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Volunteer Performances and Funeral Services in Myanmar

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Abstract: Volunteers as individuals and groups contribute to the process of community development by committing time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside or in addition to one's immediate family. In the 1990s, Myanmar has grown exponentially in grassroots social organizations including independent funeral services. Since then, philanthropy "parahita" has expanded across Myanmar. Volunteering is one of the main conduits through which the principles and values of community development can be implemented. Hence, the current study explores the services of volunteers working in free funeral service societies in urban areas from a wide range of volunteering. Qualitative research methods such as key informant interviews and participant observation were applied in the data collection. The findings show that voluntary performances can also be seen as a plural performance, as volunteers practice many different religions and belong to many different ethnic groups. The good will-led manners, words, and activities of volunteers have reduced grief and burden of the bereaved family members requiring the funeral arrangements. The accurate performances and goodwill-based manners and activities of the volunteers and the staff lead to the growth and success of free funeral service activities. Therefore, volunteering in funeral services plays an important role and it has also been seen as an indication of citizen participation in the development of the country.

Keywords: volunteer; performance; funeral services; parahita; community development

1. Introduction

"Volunteering" generally refers to any activity based on either "non-profit" or "free-will" and including wide varieties of formal volunteering through an institution to informal volunteering in a self-help community (Davissmith 1992). Since the 19th century, volunteering has developed into a highly dynamic and varied form of civic engagement (Ellis et al. 2010). In the United States, 62.6 million people volunteer at least once a year, about 25 percent of whom are permanent volunteers. It indicates the large involvement of American society in charity work, volunteering, or community services (Bejan-Muresan and Constanta Urzeala 2018).

Village, or ward (urban residential area) based organizations are known as 'parahita' organizations (Griffiths 2017). Parahita as a Pali word describes the concept of altruism, generally translated as 'for the good (benefit) of the other'. Parahita acts as a boundary object, representing an idea and an ideal that embodies a morally and ethically superior virtue (Griffiths 2018). The general expression is one of altruism. However, even official discourse warns of the need for 'balance' between pure altruism and caring for one's own needs (Ashin Sandar Thika 2014).

Pitaka literature indicates that philanthropic work existed during the lifetime of Gotama Buddha. A group of thirty-four youths headed by Magha was reborn in Tavatimsa deva realm (celestial abode) after their death for their philanthropic work. They mended roads, dug drains, built rest houses and bridges in their village when they were reborn as human beings. Magha was reborn as the Lord of devas. Because of their community work, they become celestial beings enjoying the great pleasures (Ashin Sandar Thika 2014). Volunteer services are derived from Buddhist teachings and is a valid expression of Myanmar culture. In this way, the expressions of parahita have become a significant element of Myanmar identity, particularly amongst the younger generation.

Volunteering is diverse and covers social, cultural, health service, education, employment, development, and environmental activities. Philanthropy (Parahiti) became popular since 2000. Since then, free funeral services have sprung up and the number of volunteers has increased. When Cyclone Nargis struck in 2008, many volunteers helped the victims. Many civil society organizations and social welfare organizations have emerged to address community needs and

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development. These organizations are in fact, non-profit public service organizations, funded by donations and mainly staffed by volunteers.

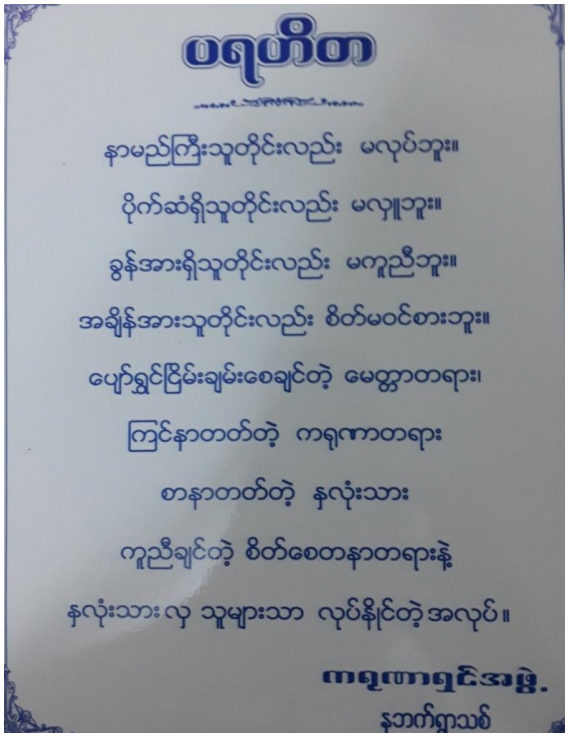
Philanthropy has benefited others from the time of the Buddha to the present day. In every era, monks and elders have encouraged philanthropy. Volunteering is based on the religious beliefs of the Myanmar people. As they co-operate their duties of the association, staff, and volunteers are indispensable for FFSS (Ygn). To alleviate the burden of the bereaved families, volunteers provided funeral assistance, which was previously considered a lowly activity. The good will-led manners, words, and activities of volunteers relieve the bereaved family members of their grief. The emergence of volunteers has reduced the burden of funeral arrangements. The accurate performances and goodwill-based manners and activities of the volunteers and the staff are also the causes of the development and success of free funeral service activities. Volunteering is one of the main conduits through which the principles and values of community development can be implemented. However, current research explores performance of volunteers working in free funeral service societies.

