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King Maṅḥ Co Mvan's Exile in Bengal: Legend, History, and Context

Jacques P. Leider and Kyaw Minn Htin

An outline of the rule of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan can be sketched as follows. He became king in 1404, ruled for two years, when a Burmese invasion forced him to abandon the throne and flee into exile to the "West." This term would imply a place somewhere in Bengal or India. The exile lasted for about twenty years, much less according to some sources. The king regained his throne thanks to military backing from a Western, supposedly Indian ruler and came back to Launggrak (Loṅḥ krak) around 1428 and founded Mrauk U in *sakkarāj* 792 (1430 CE), a year all the sources agree upon.

In an article published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1844, Arthur P. Phayre, a British governor of the province of Arakan and the first Western historian of the old kingdom, retold the story of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan following a chronicle written at Phayre's initiative by Ṅa Mañ, "one of the most learned among the literati of his country."[1] In Ṅa Mañ's version, the story contains many details that would suggest the legendary character of the narrative. Unfortunately, the Ṅa Mañ chronicle has been neither edited nor even printed, making its textual contents still largely unknown.[2] By omitting many details and selecting only those parts of

1 A.P. Phayre, "On the History of Arakan," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1 (1844): 23–52.

2 Ṅa Mañ chronicle. British Library OR 3465 A. All the subsequent quotations are found in the relevant section on King Maṅḥ Co Mvan, f°239–52.

the story that made historical sense to him, Phayre provided a more rational account. It could be summarized as follows.

The dethroned king fled to the west, to the land of the "Thu-ra-tan king" where he was received "with distinction." But the "Thu-ra-tan" ruler "being engaged in wars, could not afford him any assistance." The story goes on to tell us that the king in exile helped the ruler to defeat an attack by the king of Delhi, thanks to several cunning devices and taught the king's subjects the art of entrapping wild elephants. Within this sub-narrative, Phayre left out an episode that explains how the "Thu-ra-tan king" conquered Delhi: "Out of gratitude for these services, the king determined to assist the exiled prince in the recovery of his kingdom."[3]

In the next paragraph, Phayre follows up with a description of the tributary relationship between Bengal and Arakan that followed, presumably, the return of the king on the throne:

> The restored king, however, was forced to submit to the degradation of being tributary to the king of Thu-ra-tan, and from his time the coins of the Arakan kings bore on the reverse, their names and titles in the Persian character; this custom was probably made obligatory upon them as vassals, but they afterwards continued it when they had recovered their independence, and ruled the country as far as the Brahmaputra river.[4]

This statement on the political relations between Arakan and Bengal, presumed to be true for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was not an interpretation of Phayre. It can be traced in several Arakanese sources that deal explicitly with the reign of the founder of Mrauk U. The truth of this description

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3 Phayre, "On the History of Arakan," 46. The story of the re-conquest of the Arakanese capital will be reviewed below.

4 Phayre, "On the history of the Arakan," 46. For more on coins, see Arthur P. Phayre, "The Coins of Arakan: The Historical Coins," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 15 (1846): 232–7. References to the coins are also found in manuscripts that belong to the group of chronicle texts associated with the *Dhaññavatī areḥ tō puṁ*.

has never been seriously put into doubt, because anyone familiar with Arakanese history knows about the existence of coins that emulate the model of the Bengal sultans and later seventeenth-century trilingual coins with royal titles. There is thus little doubt about the influence of Bengal minting on Arakanese coins.[5] Still, the connection between a tributary relationship and the minting of coins is merely an interpretation and not the causal link it pretends to be. There is actually no historical evidence for a political dependence of Arakan on Bengal in the early fifteenth century, there are no extant early fifteenth-century Arakanese coins, and there is no proof of a "custom" for Arakanese kings to symbolically express their subjugation to Bengal. Moreover, no date or event is assigned to the recovery of "independence." In conclusion, the embedding of the exile story in a supposedly historical context gives authority to the exile story. But once this context is debunked as possibly later information or a device of the chronicler to construct a particular reading of history, the king's exile story loses at least some, if not all, of its credibility.

Not surprisingly, the story of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan's exile in Bengal and its assumed political consequences are one of the best-known and most quoted episodes of Arakanese history. It has also provided a foundational setting to explain the arrival and settlement of Muslims in Arakan at the time of the re-conquest of the kingdom. Certain authors date the arrival of Islam in Arakan even earlier to the eighth century of the Common Era, but the exile story is unrivalled in its colorful details and associated episodes of mosque building and Muslim settlements. There is in fact neither hard archaeological or epigraphic evidence nor any compelling literary evidence for Muslim settlements in Arakan in the early fifteenth century. On the other hand, trade connections along the coast make a Muslim presence more likely. Chittagong figures prominently as a cosmopolitan, Muslim-dominated trade port in the northeast Bay of Bengal since that time. Nonetheless, Arakan's location at the periphery of the flour-

5 See Thibaut d'Hubert's article in this volume.

ishing sultanate of Bengal may have stimulated the historical imagination, but the idea of a cultural impact or political links gains little weight from the dubious exile story.

This article argues that the exile story itself has no historical foundation and offers a comparative analysis of several Arakanese narratives dealing with the reign of the king, in particular with the episode of the "Bengal" exile. For most Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan familiar with Arakanese history, this story is considered as a historical fact, because they know the story through the retellings by the two most important British colonial historians of Burma, A.P. Phayre and G.E. Harvey, whose writings have enjoyed eminent authority for decades until today. This article will also point to notable differences that exist between the narratives, altogether weakening the historicity of the exile account.

On the other hand, this article does not seek to discredit the idea that the founder of Mrauk U may have gone into exile for a certain number of years after being dethroned. It leaves the question open, as this is rather a matter of speculation due to a number of contradictions in the historiography. A tentative argument will be put forward to a hitherto unexplored path of enquiry that relates to the role of the Mon kingdom of Pegu in the political affairs of early fifteenth-century Arakanese kingdom.

