe 1886–1888* [Vol. 1 of The diary of Wekmasut Wundauk, 1886–1888], Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005, p.1. Wekmasut Wundauk was a courtier who served King Mindon and King Thibaw (1878–1885).
- (21) Tin Naing Toe states that this anthology seems to have first appeared during the reign of King Bodaw (1781–1819), and other songs were then added to the original palm-leaf manuscript when edited by Wekmasut Wundauk. Tin Naing Toe, *Kyan hnyun 100* [The guidebook for one hundred literatures], Yangon: Thin Sapei. 2011, pp. 73–75.
- (22) NL 3149: ka (w)–kaa (k).
- (23) Maung Maung Lat, *Gita wi thaw dhani kyan* [Anthology of purified songs], edited by U Ba Cho, 6th ed., Yangon: Didouk Sapei-taik, 1967.
- (24) Pyone Cho, U, *Maha gita paun gyouk ci* [Anthology of *maha gita*], 6th ed., Yangon: Pinya Alin Pya Saouk-hsain, 1968.
- (25) Personal communication, March 23, 2010.
- (26) Ministry of Culture, *Naingandaw mu maha gita, pahtama dwe*, 1954, p. ka.
- (27) UHRC pe465: ngu (w).
- (28) Ibid., ngu (k).
- (29) NL Barnard1076: ka: (k).
- (30) NL 3149: zaa (w)–zi (k).
- (31) Ministry of Culture, *Naingandaw mu maha gita*, 1969, p. 7, 19.
- (32) San Myint, *Maha gita hswei-nwei-gyek* [The discussion on *maha gita*], Yangon: Myawadi Pounhneik-taik, 1990, p. 32.
- (33) Saw Mya Aye Kyi, Daw, *Gita hnin aka* [Music and dance], Yangon: Sapei Beiman, 1968, p. 42.
- (34) I had discussed about these characteristics of genre. Inoue, *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*, pp. 80–81.
- (35) Ministry of Culture, *Shei-yo myanma pantya: Classical Burmese Music*, Yangon: Ministry of Culture, 1952.
- (36) Ibid., p. 0.
- (37) Ministry of Culture, *Pantya mu-hman sanpya shei-yo myanma thachingyi-mya thinkeita saouk: Standardized Classical Burmese Music, 3 vols.*, Yangon: Ministry of Culture, 1960.
- (38) Ibid., vol. 1, Preface (no page numbering).
- (39) Ministry of Culture, *Naingandaw mu kyo thachin 13 pouk i gita thinkeita mya* [The notation for the national version of thirteen *kyo* songs], Yangon: Ministry of Culture, 2004.
- (40) Shoon Myaing, *Gaba gita thinkeita ni-pyinya hnin myanma maha gita myanma thachin: International Notation and Myanmar Classical Songs*, Yangon: Tain Lin Saouk-taik, 2001. *Myanma maha gita thachin mya: Mahagita Myanmar Classics*, Vol. 1, Yangon:

Younci-gyet Sapei, 2004, *Myanma maha gita thachin mya: Mahagita Myanmar Classics*, Vols. 2–3, Yangon: Cipwa-yei Saouk-taik, 2005.

- (41) In rare cases, the same song can be sung to different melodies when they are performed with *hsaing waing* (drum circle, or drum circle ensemble) accompaniment, rather than with harp.
- (42) NL 3149: nu (w).
- (43) Ibid., na: (k).
- (44) Ibid.
- (45) Ibid., ne (w).
- (46) Ibid., na (k).
- (47) NL Barnard1076: ku (k).
- (48) Ibid.
- (49) Ibid.
- (50) Ibid.

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(Abbreviations that appear before call numbers were added by the author. National Library (NL), Universities' Central Library (UCL), and Universities Historical Research Centre (UHRC).)

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