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**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF MYANMAR'S
TRADITIONAL WEAVING PRACTICES:
TIPTOEING MODERNISATION THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY**

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Abstract:

Myanmar's traditional weaving practices are a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, yet they face significant challenges in modernisation and globalisation. Myanmar's traditional Lunyarkyaw Acheik weaving is an ancient and culturally considerable practice that faces numerous challenges in the modern era. With the increasing pressure of globalisation and modernisation, this heritage craft struggles to maintain its relevance while preserving its authenticity. Key challenges include a declining number of skilled artisans, the rising costs of raw materials, and competition from mass-produced fabrics. However, there are also opportunities for revitalisation through sustainable practices, innovation, and integration with modern fashion trends. By embracing eco-friendly production methods and promoting fair trade, Lunyarkyaw Acheik weaving can secure a future in the global market, ensuring its cultural preservation. This paper explores the delicate balance between modernisation and sustainability in the craft, highlighting how strategic adaptation can foster economic opportunities while maintaining traditional values. Through careful planning and support, Lunyarkyaw Acheik weaving has the potential to thrive as both an artistic heritage and a sustainable industry.

Keywords:

Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik, Weaving Culture, Traditional Practice, Modernisation, Sustainability

Introduction

Myanmar's rich cultural heritage is intricately woven into its traditional textile arts, with one of the most revered being the Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik. This intricate and vibrant fabric is a testament to the country's deep-rooted weaving traditions dating back centuries. Acheik textiles are traditionally worn clothing in Myanmar that represents cultural identity. They are woven using intricate patterns and designs with silk threads on a manual loom. Acheik weaving was historically reserved for royalty and high-ranking officials but is now worn by women during special occasions. While hand-woven Acheik can be expensive due to its time-intensive process, modified machine-woven versions using silk and cotton are more affordable to preserve the tradition.

Weaving is an ancient, longstanding practice in Myanmar, and historical evidence suggests that textile production has been an integral part of Myanmar's life for over a millennium. Traditionally, the craft has been a communal activity passed down from mother to daughter across generations. Each region of Myanmar boasts unique styles and techniques, reflecting the diversity of the country's ethnic groups. This paper explores the cultural significance of Myanmar's weaving practices, focusing on the Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik, and discusses the efforts towards sustainable development within this traditional craft.

Background History of Myanmar Weaving Culture

The weaving culture in Myanmar has a rich and diverse history that spans centuries and is deeply rooted in the country's cultural heritage and traditions. The designs depicted on pots and stone carvings can assume that cloth weaving existed during this time, though there is no clear evidence of the methods used. However, there is clear evidence from stone inscriptions that a broad and diverse range of cloth was woven. During the Bagan period (107–1360), a distinct Myanmar style emerged, influenced by cultural elements of Amarapura and Yadanarpon. Historical records indicate that the Inwa period (1095 -1113), under King Hanthawati-Pa's reign, was when Acheik emerged. It is characterised by its intricate waves interwoven with bands of horizontal stripes and embellished with arabesque designs. During Inwa period, the number of colours and complexity of design was simple, but by the Amarapura period (1181-1199) more colors and complex designs were incorporated.

Evidence of "wavy" design was found long ago in Myanmar. The earliest Luntaya Acheik textiles featuring wave-like motifs are believed to have been produced as early as the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885). The study of the mural paintings of the *Ananda-oak-kyaung* of Bagan, belonging to King Bagyataw's reign (1819-1837), reveals the established presence of *Acheik* weaving and silk weaving industry. Handloom weaving industries are found in different parts of Myanmar, such as Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, Shan States, Mandalay, and Sagaing Region. The most famous handloom weaving is Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik, which is predominantly found in Amarapura Township in Mandalay Region and Sagaing Township in Sagaing Region. Each Myanmar region developed unique weaving styles, patterns, and techniques, often influenced by local customs, ethnicities, and natural resources.