2. The concept of volunteering

Volunteerism is a fundamental source of community strength and resilience that exists in all societies throughout the world. Volunteerism is expressed through a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery, campaigning, and advocacy, as well as other forms of civic participation. Myanmar, like most countries in the world, has traditional forms of volunteerism that are closely associated with mutual aid. This traditional form of volunteerism is known as "Ah-myar ah-kyo-saung, ko-ah-kyoaung", which means "benefiting oneself in serving for the benefits of others". The chairman of the Free Funeral Service Society (Ygn) said that philanthropy (parahita) means holding on to the four cardinal virtues[1] and acting in a sympathetic way (Myanmar Cele Crazy MCC interview, 2018). According to a member of a parahita organization in Myaung Township, parahita is based on Buddhist teaching, emphasizing the good of helping others (Griffiths 2017). That's the reason why volunteers are highly valued and respected among the general population. "Say Ta Na Won Htan", translated as "Volunteerism" is deeply rooted in Myanmar culture and tradition (UN Volunteers Field Unit Myanmar 2015).

The existence in Myanmar of long-standing practices of donations, support for the poor, elderly and infirmed are well documented (Hla Maung 1962), embedded in both oral and written traditions of community ethics (Ashin Sandar Thika 2014). Social organizations describe village, or ward (urban residential area) based organizations self-describing as 'parahita' organizations (Zin Mar Latt 2015; McCarthy 2016; Griffiths 2017). These organizations are in fact, non-profit public service organizations, funded by donations and mainly staffed by volunteers.

As Myanmar is a developing country, volunteering and community development activities play an important role in communities, especially poor people. Although the Burmese people have a long tradition of helping one another with their needs, the term volunteer began to become popular around the year 2000. After the violent Cyclone (Nargis) in 2008, volunteering proliferated to help the victims in Myanmar. Since then, they have been involved in education, health, natural disaster relief, and social welfare. The volunteers must devote their time, money, and energy, holding on to the four cardinal virtues, and helping others. One volunteer mentioned that volunteering was difficult.



Parahita

Not all famous people practice it

Not all rich people donate

Not all strong people help (others)

Not all people with free time are interested

Joyful, peace-building loving kindness

The charity shown by compassionate people

The empathetic heart

A generous spirit, willing to help

Only can be done by the pure hearted

(author's translation)

Figure 1. Poem on 'Parahita' composed by Karuna Shin Organization.

1. love, compassion, rejoicing and detachment

"It is not easy to be a volunteer. Although you are eager to do volunteer work, you need to give yourself time. You can give time, but you need to be willing."

Only those who are an empathetic heart, a generous spirit, and willing to help with compassion will be able to do benefic to others. According to a poem written by the Karuna Shin Organization in the article of (Griffiths 2017), it is difficult to be a volunteer (Figure 1).

The venerable Shin Maha Silavunsa, an eminent Buddhist Monk in the Ava period (AD 1364-1555), wrote extensively on religious and social issues. He was well-versed in Pali and Myanmar literature and exhorted his students to work collaboratively for the good of others. His writing and its English translation are shown in Figure 2.

