

Locating Arakan in Time, Space, and Historical Scholarship

The scholarly study of Coastal Burma – more particularly, Arakan – has been slow to mature. ‘Critical source editions are virtually non-existent,’ writes Stephan van Galen, ‘major collections of inscriptions remain unpublished, and the architectural heritage of [Arakan’s capital city] Mrauk U crumbles in the jungle’ (Van Galen). Beyond these empirical problems are thorny conceptual issues deriving from the region’s geographical location. Ethnically, it straddles a porous borderland between the Indo-European and Tibeto-Burmese linguistic worlds, its population speaking distinctive dialects of Burmese. In the early modern period, the Arakan coast also lay astride a political fault line, its principal port, Chittagong, controlled alternately by states in Bengal and Arakan. And in our own age, the region has lain astride a scholarly fault line dividing South Asian and Southeast Asian area studies. By drawing together specialists from both these camps, together with scholars of Dutch and Portuguese maritime history, the present volume has taken important steps in overcoming entrenched academic barriers.

The authors appear to be in agreement on several issues, such as how best to understand the dynamics of interstate relations in early modern coastal South and Southeast Asia. Several contributors make a conceptual distinction between interior agrarian states and coastal commercial states, noting that the former more typically competed with each other than with their coastal counterparts; and conversely, that coastal commercial states more generally competed with each other than with agrarian states in their immediate hinterland. Accordingly, whereas inland agrarian states like Pagan or Angkor sought to control maritime states, they rarely destroyed them, since the latter served as their sources of luxury goods and windows on a wider world (Aung-Thwin). In the same way, segments on the coasts of the Bay of Bengal generally had more interaction with each other than with their respective hinterlands (Om Prakash). This more intense interaction often led to conflict. It was to acquire direct access to the international trade of the Bay of Bengal, for example, that the coastal state of Ayutthaya seized its maritime rivals in Tenasserim (1460s) and Tavoy (1488) (Chutintaranond 1999).

However, the kingdom of Arakan (1430-1784), examined from several perspectives in this volume, does not appear to fit easily into this neat conceptual dichotomy. Sanjay Subrahmanyam sees the state as a hybrid entity occupying a position somewhere between a truly ‘agrarian state,’ characteristic of the early medieval period, and a heavily commercialized ‘trading sultanate,’ such as early modern Melaka (Sub-

rahmanyam). Its two major cities, Chittagong and Mrauk U, symbolized the two poles of this hybridized polity – the former, a wealthy international port city at the head of the Bay of Bengal; and the latter, a capital city located on the edge of a range of forested mountains overlooking several wide alluvial plains, and connected to the Bay of Bengal by the Kaladan river. Situated in this way, Mrauk U was a market for local rice-producers as well as a political and ceremonial center. But the state derived more revenue from ordinary trade through the port of Chittagong than it did from its agrarian base, suggesting that Arakan's political fate was tied to its control of that city. Indeed, for Michael Charney, the final blow to the state came in 1666 with the loss of Chittagong to the Mughal empire (Charney).

But the Arakan kingdom was hardly a pure 'trading sultanate,' especially in view of the predatory raids it regularly conducted along the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. For the state's real power rested on river-warfare, which it waged by striking flourishing port cities by means of small and swift galleys fitted with swivel cannon (Leider). Only the rise of Dutch sea power, argues Van Galen, put an end to the coastal kingdom's ability to force trade by harassing coastal shipping (Van Galen). Here, then, we see another side to Arakanese society, composed largely of 'sea people' – fishers, gatherers, pirates, traders – such as are found throughout maritime Southeast Asia among ethnic Malay, Bugis, Moluccan, or Toraja groups. A more purely aquatic type of sea people are represented by the Moken community, found along the Mergui Archipelago further down the Burma coast. Described by Jacques Ivanoff as marine nomads who 'live on boats during the dry season and remain on land, in dwellings during the rainy season,' the Moken are so sea-based as to be entirely dependent on agrarian populations, to whom they barter shellfish for rice (Ivanoff 1999). By contrast Arakan, its political economy sustained both by agrarian-based Mrauk U and by coastal Chittagong, from which it engaged in regular trade as well as predatory raids, appears to have been a truly amphibious hybrid, with one foot on land, and perhaps a bit more than one foot in the water.