Myanmar Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik (*Luntaya Acheik*)

The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in upholding its richness. Acheik designs are woven using intricate patterns and designs with silk threads on a manual loom. Acheik weaving was historically reserved for royalty and high-ranking officials but is now worn by women on special occasions. While hand-woven Acheik is often expensive due

to its time-consuming process, modified machine-woven versions using silk and cotton are more affordable to preserve the tradition. "*Luntaya Acheik*" is highly valued and recognised among Myanmar's weaving arts.

"*Luntaya Acheik*" translates to "an interlocking tapestry textile woven with a hundred shuttles". The name reflects the intricate weaving process where numerous shuttles interlace weft threads create detailed patterns. "Lun" or "Lone" refers to weaving shuttle, "Taya" or "Ta Yha" means one hundred, while "Acheik" denotes the tapestry-weaving method. Despite its descriptive name, it is commonly abbreviated to "Acheik" or even "Cheik" for convenience. Luntaya Acheik textiles are believed to have been woven for the court during the Konbaung dynasty (1752 to 1885), when the technique was first developed. Strict sumptuary laws dictated that only royalty or high-ranking officials were allowed to wear these textiles except when granted by the King or one of the Queens. In the 18th century, when Luntaya Acheik textiles were first woven for the court, they were already sold at a high price. Weaving these textiles has always been a meticulous craft, often requiring one day for two weavers working simultaneously to produce just an inch of cloth. The high cost and the sumptuary laws limit the use of Luntaya Acheik textiles to only the elite class.

During the early Konbaung period, textile patterns were simpler and required 20 to 50 shuttles. However, by the time of King Mindon's reign (1835–1878), the designs had become more complex, demanding 120 or more shuttles used. Luntaya Acheik textiles are woven utilising "interlocking tapestry weaving", whereby different colours of weft threads from various shuttles form the lines and motifs of the design. The technique can be traced back to an ancient form of tapestry weaving, categorised into two types: Slit Tapestry Weaving and Interlocking Tapestry Weaving. *Luntaya Acheik* Textiles employ the latter. Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik is a testament to Myanmar's rich cultural heritage and artistic ingenuity. Its intricate designs and labour-intensive techniques reflect the dedication and skill of Burmese weavers. By continuing to support and innovate within this tradition, Myanmar can preserve an important part of its cultural identity while fostering greater appreciation for Acheik on the global stage.

Patterns and designs of Myanmar Acheik

The weaving technique involves intricate patterns often inspired by nature, folklore, and religious motifs. The term "Acheik" reflects the typical wave-like patterns of this style. These patterns represent the river's waves and are characterised by its flowing, undulating lines. Acheik is primarily woven from silk, which was chosen for its lustrous finish and smooth texture. The high-quality silk threads are often dyed using natural dyes to achieve vibrant, distinctive colours of Acheik textiles. Myanmar Luntaya Acheik textiles are simply fascinating. Its beauty is showcased through the complexity and intricacy of the intertwined and grouped wave patterns. These patterns flow freely as each strand of silk weft yarn from hundreds of shuttles is woven and interlocked to form a curvilinear line delineating various motifs, including geometrics, floral and foliage tendrils and birds. The wave-like or zigzag pattern has been predominant worldwide across many civilisations and cultures. Pre-historic evidence from various civilisations, not limited to Myanmar, demonstrated that such motifs adorned various artifacts. However, the people of Myanmar elevated these simple motifs, attaining the pinnacle of design development.

Acheik weaving is highly labour-intensive and requires considerable skill. The process involves using hand-operated looms, where weavers meticulously interlace silk threads. The

intricate patterns are created by interweaving the weft (horizontal threads) with the warp (vertical threads). A distinctive feature of Acheik is the addition of supplementary weft threads to create complex patterns and textures. The motifs adorning Luntaya Acheik textiles can generally be categorised into wavy designs, floral tendril designs and animal designs. During the early Konbaung dynasty, simple wavy or geometric motifs are primarily used to design Luntaya Achei. The floral tendril gained popularity after the mid-dynastic period and peaked during colonial times. Most Acheik designs are based on three to seven elementary motifs, with current practice inclining towards three to five. High-quality *Lun-Yar-Kyaw Acheik* are woven using only elementary designs. Moreover, almost all textile weavers in Amarapura have adopted modernised Acheik designs to ensure the patterns remain contemporary.