"If one has something to do,
Others should not neglect and leave him alone
All should cooperate to have things done
Many hands make light work".
(Venerable Ashin Maha Silavunsa)

တစ်ယောက်ကိစ္စ ကိုင်တွယ်ကြသော်
ခြေကြွေလက်သာ မနေသာသည်
တတ်ပါသမျှ ညီညာကြ

Figure 2. Shin Maha Silavunsa writeup and its translation.

Pali scholars have encouraged community welfare work or philanthropy (Parahita). However, there was not an immediate link between Parahita spirit and assistance at funerals. Although volunteering or Parahita was a noble practice espoused since ancient times, the public was reluctant to offer services for funeral ceremonies. This was because they believed that 'asuba' (tokb) or funeral occasion was inauspicious. However, venerable Buddantta Tikha (Agga Maha Pandita) remarks on Parahita (community welfare work) as follows, led to the foundation of the Byamaso organization by a Buddhist monk based on this principle (Figure 3).

Auvada Katha (Advisory words) of Budantta Tikha (*Agga Maha Pandita*)

The benevolent one can do the meritorious deed by working like an undertaker.

အနိမ့်ဆုံးသော ကုသိုလ်အလုပ်မျိုးသည် မြင့်မြတ်သောစိတ်ဓါတ်ရှိသူတို့၏အလုပ်ဖြစ်သည်။

Figure 3. Buddantta Tikha (Agga Maha Pandita) advice for Parahita.

Volunteering is based on the religious beliefs of the Myanmar people. Buddhists believe that only by doing good deeds in this life, one can have a good life in the afterlife. Therefore, they do all they can to help others with their difficulties and needs. Social cohesion is an imperative key to the development of the country (UN Volunteers Field Unit Myanmar 2015) as volunteering teamwork is more effective than individual work. Besides, volunteers work together, regardless of race, religion, or wealth.

3. Results and Discussion

This study was focused on the Free Funeral Service Society (FFSS (Ygn)) located in the North Dagon Township, Yangon Region of Myanmar (Figure 4). It is the first and the largest civil society organization in Yangon. This research aimed to explore the performance of volunteers in free funeral service societies. Qualitative research methods such as key informant interviews and participant observation were used for data collection. Key informant interviews were conducted with volunteers and family members of the deceased. A total of thirty informants; ten members of the deceased family; ten females, and ten male volunteers including hearse drivers were also interviewed. The main research questions were: Why are you interested in volunteering? How services do you provide? To what extent can volunteer work meet the needs of the bereaved family? And how important is philanthropy to the community?



Figure 4. Free Funeral Service Society (Yangon).

4. Results and Discussion

In Yangon, FFSS (Ygn) was established in 2001 to support bereaved families with funeral arrangements. The organization aids the public regardless of race, religion, gender, or social status, extending its services to health care, education, rehabilitation, and rescue work in cases of natural disasters. Volunteers of FFSS (Ygn) contribute their services across five departments: the education center, Thukha clinic, emergency, reception, and funeral service. As part of this research, participant observation was conducted through Saturday volunteer work in each of the five branches. Within the funeral service branch, duties included carrying the deceased from homes or hospitals to cemeteries. Although the study was formally carried out between 2018 and 2020, participant observation through volunteer service with the organization had already begun in August 2017.

Since the FFSS (Ygn) started with volunteers at the time of its establishment, many philanthropists have appeared. The volunteers are actively involved not only in the funeral services but also in the educational, health, and other social service activities. Along with the emergence of free funeral service societies, a social class named volunteers who are keen on engaging in altruistic activities has spread all over the country. Volunteers have various religions including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and the Hindu. They are artists, doctors, teachers, students, government staff, youth, but they all have volunteer spirits and participate actively. Their age range is from 18 years and above. Volunteers perform assigned work at least for one week in a month and one day in a week. Only when they work at least three weeks in the association, they are allowed to become a formal member. Before a year, they are regarded to be a guest member and after a year he or she is assigned to be a full-fledged member. But, if the assigned days are not ripe enough, a member card is not issued. Volunteers are assigned in every sector, such as education, health, reception, emergency, and funerary.

The FFSS (Ygn) offers free education to the poor people who cannot send their children to state high school. The society has volunteer teachers who teach these children. All academic subjects are taught to the high school level who cannot afford to attend the state high schools. Besides providing basic education through regular classes, non-formal and vocational training courses are offered at the FFSS (Ygn) education service department. In education sector, volunteers assist in accepting applications for trainees, assisting with examinations, and preparing the book.