For both geographers and historians, the benefit of studying a complex region like Arakan is that it forces scholars to test and refine analytical categories such as 'frontiers', 'borderlands,' 'shatter zones,' 'cores' or 'peripheries'. The 'frontier' concept still carries the connotation given it by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who used the term in the dynamic sense of a culture group expanding into 'empty' space or into the territory of another culture. From the perspective of the Irrawaddy region, one might think of Arakan as a 'frontier' in the sense of a zone in which one form of Buddhist practice gradually displaced another one. But looked at from the Bengal side, the region might more closely resemble a 'borderland,' since it lay on the eastern edge of one of India's largest-ever imperial systems, the Mughals. Sunait Chutintaranond, however, advises against embracing any 'centralist historical ideology,' which terms like 'frontier' or 'borderland' seem to imply, urging us instead to adopt the perspective of provincial cities like Tenasserim, Mergui, Tavoy, or Martaban (Chutintaranond 1999). And indeed the rulers of Arakan, having a sovereign dynasty, revenue system, imperial legacy, standing army, and locally-minted coinage, possessed a 'centralist historical ideology' of their own. They certainly would not have considered their kingdom as any sort of frontier or borderland. To the

contrary, by the early seventeenth century the kings of Arakan had come to see their state as the center of Buddhism's political world.

Geographical categories such as 'cores' and 'shatter zones' are also of limited use here. Politically, Arakan's relatively stable and centralized tradition of royal power would suggest a core. But core regions are also indicated by a high degree of monolingualism, and the Arakan region, with its several dialects of vernacular Burmese, its Bengali high literature, its Pali chronicles, and its Portuguese and Persian diplomatic correspondence, might rather suggest a shatter zone. Nor is much gained by invoking Immanuel Wallerstein's econocentric 'core-periphery' model, according to which one might judge Coastal Burma peripheral inasmuch as it imported coarse as well as elite textiles manufactured in India, notably Bengal (Dijk 1999). On the other hand, one could equally view Bengal as peripheral in relation to the Arakan state, since the latter raided the Lower Bengal delta for unfree labor to be resettled in Arakan or sold to Europeans as slaves (Van Galen).

The study of Coastal Burma would seem, then, to expose the limitations of several conventional categories of scholarly analysis. But if academics must live by such categories, and they probably do, my own reading of these chapters on Arakan suggests what might be called a 'niche realm,' that is, a political economy that successfully, if idiosyncratically, adapts itself to its particular environmental, economic, cultural, and political context. The Arakan state's amphibious character – part-agrarian, part-maritime – seems to have been perfectly suited for a coastal region sealed off by mountains from the agrarian society of Upper Burma, but connected by sea to the neighboring and commercially active Ganges and Irrawaddy deltas. Consider what happened when Arakanese fleets seized and looted Pegu in 1599. Apart from bringing back to Mrauk U a prestigious white elephant and making rhetorical claims of rightful succession to the Pegu kingdom, the Arakanese declined the challenge of assimilating an administratively complex state that was in fact larger than their own. Doing so would have drawn them too far into the agrarian world of Lower Burma, disrupting the delicate balance between land and sea they had already established for themselves. The Arakanese state was also a 'niche realm' in its pattern of military recruitment, using much of its sea-derived wealth to employ foreign mercenaries from all over Eurasia. These consisted of many hundreds of renegade Portuguese mariners, musketeers, and gunners, together with renegade Burmans, North Indians, and even Christian samurai driven from Japan by the early Tokugawa shoguns.

The active role played by Arakanese in the lucrative Bay of Bengal slave business – in which they served as procurers, masters, and traders – perhaps best highlights their ability to exploit a particular socio-economic niche. In addition to raiding Lower Bengal for slaves to work in their own textile industry – 80,000 of these were taken in 1644 alone (Van Galen) – the Arakanese also sold Bengali slaves to the Dutch East India Company, which then used them both to avoid paying local wage labor in their commercial factories (Dijk 1999) and to work its spice plantations in the East Indies. Indeed, regular slave-capturing raids made by Arakanese war-fleets into eastern and southern Bengal, notes Prakash, 'had turned Arakan into the largest supplier of this human cargo in the Bay of Bengal region' (Prakash). Successful as it was in exploiting the slave business, though, the Arakan state seems to have become fatally

dependent on this activity. When the rise of Mughal power deprived it of access to eastern Bengal in the 1660s, and when unacceptably high mortality rates among captured slaves cooled Dutch enthusiasm for using slave labor, the Arakan state underwent a steady decline.

Finally, the Arakan kingdom, sandwiched between Burmese states of the Irrawaddy and Bengali states of the lower Ganges, reveals a 'niche' character in its distinctive patterns of cultural patronage. The effect of these patterns was to connect Arakan simultaneously to Buddhist, Indic, and Islamicate civilizations. Coined by Marshall Hodgson, 'Islamicate' refers to an interregional, cosmopolitan culture that, transcending specifically Islamic beliefs or practices, embraced secularist, mainly Persian values and was cultivated by both Muslim and non-Muslim elites throughout South and Southeast Asia from about the thirteenth century on. It was in order to participate in that wider and culturally hegemonic world that Arakan's Buddhist kings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries adopted Perso-Arabic titles for themselves and employed Bengali Muslims as their chief ministers of state. They also patronized poets like Alaol and Daulat Qazi, who translated Persian or Hindi works of romantic literature into Bengali. It was for the purpose of connecting themselves with the larger Islamicate world, too, that we find Arakanese nobles depicted in monumental art wearing the same sort of conical caps (Persian: *kulah*) and upper body garment (Arabic: *qaba*) as those worn in contemporary Isfahan, Delhi, or Vijayanagara (Gutman).¹ Similarly, much Buddhist architecture produced in sixteenth century Mrauk U shares remarkable affinities with mosque architecture of the contemporary Bengal sultanate (Gutman).

