

Preface

This volume originates from the Academy Colloquium on 'Coastal Burma in the Age of Commerce' held in Amsterdam in October 1999 under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences (KNAW). Co-sponsors were the International Institute of Asian Studies (ILAS) and the Research School for Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS).

Although most of the chapters spring from the papers that were presented during the colloquium, many have been revised, following the colloquium's discussions or in response to our editorial comments. Some scholars prepared papers or made comments at the conference that could not be included in this book. We are indebted to the authors Sunait Chutintaranond, Wil Dijk, Jacques Ivanoff and Lodewijk Wageenaar, as well as to the discussants Cees Fasseur, Jan Heesterman, Ticia Rueb, Dirk Kolff, Femme Gaastra and Bhaswati Bhattacharya. We are particularly grateful to Richard Eaton who invited our invitation to reflect on the colloquium's overall outcome (see the final chapter).

The initiative for this colloquium was taken by Jos Gommans and Stephan van Galen of Leiden University. It was inspired by a certain frustration with the current rigid demarcation between South Asian and Southeast Asian historiography. Although earlier, similar feelings of dissatisfaction had led to a conference on the Bay of Bengal (in Delhi 1994), we felt that it would be worthwhile to attempt a more geographically restricted conference in which confrontation between scholars from various backgrounds could not be avoided any longer. Hence we were keen to invite both South Asianists and Southeast Asianists; both orientalist and historians; both francophone and anglophone scholars; both generalists and specialists.

That the chosen region turned out to be Coastal Burma was not a co-incidence. In fact, being situated at the open frontier between South and Southeast Asia, Coastal Burma epitomizes as it were the multi-cultural characteristics — in terms of language, religion and political organization — of the larger Bay-of-Bengal region. Earlier the same perception gave birth to Stephan van Galen's current research project on frontier and state-formation in early modern Arakan. But what really launched the colloquium was the sudden awareness that the last decade had produced a tremendous amount of new research on Coastal Burma. For example, it soon turned out that no less than three doctoral dissertations on early modern Arakan were either in preparation or had just been finished. As the scholars concerned became only recently aware of the situation — one other sad consequence of the field's fragmentation —

a conference on Coastal Burma would be a most suitable opportunity to bring these scholars together and to discuss their research in the light of current scholarly issues concerning trade and state-formation in the larger Bay of Bengal region.

To what extent, the colloquium achieved its bold goals? Did the colloquium really succeed in bridging the existing scholarly fault line between South and Southeast Asian studies and did it produce some fresh perspectives or new insights? Of course, here the reader should judge for himself, perhaps being helped by Richard Eaton's concise afterthoughts at the end of the volume. Nevertheless, as a kind of introduction to this volume, we should mention some of the main issues raised during the colloquium.

First of all, one may say that Coastal Burma gained some new co-ordinates on a much wider geographical map than before and on which modern, national and ethnic boundaries were far less prominently present. Of course, Coastal Burma as such is hardly ever seen as one geographical entity as it comprises from north to south three sub-regions (Arakan, Lower Burma and Tenasserim) that have each their own particular history. Most historians, looking at Burma's past from the point of view of its politically dominant centres, have merely seen them as parts of the periphery of a land-based state or empire. In his paper Michael Aung-Thwin supports the view that Lower Burma has rarely been more than a distant periphery of Upper Burma, the cradle of Burmese kingship and culture. Tenasserim's history is intimately woven into the conflictual relationship between Thailand and Burma and the region enjoyed a more ambiguous peripheral situation in regard to both realms. The kingdom of Arakan, lying on the eastern edge of Bengal, was an aggressive neighbor of the Burmese and the Mughals alike. Unsurprisingly, none of the authors attending the Amsterdam conference took a sweeping view of Burma's coasts as a whole, a perspective that would have implicitly suggested the existence of bonds within the maritime region. Being specialists in sensibly different areas of research, most speakers were consequently more or less concerned with just one of the three sub-regions although especially the Arakan papers appeared to stress what could be called a Bengal-Arakan continuum.

Nonetheless and despite the variety of their papers, most participants at the conference were treading a common ground and speaking a common language. The papers in this volume challenge the superficial perception of outlying, unruled or semi-autonomous areas which had little in common. Forming Burma's maritime frontier, Arakan, Tenasserim and Lower Burma shared challenges and opportunities as their ports were integrated into the networks of trade and cultural interaction of the Indian Ocean. Thus the idea of looking at the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal as a geographic and historic entity and as an object of research *per se* goes beyond the study of just local or peripheral autonomies. Indeed, from different perspectives the overall interest was focusing on cultural and political interaction, conflict and symbiosis, analyzed and interpreted with constant reference to the economic and political framework of expanding trade routes and cyclical change.

