

The Traditional Customs of Innthars

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Abstract

The Innlay lake which is located in Nyaungshwe valley, Nyaungshwe township of southern Shan State is the lake which has been existed since ten millions years ago. It is the lake designated as the honorable zone of cultural heritage in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Innlay region is well-known for the scenes filled with ancient cultural heritages, traditional culture and religious festivals held all the year. Therefore, it is the area filled with ancient cultural heritages which attracted not only the visitors within the country but also the tourists.

Introduction

The ethnic people in the Union of Myanmar have their own ancient songs, poems, literary works, dance and costume styles of locality, so also the Innthas have their own traditional culture. The costumes of Innthars, their way of worship, their foods which are honorable for the Innthars and cannot be available in other regions are illustrated in this paper.

Finding and Results

Innlay Lake is a cultural heritage site and it is the second largest natural fresh water lake in Myanmar after Inndawgyi lake of Mohnyin district in Kachin State. Innlay Lake is more well-known than the Indawgyi Lake and it is an extraordinary shallow natural pond which located at flat area on hilly region located to the southern most of the Maw Shans' region. The group of ethnic people living around Innlay region of southern Shan State is called Innthar. They are not like Shan Ethnic people nor resemble with Kayin nationality nor Bama people. These people are called Inn-sar by Innthar language and the Shans recognize them as Myanmar ethnic race and call them Inn Myanmar or Mant Naung, that is Myanmar living in the natural pond. As a result, the perceptions of international and domestic tourists on the tourism related supporting factors are mostly positive. The Innthas have their own traditional culture. Although having mixed with Shan and Myanmar culture, Innthas are found to be more Burmanized.

The Traditional Customs of Innthars

The ethnic people in the Union of Myanmar have their own ancient songs, poems, literary works, dance in association with musical instruments, and costume styles of locality, so also the Inthas have their own traditional culture. Although having mixed with Shan and Myanmar culture, Inthars are found to be more Burmanized.

In ancient time, male person of Innlay region had worn top-knot of hair (What Myanmar call "Yaung Ti Ku") at the right corner of parietal bones and worn turban called "Yaung Kyein Chin". At the festivals, they used to wrap silk turban. Nowadays, top-knot of hair cannot be found on the heads of male persons of Innlay region. Some male persons have clean-shaven head or some male persons have their hair cut short in neat and tidy. Elder persons wrap their heads with shawl or scarf and used to wear bamboo-hat.² Since ancient times, females of Innlay region wore Myanmar hair knot. Nowadays, females like Myanmar women wear hair knot and without wrapping turban. They put scarf on their shoulder. In ancient time, male person used to wear underwear with sleeve double layers and wear coarse

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² Observer, "Inle Hnit Intha" (Inle and people of Inle), *Shan State Journal*, Shan State Government Press, Taungyi, 1961, pp. 111-112 (Henceforth: Observer, 1961)

cloth penny sewn in the shape of Yin Phone (front flap of a Myanmar jacket) as overcoat. They also worn loose trouser (locally called “Chway Ein Twel”) which was mostly in black color. Nowadays, pink color is worn. At the present time, Innthars wear jacket with short sleeve and loose trouser like Shan trouser.¹ Male persons put on large belt having bag at their waist.² They wear sleeper made of raw hide of cow or buffalo. They put on Shan bag on their shoulder and betal box is put inside the bag. At home, they wear Penny jacket with front flap and Shan trouser which is not loose. At the festivals, they wear loose trouser woven with silk and satin and front flat jacket. Silk is white in color and satin is brown in color. During the reigns of Myanmar kings, Inn females worn jacket woven with cotton cloth called “Chin Inn” which was sewed by hand and seam was put up outside. Moreover, they wore hand-woven Penny cloth, front flat jacket made of Paduma cloth in white color. *Hta-bi* (under garment of women) looks like dress used to be worn by female artiste in Anyeint and at the festivities; they wore longyi which was slit at the sides to allow easier walking. Color was light pink, deep pink in pattern of stripes and wavy pattern decorated with silk and satin fabric.³