One focus of the investigation lies in recurrent themes and literary devices that permeate the various narratives and multi-layered connections. We will also briefly look at the writing process through which the basic narrative was amplified and embellished. The aim is a critical approach of the exile story in particular and the king's biography in general, by reviewing both within the context of the politically unstable kingdom before 1430.

Sources for the Study of the Exile Narrative

There are both primary and secondary texts that need to be examined to study the stories and legends surrounding the reign of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan. The present study has tried to

include as many sources as possible, but it does not pretend to be comprehensive. With regard to our thesis, namely, that the exile story is a legend rather than a historically ascertainable fact, some of these sources are more important than others. One of the authors (Jacques Leider) had earlier followed a line of scholars discussing the identity of the sultan of Bengal at whose capital the Arakanese king took refuge. If the exile itself is no more a matter of historical investigation, such speculations become obviously redundant and do not need to be refuted here. Nonetheless some of these works will still appear in the list of references, because they contain valuable information regarding the Muslim and Bengali impact on Arakan during the early modern period.

The main sources, in Arakanese, Burmese, or English, are briefly presented below while the full references may be found in the bibliography. Besides the sources listed here, we have been looking at the representation of the king's rule in a number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arakanese manuscripts that vary in length and often cover only certain periods of Arakanese history. With the exception of the *Aṅḥ Cok* chronicle that exists in a short and a long version, they will not be individually listed here.

No serious attempt has yet been made to describe the Arakanese historiographical material from the point of view of the genealogy of its contents. It would be a daunting task because of the composite nature of most manuscripts, their intertextuality, their connections, and the unresolved problem of explaining incompatible chronologies. Dealing with a single important reign reduces the complexity and helps the researcher to focus on points of comparison. With regard to our interest in the exile episode and independently from any consideration of facticity, chronicle traditions or individual texts can be differentiated by the name that they use for the founder of Mrauk U, the geographical denotation of the place of his exile, and the term used to refer to the king who put Maṅḥ Co Mvan back on the throne. Let us first note that there are texts that do not contain a single word on the exile story. Among the majority of texts that acknowledge an exile

episode, there are historiographic texts that call the king Nara Mit Lha when he becomes king and call him Maṅḥ Co Mvan only when he reconquers his throne upon his return from exile. Other texts know him only as Nara Mit Lha while *Ṅa Mañ rājavaṅ* or *Aṅḥ Cok rājavaṅ* designate him only by the name of Maṅḥ Co Mvan. None of these names or titles and their variants have been explained.

These texts can also be differentiated by the way the place of exile is referred to. No text refers to Bengal or its sultan's capital by their names. The most common expression to refer to Bengal and India is *anok*, "west," a term that allows for many interpretations. It is occasionally combined with *prañ*, "country," to refer to the country in the west. The latter term can also be found in combination with *Sūratanḥ maṅḥ*, "the country of *Sūratanḥ* king," or *kulāḥ*, the "foreign" or "Indian" country. Another standard and somewhat clearer geographical expression for Bengal in Arakanese sources is *kulāḥ 12 mrui.* or *kulāḥ bhaṅgā 12 mrui.*. The expression refers to a political constellation in late sixteenth-century Bengal that prevailed until 1613 when twelve Hindu and Muslim lords (*bharo bhuiyas*) in East and Southeast Bengal successfully resisted the Mughal conquest. The term *bhaṅgā* may appear in garbled form as *pha ṅā* or *paṅ kā*. A rich variety of designations co-exist in these texts for the lord who supposedly enabled the exiled king to regain the throne. Besides the *Sūratanḥ Maṅḥ* of Ṅa Mañ, we also find *pāchā maṅḥ, pāchā maṅḥ krīḥ* and *kulāḥ pāchā maṅḥ*, as well as a combination of both, such as *kulāḥ maṅḥ Sūratanḥ.*

The starting point of this investigation is the aforementioned Arakanese chronicle that contains the most elaborate account of the exile story together with its most popular retelling in English.

- Ṅa Mañ's chronicle (*rājavaṅ*) was written about 1842. Arthur Phayre's personal copy, a paper manuscript, is kept at the British Library.[6]

6 Zaw Lynn Aung, "Study of A Rakhine Manuscript Deposited in the British Library," *Suvannabhumi* 12 (2013): 29–39.

- Arthur P. Phayre's selective retelling of Ṅa Mañ's chronicle account is found in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* as indicated above.

The main alternate, but much shorter, account is found in a family of similar texts that we refer to collectively as the *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* tradition.

- The *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* is essentially a compilation of "wise minister speeches" attributed to a Burmese monk in the south of Arakan after the Burmese conquest at the end of the eighteenth century. This compilation's historical framework provides summary accounts of particular reigns, but suffers from an erroneous and distorted chronology. It calls the king only by the name Nara Mit Lha (Narameikhla).[7]
- G.E. Harvey's paragraph on the exiled king is partly based on the *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tōpuṁ.* It is found in Harvey's *History of Burma,* published in 1925 and remained for several decades the standard authority on Burmese history.[8] It is no longer.
- In 1931, the monk Candamālālaṅkāra published the *New Chronicle of Arakan (Rakhuiṅ rājavaṅ sac),* a compilation of Arakanese chronicle narratives. This work is extremely important because it contains side-by-side narratives taken from the Ṅa Mañ chronicle, the *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* and the "old chronicle." Candamālālaṅkāra's reading of Ṅa Mañ's account on

7 An early print of *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* was Kawisarābhisuripawāra, *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* (Rangoon: Burmah Herald Steam Press, 1881). It was later re-edited in a volume containing various *areḥ tō puṁ, Mranmā maṅḥ areḥ tōpum* (Rangoon, 1967), 10–139. Palm-leaf manuscript copies that contain parts of this chronicle are relatively common in comparison with other kinds of Arakanese historiography. An edited version of such an incomplete text is, for example, Maung Paw Tun, *Dhañña̍vatī rājavaṅ sac* (Akyab, 1922). A complete edition of the royal minister's discourses is found in *Mahā paññā kyō lhyok thumḥ* (Rangoon: Haṁsāvatī, 1964).

