The Role of Myanmar Proverb in Myanmar Traditional Life

Khin Saw Myint

Abstract

The word “proverb” is derived from the Latin word “proverbium”, which means a brief popular saying. A proverb expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind. Every society has its own proverbs that can display thoughts of its people. Myanmar proverbs through the ages have exhibited the Myanmar way of thinking, Myanmar way of life and philosophical values that identifies the national characteristics of the Myanmar people. This paper tries to reveal the philosophical values in Myanmar Proverbs.

Keywords: proverb, philosophical value in Myanmar Traditional life

Introduction

Myanmar proverbs are influenced by the very rich cultural values, moral values and strong belief of Theravada Buddhism. There are various usages of moral term in Myanmar proverb. The moral term in Myanmar proverb presents Myanmar ethical norms and Myanmar cultural values. Myanmar proverb throws light on divers’ characteristics of human beings. Myanmar proverbs express the human characters and their conduct.

Myanmar Proverbs reflects the Myanmar social values. Myanmar proverbs in this section give an insight into situations that may arise between friends, relations, lovers, husbands and wives, teacher and their pupils and so on.

In Myanmar proverbs, its can be found the idea of Harmony of social relationship. In Myanmar way of thinking, it can be found that the idea of Harmony plays a significant role in social relationship and in moral conducts. Myanmar people usually live together in harmony with nature as well as social environment.

1.1 The Nature of Myanmar Proverb

The word “proverb” is derived from the Latin word “Proverbium”: “Pro” means forth and “verbium” means word. A proverb is called a brief popular saying. Some define proverb as ‘a short wise saying’. A saying becomes a proverb when it is taken up and assimilated by the common people.

The word “proverbs” means in Myanmar “sagabaunj”. It means “similarly saying”. Myanmar proverbs are very unique from the others. This short listing features most of the famous proverbs in the Myanmar culture. Some Myanmar proverbs are influenced by the very rich cultural values and the strong belief of Buddhism. Myanmar still use these saying frequently, whether in formal speech or in daily conversation.

Flourishing proverbs have their own significant characters. The characters of proverbs are as follows:

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1. A proverb is short and to the point.
2. It is packed full of meaning.
3. It is neat and concise in form.
4. It has gained quick and lasting entry into the public mind.

These characters make proverbs memorable. A proverb expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind. Proverbs have given us a graphic picture of the development and progress of human life and thought. The function of proverb is to provide the general advice about how to act and live in daily life.

There are various proverbs in Myanmar language. All Myanmar are fond of proverbs in their daily life. Myanmar proverbs express the views of man about their fellow men and about human life in its various aspects. A proverb may have more than one implication depending on the circumstance in which it is used. A Myanmar proverb throws light on divers characteristics of human beings. Myanmar proverbs express the human characters or human behavior. Moreover, they are employed for many other purposes as follows:

1. to convey practical knowledge
2. to enhance the way of life of people
3. to demonstrate universal truths

The foremost proverb scholar Wolfgang Mieder defines the term proverb as follows.

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.¹

Many proverbs have their origins in oral traditions but some have their origin in literature. The synonyms of proverbs are “adage”, “saw” and “byword”. Proverbs reflect the cultural values including the way of thinking, and the physical environment from which they arise.

In studying the ways of thinking of a people, we have to find the clues in their language. The proverbs are part of language, it can reveal the way they generally think. We come to know their perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, by studying Myanmar proverbs through the ages, we can understand the Myanmar way of thinking.

In Myanmar way of thinking, it can be found that the idea of harmony plays a significant role in social relationship and in moral conducts. Myanmar people usually live together in harmony with nature as well as social environment. There are many Myanmar proverbs that express the idea of harmony and some are as follows.

- A branch on which bees can swarm and squirrels scamper.
  ပြန်လည်ချစ်ခြင်း ပင်လယ်ချစ်ခြင်း
- Reeds depend on alluvial land and it on reeds.
  အိုက်စိုက် အိုက်စိုက်
- If there is unity then the country will prosper.
  အစိတ်အပိုင်း အစိတ်အပိုင်း

- Doing good for the many brings benefit to oneself as well.
- Only if one extends his arms (alms), will others do the same.
- The crow pays deference to the crow-pheasant and the crow-pheasant also pays deference to the crow.
- It advocates avoidance of extremes. Myanmar people accept that it is best to follow the middle way that avoids extremes. Myanmar proverbs that advocate the idea of moderation are as follows:
- Healthful when taken in moderation, harmful when taken in excess.
- Tune the harp strings neither too taut nor too slack.
- If the string is too tightly tied, it will break off; if the string is too loosely tied, it will wrinkle.
- Adjust the burden to capability just as you match the arrow to the bow.
- The idea of change can be found in many Myanmar proverbs. If one realizes that nothing is permanent then one can develop stability of thought. Some of these proverbs are:
- A gilded pinnacle once; now relegated to the wood-pile.
- The bonlon fruit and the mudskipper are on top of each other by turn.
- Strain against the current sometimes and be under easy sail in calm waters at times.
- The tree-stump and the grass come into prominence in turn.
- Misery alternates with well-being.