On one hand, studying the coastal lands as areas of challenging interaction steers clear of a reductionist view of looking at the coast mainly in terms of a purely

dependent situation. On the other hand, the considerable amount of recent primary research displayed in the papers ensured that viewing Burma from the ship's deck did not result in an exercise of merely rethinking Burmese history. The conference gave the floor to explorers into little or yet unknown land and generated fresh new looks that go beyond conventional approaches.

The pivotal concept of inner and outer frontiers emphasized by Jos Gommans at the outset of the conference was of immediate concern to all participants. Scholarship has usually drawn a strict parting line between South Asia and Southeast Asia. There seems to be a consensus that the conventional division is of little practical use when we try to understand specific conditions of interaction in the area. Arakan in the seventeenth century displays a contradictory situation of simultaneous political rivalry and cultural interaction with Bengal and Upper Burma. The exploration of the confines of South and Southeast Asia reveals in this case that frontiers are just as much dividing lines of differing religious and political orders as thresholds of interacting cultures linked in a wider socio-economic sphere.

Political expansion is a theme which underlies several papers that take a critical look at the earlier perception and interpretation of sources regarding Pagan, Sukhothai and Arakan. In his contribution on models of perception of early Thai sources, Barend Terwiel cautions against a simplistic interpretation of place names appearing in early epigraphic lists 'describing' the kingdom. Places located far away from the centre do not prove any kind of direct political domination. In his outline of Arakan's expansion into southeast Bengal, Jacques Leider's paper touches upon similar problems of bringing written Arakanese sources in accordance with a meaningful interpretation of a yet poorly known geographical and historical context. For Old Pagan's admittedly much better known history, Tilman Frasch's and Michael Aung-Thwin's papers offer contrasting views of Pagan's relations with its southern periphery. Contacts with Arakan existed, says Frasch with detailed reference to a meager epigraphic record, but one cannot ascertain the nature of that relationship. Aung-Thwin strongly contests the conventional view, defended here by Frasch, that while Pagan's suzerainty stretched down to Tenasserim and Lower Burma, Pagan's kings established their control over the Mon population whose political ascendancy at such an early period the American scholar flatly denies. Expansion can form a major part of the framework in which mutual contacts between cultures come under way. The same holds true for trade, but Michael Aung-Thwin is highly critical of fellow historians who have emphasized the economic significance of Lower Burma's trade for the Upper Burman monarchy. Though his argument minimizes the importance of the periphery for the centre, it does not pre-empt the debate on cultural interaction.

Arakan's prominent place at the conference was not only due to the fact that research into its hidden past is at last taking its due place in Burmese and Southeast Asian studies. At the heyday of its monarchy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its political and economic history points at a record of connections with the eastern and western shores of the Bay of Bengal as much as its integration into the trade network of the Indian Ocean. In the early seventeenth century, Arakan controlled stretches of coastal land in southeastern Bengal and Lower Burma. Portuguese traders, mercenaries and adventurers that had taken root on its soil became extremely

active and prospered in the shadow of Arakan's military campaigns going either north or south.

Om Prakash's study of Coastal Burma's integration into the inbound and outbound trade flows of the Indian ports of the Bay of Bengal illustrates how much the minor ports of the eastern Bay (minor in comparison with other more affluent Southeast Asian ports) benefited from the favorable circumstances of an age of commerce. The awareness of economic and political conditions that set Arakan apart from its neighbors emerges in the first part of Sanjay Subrahmanyam's paper. He wonders how we should conceptualize a hybrid kingdom like Arakan that lived on its prosperous rice production while trying to build an even greater fortune by welcoming both traders and mercenaries. Taking into account this particular development on the margins of two land-based empires and Arakan's own centralist ideology, Richard Eaton suggests the term of 'niche realm'.

Subrahmanyam further addresses the problems of a Dutch embassy at the court of Arakan, a subject that offers a close look at the kingdom's significant slave trade. The Dutch involvement in Arakan is also stressed by Cathérine Raymond's contribution to an analysis of Wouter Schouten's account of Arakan. Stephan van Galen's study of King Narapati's 1644 deportation of Chittagong weavers to the central plains of Arakan provides a rare piece of evidence of a failed economic policy at a time of inner political troubles. His paper especially focuses on the port of Chittagong, a cornerstone of Arakan's trade, and raises an interesting controversy on the beginning of Arakan's decline in the second half of the seventeenth century, taking issue with previous attempts of periodizing Arakanese history.

Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h's research on the Maritime Silk Road before the thirteenth century led him to conclude that sea connections between eastern and western Malayan ports were much more important than land roads crossing the Peninsula. He thinks that the greater significance of maritime liaisons is also valid regarding the Mergui-Tenasserim area. The analysis of Arakan's expansion towards Bengal and Lower Burma and its coastal trade generates similar conclusions. The Talak, Am and Taungkut mountain passes leading to Upper Burma were of marginal importance as long as there was no impediment to direct trade between India and the Lower Burma ports.

In spite of decades of slave raiding, piracy, invasions and open war, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw cultural and religious interaction between Arakan and Bengal on one hand, and Burma, on the other. Arakan's somewhat overlapping cultural frontiers inspired several papers, notably Swapna Bhattacharya's study of the impact of Bengal's culture on Arakan. She breaks new ground displaying a complex array of religious and cultural polymorphism that scholars have hitherto neglected. Moreover her political interpretation of the translation of Persian/Hindustani literature into Bengali at the court of Mrauk U, increases our perception of the anti-Mughal stance shared by the native Arakanese court and its Muslim officers.

Arakan's religious monuments are mostly Buddhist pagodas that have as yet been overlooked by Southeast Asian art historians. They bear testimony to the country's alternately receptive attitude towards the Muslim art of the Bengal sultanate and the Buddhist architecture of the Irrawaddy valley, but they do also display original

features that were locally inspired. Pamela Gutman's paper is the first attempt of a chronology of Mrauk U's Buddhist architecture from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century and it highlights several prominent *stupas*.

In a wider context, Michael Charney draws our attention to the Buddhist sangha reform movement led by the Arakanese monk Saramedha in the second half of the nineteenth century. From his monastery in Akyab, Saramedha set out to preach among the Chakma people of the northern Chittagong district. For Charney, the way Saramedha's Theravada Buddhist modernism is revealed in the available literature on its leader, illustrates the fact that cultural and religious influences which transgress intra-regional borders, are either ignored or differently interpreted by historiographers on each side of the frontier.

As ultimately none of the papers can be read in the narrow perspective of a strictly local context, this short review hints at some further common threads conveying a sense of unity of Coastal Burma. Burma's economic integration into the wider sphere of the Indian Ocean has been mainly emphasized with reference to its Lower Burma ports. Papers in this volume indicate that a better knowledge of the coasts and the life of its ports as a whole increases our understanding of Burma's place in the regional context. Openness, change and flexibility, so typical of ports and life at sea, characterize Coastal Burma as well, but they have received little attention in the reconstruction of Burma's past. The perception of the specific features of the maritime frontier could thus balance our reading of the mostly state-centred histories of Burma. Above all, it should remind us of the fact that even the more isolated, agrarian states of mainland Southeast Asia could only thrive if they could connect an expanding agrarian base to the rich, mobile resources of the maritime frontier, be it by trade, plunder or conquest. As variously brought out in many of the following chapters, the pre-modern state should not be seen as a closed agrarian entity with a centre and appropriate peripheries, but rather as an open, mandala-like network of fluid alliances and trade routes, or perhaps, as appears from the title of even the most powerful of Bengali kings, as a realm connected by 'a string of pearls'. It were these open networks which created what Subrahmanyam, following Braudel, called 'the collective destiny' of the Bay of Bengal. Obviously, in such a situation, the distinction between centre and periphery becomes blurred as both are situated on the same *limes* sprawling into that almost ever expanding world called the Indian Ocean.

Be it so, the life of ports, the structure of the peddling coastal trade, the multifarious activities of wandering monks and Muslim saints or the impact of the movement of people (traders, adventurers, mercenaries, artists, deportees, refugees etc.) still await further research. The interest raised by the Amsterdam conference may thus lead to a greater awareness of Coastal Burma's own profile and gradually make up for its ill-defined peripheral status. Hopefully, it will also stimulate scholars to situate Burma in the geographical context of the Bay of Bengal and enable them to bring in some fresh Indian Ocean air into the closed compartments of area studies.

A final word should be said about the editing process of this volume. As the spirit of the colloquium was one of transgressing national, disciplinary and linguistic boundaries, we decided to break down superfluous barriers raised by varying intricate

systems of transliteration. Thus dispensing with diacritics, the transliteration of foreign terms was standardized on the basis of their common usage or their pronunciation, always having a keen eye on keeping them identifiable to the specialist and the non-specialist alike. Obviously, with this aim in mind, a degree of subjectivity and inconsistency could not be avoided. Regarding the editing of the English, as non-native speaking English editors, we are heavily indebted to the kind and accurate assistance of Rosemary Robson. Needless to say that all the editing remains our own responsibility.