8 G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), 139.

the king is selective and introduces some noteworthy changes.[9]

- Tha Htun Aung's *Rakhuiṅ Mahārājavaṅ tō krīḥ* is based on a work that is not known through manuscript copies.[10] It is clearly a work that was modified and partially rewritten at the time of its publication. Its contents are linked to a chronicle in forty-eight paragraphs linked to a minister called Vimala.
- Another undated Arakanese chronicle that exists in manuscripts of various lengths is the *Aṅḥ cok* chronicle. Unlike Candamālālaṅkāra's work or the *Dhaññavatī areḥ tō puṁ*, it has not been updated to a standard Burmese

9 In the 1920s, the Arakanese monk Candamālalaṅkāra compiled a "chronicle" that was based on the tradition of previous Arakanese historiographies (Ashin Candamālalaṅkāra, *Rakhuiṅ rājavaṅ sac*, 2 vols, Mandalay, Hamsawati-pitakat, 1931–32). It brought together two textual lineages that can be traced throughout a variety of nineteenth-century manuscripts, one that is linked to historical content found in various versions of the *Dhaññavatī areḥ tō puṁ* (ibid., vol. 2, 15–20) and another that may be identified with the Ṅa Mañ chronicle (ibid., vol. 2, 1–11). He also refers to a manuscript tradition called the "Old Chronicle" whose identity remains elusive and to individual texts containing historical material. Candamālalaṅkāra selected, quoted, revised, rewrote, adapted, and commented on these texts, but only a comparative reading with other text editions or manuscripts versions could clearly show his own input. Placing partly incompatible accounts relating to the early fifteenth century side by side, Candamālalaṅkāra tried to streamline and rationalize these accounts while retelling them. He followed the essence of Ṅa Mañ's narrative, but comparing it with other sources at hand, he changed proper names and dates and inserted a number of details to amend what he probably perceived as a lack of clarity in Ṅa Mañ's narrative. This is not dissimilar from other nineteenth-century manuscript chronicles that also went through a process of updating while being copied or rewritten. Examples are the identification of King Maṅḥ Swe as Maṅ Khoṅ of Ava; of "Pagan country" as Ava; of Naramala, a name given by some texts to King Manḥ Co Mvan's brother as "Maṅḥ Kharī-Ali Khaṅ," the name of Maṅḥ Co Mvan's successor commonly considered to have been his brother. The first Burmese governor of Arakan following the invasion that led to the departure of Maṅḥ Co Mvan is referred to as governor of Kamit by Ṅa Mañ but identified as Nōrathā, the governor of Kalemyo, by Candamālalaṅkāra.

10 Tha Htun Aung, *Rakhuiṅ Maharājavaṅ tō krīḥ* (Sittway, 1927).

language form and warrants much further research as has hitherto been possible. Like the *Rakhuiṅ Mahārājavaṅ tō krīḥ,* the *Aṅḥ Cok rājavaṅ* could probably be dated to the mid-eighteenth century and linked to an elite of court writers.[11]

Ṅa Mañ did not create the legend that mutated into a meaningful historical narrative adaptable to various contexts in the hands of British colonial historians. His account is linked to earlier representations that we will refer to as precursor narratives. These are found in the following two texts:

- The *Maṅḥ Rāja krīḥ cā tamḥ* is a royal manual written for Arakan's King Maṅḥ Rājā krīḥ in the early seventeenth century. It contains a summary account of court traditions and dynastic history. The text has not yet been edited and remains largely unknown in Myanmar. A single manuscript copy of the text is kept at the National Library. The text contains historical updates until the late eighteenth century when the present manuscript was most probably copied.[12]
- Historical information on Arakan was collected by Thomas Campbell Robertson, a British judge, around 1823 and 1824, at the time when the East India Company prepared its troops to invade the province. In 1828, Charles Paton reproduced a dynastic account of Arakan based on Robertson's material. The transliteration of indigenous names shows that the informants were probably local Muslims.[13]

11 *Aṅḥ cok rājavaṅ*, ms. copied February 8, 1860, private collection Sittway.
12 *Maṅḥ Rāja krīḥ cā tamḥ,* ms., National Library of Myanmar, NL 1537.
13 Charles Paton, "Historical and Statistical Sketch of Arakan," *Asiatick Researches* 16 (1828): 353–81.

One may note that the limited information about the king in the above-mentioned *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* contains elements of the narrative as it existed before Ṅa Mañ.

Contemporary Muslim interpretations depend heavily on Ba Tha (Md. A. Tahir), considered to be the father of Rohingya historiography. In his *History* published in 1963, he amplified and embellished the narrative that became the groundwork for later Muslim writers. While they largely diverge in their perceptions of the Muslim presence in Arakan, neither Buddhist nor Muslim writers have ever seriously questioned the historical character of the exile story.[14]

Ṅa Mañ's Exile Account

The Ṅa Mañ chronicle is an attempt to cover Arakan's history from its mythological origins down to the arrival of the British. In comparison with other Arakanese historical texts, it comes closest to the tradition of Burmese court chronicles focusing on the succession of royal dynasties. The late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries were periods of political instability in Arakan with the kings of Ava and Pegu interfering in court successions. Most sources date the arrival to power of the king, known as Nara Mit Lha or Maṅḥ Co Mvan, to 1404, 1406, or even somewhat later. The historical narratives suggest that he was overbearing, morally corrupt, and lacking due respect for the local elite. This behavior was allegedly the cause of his downfall as he had no allies to defend him when challenged by troops sent by the king of Ava.[15] Ṅa Mañ says that he fled to the west with some close relatives, trying to escape the governor of Chittagong who threatened to take away his wife, and headed for a "land where a king resided." The chronicler says that this was the land of the king of *Suratanḥ*, at whose court he was well-

14 Ba Tha, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma* (Chittagong: The Institute of Arakan Studies, 1999) (English translation) [1st ed. 1963 in Burmese].