At Ywa Ma, as native longyi, a kind of longyi called “Hat Yar” is used to wear. Beginning to weave at Heya Ywama, it is called in local usage “Hat Yar Longyi”. During ancient time, in the initiation ceremony, Heya Longyi (wrapped under garment of female) which was sewed not in circle pattern was used to wear. In ancient time, it was worn up to the breast level. Both silk and cotton fabric have brown and yellow stripes, with four partitional spaces. It is the cloth usually worn in ceremony and if cloth is woven in three partitional spaces, it is designated not as ceremonial dress and worn in secluded place. The partitional space of longyi is used to take even number. In former times, they wore slipper made of raw leather. At the present times, Inn female persons wore costume like Myanmar women and they are so Burmanized that if you don’t talk to them, they cannot be differentiated suddenly.⁴ In former time, Inn elder male persons wore gold earring in small size. Females wore gold or silver hairpin and gold comb at their heads. They wore gold bracelet at arms and gold bracelet in puff and maidens used to wear medium-sized gold anklet in the pattern of head of *Naya* (Mythical animal). Elderly persons do not wear it. It is worn for beauty and tradition. Based on richness, gold, silver, diamond or precious stones are used as ornaments with modern designs. In the locality of Innlay, there are foods worth pride for Innthars which are not available in other regions. These are Inn Mont-ti, Nga Hta-min-nel, Wet-thar-chin, San-lone-sae Kyaw, Toh-hoo Kyaw, Toh-hoo Thoke, Toh-hoo Chauk, Kauk-nyin Mont-htaung Kyaw, Mote-ti-chauk, Say-khar Hin, Nga-chin Thoke, and Ju-myyit etc.⁵

In Innlay region, a variety of Say-khar Hin (Bitter soup) are cooked and eaten, such as *Nga Shint Say Khar*, *Pe Taunt Saykhar*, *Pe Kyar Sae Say Khar*, *Pe Pyin Sae Say Khar*, *Pein Ou Say Khar*, *Pha Yon Thee Say Khar* and *Ar Lu Say Khar*. If the host asked what curry is served to him, the host will answer thus: “Taung Ni *Pe Kyar*, Taung Kyar *Chan See*, Taunggyi *Say Khar*, Innhtein *Nga*”. Taung Ni *Pe Kyar* is the pea produced from area between Shwe Nyaung and Yatsauk. Taung Kyar *Chan See* is egg-plant grown at Taung Kyar area of Innlay lake. Taunggyi *Say Khar* is *Say Khar* (bitter soup) produced from Taunggyi area. Innhtein *Nga* is the fish produced from Innlay region. As Innlay *Say Khar*, curry comprised of four kinds which Innthars served the host with the deep intention, explaining that such ethnic people as

¹ Khin Nyein Kyi, History of Nyaungshwe (1886-1918), A Ph. D Dissertation submitted to the University of Mandalay, 2009, p. 139 (Henceforth: Khin Nyein Kyi, 2009)

² Director Myint Maung, *Inle*, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1984, pp. 64-65 (Henceforth: Myint Maung, 1984)

³ Daw Nay Yi Yi, *Inn Taing-yin-thar Yoe-yar Yin-kyay-hmu Da-lae Htone-tan-ar Lae-lar-gyin* (Study of traditional culture of the national races in Innlay region), Archaeological and National Museum, Taungyi Branch, 2014, p. 7 (Henceforth: Nay Yi Yi, 2014)

⁴ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 8

⁵ Personal interview with Daw Sandar Moe from Kyaingkham East village, 29-4-2018

Shan, Pao, Danu and Taungyoe are living together in unity at Innlay lake and its surrounding areas. Innlay *Say Khar* is the most popular curry of Innthars. *Say Khar* curry and *Nga Chin Thoke* (Mixed salad of pickled fish) is used to be served at the ceremonies of making merit.¹ Every Innthars used to drink plain tea. Innthars used to put salt in plain tea. The Innthars have eaten more fish than other brethrens of nationalities because of the Innlay lake. They can have a variety of fish and different kinds of recipies.² In *Daung-lan* (Big circular tray on a stand), cooked rice is piled up with curries place at center and have the meal in comradely association. Blanket (Pyit-si-oo or Lhwan-phon, bedsheet (Shaw-lite Htoe, Khinn phon), ordinary large mosquito net, and mosquito net with slit at the side or in the direction towards feet. At the mosquito net in the direction of head, interior part, a bag is attached and sword or spear is kept as protect.³