The design patterns of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik are elaborate and symbolise various cultural and natural elements. Common motifs include flowers and vines, representing beauty and nature, with lotus flowers symbolically representing Myanmar culture. Complex geometric shapes like diamonds, squares, and zigzags create visually stunning designs. Figures from Myanmar mythology, as well as animals like peacocks and elephants, are often depicted. These motifs convey cultural stories and beliefs. Acheik textiles typically feature bright and vibrant reds, yellows, greens, and blues. Each colour selection and its combinations convey significant cultural meanings. Designs of knotted have existed since the 16th century. Initially, the weave designs were not woven fabric but colourful wave-like patterns on the linen, resembling wave designs stitched together. In the post-Nyaungyan period, intricate weaving designs were introduced, incorporating small loops between frames. Myanmar's traditional Acheik designs begin with wave-shaped designs, eventually evolving into lightning-like floral and cloud flower embroidery designs.

Technical and Artistic Aspects

The weaving of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik involves a combination of specific materials carefully chosen for their quality and ability to create the desired aesthetic. Silk is the primary material used for both warp and weft threads in Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik and is selected for its strength, flexibility, and natural lustre, which contributes to the fabric's luxurious appearance. Gold and silver threads are often incorporated into the weaving process to add a touch of luxury and elegance. These metallic threads are used sparingly to highlight specific motifs or details within the design, creating a striking contrast against the silk background.

Historically, dyes were extracted from plants and minerals, though modern processes may use synthetic dyes for consistency and vibrancy. While traditional natural dyes are still used in some cases, modern Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik may incorporate synthetic dyes for consistency and a broader range of vibrant colours. Synthetic dyes often offer better colourfastness, ensuring the colours remain vivid and durable. Traditional wooden looms are used for weaving Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik, providing a sturdy frame for the weaving process. Various tools, including shuttles and needles, are used to control the threads and create the intricate patterns characteristic of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik. By combining these materials with skilled craftsmanship and intricate weaving techniques, artisans can create Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik fabrics that are visually stunning, culturally significant, and rich in history. Acheik weaving involves complex warp and weft threads interlacing to create distinctive wavy patterns. Traditional wooden looms are used, where the weaver manually controls the shuttle and tension to achieve the desired patterns. The design process begins with detailed planning on graph paper to ensure symmetry and precision before the weaving process starts.

Creating a single piece of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik takes several weeks to months, depending on the complexity of the design. Skilled master weavers with years of experience are often revered in the communities for their expertise. The craftsmanship involved in hand-weaving Acheik requires exceptional skill and precision, with techniques passed down through generations to ensure each piece is unique. While traditional patterns are preserved, artisans often experiment with new designs, blending old and new to keep the art form dynamic and evolving. Acheik patterns and designs are integral to Myanmar's cultural identity, reflecting the nation's heritage and traditions. These designs are meticulously planned to ensure symmetry and balance, which are aesthetically pleasing and harmonious. The wave-like patterns create a sense of flow and movement, drawing the eye across the fabric and giving it a dynamic quality. The artistic aspects of Myanmar Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik encompass a rich tapestry of design motifs, colour symbolism, textural intricacies, and cultural narratives, all of which contribute to its enduring beauty and significance.

Evolution of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik Textiles

Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik boasts a rich history intertwined with Myanmar's cultural and political evolution. This luxurious textile originated in the Amarapura region during the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), worn primarily by royalty and nobility. Throughout the British colonial period and subsequent independence, the production and use of Acheik have significantly adapted to changing social and economic conditions. At the same time, it remained a symbol of cultural heritage; its exclusivity diminished, allowing broader access to this fabric among different social classes. Post-independence, Acheik continued to be cherished in traditional ceremonies and attire, reflecting the nation's ongoing respect for its culture.