15 Maṅḥ Co Mvan's decadent behavior became a standard reference for royal depravity in the *Maṅḥ rājā krīḥ cā tamḥ*.

received and treated like the ruler's own son.[16] We are told that he was going to stay there for a long time, as the ruler had no available soldiers to intervene in his favor. The implication is that the king had not fled into exile to abstain from politics, but to raise troops to regain his throne. According to Ṅa Mañ, the *Suratanḥ* king faced an invasion by the Delhi king, who came with "elephants, horses, chariots and foot soldiers as well as dogs big like cows." Maṅḥ Co Mvan saw his stepfather and his people terrorized and said, "Father great king, let me do my duty. I will get the better of those who besiege us." So the king promised Maṅḥ Co Mvan that if he would triumph over the king's enemies, he would provide him with troops to retake his throne. Maṅḥ Co Mvan instructed the soldiers to dig holes and cover them with straw and earth so that the elephants and horses of the invaders fell to their death on iron spikes laid out at the bottom of the traps. The colossal dogs were overcome with pieces of meat that contained metallic hooks. Having successfully resisted the invaders, the *Suratanḥ* king pursued them back to Delhi, but dense bamboo forests prevented an attack of the city. Maṅḥ Co Mvan asked for a huge amount of gold coins to get rid of the forest. The *Suratanḥ* king immediately complied with the request and let his troops retreat. Maṅḥ Co Mvan spread the coins among the bamboo groves and soon the Delhi people swarmed out of the city and cut down the bamboo so as to collect the coins. In a short while, the *Suratanḥ* king had his troops return and conquer Delhi. As he found the facticity of Ṅa Mañ's story apparently lacking, Phayre left it out of his retelling. Interestingly, this episode of the conquest of the fortified city (in Ṅa Mañ's account, Delhi) has some regional parallels. Similar stories are found in Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia, and may have Chinese origins.[17]

16 Phayre, *On the History of Arakan,* 44–6. The transliteration of this king's name or title follows the manuscript version of Phayre's copy of Ṅa Mañ. Variants of *Suratanḥ* found in other texts are *Sūratan* and *Suratan.*

17 For Cambodia, see D. Chandler, "The Preah Ko Preah Kaev Legend," in *History of Cambodia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2007), 101; for Laos, see Michel Lorrillard, "Les chroniques royales du Laos—Essai d'une

Ṅa Mañ thus transformed the discredited king in exile into a local hero. In the third and last episode, readers are told that Maṅḥ Co Mvan taught the subjects of his royal protector how to catch and train elephants. After all these demonstrations of astuteness, the *Suratanḥ* king praised him, arranged troops to reconquer the throne of Arakan, and bid him farewell with the words, "My country and my son's country should be like one country." This happened allegedly nineteen years and seven months after the king went into exile. Depending on variant dates of the early reign, this would have taken place somewhere between 1426 and 1428.

The story goes on to tell us that Ulu Khaṅ (often transcribed as Wali Khan in English texts), the commander who led the troops, took power in Arakan, but did not hand it over to Maṅḥ Co Mvan. Ulu Khaṅ was compelled to cede power to a local strongman who promised the commander his beautiful daughter while Maṅḥ Co Mvan was thrown into prison. Explanations vary on how he was set free. Ṅa Mañ says that local people took him out of prison. Candamālālaṅkāra, who ignores the role given by Ṅa Mañ to the local strongman, states that it was the king's younger brother Maṅḥ Kharī who released him from prison. Phayre cuts short this part of the story and says that "he escaped and fled to Bengal." The betrayal upset the *Suratanḥ* king and he appointed two ministers, Dān Pā Cū and Pan Pā Cū, and a military commander, Chatyā Khat, to lead troops to install Maṅḥ Co Mvan on the throne and put the traitor to death. Ṅa Mañ goes on to describe in graphic detail the severe punishment meted out to Ulu Khaṅ: he was beheaded, his head was boiled in oil, and his skin was flayed and dried. While the chronicler repeats this description word by word at the moment of its execution, Candamālālaṅkāra reports the procedure only in brief while

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chronologie des règnes des souverains lao (1316–1887)" (PhD diss., EPHE, 1995), 52–5 ("La prise de Vientiane"); Daniel Perret, "La formation d'un paysage ethnique. Batak et Malais de Sumatra nord-est" (Paris: EFEO, 1995), 105–6, conflict between the sultan of Aceh and Sultan Sulaiman of Deli Tua.

Phayre politely spares his readers any details ("suffered the fate his crime deserved").

The record of the events that took place in Arakan while the king was in exile forms a second, parallel narrative. It tells about successive Burmese and Mon interventions and gives the names of the governors put in place by Ava or Pegu. The chronicler tells us that these place-holders were unable to control more than the vicinity of the capital where they were entrenched with their garrisons.

