

Information and Communication Technology in Arts and Culture Myanmar

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Introduction

In this era of globalisation, the need for complete, accurate and quick-to-access information is increasing, and this presents a challenge to cultural institutions and arts centres, as information services continued to be demanded of them. The role of information and communication technology (ICT) in developing the arts and culture in Myanmar has taken an importance that the Department of Cultural Institute are aware of.

Background, History and Establishment of ICT in Myanmar

At present, technological developments in the world are exhilarating. If a nation is not able to meet the challenges, and to take advantage of the opportunities resulting from the process of globalization and ICT development, it will be left behind and the disparity will only become more pronounced. The Government of Myanmar, after carefully assessing the global changes, understand that ICT plays a vital role in building a modern, developed nation.

With the objectives to produce technicians who can invent, repair and apply computer hardware and software technology, the Government has conducted courses at the Yangon University of Computer Studies since 1971. To promote effectiveness and success in the development of science and technology, the Government established the Ministry of Science and Technology in 1996. In a developing nation like Myanmar, ICT development is impossible without the government's ardent and energetic support. As a signatory to the e-ASEAN agreement, it will have to work towards the progress of computer technology. The Myanmar Computer Technology Development Council has been set up, and is promoting the computer science stage by stage to the best of its capability.

In October 2002, Bagan Cybertech was established as an economic enterprise, with the objective of providing necessary communication infrastructure for regional IT companies that produce software and services. It was formed with the primary function to assist in Myanmar's quest to establish a significant presence in the information and communication technology industry. The Bagan Cybertech is one of Myanmar's public Internet service providers, and together with the VSAT infrastructure, access can be made from anywhere in Myanmar regardless of the geographical limitations. The Internet will feature the national portal as well as various web sites for e-commerce, e-education, media, news, entertainment and much more.



At the Fourth Informal ASEAN Summit, held in Singapore in November 2000, heads of the ASEAN nations signed the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement. A national level organisation, the Myanmar e-National Task Force, was formed to implement the task. In early 2001, Myanmar committed to having an Information and Communication Technology Park to provide opportunities for private IT companies to use cutting edge technologies in developing software and other technological products and, moreover, to provide quality services to interested customers worldwide (as a result of co-operation of respective departments, Bagan Cybertech and the Myanmar ICT Development co-operation, under the guidance of the Myanmar Computer Technology Development Council, were able to build the Myanmar ICT Park, which has been operating since January 2002).

Myanmar ICT Park

Myanmar ICT Park will mainly provide modern communication services to local and foreign IT companies in software production. E-Commerce, e-learning and other IT related works can be implemented by the programmes and services of ICT Park and e-government will also be developed. The ICT Park facility is designed to provide tenants with the opportunity to create products and services, particularly in the software industry, to compete in today's global market.

Following independence, with the purpose to maintain and disseminate traditional art and culture, the Ministry of Culture was established in 1952. According to the policy of the Ministry, since 1954, the Department of Cultural Institute has been established to take charge of libraries, museums, research on literature and culture of the national races, and the observatory. Under the guidance of the Ministry, the department has established the National Museum, the National Library, Research Branch, and

cultural museums in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan States, Mandalay and Ayeyarwaddy Divisions.

To meet the objectives of the Department of Cultural Institute (of collecting and researching on Myanmar's cultural heritage; preserving the cultural heri-



tage materials; and disseminating cultural knowledge and information to its people, etc.), several developments have taken place: The National Museum, State and Division Cultural Museums have been established, and they preserve and display collections of cultural heritage; promotion of Myanmar's culture



through tourism and drawing the public to the museums by instituting changes in display to keep abreast with the time, and make collections more interesting; compilation and continuous production of National Museum guidebooks and pamphlets; the collection of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, parabolic, ancient treatise and literature at The National Library and State and Division Cultural Libraries, including compilation of annual national bibliography, and rare books and manuscripts for the public interest; increased research and documentation; and more interaction with international libraries.

The department has a web site that showcases Myanmar's culture. There is an introduction of National Museum's collections, the 180-year-old Great Lion throne of Myanmar Kings, the masterpiece of the National Museum and symbol of Myanmar sovereignty, and other collections such as ornamental attires of the last Myanmar King and Queen, have been included.

The National Library is proud of its rich collection of rare and valuable ancient Myanmar manuscripts, palm-leaf and folded paper parchment (Parabaik) that are at least 100 years old (some of them are about 200 years old), which are regarded as sacred objects. Very rare and old palm-leaf manuscripts are also scanned and converted into electronic form, like CD-ROM. Digitization of Rare Books Collection, printed books published up to in 1900 and serials published up to 1948, has also been initiated by using the in-house system. Conversion of bibliographic data of books from card into machine-readable form has also been carried out.