In contemporary Myanmar, Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik production faces challenges and opportunities. While preserving traditional techniques, exploring modernisation also appeals to local and international markets. Efforts are being made to balance traditional craftsmanship with new design influences and sustainable production practices. There has been a growing interest in reviving and preserving traditional weaving techniques and designs in Myanmar in recent years. Artisans, government and non-government organisations are working to document, promote, and sustain this cultural heritage. While traditional weaving techniques are valued and preserved, there is room for innovation and adaptation to modern market demands. Contemporary designers often collaborate with traditional weavers to create fusion designs that blend heritage with modernity. With increasing globalisation and tourism, there are opportunities to expand market access for Myanmar textiles domestically and internationally. Overall, the weaving culture of Myanmar is a testament to the country's rich history, cultural diversity, and artistic craftsmanship. By preserving traditional techniques and embracing innovation, Myanmar weaving continues to thrive as a vibrant expression of cultural identity and creativity.

Regarding the preservation efforts, there are ongoing efforts to preserve the traditional techniques of Acheik weaving. This includes training new generations of weavers and promoting the textile in local and international markets. Some contemporary designers are integrating Acheik patterns into modern fashion, expanding its appeal and ensuring its relevance in the global textile industry. Several weaving workshops in the Amarapura area continue to thrive in supplying textiles for domestic consumption and souvenirs for foreigners. The evolution of Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik mirrors Myanmar's broader historical and cultural

shifts, maintaining its status as a vibrant emblem of the nation's rich heritage while adapting to contemporary trends and challenges.

Myanmar Government Initiatives and its Policies

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in Myanmar's economy, contributing significantly to employment and economic growth. The government of Myanmar has implemented various policies and initiatives to support and promote MSMEs. The following are some critical aspects of these policies:

- a. The Myanmar government has established a regulatory framework to simplify the start and operation of MSMEs, including streamlining business registration processes, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and providing legal support to ensure compliance with national standards. The government offers financial support through various schemes, including low-interest loans, grants, and subsidies to MSMEs. These economic incentives are designed to improve access to capital, often a significant challenge for small businesses.
- b. Recognising the need for skill development, the government has launched various training programmes to enhance the managerial and technical skills of MSME owners and workers. These programmes include business management, marketing, financial planning, and technology adoption. Efforts are initiated to improve infrastructures supporting MSMEs, such as developing industrial zones, business incubators, and technology parks. These initiatives provide MSMEs with facilities and resources to operate and grow efficiently.
- c. The government promotes MSMEs by facilitating access to local and international markets, including trade fairs, business matchmaking events, and export promotion activities. Additionally, policies are in place to support MSMEs in meeting international quality standards to enhance their competitiveness globally. The government encourages MSMEs to adopt new technologies and innovative practices to foster innovation. This includes supporting research and development activities and facilitating access to modern technology and digital tools.
- d. Ongoing legal and policy reforms aim to create a more conducive environment for MSMEs. This includes the implementation of the Myanmar Companies Law, which provides a more flexible framework for business operations and ownership. The government collaborates with various international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and private sector entities to comprehensively support MSMEs. These partnerships often result in joint initiatives, funding opportunities, and knowledge exchange programmes. Policies are also in place to encourage MSMEs to adopt sustainable and socially responsible practices. This includes support for green technologies and practices that promote environmental sustainability and social welfare.

The government has introduced specific measures to support MSMEs in crises in light of recent challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures include financial relief packages, tax deferrals, and targeted support programmes to help businesses recover and adapt. The policies implemented by the government for MSMEs are designed to create a supportive

ecosystem that fosters growth, innovation, and competitiveness, thereby contributing to the country's overall economic development.