Innthars are hundred percent Buddhists and so when they gave birth a boy, they try to hold initiation ceremony. When the child is over ten or about fifteen years of age, he is sent with *Ka-taw-pwe* to the Abbot whom they revere and made him learn prayers of asking robe. It is known that it is custom in Innlay region to hold initiation ceremony mostly in collection rather than by individually.⁴ Nowadays, there are traditional novitiation ceremony and initiation ceremony held by individual. Novitiation ceremony is held by designating dates, such as the day of dispatching would-be-novice, day of serving guests, and day of listening sermon etc. In the *Daung-lan*, a comb of banana, a package of moisten pickled tea, betel leaves and tobacco, two areca nuts put on bamboo pole, a pennant pole, a tray with fried cooked rice on it, snack up and down in position, a snack made of jaggery, etc. There are snacks, *Pauk pauk* (Pop corn), sesame jam, are put in the tray for propitiation to the spirits.⁵

Six to nine trays of offertories are to be prepared for propitiation to the Nats. On the next day, it is designated as the day of calling *Shin-laung* (would-be-novice) who is taken. The parents and relatives went to monastery where their child is dispatched and bathed him, applied with fragrance and beauty, wearing with dresses, ornaments and put the *Shin-laung* to show *Sima* (Ordination hall) near the monastery. The next day after the would-be-novice is taken; the *Shin-laung* went round and paid obeisance to parents, relatives and elder persons. Paying obeisance is made with *Ka-daw-pwe* and the *Shin-laung* first pay obeisance to his parents (Mway-o, Pha-o in Innthar usage) and then to relatives and elder persons (Lu Koo Lu-oe) from door to door. The elder persons who received obeisance have to give money as presents to the *Shin-laung*. Before entering into the house, two women have to place a leaf of banana with pickled tea on it at both sides of the door and then entered into the house where he will pay obeisance.⁶

On the next day, which is the day of listening sermons, the ceremony of putting on cotton fibre amulet to keep off evil was begun to hold at 7:00 am. The *Shin-laung* (would-be-novice) wearing regalia and sit in composure. In front of the would-be-novice, a tray of offertories is prepared like the tray of offertories for the propitaiton to the Nats. A Male fish (Nga Yant) and a female (Nga Fein) are roasted and put in the offertories. Cotton fibre amulet is to put on banana leaf. The guests took this cotton fibre amulet and put it on the right hand of

¹ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 9

² Maung Aung Mon, *Thar-chin Doh A-kyauing Ta-zae Ta-zaung* (Observation casually about the national races), Yangon, Sarpay Baikman Press, 1985, pp. 166-167 (Henceforth: Aung Mon, 1985)

³ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 31

⁴ Thar Oo (Shan Pyay), *Taung-dan Pyar hnit Mya-kan-thar Sar-zu Mya* (Collection of papers about the blue mountain range and emerald lake), Yangon, Shwe Minthar Press, 2015, p. 45 (Henceforth: Thar Oo, 2015)

⁵ Record of the novitiation ceremony held in the village of Kyaingkhram East village, Innlay region, 21-4-2018 (Henceforth: Record of the novitiation ceremony 21 April 2018)