Phayre's Rephrasing of Ṅa Mañ's Exile Account

Phayre considered the exile story as encapsulating historical facts and tried to explain and interpret it in a way to produce a rational historical account matching the regional geography. Ṅa Mañ did not use the name "Bengal," but it is clear from the context that Phayre understood Ṅa Mañ's term "West" as meaning "Bengal" so that the king of Suratanḥ had to be identified as the "sultan of Bengal" and his unnamed capital as Gauda/Gaur. Other Arakanese writers shared this interpretation and, as has been stated above, some pre-twentieth-century texts use traditional terms such as *kulāḥ 12 mrui.* to imply that it was Bengal, or at least a part of it. Phayre reproduced key parts of the story as told by Ṅa Mañ in a rather factual style and did not try to interpret the identity of the Suratanḥ king himself. Still he questioned the identity of the "Delhi king" of the story, saying that it could "mean any king between Bengal and Delhi, probably the king of Juanpur" [*read:* Jaunpur]. He further commented that if Maṅḥ Saw Mvan had arrived in 1407, following Timur's invasion of North India, the "Dehli [sic] sovereign was not in a condition to attack Bengal."[18]

Since Phayre's retelling, the story of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan's exile in Bengal has been received as an authentic piece of history. Buddhists, Muslim, and British writers alike accepted

18 Phayre, *On the History of Arakan,* 45.

it, and its veracity was not doubted. In summarized forms, it has found its way into the tourist guidebooks that provide introductions to Mrauk U's architectural sites. It will be shown in a following section that it has also become, more importantly, an essential element in a peculiar Muslim retelling of Arakanese history that serves ideological needs to bolster claims of Muslim origins in Arakan.

There is no factual basis for a political dependence of Arakan on Bengal; no trace of the payment of taxes either in Bengali or Arakanese sources; and no inscriptions, appointments of tax officers, or exchanges of missions that would provide any hint to political relations. Still, the belief of writers during the colonial period that Arakan became a "vassal" of Bengal is not difficult to explain. India was generally seen as the main civilizing force in the emergence of Southeast Asian states. The extrapolation of this basic assumption became understandably popular among South Asian authors and Bengal was seen as a place from where civilization would have been exported to Arakan. Such wide-ranging interpretations also prevailed among the British elite in British Burma. For example, Maurice Collis, a well-known and prolific author, strongly emphasized this cultural-cum-political influence in an article written in 1925, and his views have apparently held sway until long after independence.[19]

Interpretations include the idea that there was demographic and cultural impact as the sultan's troops supposedly settled in Mrauk U. The construction of the now destroyed Santikan mosque would have been initiated by those troops. Drawing on these uncertain claims of cultural hegemony, settlements and religious architecture, twentieth-century Muslim authors from Arakan have tried to reconstruct Arakanese history itself as the history of an Islamic sultanate, rather than a Buddhist kingdom. It is not the dearth of sources,

19 Maurice Collis, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay (A Study of Coinage and Foreign Relations)," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 15 (1925): 34–52. Collis' paper was reprinted in the *Burma Research Society Fiftieth Anniversary Publication* in 1960.

but rather the lack of critical studies on Arakanese history that have been an obstacle to such extravagance. On the other hand, there is no reason to discard the argument of a Muslim presence in Arakan during the fifteenth century. This is not only likely but underscored by the existence of Muslim-style titles of several kings, a surviving Persian inscription from 1495 in Mrauk U, and multiple references in Arakanese chronicles to contacts and rivalries with Chittagong. It is not the nature of the body politic that has been misunderstood in Arakan, as sometimes suggested, but rather the way that, in the *longue durée,* Muslim roles and phenomena of Islamicization have been neglected in the presentations of Arakan's past.

The rationalized and simplified reading of the chronicle account and the pro-Islamicization stance flow together in the succinct, straightforward account found in G.E. Harvey's *History of Burma* that peremptorily states:

> Narameikhla 1404–34, when ousted in 1404 by the Burmese, fled to Bengal, was well received by the king of Gaur and served him with distinction in the field. After many years in exile, he was given a levy from Gaur to regain his throne, and although the Mahomedan commander at first betrayed and imprisoned him in Arakan, he was ultimately reinstated in 1430. His Mahomedan followers built the Sandihkan mosque at Mrohaung ...[20]

In conclusion, one may say that the story of the king's exile in Arakan gained authority in Western and Burmese eyes because it was successfully rationalized. It kept its authority as it became by itself a relevant story for particular audiences and, one may even say, a cornerstone of certain interpretations of Arakanese history. In the end it could not be wrong because it was so useful; expressing doubt about it became ever more difficult. Still, the story was also successful because

20 Harvey, *History of Burma,* 139. We are unable to say from where Harvey obtained the information on the Santikan mosque foundation as it is found nowhere in the chronicles.

it was embedded in a narrative structure that explained Arakan's political instability in the early fifteenth century as a cyclical pattern triggered by outside political interventions.

Precursor Narratives of the Exile Story

The most expedient way to do away with the supposed historical character of the exile story is a close look at the versions that we find before the nineteenth century. In the shortest version of the precursor narrative, the chronicler simply tells us that the king went and obtained military support to gain back power.[21] Building on this statement, another generation of authors then stated that Maṅḥ Co Mvan had fled to the court of Delhi whose ruler they variously call "king of Dīlī," "Rum pashya," or "king of Hindustan." This version is also found in the earliest English-language record of Arakanese history, the "Historical and Statistical Sketch of Aracan," published by Charles Paton in the *Asiatick Researches* of 1828. No mention is made of Bengal or an extended stay at the sultan's court. We are told that Maṅḥ Co Mvan went straight to the court of the "King of Hindustan" at Delhi where he taught the people how to tame elephants and obtained the military support he needed to reconquer the throne.[22]

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21 Printed and manuscript versions of the *Dhañña̍vatī areḥ tō puṁ* as earlier mentioned; Tha Htun Aung, *Rakhuiṅ Maharājavaṅ tō krīḥ*; U Pandi, *Dhañña̍vatī rājavaṅ sac*. The dates in these three texts are literally a mess and cannot be reconciled with the much more correct timeline in Ña Mañ.