Challenges

The Acheik weaving tradition faces significant challenges threatening its sustainability and cultural significance. A declining artisan workforce is evident as younger generations increasingly gravitate toward urban job opportunities, showing less interest in the labour-intensive skills required for this craft. Market competitiveness suffers due to high production costs due to premium materials like silk and the manual labour involved. Additionally, many weaving workshops operate locally with limited access to international markets, hampered by a lack of marketing skills and technological expertise. The competition from cheaper, machine-made fabrics further complicates matters, as artisans feel pressured to modernise their designs, risking the dilution of traditional Acheik patterns. Compounding these issues is a lack of government support, which results in insufficient funding and limited access to resources and training programs for emerging artisans.

Opportunities

The growth of tourism in Myanmar presents significant opportunities for the Acheik weaving tradition, as there is an increasing demand for culturally substantial products. Cultural preservation programs could further enhance support and visibility for traditional crafts, while the global shift towards sustainable and handmade fashion aligns well with the artisanal nature of Acheik textiles. This trend boosts interest and resonates with modern consumer values, making hand-woven fabrics more appealing. Additionally, the rise of e-commerce allows artisans to reach international consumers directly, leveraging social media to share the intricate stories behind their craft. Support from NGOs and government initiatives focusing on cultural preservation can provide essential resources and grants to sustain traditional weaving practices. Collaborations with contemporary designers can revitalise traditional patterns, introducing them to broader markets and showcasing the unique Acheik technique to a diverse audience.

In a visual, these aspects could be represented through contrasting images: one depicts challenges, such as a struggling artisan or industrial competition, and the other shows opportunities, like fashion trends or cultural appreciation. Here is a column chart illustrating the challenges and opportunities of the Lunyarkyaw Acheik weaving practice. The red bars represent the challenges, such as workforce decline and high production costs, while the green bars highlight opportunities like sustainable fashion trends and online marketplaces. Each factor is rated by its potential impact.

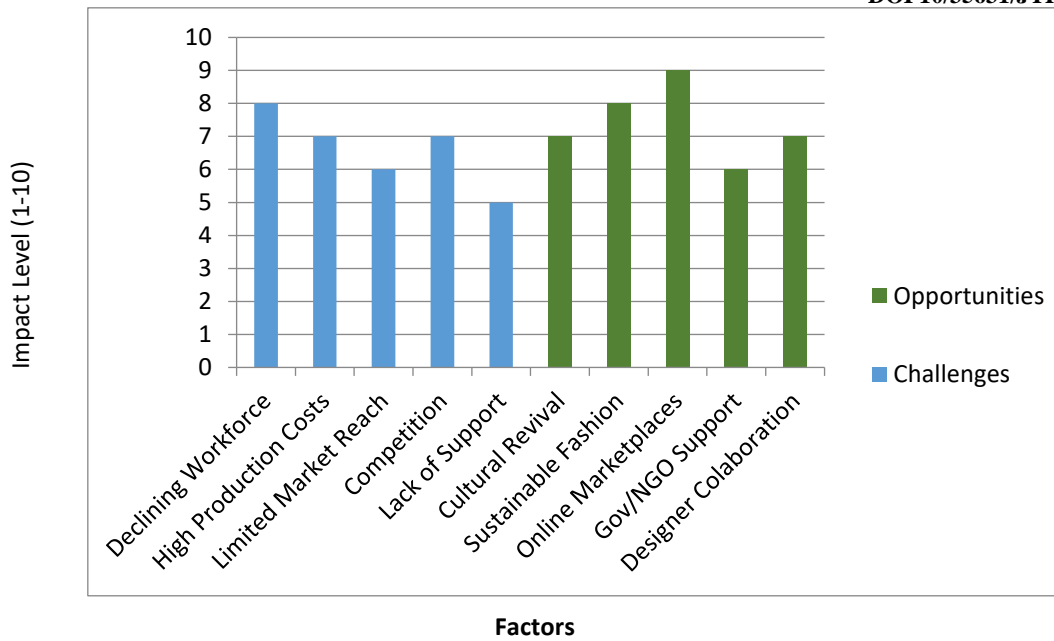


Figure 1. Challenges and Opportunities in *Lun-yar-kyaw Acheik* Weaving Practice

I collected the hypothetical data to compare the number of weavers and annual textile production over ten years (from the past to the present) in Amarapura, Mandalay, and Sagaing Township. The following data trends are collected.