1.2 The Classification of Myanmar Proverbs

The word “proverbs” means in Myanmar “sagabaunj”. It means “similar saying”. Myanmar proverbs are essentially similes or parables. Myanmar still use these sayings frequently, whether in formal speech or in daily conversation. Myanmar proverbs uninfluenced by the very rich philosophical values and the cultural values of Buddhist's life.
Culture is concerned with the description and analysis of people's lives and traditions. Every society has its own cultural norms. These norms are cultural foundation of that society. Myanmar has its own philosophy which is based on Theravada Buddhism. Myanmar traditional thought finds expression through Myanmar proverbs. Myanmar proverbs are concerned with Myanmar ways of thinking.

Myanmar proverbs express the views of man about their fellow men and about human life in its various aspects. Myanmar proverbs express the various circumstances of Myanmar life.

Myanmar proverb throws light on divers' characteristics of human beings. Some Myanmar proverbs express the human characters and their conducts. They are as follow:
- *To shave off a spot on the already bald head.*
  ကုန်းမှာတော်တော်လိုက်ပါ။
- *One usually feels jealous upon the other who out scores.*
  ငြိမ်းငြိမ်းလိုက်တယ်တယ် ချောင်း
- *One cannot see the exudation of his own eyes, but he can see that of others.*
  ငြိမ်းစားတော်လိုက်တယ်တယ် အိုးဆောင်တော်လိုက်တယ်
- *No care who dies.*
  The important thing is the health of Nga Tay, one's own sun.
  ကြီးမားသားလေးမှာ ကြီးမားသားလေး
  The above Myanmar proverbs explain the ethical concepts of "evil deeds", "lobha" or "greed" and "dosa" or "anger". These proverbs refers to the bad action is immoral for social life.

The Proverb Concerning the Verbal Action

Verbal action is very important in Myanmar moral life. Some Myanmar proverbs refer to this ethical idea. They are as follows:
- *Say only seldom, but keep the words what you have said.*
  စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
- *If one talks a lot, some words may disclose the true mentality of the speaker.*
  စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
- *After the spoken out words, the legal action may follow.*
  စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
- *Talking too much may demonstrate more mistakes.*
  စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ စိုက်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
- *Eat up all the rice, but not speak out all to say.*
  ပျိုးဖော်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ ပျိုးဖော်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
- *A sweet mouth previals success.*
  ပျိုးဖော်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ ပျိုးဖော်ပျိုးဖော်ပါ
  The above proverbs can be explaining the vital part of verbal action in Myanmar way of life.
The Proverb Concerning the Social Relation

- The existence of a small midriver island depends on the net work of roots of the reeds and the everlasting growth of the reeds depends on the firm existence of the island mass.

- *If the crow shows respect to the crow-phenant, then the latter will do the same to the crow.*

- *The person who really endears you is your relatives. The dish which savours well is a best dish.*

- *If the male is endearing, its eggs will be adored.*

- *Good people are happy among themselves.*

- *In time of lest, family is best*

The Proverb Concerning the Khanti Practice

- If one entertains fury or begins with fury, he will make mistakes.

- *Say little and keep your word*

- *If one accepts the law of Karma, one can easily dispell one's fury.*

- *Tolerance leads to Nirvana.*

- *The rudeness should be conquered by genteefulness.*

- *The fury of a wiseman does not peep out.*

- *One may be killed if he creeps underneath and old tree, but, one may never be killed if he succumbs to a person.*

The Proverb Concerning the Law of Karma

- *The result or Karmic effects of one's own deeds.*

- *Do the injustice, comes the unhappy end.*

- *Behave modestly and keep higher ambitions.*
The Proverb Concerning the Role of Gratitude

- If one wishes to beat the watch-dog, he should take into consideration of its master's favour.
  အိမ်ဒေါ်းဦးလိုက်တ္တို အိမ်ဒေါ်းသားမြင်သွားတို

- Even for a mouthful of food eaten, one owes gratitude to the host.
  သီးသယ်စောင်းရာ အိမ်သားချင်

The critical analysis of the above selected Myanmar proverbs, we seen their usages are reflected in Myanmar personality, Myanmar national spirit, Myanmar culture and Myanmar ethical criteria. So Myanmar proverb as moral foundation for Myanmar traditional thought.

1.3 The Impact of Buddhism in Myanmar Ways of Life

Every nation has its own proverb which is the cultural foundation of that society. Myanmar has own distinctive culture and civilization has flourished through its long history. Myanmar culture is based on Theravāda Buddhism that was introduced into the country, during the era of King Anawrahta of Bagan. Theravada Buddhism flourished in Myanmar not only as a religion, but also as a way of life. Buddhist morals and ethics has influenced our social relationships, art, culture and so on. Myanmar cultural values find expression through proverbs in Myanmar daily life. These proverbs are concerned with Myanmar culture and Myanmar way of life.