Rulers in Arakan also legitimized themselves with reference to internationalist Indic and Buddhist norms. Thus Man Pa (1531-1533), who had the Islamic *kalima* engraved on coins struck in Chittagong (Bhattacharya) and styled himself 'Zabauk Shah,' also adopted the Sanskrit imperial title of *rajadhiraja*, 'king of kings,' and is represented in Mrauk U bas-reliefs as a *cakravartin*, or world-conqueror (Gutman; Leider). At the same time, he patronized the construction of a shrine for a Buddhist relic, a tooth brought to Arakan from Sri Lanka (Bhattacharya). And Fray Sebastião Manrique, who witnessed the coronation of Sirisudhammaraja, reports that for one of the rites of this ceremony water was brought to Mrauk U from the Ganges river (Manrique 1:77) This rite would have drawn on mythological associations between the Ganges and Indian imperial kingship dating to Mauryan times (321-181 BC).

Both epigraphic and artistic evidence, moreover, suggest Arakanese royal claims to be legitimate successors to the Candra dynasty of Bengali Buddhist kings (c. 825-1035) (Leider). Such claims would provide a deeper, historical reason for persistent Arakanese attempts at controlling eastern Bengal, even when such attempts appeared to outsiders as wanton pillaging. A possible Candra connection would also explain the Arakanese kings' rhetorical claims to sovereignty over eastern Bengal's *barah bhuyan*, the 'twelve chieftains' who stoutly resisted the imposition of Mughal authority in that region in the early seventeenth century. Here it is instructive to consider

¹ On the use of these garments in the 'Hindu' state of Vijayanagara, see Wagoner 1996.

the titles by which Sirisudhammaraja was addressed on the occasion of his coronation, witnessed by Manrique in 1635:

Emperor of Arracan, rightful brother and possessor of the White Elephant and Chanequas of the Tangu, and hence rightful successor in the direct line to the Empire of Pegu and Brama; Lord of the twelve Boiones of Bengal and of the twelve Kings ... Lord of the ebbing and flowing tides (Manrique 1:369).

Although the last of the 'twelve chieftains' of Bengal had in fact been assimilated into Mughal service some fifteen years earlier, and though the Arakanese had abandoned Pegu even before that, the titles used here clearly suggest how the king of this 'niche realm' placed himself in the political universe of his day. Noteworthy, too, is his claim to be lord 'of the ebbing and flowing tides,' emphasizing the kingdom's manifold dependence on the sea.

On several issues, however, contributors to this volume are not in full agreement. One of these is the conference organizers' use of 'Age of Commerce' – the period from the early fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries – to situate Coastal Burma in time. There seems a certain lack of enthusiasm for this phrase, which most contributors avoided altogether, substituting for it 'early modern.' Only Michael Aung-Thwin engaged in a discussion of 'Age of Commerce,' concluding that the phrase is problematic for several reasons. First, it suggests that this was the first and only time Lower Burma had ever experienced extensive trade, when at least three other 'ages' – one with Rome and China, one with Gupta India, and one with Cola South India – might share an equal claim to the designation. Second, the phrase is meaningless unless put in the context of the region's total economy, which above all includes its agrarian output. And third, one cannot properly evaluate the commercial significance of this particular age without quantifying the significance of the periods both before and after it, and this has not yet been done.

Evidence from other papers does suggest, however, a case for designating 15th-18th century Coastal Burma an 'Age of Commerce'. First, the maritime arrival of Europeans in this period seems to have stimulated the region's commerce in new ways. For one thing New World silver, imported from the late sixteenth century via the Philippines and India, replaced copper coinage and promoted monetization in the Burmese economy (Prakash). For another, Portuguese mercenaries often commanded the Arakanese vessels that raided coastal Bengal for captives, while Dutch *voc* officers purchased those slaves for personal service or plantation labor. A real commercial shift seems to have begun in the 1560s, with the emergence of a new, east-west pattern of maritime trade that linked Coastal Burma with Masulipatam to the west and with Aceh to the south-east (Subrahmanyam). Moreover, some interregional contacts that appeared in this age, though established for commercial reasons, had important non-commercial implications. For example Dutch officials, hoping to undermine the influence of their Portuguese rivals in Sri Lanka in the late seventeenth century, allowed Buddhist monks to travel on *voc* ships between Sri Lanka and Arakan. By serving in this way as intermediaries, the Dutch company both

facilitated and quickened religious contact between the two Buddhist realms. We even hear of the court at Kandy inquiring of the Dutch governor in Sri Lanka as to the nature of Buddhist practice in Arakan (Wagenaar 1999).