⁶ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 53-54

the *Shin-laung* and put contributed money as much as they could effort in the cup placed in front of the would-be-novice.¹ The ceremony of putting cotton fibre amulet was terminated before midday and the *Shin-laungs* were put off clothes and bathed them and cleaned. From 2:00 pm, crowd gathered in front of the Reverend monks who will novitiate the boys and pay obeisance to the Sayadaw. It is usual to shave the hair before entering into novice hood.² After shaving head, turmeric mixing with rice flour was applied on the head and by wearing ordinary dress, the boys were taken to Sayadaw and entered them into novice hood. When wearing robe, monks themselves had to make dressing, but not by lay persons. After serving lunch to Sangha, guests were served with foods.³ Innthars are very religious and as their economy is thrived, although they might be thrift in food or dress, they are very generous in merit-makings. At the ceremonies of merit, villagers from the whole village were invited and served them with traditional meals including *Say Khar* curry (Bitter soup), Salad of Jue-myt, Wet-tha-ni chet, and Tha-yay-pwa-kyaw. In this way, they are able to maintain lovely Myanmar traditional customs.⁴ In Innlay region, initiation ceremony is held at single day or at separate day in accordance with the tradition of locals. The guests from near and far came and returned after the ceremony of listening to sermon and making libation. It is held at the monastery located in the forepart of the village. All Innthars took part in meritorious deeds with good will to finish initiation ceremony successfully.

After listening to sermon, things are collected and placed in order and after then, residents in the ward went to the homes of donors to ask for alms. It is the custom called “*Mee Sue Khan*” which is essential at the end of meritorious deed. The male persons came with Oezi and dancing troupes and served them with meals. As a sign of success, they merrily danced, holding Yaungma and spoons wrapped up with Aung *Tha Pyay* flowers. The sounds of their amusement overwhelmed over the whole water surface of Innlay lake.⁵ Innthars also have various traditional dances, such as “Lan-si Dance”, “Lun-si Dance”, Oe-zi-gyi Dance” and they also held ceremony of reciting poem called “*Taik-tay*” which the Innthar bachelors and maidens used to recite. Rural music troupes and rural traditional dances are not an individual performing art, but it is a collective rural dance in which all persons have to perform collectively.⁶

In performing “Lan-si Dance”, a troupe comprise of 20 male persons, having two large drums with leather stretched tightly across both ends, which has one feet in circumference at the top and one *Lan* (Unit of length equivalent to two yards) in length, a pair of cymbal, two set of bamboo clappers, one oboe and one singer at the least. In performing Lan-si Dance, attributes of the *Buddha*, classical songs praising the glory of kings, attributes of Three Gems (*Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*) are sung. This Lan-si Dance started from He-yar Ywa-ma. The Kason Pwe, Ceremony of offering meals, and merit-making ceremonies, Lan-si Dance is essential and it is an outstanding traditional musical troupe. Two players of long drums play drum by hanging it with rope from their shoulder and stand with their knee touched on earth or waving their body in dancing style and in cooperation with bamboo clappers, they played drum

¹ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 54

² (a) Record of the novitiation ceremony, 21 April 2018

(b) Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 54-55

³ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 55

⁴ San San Myint, “Innlay De-sa Si-pwa-yay” (Economy of Innlay region), *Myanmar Historical Research Journal, Journal*, No. 2, 1998 June Issue, p. 86 (Henceforth: San San Myint, 1998)

⁵ Nyo Win Aung (Taungyi), *Inn-lel hnit Innlay A-hla* (Farm lands of Innlay and its beauty), Taungyi, Shwe Naingan Sarpay, 2011, p. 179 (Henceforth: Nyo Win Aung, 2011)

⁶ U Thein Than Tun (Writer, History researcher), *Innthar Mya ei A-chit Pan-pwint-mya* (Love flowers of Innthars), Taungyi, 2018, p. 1 (Henceforth: Thein Than Tun, 2018)