Number of Weavers: Gradual decline over the ten years due to younger generations leaving the craft.

Amarapura: Decline from 250 to 220.

Sagaing: Decline from 230 to 180.

Mandalay: Decline from 200 to 160.

Here is comparing the data over ten years (2014–2024) for weavers in Amarapura, Mandalay, and Sagaing:

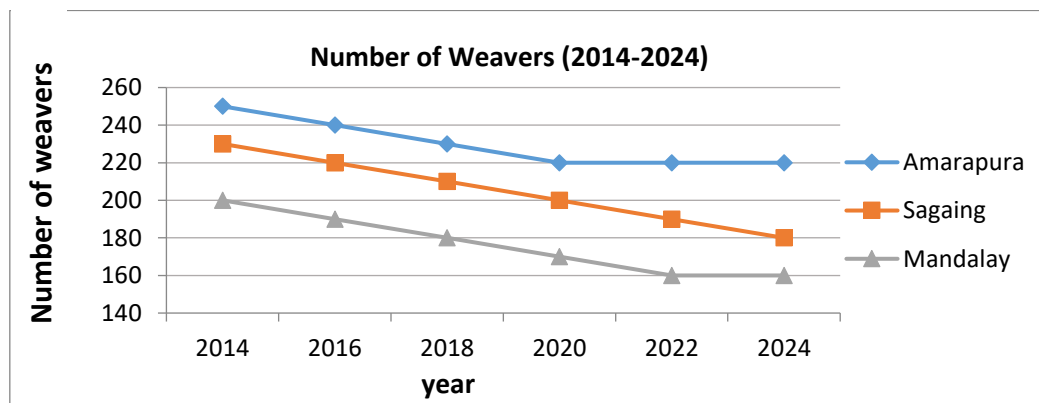


Figure 2. The Number Of Weavers In Each Region Over Time Highlights The Decline In Artisan Numbers Across All Three Areas.

Textile Production (number of textiles per year): Fluctuating based on market demand, but generally stable in regions like Mandalay.

Amarapura: Fluctuation between 6500 and 6000.

Sagaing: Decline from 5000 to 4500.

Mandalay: Decline from 4200 to 3800.

Here is a comparison of the data over 10 years (2014–2024) for textile production in Amarapura, Mandalay, and Sagaing:

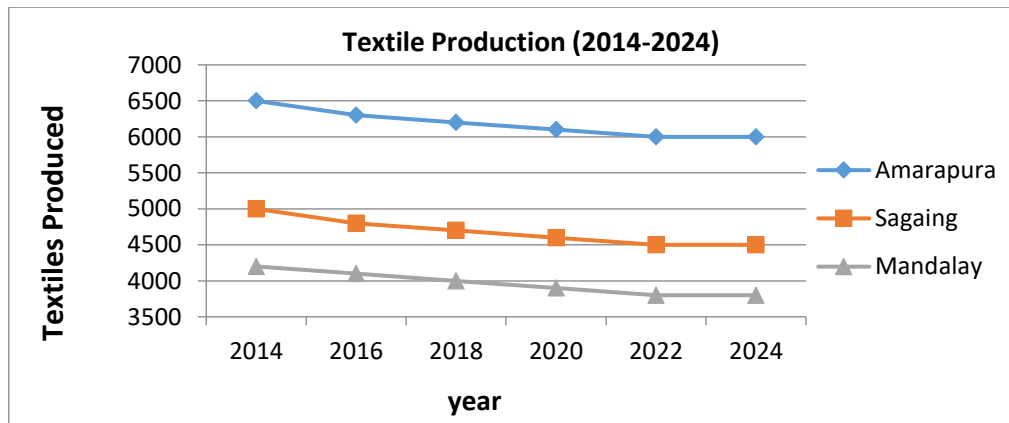


Figure 3. The Annual Textile Production Trends Over The Same Period Show A Gradual Decline Or Stabilisation In Production Output.