FFSS (Ygn) provides health care services for the living. Thukha Charity Clinic (Yangon) was opened on March 2, 2007, to provide free medical care to patients. Each volunteer doctor is allowed to consult with 20 patients daily. Patients must call the clinic one day in advance and make a booking. Therefore, the volunteer must assist in answering phone calls and providing services to patients who come for medical treatment daily when they are on duty at Thukha Charity Clinic. Volunteers are first served in the reception area when they first become members of the FFSS (Ygn). Volunteers are on duty at the reception desk, welcoming donors and visitors and assisting with their needs. They can go to the galleries and other departments such as education, the clinic, motor vehicle department to see the activities of the association. Sometimes they have to go and help with garbage collection and other departments if they need help.

The emergency salvation department of the FFSS (Ygn) provides 24-hour services. As emergency and ambulance services, the department provides services including taking to hospital those people who are seriously ill, those who have been hit by a vehicle or those who have been accidentally injured and helping the victims of natural disasters such as fire, flood, earthquake and so on, by directly traveling to those disasters-hit areas.

The bereaved family members who want to ask for free funeral service can contact society either by phone or in person. When a person asks for help a permanent staff or a volunteer needs to make a complete record concerning the funeral service. The volunteer or the staff must exactly record the data, such as the name and age of the deceased, the name of the family member who seeks help, address, phone number, and the name of the cemetery where the dead body is to be transported. After acceptance of free funeral services, volunteers must go either to the funeral home or to the hospital together with the necessary documents in the specific time to carry the dead body. A driver and his assistant as well as one or two volunteers are needed to carry the dead body. If the assistant is unavailable, the driver and the volunteer only have to do the task. The volunteer has to bring the documents issued from the FFSS (Ygn) and the fees for respective funeral services such as he/she must bring a mortuary fee is 1,500kyats (US$1) for one day or 3,000kyats (US$2) for two days or a cremation fee is 4,000kyats (US$2.66) (Until -2020). After 2021, a mortuary fee increased to 3,000 kyats (US$0.66) per day, and the cremation fee increased to 10,000 kyats (US$2.2).

The volunteers are required to check the necessary certificates when they arrive at the dead body. If the dead body is required to be kept in the mortuary, the volunteer must receive the original and two copies. One copy and the original paper of the cremation certificate must be given to the cemetery in-charge committee of the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) and the rest one copy must be brought back to the FFSS (Ygn). If the dead body is directly cremated, the volunteer must take the original letter of the cremation certificate and one copy. The volunteer must be given to the cemetery only one original letter and the copy must be brought back to the FFSS (Ygn). In carrying out funeral services, a death certificate issued by the respective cemetery is important. When the parts of the body are cremated, a death certificate is needed.

After that, the volunteer explains the FFSS (Ygn)'s activities and discusses the funeral arrangements. Next, two pamphlets are given to the family. The first pamphlet gives detailed information about society, such, as its, aim and its functions. The pamphlet describes that FFSS (Ygn) is a non-profit public service association and if anyone asks for help, for it, it will provide him funeral service free of charge. It also warns the bereaved family not to bribe any staff or volunteer for their service. If a volunteer takes bribes, this will damage society's image. If they want to make donations, they can donate cash or kinds of things to society directly. This pamphlet also gives the information found the society's phone number and address. The second pamphlet contains advisory words of Shwe Hamsa Sayadaw2. These words are taken from the commentary of Aprihaniya "အပရိဟာနိယ" treatise concerning the obsessions about the funeral should be dispelled. The FFSS provides the consumer with free transportation service to carry the dead body to the respective cemetery, fees for cremation, fees for mortuary for up to two days, hiring glass coffin service in the hall

2. Venerable Buddhist Monk

for those who do not want to buy coffins, and a boxlike wooden board with low frames onto which the dead body is placed for cremating. In case, the deceased is a monk, the FFSS also provides a golden barge (Kara Wait Phaung Taw) as required by tradition.