with energetic style.¹ Lunsì Dance is really a kind of tug-of-war contest dance. It is a small drum, having six inches in circumference at the top and two *Taung* (One *Taung* is equivalent to 18 inches) in length, which is stricken with two bamboo sticks by two men on both sides. It is a traditional dance of Innlay region performing at the ceremonial cremation of a monk's relics. It is the dance performing in the style of struggling between celestial beings and human beings to get the corpse of the monk when resided at one's own village. After the cremation had ended, surface of drum is broken and the drum is again stretched with leather when there is another ceremony of cremation.² The distinctive feature of *Oe-zi-gyi* Dance troupe is that the performers are mostly female persons. With a large drum having 2.5 feet in circumference at the top and five feet in length, one oboe, a pair of cymbal, one gong and a bamboo clapper, *Oe-zi-gyi* Dance is performed. At the festivals held in traditional customs, Innthu women themselves played music, by stretching up gently their arms high, waving their body and danced. It is the traditional dance of Innlay region.³ Innthars are the people who believed ardently in Buddhism. But there are some people who worshipped animism. They worshipped and made propitiations to the Guardian spirits of village, earth and religion. But they do not worship Thirty-seven Nats nor they hold ceremony to propitiate Nats. In every village, there is Nat-sin (Shrines for a Nat). Once a year, Guardian spirit of village is propitiated at the shrine with pickled tea and flowers.⁴

The remnants of ancestors, such as turban, clothes, silver betel box, sword keeping in oneself, ring studded with precious stones and ruby etc. are held high regard. These materials are supposed to make prosperity or to keep off evils and dangers.⁵ In ancient times, houses were built by choosing propitious time and *U-yu-taing* (Post) is first built in the southeast corner of the house. Other posts were built by turning round this post in right direction. At the top of U-yu Taing, Tha-bye, Yay-mae, Htan (Palmyra leaf), leaf of banana, Pin-ni and Pin-phyu are tied around. The room at the corner of *U-yu-taing* is kept as inner room. In building houses, posts were built in water or ground is fulfilled with earth. Houses were used to be built with long stands and the ladder is installed beneath the house. At the present time, by filling earth, Innthars came to live in two-storey house with a boat keeping on the ground. There are also three-storey houses with glass widows, having corrugated roof, or modern building with aluminium Zinc roof.⁶ *Thugyi* made *Ywa-saw* to tell the villagers in louder voice that whose house would be built on what day, urging the villagers to take part in building. On the day the house was built, villagers came to help in building the house to finish within a day. The host, if he could afford, had to serve the villagers with meal.⁷

Those who wanted to migrate from other areas went to Thugyi, taking Kalat (Small circular tray with a stem) with flowers putting on it, and revealed the list of family who would be living together and requested Thugyi to regard them as his own relatives. They also promised to follow customs of social occasions of joy or grief and said that they came to ask for permit to live in village of Thugyi.⁸ In ancient times, as utensils used at the occasion of

¹ (a) Maung Maung Chit Oo, 2012, 175

(b) Thar Oo, 2015, 100-101

² (a) Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 38

(b) Maung Maung Chit Oo, 2012, 179

³ (a) Thar Oo, 2015, 100-101

(b) Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 38-39

(c) Maung Maung Chit Oo, 2012, 179

⁴ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 44

⁵ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 44

⁶ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 60

⁷ Maung Myint, *Mirro of Shan state*, 63

⁸ Maung Myint, *Mirro of Shan state*, 64

death, square mat woven of rind of bamboo, earthen jug for making libation, a cup made of rind of bamboo (what they called “Saw Gyi” in locality), a basket woven of rind of bamboo which was to be placed at the forehead of the corpse, and earthen vase, and coffin which was done by rich persons.¹ Cemetery was used to be chosen at the inauspicious direction of village. Villages at the vicinity of land, corpse was buried in ground. In Innlay region, when a person died, the whole house was cleaned and the corpse was placed in that room, made the corpse worn new dress and prepared.²

Being inauspicious occasion, people had to ride in even number on every boat. The oarsmen of the boat which carried coffin must not row with foot until the boat reached beyond the environs of village, but they must row with hands and must not look back. When the corpse was carried on the road, if clothes were hung on, people went out to bring in clothes. Persons who went in procession to dispatch the corpse were to wash their hands with *Ta-yaw-kin-pon* (water mixed with shrub which is believed to deter evils) or apply it at their forehead at the entrance of cemetery. They also went back home straightly. After reaching their home, they used to go other places they liked. It had no custom to go other place amidst their return journey. If there were dead persons in village, novitiation ceremony or ceremony of marriage are postponed. If a person died on the day when ceremony of making merit was held, the corpse was buried within the day.³