22 Following a Burmese invasion, Manḥ Co Mvan (called Júmúwaí in Paton's historical account) proves unable to resist the invaders, leaves Arakan and takes refuge with the King of Hindustan. "Júmúwaí having ingratiated himself with the King of Hindustan, by teaching his people the proper way to catch wild elephants, made bold to solicit his aid to recovering the throne of Arakan. The King sent one of his ministers, by name of Walí Khan, with an army for that purpose, and he succeeded in driving the Burmese out of the kingdom; but, instead of placing Júmúwa [sic] upon the throne, he threw him into prison, and usurped the government himself. Klíkang, Júmúwai's brother managed to bribe the officer, in whose custody he was, and they both fled to the King of Hindustan, who, on hearing what had occurred, sent for Sadík Khan, the son of Walí Khan, and ordered him

Doubts about this story linking Arakan's dethroned king to the faraway court of Delhi may have appeared with the spread of more accurate historical knowledge about India and political relations between South and Southeast Asia in the early stages of British rule. The connection between a mighty lord in North India and an obscure local chief from a jungly place in the northeast Bay of Bengal may then have seemed as unlikely to Ṅa Mañ as it seems to us.

The oldest source of the exile narrative is arguably the *Maṅḥ Rājakrīḥ Cātamḥ* that dates back to 1602. Nonetheless, not all the descriptions in this historical text go back to the seventeenth century, as the anonymous writers who copied the text and extended the record down to their time, most likely inserted new parts down to the late eighteenth century.

Following the *Maṅḥ Rājakrīḥ Cātamḥ*, Maṅḥ Co Mvan returns from Delhi to Arakan with the troops of the infamous Ulu Khaṅ. Imprisoned by the general, he is set free by his brother, goes back to Delhi, and finally regains his palace thanks to Chatta-rā-sat, identified as the son of Ulu Khaṅ.[23] Hindustan, perhaps even more than Bengal, endowed the (real or imagined) exile with flair and prestige. The precursor narrative sounds a tragic note with Ulu Khaṅ's son put in charge of handing over the throne to Maṅḥ Co Mvan, but at the same time summoned to execute his own father.

Early Fifteenth-Century Arakanese and the Conditions of Political Instability

Arakanese sources that narrate dynastic and political events of the fifteenth century are most likely accounts that were not

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to proceed in company with two of his ministers Jú Baba, and Daím Baba, with strict injunctions to replace Júmúwai on the throne; and put his own father to death. The King's orders were duly obeyed, Júmúwai was reinstated, and Walí Khan decapitated." Paton, "Historical and Statistical Sketch of Arakan," 361–2.

23 *Maṅḥ rāja krīḥ cā tamḥ*, f° kāḥ (r°) These characters are the indication of the folio according to the Pali letters ordering system; r° is an abbreviation for "recto."

written before the early seventeenth century. It is largely impossible to resolve disparities that exist in various sources concerning the successions of kings before 1430. Even for the century up to 1530, the dated succession of kings cannot be ascertained, as there are no inscriptions or alternate sources that would help us to do so. These later chronicles and annals suggest that in the early fifteenth century, Arakan was a plaything of its powerful neighbors, Ava (Upper Myanmar) and Pegu (Lower Myanmar). The hegemonic claims over Arakan by either of the two kingdoms are nowhere expressly stated as part of their political objectives. Still, it is clear that Pegu wanted to extend its control along the northwestern littoral of the Bay of Bengal with the help of its fleets, and Ava wanted to have a say in the affairs of the court of Laung-grak. In the terminology of the chroniclers, this vying for influence and power is presented as an alternation of military-supported intrusions from Ava and Pegu that took place because requests for military intervention had been made by political contenders in Arakan. To a certain extent, the rivalry for the control of Arakan may not have been more than a matter of prestige, a game of tactics rather than a territorial strategy. Burmese or Mon chronicles do not refer to Arakan as an important political or military target. The Arakanese chroniclers probably speak truth when they state that, following these Mon and Burmese intrusions, the invaders controlled the capital city but were helpless to administrate the surrounding country. The general picture of political instability in the early fifteenth century would also convey the impression that the territorial unity of Arakan as a local kingdom was still largely in the making.

While most Arakanese chronicles seem to suggest a major role for Ava in the early fifteenth century, a contrary argument can be made in favor of Pegu's predominant role. There is a single undated Arakanese inscription that fits within the time frame of King Maṅḥ Co Mvan's reign. It throws some light on the political conditions in Arakan but still leaves a lot of space for interpretations. The Parein Ahson Taung inscription (A. 4 of the standard list of Arakanese inscrip-

tions) states that a "great ruler of Arakan" made an oath to his elder brother Rājādhirac "not to plan his death" or his "destruction." As there is no name and no date, one does not know who the great ruler was and at what time he made this oath. But Arakan's political context makes it very likely that the "elder brother Rājādhirac" referred to in the inscription can be identified as King Rājādhiraj of Pegu (1385–1423). The oath can thus be interpreted as an act of submission of an Arakanese lord who saw himself as the ruler of the country but had to submit to the Mon king. The inscription also confirms Arakanese narratives, such as the *Maṅḥ Rāja krīḥ cā tamḥ*, that point to an extended period of Mon hegemony over Arakan in the early fifteenth century. U Pandi's incomplete chronicle, which belongs to the *Dhañña̱vatī areḥ tō puṁ* tradition, states that Nara Mit Lha was put on the throne by the Mon king Rājādhiraj. This information is also found in U Kala's Burmese chronicle.[24]

Another inscription, A. 82 (Kyauktaw Phaya inscription), dated *sakkarāj* 783 (1422 CE) leads us to hypothesize the presence of an independent ruler in Arakan at a time that falls within the era of the exile episode. It contains the wish of its nameless author to be a just king in the time of Metteyya and to see Metteyya with his own eyes.[25] Such a wish would hardly have been issued by anyone else but a serving ruler. Still, it is obviously difficult to guess how much such an interpretation could be extrapolated with regard to the general political conditions in Arakanese.