Since the Union of Myanmar is made up of over 100 national races, and ethnic groups have managed to retain much of their linguistic, cultural and artistic heritage, they have their own customs, languages, arts and cultures, reflecting the differences in the geographical location, climate, communication and inter-relationships. There are many records on ethnology. The State and Division Cultural Museums have collected and preserved their region's respective cultural heritage, and the displays at their museums serve to improve understanding of each culture better. They have been undertaking the tasks of keeping records of folk literature, traditional music and musical instruments, seasonal festivals and social ceremonies in audio-visual media.

For research and studies on Myanmar's culture, a Research Branch on ethnic culture was formed



in 1954. They did field works and recorded and published some publications on ethnic tradition such as prominent festivals like “Manao”, “Kuthobo”, etc.. There are many cultural exhibitions organised by the three departments, the Department of Cultural Institute, the Department of Fine Arts, and the Department of Archaeology. In the year 2000, two exhibitions, Myanmar Traditional Apparel and Myanmar Necklaces (Beads) Exhibitions, were held. In the former, costumes of national races, dress of ancient pre-war and post-war periods, and the modern day were presented. The latter displayed the traditional necklaces of Myanmar’s nationalities, the Stone Age, and Pyu Period up to the present (documentation on the two exhibitions are in C.D. Rom and compiled on the Ministry’s web page).

Strategies for Development

Myanmar has a long history and remarkable cultural heritage. The Department of Cultural Institute needs to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage; compile and publish the cultural traditions of the national races; and constantly form strategies to meet the mission of the Department, including the use of technology.

Multimedia programme on Myanmar’s culture

There are many rich collections that are preserved at the National museum, national Library and State and Divisions cultural museums. The cultural heritage collection can be classified into the following groups: Royal materials, Ethno-culture, Folk culture, and arts and crafts. The National Museum offers a frank documentation of the country’s cultural development through roughly two millennia of tumultuous times, through devastating wars and a fractious post war period, to reflect a people’s sincere pride in a unique past. The documentary on the Great Myanmar Lion Throne, and

related materials of Myanmar kingdoms from the Mandalay Palace, and invaluable Royal regalia of Myanmar kings, are royal materials. Myanmar arts and crafts concerned with painting, drawing, prints, and sculpture, architecture, and folk arts and crafts, and folk literature are maintained at the National Museum, and will be documented on C.D. ROMs. Biographical information on Myanmar artists, writers and performers, a



catalogue of their works and directory of art galleries in Myanmar will also be included. To complete this, ethno-cultural and historical materials are included. As are the following: arts and crafts, ethnic music and musical instruments, performances of music and dance, folklore, ethnic literature, traditional attires, textiles, weapons, equipment and tools used in hunting and farming, materials used in traditional weaving, traditional festivals and social ceremonies.

Traditional attires and textile-making are both rich heritage of the country. The process of yarn-ing, dyeing and weaving, and their motifs and patterns are traditional ideas of the ethnic groups, which contain visual arts, performing arts, literature (prose and poems), folk arts and folk literature. Some visual arts such as floral designs and scripts in traditional style are created on paper parchments. These national treasures are now to be stored in digital form for posterity.

As well, there are galleries and museums focusing on local arts. While there is a positive indication of thriving art communities, the artists are independent, with their own missions and purposes of reaching specific audiences. The directories of museums, galleries, libraries, archives, historical and cultural sites, with information on artists and their works, as well as the centres of folkloric activity, are being prepared for access by those interested. Furthermore, users can access information on rare collection, such as very old manuscripts and monographs, and would be helpful to researchers and scholars as well as to locals.

These inventories of Myanmar's art and cultural heritage can now be obtained through the website. It is expected that in future, local communities will gain such standard access to better understand, promote, appreciate and protect local as well as Asian culture in general, to contribute toward the establishment of e-ASEAN. Guidance for tourists relating to the protection and preservation of Myanmar's cultures is being provided, and is under further study. In this context, local populations are also made to realise the urgency in the protection of their own cultures.

Recommendation

While it is true that there are many opportunities with the use of technology, particularly in

converging and combining resources to create and expand an international audience and market for Myanmar arts and culture, there is the need to identify the priorities of information to be presented. Not only the business community but also the whole of society recognises the importance of ICT in economic, social and cultural development, and most of the efforts have been directed to raising the awareness of the value of the technology and its development. It is obvious that ICT would enrich both assessments and access of the art communities, and build existing collections with important information on the arts and culture. The Ministry of Culture is focused on essential services, which promote the process of community building. With the support of the Government and the co-operation of the IT professionals in Myanmar ICT Park, the involved cultural institutions concerned with documentation, conservation, dissemination and promotion of arts and culture, have taken significant steps in the right direction.

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