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CHANGE IN VILLAGE TRADITIONS

The Change in the Farming Tools of Rakhine

Ando Kazuo

It is the month of Kason (May-June), the monsoon season has started, and the 45-year old U Han Myint is preparing his field for the planting of rice. Two kinds of land figure prominently in Ywathitkon village for the cultivation of crops: *lè*, for the growing of rice, and *kaing*, for the growing of peanut and chilli. Rice is the staple food but peanut (from which oil is extracted) and chilli are also important in the diet. Ywathitkon has a total of 216 acres of land used for various agricultural purposes; of this, 152 acres or 70% is *lè*, 11 acres or 5% is *kaing*.

The preparation of *lè* for the growing of rice takes nearly a month. In the old way, three implements



are used: the *te* (plough), *tun* (harrow) and the *kyandon* (levelling log). The *tun* has five teeth, the *kyandon* is just a wooden log. All the implements are made mainly of wood, with some parts made of bamboo, the only metal element being the *tethwa* (ploughshare). This means that the implements are made locally, with only the *tethwa* being bought.



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In the first step of preparing the *lè*, it is ploughed over once with the *te* to break up the ground. This is followed by eight harrowings with the *tun*, with

a few days' interval between each. The harrowings are done in different patterns, so that the combination of the eight or *shitsat* results in the earth being well broken up and having a smooth texture. A 70-year old villager explained, "The word *shitsat* has passed into a Myanmar saying, *shitsat le de* meaning everything is very well mixed." Finally, the *kyandon* is used to

level the surface, and the field is now prepared for transplanting the 28-day old 18-inch high *pyo* (seedlings).

U Han Myint uses another implement in addition to the *te*, *tun* and *kyandon*. This is the *setton*, which takes the form of a wooden log studded with iron teeth. The *setton* is used much like the *tun*, but there is a better effect and after the first harrowing with the *tun*, the later harrowings are done with the *setton*. The *setton* had been introduced from the Ayeyarwady region and had been in use in Rakhine for some fifteen years. U Han Myint has been using it for seven years, but there are still

some households in Ywathitkon which do not have the *setton*.

Kaing is usually submerged by the inundation of the river during the rainy season and the preparation of *kaing* for the planting of peanut and chilli comes at the end of the rainy season in the month of Tazaungmon (November-December), about the time that the *kauklat* or middling variety of rice is harvested.

U Ta Bo, a 72-year old villager, describes the way that *kaing* is prepared during the rainy season.

the *te* (plough) and the *kalagyan* (crusher). Their use goes together, although it is on separate days. First the *te* is used in the late afternoon, and then the *kalagyan* in the early morning of the following day. This is repeated six times.

The peanut seed is sown after the seventh use of the *te* in the afternoon, and the use of the *kalagyan* the next morning is for covering the seed with soil. Earlier, in using the *kalagyan*, the farmer stands on it to crush the soil, but in the last use to cover the seed, he does not stand on it at all. As for chilli, the 30-40 day old seedlings are transplanted after the sixth use of the *kalagyan*, when one or two men stand on the *kalagyan* to make the soil more compact.

A 34-year old villager, Ko Kyi Lwin, uses two more implements in the preparation of his plot of *kaing*—the *tun* (harrow) and the *daleinton* (roller). He uses the *daleinton* following the use of the *kalagyan* on the second morning, and the *tun* following the use of the *te* on the third and fourth afternoons in order to remove weeds and grasses.

Like the *setton*, the *daleinton* is a new implement in Rakhine, introduced from the Ayeyarwady delta region and in use for about twenty years. Although there are 28 households which have a *kalagyan*, only four households other than Ko Kyi Lwin have the *daleinton*.

The *setton* and the *daleinton* are not the only new farming tools which are in use in Rakhine. The *te* which is now in general use and is very much a part of farming life is also a new farming tool in Rakhine. Describing farming practices in the early 20th century, the *Sandoway District Gazetteer* noted:

“The Burmese *te* only just being brought into use in the district, the plough in common use is called an *at*. This is an implement which, as its name implies, has a narrow, pointed, needle-like shape, but in its more modern form there is an inlay of iron on the upper part of the point. Ploughing with the *at* is a longer and more laborious process because it only digs into the soil and does not turn the clod over as the *te* does. When an *at* is used the land has to be ploughed twice, the second time crosswise to the first.”

There is no evidence of the *at* in Ywathitkon. U Soe Myint, a 57-year old man from a neighbouring village, said that the *at* had been used both in *lè* and *kaing*, but had gone out of use thirty years ago. An *at* was found at Kyaungtaung village, a 30-minute drive away from Ywathitkon. U Tun Maw, a 70-year old villager there, said that the *te* came to the village before his marriage which took place 40 years ago, and that in the old days they used to call the *te* “*kalate*” (Indian *te*) because they bought it from Indian merchants.

So what is “traditional” in Rakhine rural life? A casual visitor, seeing U Han Myint preparing his field thinks he sees a timeless scene—rice has been cultivated for centuries, and U Han Myint is farming just as his father and forefathers did. In reality, the “traditional” has changed. The *setton* and *daleinton* are new implements which were introduced twenty years ago, the *te* was still new fifty years ago. Whatever notions outsiders might have of the “traditional,” the villagers of Ywathitkon have, on their own initiative, adopted new farming tools and new crops to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves. Perhaps outsiders should learn what meaning the “traditional” has for villagers so that they can work with the villagers in the improvement of their livelihood.

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Further developments came after 1988 when Myanmar reversed its earlier economic policies in order to develop a market-oriented economy. There was an improvement in infrastructure, in particular the building of roads and bridges in the Ayeyarwady delta region, where transportation had previously been almost exclusively by rivercraft. The construction of the Gwa-Ngathaingchaung road in 1990 helped to link Yahaingato to the network of roads and to make Yangon much more accessible.

With the stimulus of a growing market, fishermen improved their equipment and the *nga konenyo paik* nets which had been made of cotton in the 70's and 80's came to be made of nylon from 1992.

Ice factories were constructed by the government in Gwa, Aleywar and Kantharya in the early 90's, and they further helped to transform the fishing industry in Yahaingato. It was now possible to send fresh fish in frozen form to Yangon, and among the fish that was sent, *nga tautoe* and *nga bartar*, groupers (Serranidae) with a high demand in foreign markets, came to figure prominently.

Yahaingato has been greatly transformed. The opportunities provided by the new developments have made it possible for every one to have a share. Men catch the fish and women help in its processing. There is no friction at all between the old inhabitants and the immigrants, they work together and they intermarry. Some old men remember the days when fish was used as a fertilizer, but everyone in Yahaingato is optimistic about the future of the fishery of their village.