Arakan's relations with the northeast Bay of Bengal is a greater mystery because East and Southeast Bengal's history itself is not sufficiently known to allow us to speculate on political and cultural relations. The issue of contacts of Arakanese rulers with Hindu and Muslim lords in Southeast

24 U Pandi, *Dhañña̱vatī rājavaṅ sac* (Rangoon: Pyay-gyi Mandaing-pitakat Press, 1910), 137; U Kala, *Mahārājavaṅ krīḥ*, vol. 1 (Yangon: Hamsawati Press, 1960), 515.

25 Following a Buddhist belief, Metteyya is the fifth and last Buddha of the present cosmic cycle.

Bengal remains opaque mainly because there are no sources at hand. The impact of Bengali Brahmins on the court ritual and traces of Islamicization remain elements of speculation often retro-projected by later writers. Trade and the movement of people along the coast were, as we have said above, very likely. Nonetheless, not much is known in any detail about, for example, the country's own exports. Early seventeenth-century sources point to the transit of rubies from Upper Myanmar through Arakan.

The foundation of Mrauk U and its rapid rise after 1433 would suggest an earlier process of political consolidation of the coastal zones and their hinterland. The prominent site of Mrauk U at the southern tip of a mountainous ridge, sheltered by surrounding hills and a man-made ring of moats and waterways is remarkable, as well as the city's geographical situation that gives access to the valleys of the Kaladan and the Lemro rivers. One unresolved question is if the city had actually been in existence before it became a capital. In this context, the relations between Arakan and its neighbors in the early fifteenth century should be considered as a matter of historical concern to explain the rise of Mrauk U as the center of a regional power after a period of political strife.

Against this outline of the historical context of the early fifteenth century and alternative perspectives that may challenge the Bengal connection built upon the exile story, it is possible to further deepen our critical reading of the story itself by looking at narrative and stylistic devices that sustain the inner logic of Ṅa Mañ chronicle.

Historiography—Cycles of Political Intervention and Narrative Themes in the Chronicle Record

The reading of chronicles challenges simultaneously our capacity to understand the text within its authorial and cultural context and to investigate it profitably with regard to

our interest, thus appealing to both our imagination and our critical mind. A story is good because it sounds convincing to the reader and because it is inserted in a culturally and politically compatible context. To critically assess historical content, historians have to spot the literary devices used to convey social and political meaning. A detailed reading of the events as told in Ṅa Mañ's chronicle reveals a cyclic scenario that employs events from outside and inside Arakan. This narrative scenario is constructed as follows:

- The king (or a governor) displays immoral behavior, commonly seen in a Buddhist context as the initial cause of political instability.
- His power is contested and an appeal is made to an outside power to intervene (Ava, Pegu, or a "country to the west").
- A commander of troops is appointed. Troops are assembled and an invasion takes place.
- The power-holder cannot resist the invasion and is either driven away or killed.
- A new prince or governor is appointed, or the king himself is restored in his legitimacy.
- Abusive power leads to another invasion and the cycle is re-ignited, or power is restored and exercised legitimately and political conditions move towards a new balance of power.

Within this scenario, the exile story is a narrative extension of the episode where the king is driven away. It feeds back into the last stage of the cycle, namely, outside intervention that sees the return of the king. From a formal point of view, it is not the king who is the focal point of the scenario; the competition for power forms the main theme throughout the narrative. The lesson we are taught is that political power is only assured by superior force; it is not warranted by the recognition of dynastic legitimacy.

In conclusion, at the level of narrative analysis, the chronicle provides the reader not only with a narrative of succes-

sive events, but also with a clue to understand political change. Several recurrent themes enrich the main subject of alternating power holders. One of them is the shameless and inappropriate behavior of the ruler, which becomes the cause of instability that triggers outside political intervention. Another theme is the auxiliary role of women. In successive episodes of the narrative, beautiful upper-class women, wives, and daughters appear as passive objects of desire or as prestige items. Alternately, they are supporting actors who appear to drive the action. King Maṅḥ Co Mvan's fall from power is kick-started when he illegitimately takes the sister of the governor of Talak. During his flight into exile, he is egged on by the threat that his wife (or his daughter) might be robbed by the governor of Chittagong. In Candamālalaṅkāra's telling of Maṅḥ Co Mvan's first return from exile, the compiler inserts a story of Maṅḥ Co Mvan's brother that explains the king's liberation from prison in the following way. When Ava's troops invaded the country to throw out the Mon garrison around 1407, Naranu, Maṅḥ Co Mvan's younger brother, fled to the Upper Kaladan valley where he married the daughter of a rich trader. When Maṅḥ Co Mvan was jailed twenty years later and Naranu cried about his brother's misfortune, it was Naranu's compassionate wife who told her father to set the king free and let him run back to Bengal.[26]

On the other hand, there is a conspicuous absence of women throughout Maṅḥ Co Mvan's adventures in Bengal. It is as if women played no role in the nineteen years of his life there. The absence of drama in the cyclic scenario is also striking. The transition of power is processed in a schematic narrative block that lacks any details or complexity. A general is appointed (individual names are given, establishing a feeling of historicity), an army is formed to invade, and a lieutenant or governor is appointed. The power of the invader

26 Candamālalaṅkāra, *Rakhuiṅ rājavaṅ sac* vols. 2, 3, and 7. Hints to this episode are also found in a version of the longer *Aṅḥ cok rājavaṅ*.

is immediately weakened as the troops retire, preparing the stage for the next intrusion. There are never descriptions of any battles.

The narrative of Maṅḥ Co Mvan's early reign, his flight into exile, the invasions from Pegu and Ava, his return to Arakan, and the retaking of the palace are set within a time frame composed of three major phases. Most narratives agree on two key dates—1404 for the beginning of the reign and 1430 for the foundation of Mrauk U. The early reign in Launggrak would have lasted around two years and the narratives allow for a return to the country one or two years before the rule in Launggrak came to an end and when the king decided to move to a new capital where he ruled for three more years.