In studying the ways of thinking of a people, we have to find the clues in their language. The existence of a common language serves as criterion for the identification of a people. Since the proverbs are part of language, it can reveal the way they generally think - we came to know their perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, by studying Myanmar proverbs through the ages, we can understand the Myanmar way of thinking. Most Myanmar proverbs reflect the Myanmar way of living as well as the Myanmar way of thinking. They are as follows:

- A deed, both subsistant and meritorious.
  ကျွန်ုပ်သော်စတိုးသည် စတိုးသည်

- Being devoid of the favour of luck, the more wiser attempts may brings more adversity.
  ဗုဒ္ဓာန် ကျွန်ုပ်သော်စတိုးသည်

- If luck favours, there will be edifice and abode readily made.
  ကျွန်ုပ်သော် ဖိုက်သို့သွားသည် ဖိုက်သို့

- The restles endeavour can eventually leads to attain the Buddha-hood.
  ကျွန်ုပ်သော် ဖိုက်သို့သွားသည်

- Luck is the mother, luck is the father.
  မိသားစွာ မိသားစွာ

- While the novice wanders for alm-rice he is infested with malaria.
  အိမ်ကြည်းသည် အိမ်ကြည်းသည်

- Spoiled for a long time; repaired at once.
  မှန်တက်ပြီး မှန်တက်ပြီး
- The merit attained in attending funeral is the same as that in ten visits to the monastery.
- The earliest teachers in life are one’s parents.
- Only if one’s stomach is full, one can observe religious precepts.
- The possessions are impermanent like illusion. The wisdom is only the coveted pot of gold.
- One really suffers because of phobia instinct.
- Destiny rules the prosperity of wealth.

Wisdom moulds the longevity of life.

The above Myanmar proverbs are reflected in Myanmar personality, Myanmar national spirit, Myanmar culture, Myanmar moral from, Myanmar Ethics and Myanmar way of thinking. So, Myanmar proverbs are moral foundation for Myanmar ways of life.

**Conclusion**

In Theravada Buddhist tradition, Buddha delivered his massage of non-violence and peace, love and compassion, tolerance and understanding, truth and wisdom, respect and regard, etc. are also guiding principle for Myanmar moral life. We may find the Myanmar thought: the morality is the people virtue in Myanmar way of life.

In Myanmar, Buddhist culture is the main foundation of Myanmar culture because most Myanmar people are Theravada Buddhist. The Myanmar way of thinking has been greatly influenced by Buddhist philosophy. Belief in the law of kana and the practice of the middle way are derived from Buddhism, which from the philosophical value of Myanmar way of thinking. In Myanmar it can be said that the Myanmar way of thinking is human-centered as illustrated by Myanmar proverbs and literature through the ages.

It is clearly seen that the Myanmar way of thinking has its own significant characteristics and philosophical values. By studying the above characteristics of Myanmar proverbs, it can be concluded that the philosophical values are very important in Myanmar proverbs. It can be said that Myanmar proverbs can continue to function in the age of knowledge, and by studying Myanmar proverbs we know that the philosophical values are very important play in Myanmar way of thinking.

Myanmar proverbs give the following benefits for Myanmar moral foundation.

1. Myanmar proverb can be supported Myanmar way of thinking.
2. Myanmar proverb explains about the Myanmar values of respecting elder, fairness, to know the value of one's gratitude, sincerity, respecting one's dignity.
3. Myanmar proverb represent the Buddhist Law of Karma, The thirty-eight blessing, Lokapala Dhamma, The four Brahma Viharas and Parami Kusala are vital parts for
Myanmar moral structure. And also Buddhist percepts are basic moral code for Myanmar moral foundation.

4. The Myanmar proverb is based on high moral attributes such as grate wisdom, truthfulness and patience.

5. Myanmar proverb makes vividly clear that Myanmar people appreciate and value of Dhamma on the basic of wisdom.

6. These selected Myanmar proverbs give three ethical principles for Myanmar moral foundation.
   (a) **To do well** - all actions of physical affairs done by one self must be good deeds without mischief making for one self and the others.
   (b) **To speak well** - all words of monthly affairs spoken by one self must be good speech without mischief for one self and the others.
   (c) **To intend good** - all thoughts of mental affairs intended by one self must be good intention without mischief making for one self and the others.

So Myanmar proverbs are clearly ethical wisdom to guiding principles for Myanmar people. Myanmar proverbs can modify and support to become a good life from the philosophical values in Myanmar Proverbs.

**Acknowledgements**

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Khin Saw Myint¹

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Keywords: proverb, philosophical value in Myanmar Traditional life

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