

Sazigyo: Making Merit

Text and Textile

By Digna Cruzem Ryan

I am neither a weaver nor a Buddhist practitioner, but I have the greatest respect for traditional weaving techniques, Buddhism and Buddhist art. I find it fascinating to contemplate how many ways a Buddhist can make merit (perform good deeds, which accumulate as 'credits' on the way to *nirvana*). Commissioning and donating a *sazigyo* is one of them. Incidentally, even though she is paid for her efforts in producing the *sazigyo*, the weaver shares some of this merit.

Sazigyo are tablet-woven manuscript binders. Tablet weaving, also known as card weaving, is a technique that combines warp and weft using flat tablets or cards, and dates back to 600 BCE in Europe. This weaving method produces strong and sturdy, narrow textiles such as straps, belts and trim. When woven to bind traditional Burmese manuscripts, they are known as *sazigyo*.



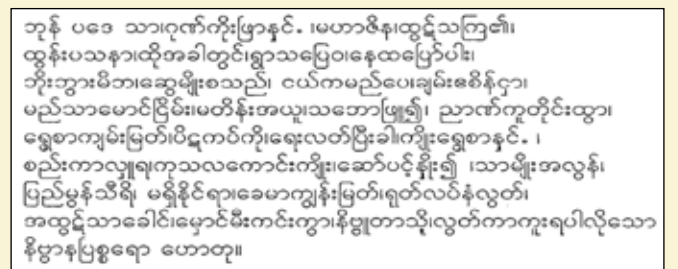
Sazigyo, L: 379cm, W: 3cm, Head (loop): 4cm, Tail: 29cm; collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum gift of Daw Mi Mi Gyi; photo by Heidi Tan

In the past, a merit-making donation to a pagoda or monastery would often comprise a *kamawaza*, a lacquered religious manuscript, wrapped in a *sapalwe*, a cotton cloth woven with bamboo splints, bound with a *sazigyo* and placed in a *sadaik*, a manuscript box.



A *sadaik* manuscript box; photo by Digna Cruzem Ryan

The *sazigyo* in the ACM collection was created for Maung Nyein from the village of Tha Pyay Wa. In his quest for merit, he commissioned the weaving of this undated *sazigyo* to both record and bind his donation of *Pitika* scriptures (the Buddha's teachings) to the pagoda:



Burmese text, courtesy of Heidi Tan of ACM and Dr Ye Myint. Translated into English by Hsaya Ralph Isaacs:

"The supreme almighty, the Lord Buddha, chieftain of Sakya stock, possessor of nine noble qualities, whose teachings glow with enduring brilliance: Now I, Maung Nyein, resident of Tha Pyay Wa village since birth, wishing to pay due honour to my parents, grandparents and family, with a concentrated mind and correct understanding, and with a clear conscience donate this manuscript of the *Pitika* scriptures, together with this binding tape specially woven with a prayer inscribed on it; seeking by the merit of this donation to attain to the highest level of unparalleled bliss, where neither mind nor matter exist; and thence, free from every kind of ignorance, may I proceed smoothly and without impediment to nirvana. May this deed be the cause that ultimately leads to nirvana!"

This *sazigyo* has been tablet-woven from hand-spun, home-grown cotton in double-faced weave, utilising warp twining to create the selvages. It is unusual in that it contains no symbols; only text. A *sazigyo* is read from left to right with the loop to the left and the tail to the right. The reverse sides of *sazigyo* generally show a mirror-image of the script and symbols on a white background.

Many *sazigyo* commence with the proclamation *Zeyatu!* (Success!) and contain auspicious symbols, such as:

- Pagoda flagstaff: *Dagondaing*
- Bell: *Kyizi*,
- Earth Goddess: *Waythondaye*,
- Fish, parrots, etc used as visual punctuation between verses

A Buddha image never appears on a *sazigyo*, but the Buddha may be represented by an empty shrine, known as *hpaya-hsaung*, or an umbrella, *hti*.



Sazigyo Auspicious Symbols: R063 Dagondaing, R004 Kyizi, R057 Empty Shrine & Umbrella, R005 Fish bracketing date: 1280=1918, R003 Parrots; photos by Digna Cruzem Ryan

To produce *sazigyo*, a number of tablets, which may range from seven to over 300, with each having four holes through which the warp threads pass, are grouped and rotated to achieve the weaver's design. *Sazigyo* are normally woven using 38 to 40 tablets.



Sazigyo tablets; photo by Digna Cruzem Ryan

Texts woven in the past included Greek, Latin, Persian and Arabic. Double-faced tablet weaving, which permits the weaving of complex symbols and script, may have reached Myanmar from India in the 18th century. Commercial weaving of *sazigyo* in Myanmar appears to have died out by the early 1960s. However, tablet weaving is still found in the production of ready-made monks' belts and slings for carrying monks' alms bowls. Unlike traditional *sazigyo* which were specially commissioned for specific personal donations, these generic, ready-made items, along with monks' robes, fans, offering bowls and other ritual paraphernalia are sold in shops for donation to monasteries.

Traditional tablet weaving continues not only in Myanmar, but also in Iran and Sulawesi to this day.

Tablet weaving as a craft has been revived in the West largely through the efforts of the late Peter Collingwood (master weaver and author of *Burmese Inscription Bands*), Otfried Staudigel (teacher of tablet weaving and author of *Tablet Weaving Magic: Patterns from Oriental Countries and 25 Patterns in Plain Tablet Weave*) and Linda Hendrickson (weaver and author of a website devoted to tablet weaving www.lindahendrickson.com). Heidi Tan, the Senior Curator of Southeast Asian Collections at ACM, travelled to Myanmar in 2009 to meet and videotape one of the very few remaining weavers with the knowledge of tablet weaving *sazigyo* with auspicious verses. Lecturer and author Hsaya Ralph Isaacs, who has written extensively on *sazigyo*, is nearing completion of another book.

Unfortunately, *sazigyo* used to be discarded by antique dealers in their quest for *kamawaza* lacquered manuscripts, but are finally becoming recognised, not only for their religious significance in the process of merit-making, but also as examples of the skill and dedication of the forgotten weavers who were responsible for their intricate texts and auspicious symbols.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Heidi Tan of ACM and Hsaya Ralph Isaacs who have kindly provided me with encouragement and advice.

*Thadu-Thadu-Thadu!**

*Well done! This proclamation appears at the end of many *sazigyo* to proclaim the deed of merit-making.

Digna Cruzem Ryan is a member of the FOM Textiles Enthusiasts Group. An avid collector of textiles from Myanmar and the Philippines, Digna travels to remote tribal areas to conduct personal research in her quest for elusive textiles. Several pieces from her collection have been exhibited in museums throughout the world.
