

## BOOKS

# Books: How teak became Asia's blessing and curse

Sweeping history explores passions spawned by the tropical hardwood



Zaw Min Naing and Zaw Zaw Aung fell a mature teak yielding four logs measuring 60 feet in total, in Gangaw, Myanmar. (Photo by Tim Webster)

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In their previous book, "Yangon Echoes: Inside Heritage Homes," photographer Tim Webster and oral historian Virginia Henderson adopted a simple but successful formula -- presenting personal tales connected with the city's heritage buildings, illustrated with beautifully composed, atmospheric images.

This formula has now been applied to a much broader topic, and the resulting, sumptuous tome, "The Social Life of Teak," casts a spotlight on the most highly prized tropical timber on our planet. Within its pages, storytellers share their experiences and insights into *Tectona grandis* (teak), while absorbing images draw the reader deep into its tales.

The scope of the book is vast, both geographically and culturally. The stories range from Scotland to Java and from India to Brazil, though the greatest number are from Myanmar and Thailand, which are both in the heart of the teak belt that runs from northern India to northern Vietnam, where teak has its origins.

A glance at the acknowledgements at the back of the book reveals the names of hundreds of people involved who shared their stories. These include genetic scientists, carpenters, sailors, woodcarvers, train restorers, building dismantlers, a teak thief, shipbuilders, *u-zi* (Myanmar elephant handlers) and cartwheel makers.

In the introduction, the authors pose several questions. "What gives teak such a powerful aura, stoking desires and capturing imaginations? How has it shaped people's lives, driving fortunes and impacting futures? What has happened to the teak forests? What is their destiny?" The answers to these questions provide us with a cultural history of teak, which turns out to be both a blessing and a curse.



In "The Social Life of Teak," the authors seek "to stimulate conversations about [humans'] role as nature's most troublesome offspring." (Courtesy of River Books)

Teak is a blessing because it is such a beautiful material -- strong, durable and workable, with an attractive grain that makes it ideal for carving or constructing houses or boats. It is from people who work the wood that we get a sense of deep awe, such as Jirasak Thanoomas, a carpenter from northern Thailand who makes the traditional *seung* instrument (a fretted lute) to play with friends. "This is a teak village. Life is slow here," says Jirasak. "The spirit of the wood is reflected in our music. Teak is our way."



Since teak trees are living things, Myanmar animists endow them with spirits that they call *youk-kazo*. Hla Taung, an architect, explains that, "Trees also have their own special fairies or spirits. Every big tree, a *youk-kazo* is staying in there. To eat or sleep under it, you always ask first, and never urinate under a big tree or kick it. But to get its wood, you simply make a request." This takes the form of a ritual with offerings, while asking the spirit politely to move elsewhere and to forgive the felling of the tree.

It was teak wood that enabled the clipper Cutty Sark, now docked at Greenwich, in England, to become the fastest ship ever to sail the seas in the 19th century. As Piran Harte, the vessel's senior ship keeper, says in the book, "Cutty Sark sailed nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nautical miles, roughly the same distance as going to the moon and back two and a half times. More than ninety per cent of her current materials were there when she was built (1869)."







Top: An assortment of *seungs*, a traditional Thai stringed instrument, made from teak. Bottom: Senior ship keeper Piran Harte aboard the 19th-century clipper Cutty Sark in Greenwich, England. (Photos by Tim Webster)

Despite its magical properties, teak is also a curse because its high commercial value makes people greedy and heartless toward their fellow humans. Zaw Min Naing, a teak logger in Myanmar, tells us, "We need to buy a chainsaw and use petrol, but only get a few dollars between us each time we cut a tree." By contrast, Bob Steber, a teak merchant in Yangon, talks about the super-rich consumers of teak. "Some of these people have got so damned much money that they've got five yachts and a couple or three houses in Europe, a couple or three houses in America, the house in Bangkok."

From several stories in the book, it becomes evident that 1988 was a very bad year for teak for two reasons. Firstly, repression by the Myanmar military after student protests led to sanctions by countries such as the U.S., which in turn led the military to sell its teak forests in order to keep the economy afloat.