In May 2008, during the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, volunteers from the FFSS traveled to the delta region of Ayeyarwaddy to bury the bodies of victims of Cyclone Nargis and donated their need. The FFSS has been providing free funeral services for 23 years, and by December 2023 had provided services to 216,420 bereaved families. Although FFSS (had to help the bereaved families with more than 50 funerals a day around the year 2010, it must help approximately a minimum of 15 funerals to a maximum of 40 ones a day these days (San San Oo 2020). During the Coronavirus outbreak, emergency response services were provided 24 hours a day. During that time, an average of 15 to 30 deaths a day was serviced, and the emergency services provided an average of 90 to more than 100 coronavirus-infected patients a day. During this time, volunteers devoted their lives for the benefit of others, regardless of their lives.

Volunteers who drive cars also drive the hearse at the FFSS. Of all volunteer drivers of hearses, four of them are women (Figure 5). Some celebrities drive hearses occasionally to gain merit (Figure 6). In fact, celebrities are role models of the fans, who love them and copy their behavior, and so they inspire their fans to follow their example. This has been a significant factor in the proliferation of funeral assistance organizations across Myanmar.



Figure 5. Female hearse drivers from FFSS (Ygn), Source: FFSS (Ygn).

Other celebrities are found to come every so often, not always, and volunteer their services for the funerals. It is learnt through the bereaved family that the help of the celebrities temporarily alleviates the grief and sorrows of the bereaved family while they are suffering from great grief. Regarding that matter, when the bereaved families who are helped by the celebrities are interviewed, a 34-year-old woman said as follows:

"When my grandma died, the two-celebrity brother and sister came and carried the dead body. I felt a mixture of sorrow and happiness and the scene relieved my grief temporarily. It turned out to be a memorable period of time for my grandma as the celebrities came and carried it."



Figure 6. Celebrity volunteers, Source: FFSS (Ygn)

Volunteers co-operate the responsibilities of the association with staff. If staff and volunteers do not abide by the rules of the association, their duties are changed or dismissed from the work as punishment. Although the association is based on Buddhism, volunteers are without any discrimination of creed or nationality come and join in the association.

According to an Islamist who drove a funeral car as a volunteer at FFSS (Ygn):

"I have no discrimination of nationality. Before death, I would like to do good and meritorious deeds. As there is less duty in our Islamic funerary association, it is not burdensome. But in FFSS (Ygn), as there are many needs, so many works are to be managed. As I want much merit, I work in this association."

All the volunteers and the staff also have to abstain absolutely from drinking alcohol. It is also strictly prohibited for them to accept any pocket money from the bereaved family members. If such a bribery case has been identified, the responsible person is normally given as a great punishment as getting fired. Even when some bereaved family members want to make donations - in cash and kind - to the FFSS (Ygn) on the hearse without directly coming to the office of the society, the responsible persons of the FFSS (Ygn) are not allowed to accept them but ask the bereaved family members to donate directly to the FFSS (Ygn) office.

According to most volunteers, volunteering is for charity, which, in the Buddhist sense, is intended to be beneficial in the afterlife. Funeral services, unlike any other venture, are traditionally considered to be inferior. Thus, it is difficult to be self-sacrificing, whether rich or poor. Volunteers who do so for the benefit of others are often referred to as "philanthropic heroes." A 60-year-old man with four years' service in volunteers work said,

"I want to do what others cannot do. It is sacred to do what others do not want to do. When I arrived at the association, I do everything trivial. My daughter and I both work here as volunteers. I drive a hearse, just as my daughter carried a corpse".

He earnestly expressed his attitude toward volunteer work. A 43-year-old woman with five years' service in volunteer work said that she has to work hard to do both volunteer work and her household routines. She also has to do her household chores concerning her husband and her offspring's; she tries her best to do these routines dutifully so that she can work as a volunteer here.

"I want to do this non-profit public service. I do not want to spend time with my family, my parents, my husband, and my children. Without doing any philanthropic work, it's not worth living. So, I do this volunteer work to benefit the community, not for profit."

She tried to finish doing her housework beforehand. If she was assigned duty the next day, she had to do her work at night. Her husband often objected to her will and he often got annoyed with her efforts. But she never got fed up with her volunteer work. She managed to do the volunteer work based on patience and understanding. Now, even her husband had already joined her in doing volunteer work.