The issue of the style of religion practiced in Arakan raises important questions about cultural relations between interior and Coastal Burma. Pamela Gutman discerns three phases in Mrauk U's changing architectural styles: a formative period (1430-1531), when the city's monuments absorbed considerable influence from Upper Burma (namely, late Pagan); a middle phase (1540-1600), when the Arakanese capital, now a 'world city,' made vital connections with both Indic and Islamicate civilizations; and a late period (1600-1666), characterized by a return to the architectural style of the Irrawaddy region, this time that of Lower Burma (Gutman).² This last stage began immediately after Arakan's conquest of Pegu in 1599, suggesting that on that occasion more was brought back to Mrauk U than a white elephant. But Michael Charney's essay suggests that the importation of Irrawaddy styles of Buddhism did not commence for another two centuries, in 1784, when Arakan was conquered and annexed by a new Upper Burman empire. At this time the colossal bronze 'Mahamuni' image, located some forty miles northwest of Mrauk U and for long the principal emblem and protector of Arakanese Buddhism, was carried off to Mandalay as a trophy of war. In return, religious missions were sent from Upper Burma into Arakan to 'purify' the monastic order there – a process Charney calls the 'Irrawaddy-ization' of Arakanese Buddhism. After both conquests, then, religious culture flowed from the Irrawaddy to Arakan, and not the other way. Following their conquest of Pegu in 1599, the Arakanese appropriated aesthetic – and evidently only aesthetic – dimensions of Irrawaddy Buddhism. On the other hand Upper Burmans, following their conquest of Arakan in 1784, imposed a much broader spectrum of Upper Burman Buddhism on Arakan, including theology and monastic customs.

Two observations may serve to conclude these brief remarks. First, several contributors remark on the regrettable influence of nationalist historiography on the writing of Southeast Asian history, and in particular the anachronistic projection of the modern nation-state backward in time. The point is well taken. Yet it is also true that, precisely because Coastal Burma did not enter modern times as a unitary, sovereign nation-state and thus cannot be construed as having had any 'national' history, this region has been largely ignored in the scholarly literature. From this perspective, then, the appearance of this volume, focussed as it is on a geographical area rather than on a nation-state, marks a certain triumph over the more baneful aspects of nationalist historiography.

Finally, we might be able to embrace, a bit more enthusiastically than most authors here have done, the phrase 'Age of Commerce' as a way of characterizing Coastal Burma in the early modern period. A passage from the memoir of Sebastião Manrique makes it clear that if in the mid-seventeenth century the 'nation' was

² Catherine Raymond also notes that, beginning with the reign of Man Raja-kri (1593-1612), the religious architecture of Arakan grew much less like that of India and closer to the forms of the Irrawaddy delta (Raymond).

non-existent, interregional commerce reigned supreme, eclipsing an event even so patently political as a royal coronation. In 1635, during the elaborate festivities surrounding the coronation of Sirisudhammaraja, the Augustinian friar made the following observations:

The Court was full of men from various foreign countries whom the exemption from all duties on merchandise, granted in such times of festivity, had induced to assemble there. They came in numerous vessels loaded with every sort of rich merchandise and hailed, not merely from neighbouring countries, such as Bengala, Pegu, and Martaban, but also from the empire of Siam, known as Sornau, and the kingdoms of Champa and Camboja. Ships had also come from various parts of India, as from the kingdoms of Musalipatam, Negapatam, and the Maldiv islands, attracted to this duty-free market. Nor had ships failed to come from the rich islands of Sumatra, such as Greater and Lesser Java, Achem, Macassar, and Bima (Manrique 1:379).

In recent years scholars of South Asia have expended considerable ink debating the degree to which early modern kings ruled by 'ritual authority' or by something more tangible – namely, the stick. Manrique, however, seems to be telling us that many of the throngs attending Sirisudhammaraja's lavish coronation ceremonies had come neither to exchange gifts and honors, nor to be cowed by an awesome display of overwhelming power, but simply to cash in on the commercial bonanza afforded by a duty-free market. Without arguing that commerce began only with the Age of Commerce, which would be fatuous, one certainly sees how thoroughly interregional trade had, by Manrique's day, penetrated institutions that might otherwise be understood as primarily political. There may well be something to this idea of an Age of Commerce.

References

- Note that references without date refer to the original papers that were prepared for the colloquium in 1999 and, after revision, published in the present volume.
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