In the same year in Thailand, hundreds of people were killed during floods by an avalanche of illegally felled logs and mud, after which the government imposed a ban on logging. However, it seems that the ban has been ineffective, and little old-growth teak remains in either country.



Top: Bandsaw carriage driver Win Min Thant and chainsaw operator Soe Myo Aung with teak logs from Myanmar's Kayah state. Bottom: A finger-jointed teak board. (Photos by Tim Webster)



The growing global demand for teak inevitably causes ecological problems. It takes more than 50 years for a teak tree to develop into top quality wood, but few humans are prepared to wait so long. So natural teak is now very rare. Seri Chompooming, a writer who lives in northern Thailand, says in the book: "It used to be eight kilometres from Phrae to reach teak forest. Now it's a hundred. Thieves stole all the forests."

One teak trader in Yangon comments: "Illegal logging itself always encourages armed conflict. This money we are using to source weapons to fight each other. Myanmar not only lost natural resources but cannot enjoy the fruits of them."

With natural teak now extremely scarce, most teak on the market these days is grown in plantations, yet the same trader warns that "quality-wise, plantation teak can never substitute natural teak." As with other monoculture crops, teak plantations lead to soil degradation and reduced biodiversity, as well as increased risk of disease.







Top: Kyaw Zwa with timber elephant Aung Khin Myine at the Long Chon Reserved Forest in Gangaw. Bottom: The painting "The East Offering its Riches to Britannia" by Spiridione Roma (1778), now hanging in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London, speaks volumes about colonists with no reservations about exploiting the resources of far-off lands. (Photos by Tim Webster)

Toward the end of the book, we read about attempts to develop transgenic teak trees, a process that could be fraught with danger -- transgenic organisms incorporate genetic material, in all cells, that includes a gene or DNA sequence transferred by means of genetic engineering from a genetically unlike organism. However, plant biochemist Helaine Carrer argues in the book that humans already produce and consume transgenic soybeans and corn, so why not teak too?

Thai anthropologist Srisakra Vallibhotama bemoans the shift in the perception of teak from a natural resource to a commodity in Thailand after a reform drive by King Mongkut, who ruled from 1851 to 1868. "After ... modernisation and democracy, something got broken. A huge change in our way of life came with the cash economy and the commodification of our resources. In the Eastern world, we try to live in harmony with the universe. In the Western world, people want to control the universe."

A book on teak would not be complete without stories about elephants, who unwittingly destroyed their own habitat while helping humans haul teak logs from forests. Yet pachyderms are endearing creatures, and Myanmar elephant handler Win Khaing shares this tale. "Each elephant wears a *khalauk* or bell of teak and bamboo, made by its u-zi," he says. "But elephants are very clever and sometimes sneaky, picking up mud with their trunks to plug the *khalauk* from ringing."



A teak and bamboo *khalauk* (elephant bell) at Nat Pauk Elephant Camp, in Indaw, Myanmar. (Photo by Tim Webster)

The imagery of this photo-driven book helps the reader to appreciate the diverse contexts in which teak can be found, ranging from its natural form in forests to being cut in sawmills, assembled in shipbuilding yards or construction projects, carved into works of art, or used to pound rice.

One image in particular, of the painting "The East Offering its Riches to Britannia" by Spiridione Roma (1778), now hanging in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London, speaks volumes about colonists with no reservations about exploiting the resources of far-off lands.

Webster's minimalist approach and eye for composition make each image worth detailed study, though if there is a minor quibble, it is that some portraits seem somewhat staid as the subjects pose self-consciously.

Overall, however, this publication is a great achievement and hopefully it will encourage readers, as the authors wish, "to stimulate conversations about [humans'] role as nature's most troublesome offspring."

*"The Social Life of Teak" (River Books, 2023).*

*Ron Emmons is a Thailand-based writer and author of "Teak Lord," a novel set in Thailand during the teak boom.*