The efficacy of the performance of 'repeated stylized acts' to constitute a visible identity is enhanced by volunteers wearing uniforms. All the staffs of FFSS (Ygn) and volunteers wear uniforms. A uniform consists of a white shirt or blouse and a black longyi regardless of gender. Thus, they can be easily recognized as volunteers from the Free Funeral Service Society by looking at their uniforms. Those working on the funeral route have to wear a Myanmar blouse (Yin Phone or Yin sei engyi) so that the bereaved family will respect them. Volunteers are required not only to be dressed neatly but also to be polite in their speech and behavior. A 43-year-old woman with five years' service in volunteer work said:

"When I go to the funeral home, I always go there with full confidence. I've made up my mind to fulfill their needs and to help them relieve their lament and agony as far as I can" She expressed her attitude towards the task she is going to do.

The good will-led manners, words, and activities of volunteers relieve the bereaved family members of their grief. The volunteers normally go and take the dead body exactly at the time that the bereaved family desires. The accurate performances and goodwill-based manners and activities of the volunteers and the staff are also the causes of the development and success of free funeral service activities. A 50-year-old bereaved family member also recounted his experience regarding the way the volunteers behave and speak.

"If a someone dies, a neat and tidy volunteer comes to the funeral home to carry the dead body. They treat the bereaved family kindly and politely. They also spoke politely and sweetly. No shouting, no disgusting behavior. With goodwill and kindness, they give their service. In addition, families do not have to pay for the service."

Since most family members at the funeral home have no experience, they are bewildered and discouraged. They talk to the volunteers with full confidence in their activities. On the part of the volunteers, they show sympathy and kindness to the bereaved family so that they can seek solace. Volunteers are those who render services for the people in their free time. When they perform funerary duties, they humbly help the bereaved families.

There are also volunteers working in community-based funeral service organizations (CBOs). CBOs relied on FFSS (Ygn) because they have not to hearse to carry the dead body. FFSS was unable to help obtain a cemetery certificate, but volunteers from the CBOs aided. All the CBOs borrowed tables and chairs, and household utensils. According to a key informant interview, funeral services volunteers from CBOs who help a bereaved family with the funeral matters in a ward contacted FFSS (Ygn). Volunteers from CBOs provide free assistance for the construction of the funeral pandal, cremation of the dead body, and hire the necessary things until the seven-day ceremony. Volunteers also collected money in the community to support the families of the deceased who could not afford the funeral expense. In the past, if there was a funeral, the deceased family had to rent a car to transport the body to the cemetery, to get a cemetery certificate at the funeral, and seek the help of a professional funeral broker to rent the necessary equipment. Now, as such free funeral service societies have risen, they render services free of charge and as a result, selfish funeral service brokers gradually diminish and replace by volunteers.

Among volunteers, there are many strata such as nationality, creed, rich, or poor. Ignoring their dignities, they render services through philanthropic spirit. Altruistic work has been done since the lifetime of the Buddha till the present time, and it is in accord with Myanmar culture. Later, it is known that Myanmar youths perform such activities individually or communally. Volunteering called Parahita has now become a kind of honorable work.

Myanmar people say that "death is more difficult than to live". But this saying is no longer to be heard because of the FFSS (Ygn), which reduces the burden of the bereaved families. All the activities relating to death that is performed free of charge by the FFSS (Ygn) are based on volunteer spirit. The emergence and sustainability of these associations are dependent on the ability to

establish and sustain a credible identity in the face both of donors and volunteers who supply the means to undertake charitable funeral services and the wider public who endorse the legitimacy of the organization.

Volunteers at CBOs assist to obtain a cemetery certificate and hire the necessary things, build the funeral pandal, and transport the dead body. Volunteers also collected money in the community to support the families of the deceased who could not afford the funeral expense. As funeral arrangements were supported by volunteer in the community, funeral brokers gradually declined and were replaced by volunteers. Thus, with the advent of free funeral service societies, volunteer assistance not only reduced funeral costs but also made funeral arrangements easier for deceased families, reducing anxiety.

5. Conclusions

The volunteers carried out the so-called unpleasant task of the lowest social class bearing the motto "Only the noble ones can do the lowest type of work in terms of social aspects but that can create a great merit (Kusala)" in their mind. Funeral services were once considered disgusting, but they are now a source of pride because of the hard work and dedication of the volunteers. As a result, volunteering, which many are now unable to do, is now recognized by the public as a proud and impressive work. The active participation of volunteers has led to the emergence of free funeral service societies across the country. Without volunteers, free funeral service societies could not survive in Myanmar society. In addition, in a developing country like Myanmar, volunteers are essential for the development of society.

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