These charts help visualise the weaving workforce and output changes, reflecting challenges like generational shifts and market demand.

Finding And Discussion About The Sustainability In Myanmar's Weaving Culture

In Myanmar's weaving culture, sustainability encompasses various aspects, including financial development, environmental conservation, socioeconomic development, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. The following are vital considerations for promoting sustainability within Myanmar's weaving culture. The government should encourage using sustainable materials such as organic cotton and natural dyes derived from plants to reduce environmental impact. Efforts to minimise water usage and pollution attributed to the weaving process include water recycling and proper disposal of waste materials. Moreover, promoting the conservation of indigenous plant species used for dyeing helps to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem balance while raising awareness about preserving natural habitats where raw materials for weaving are sourced.

Concerning socioeconomic development, the textile industries and practitioners must ensure fair wages, safe working conditions, and equitable opportunities for weavers, particularly women, who are often the backbone of the industry. Substantial support should also be given to community-based weaving enterprises and cooperatives that empower local artisans while fostering socioeconomic resilience. The government must provide training programmes and apprenticeships for traditional weaving skills and knowledge transfer to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. Initiatives to revitalise and safeguard endangered weaving traditions and styles unique to specific regions or ethnic groups should also be supported. It would facilitate mentorship programmes where master weavers pass down their

expertise to apprentices, preserving intangible cultural heritage and fostering a sense of cultural identity.

Regarding Market Diversification, Myanmar needs to explore opportunities to diversify markets for Myanmar's woven products, including both domestic and international markets, to foster collaborations between traditional weavers and contemporary designers to create innovative products that appeal to modern consumers while maintaining cultural authenticity and to encourage the development of high-value, niche products that showcase the unique craftsmanship and cultural heritage of Myanmar's weaving traditions. The government must advocate for supportive policies that promote the sustainable development of the weaving industry, including funding for skills training, infrastructure development, and market access initiatives. Myanmar also needs to develop and enforce regulations to protect traditional knowledge, intellectual property rights, and the authenticity of Myanmar's woven products.

By integrating sustainability principles into Myanmar's weaving culture, it is possible to preserve this rich heritage for future generations while promoting socioeconomic development, environmental stewardship, and cultural resilience. Despite facing significant sustainability challenges, artisans' collaborative effort and the government's initiative to promote environmentally friendly practices and fair trade is a vital component. Through these efforts, the weaving tradition continues to thrive, preserving its cultural significance and contributing to the economic well-being of weavers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the weaving culture in Myanmar is a vibrant and deeply rooted tradition that reflects the country's rich cultural diversity and heritage. Myanmar's handloom weaving represents more than just a craft; it's a form of artistic expression and identity passed down through generations. However, this heritage is increasingly under threat. The challenges facing Myanmar's weavers, ranging from economic pressures, competition from mass-produced textiles, and the erosion of traditional knowledge to political instability and environmental changes, are profound. The decline in skilled artisans, particularly those practising rare techniques, highlights the urgent need for preservation efforts. Despite these challenges, there is a growing awareness of the importance of sustaining this cultural heritage. Efforts to support weavers through improved market access, education, technology integration, and substantial institutional and governmental backing are essential. By valuing and investing in Myanmar's weaving culture, there is hope that these traditional crafts will survive and thrive, continuing to enrich the country's cultural tapestry for generations. Myanmar's Lunyarkyaw Acheik weaving faces significant challenges due to modernisation and global competition. However, through sustainable practices, cultural tourism, empowerment of local artisans, and modernisation of design, there are promising opportunities for revitalisation. To ensure the survival of this cultural heritage, a balanced approach that integrates tradition and modernity is necessary. Myanmar can preserve this vital aspect of its cultural identity for future generations by tiptoeing through modernisation with sustainability at its core.

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