At the cemetery, before the corpse was buried, coffin was opened and people took refuge in the Three Gems to share the merit with the deceased. Something which the deceased was fond of was put in the coffin together with the corpse. In order to share merit with the deceased, monks in even number were to be invited, such as two monks, four monks, or six monks etc.⁴ After burying the corpse at the cemetery, in dedication to the deceased, meal was offered to monks on seventh day and merit was shared. Meal was offered within seven days of the month. If meal was offered within the month, sermon was listened inside the room and if meal was offered beyond the month, sermon was listened outside the room and merit was shared. *Zar-tar* (Heroscope) of the deceased was offered to the pagoda together with food.⁵

With regard to marriage, cousins could not get married in ancient time. Marriage could not be made between two persons who were related as grandchildren or great grandchildren. For example, nephew or niece of the wife of uncle or aunt could not get married. But there was no certain designation. It was because of tradition.⁶ When bachelor and maiden in Innlay region were fond of one another, they could get married in front of elder persons of both sides. The marriage ceremony was held at the house where the bride or bridegroom would go and live. On the day of marriage ceremony, in early morning, foods were offered to monks and then the senior monk gave admonition. At the marriage ceremony, it had the custom that the two couples who had married in their early age from the side of parents of bridegroom stretched the rope over gold and silver wares which were put up by bridegroom or custom of locking the boat. There was a custom called “Kinn See Thi” which means “Asking a little sum of money for pleasure”. The bride and bridegroom had to pay obeisance to relatives of both sides for seven days as soon as they got married.⁷

¹ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 32

² Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 57

³ Maung Myint, *Mirror of Shan state*, p.66

⁴ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 58

⁵ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 59

⁶ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 48

⁷ Daw Khin Khin Oo, “Intha Doh ei Ba-wa Ah-htway-htway” (Gernal events of Innthars’ life), *Tekkatho Pyinnyar Pyinnyar Padethar Sarsaung*, Volume V, Yangon, Universities Press, 1970 December, p. 124 (Henceforth: Khin Khin Oo, 1970)

In Innlay region, if infant was born, it was named “Aung Nge Ni”, if twin of boys were born, they were named “Maung Gyi and Maung Nge”, and if twin of girls were born, they were named “Ma Gyi Ma Nge” affectionately. In southern part of Innlay region, female infant was named “Mae Pone” and male infant was at the age of one or two years, he was named “Nga Ni”. “Ni” means “Young”. When the child reached the age of talking, either grandparents or mentor chose the auspicious time and named the child. On 7th day after the child was born, earboring was made and had the baby bathing. The guests gave gifts to the child and prayed for the child. Name was given depending on the date of birth.¹ The art of rowing the boat with foot can be found only in Innlay region in the world. It is not known exactly when the art of rowing boat with foot began. In Innlay region, since the time the Innthars arrived. Scholars are in different opinions over the descendency of Inntha national races. Therefore, time of rowing the boat by foot cannot be guessed.² Shops are opened on boat and commodities are bought by going along with boat. There are also Five Day Markets called “*Yay Paw Zay*” (Bazaar opened at the expanse of water).³

Conclusion

In Conclusion, Inthars from Innlay region which is encircled with blue-greenish mountain ranges and hills in red-brown color are honest, upright and hospitable to guests. They are also very industrious, devout in religion and contented persons. The cultural traditions of the Innthars are mixing with both Shan and Myanmar, but they are more Burmanized. Styles of ancient Myanmar can also be found there. In wearing dress, Inthar male persons generally wore Shan trousers and Myanmar Jacket which are woven of coarse cotton cloth called “Phyin Ni” produced from Innlay weaving industry. In other words, Innthars do not have separate costume like other ethnic people. Letter of Innthars are also Myanmar and there is slight difference in tone. Innthars are hundred percent Buddhists and very devout in religion.

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¹ Nay Yi Yi, 2014, 51

² Thar Oo, 2015, 24

³ (a) Maung Myint, *Mirror of Shan State*, 73

(b) Insight Guide Burma (Myanmar), www.insightguide.com, (13.3.2018)

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