The lack of historical sophistication is compensated by the use of dates and proper names of the people. But these names vary with the text versions. Moreover, the roles of various people within the narrative change and no single date can be ascertained by hard evidence. Within the general tripartite time frame that establishes a semblance of historical consistency, stories have been rewritten, interpreted, enlarged, and embellished.

One may argue that the legends surrounding the founder of Mrauk U go back to a core of oral stories that predate the writing of royal annals and chronicles. In comparison with later chronicle writing, the lack of any reference to a code of moral principles or royal standards is striking. The ideological matrix founded on the *dhammarāja* concept and the ten duties of the virtuous king of the later Buddhist-inspired chronicle writing is completely absent. The story provides no moral lessons, nor does it relate to any kind of royal ideology through symbols or symbolic acts. In our view, these features mark the narrative analyzed here as an originally different and older text production. Only a few religiously inspired deeds were recorded in historical sources relating specifically to the foundation of Mrauk U. Arakanese sources that deal with fifteenth-century kings rarely mention meritorious religious works or pagoda foundations performed by the king.

Candamālalaṅkāra's later chronicle compilation is an exception in that regard.[27]

Despite the absence of action and suspense, it looks as if Ṅa Mañ tried to endear himself to the Arakanese reader (or listener) by using formulas such as "our Arakanese men," "our Arakanese king," or "our Arakanese country." An emotionally charged oral element is also prominent in the direct speech at the reception at the foreign court and in the description of the happiness of the people when the legitimate king regained his throne.

A Muslim Interpretation: The Exile Story in Ba Tha's History of the Rohingyas

The most far-reaching interpretation of the exile story is found in Ba Tha's (Md A. Tahir) work of 1963, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma*.[28] Ba Tha had already drawn attention to the Muslim presence in Arakan's pre-colonial history in a few articles published in *The Guardian*, a monthly periodical.[29] In his book, he interpreted the exile story in the sense of a subjection of Arakan to Islamic influence and political supremacy.[30] This thesis challenged the mainstream Buddhist interpretation of Arakanese history and made a huge impact on the perception of Arakan's history by contemporary and later Muslim generations. The book made a foundational contribution to the construction of a peculiar "Rohingya" identity for Muslims of North Arakan. To understand some of the implications of Ba Tha's historical interpre-

27 Candamālalaṅkāra, *Rakhuiṅ rājavaṅ sac*, vol. 2, 10.

28 The book was originally published in Burmese by the local United Rohingya National League at Myitkyina in 1963 and translated into English in 1998.

29 Ba Tha, "Shah Shujah in Arakan (Origin of Muslims in Arakan)," *The Guardian* 6, no. 9 (1959): 26–8; "Roewengyas in Arakan," *The Guardian* 7, no. 5 (1960): 33–6; "Slave Raids in Bengal or Heins in Arakan," *The Guardian* 7, no. 10 (1960): 25–7; "The Coming of Islam to Arakan (A Brief Study of Islamic Civilization in Arakan)," *The Guardian* 12, no. 3 (1965): 9–13.

30 Ba Tha, *A Short History of Rohingyas*, 18–24.

tations, we need to recall a page of Arakan's contemporary history.

During the 1950s, the Muslims of North Arakan were fighting for the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone. Some did so by engaging in electoral politics; others opted for armed struggle, such as the Mujahidin whose last troops laid their arms down only in 1961. The Muslims, a great number of whom had migrated from Chittagong to Arakan in the preceding decades, were also divided over the choice of a specific name to identify themselves. Some remained attached to terms met in British census reports, such as "Arakan Mahomedans," while the more politically active factions discussed terms such as Roewhengya, Ruhangya, Rohangya, and Rohingya, which were derived from Rwangya, a relatively obscure local name used by a part of the ancient Muslim community. The history of these variant terms drawn from the East Bengali dialect of local Muslims remains a daunting task for scholars, as none of them was recorded in British colonial sources.[31] Their etymology is not problematic as they are related to the Bengali term for the country, Roshanga, and derived from Rakhanga, the classic Pali word for Arakan. It is well known today that the word Rohingya came out as the winner of the contest, though it remained for decades a little-known term that did not spread much beyond the tiny Muslim elite community that promoted its use for all the Muslims of Arakan. The biggest political triumph of the emerging Rohingya movement was the creation of the Mayu Frontier Zone in May 1961, which created a predominantly Muslim autonomous area.[32] The Rohingyas shared the quest for political autonomy with many other militant groups all over Burma, but their key assertion that the Muslims of

31 Another variant, Rooinga, is mentioned in an English pre-colonial source: Francis Buchanan, "A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire," *Asiatick Researches or Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia V* (1799): 221.

32 The Mayu Frontier Zone was integrated into the district of Akyab in 1964, two years after the taking of power by General Ne Win.

Arakan were a distinctive ethnic group was not only controversial, it was plainly rejected by the Arakanese Buddhists and the successive governments of Burma/Myanmar.[33]

Ba Tha's claim of a separate ethnic identity was directly linked to a historical interpretation of Arakan's past that sustained the political and ideological discourse of the Rohingya movement. The exile story of Mrauk U's founder became one of the key references because it provided a seemingly historical anchor to connect the presence of an early modern Muslim community in Arakan to the kingdom's dynastic history.

The discussion below focuses on Ba Tha's creative enlargement of the narrative that contains new narrative and descriptive elements that call for a critical review. Nonetheless, such criticism is not meant to deny the historiographic and ideological significance of Ba Tha's work as such, because it was as much a symptom of the emerging Rohingya nationalism as it is still a reflection of a Muslim identity formation process in Arakan.

Ba Tha did not use the original manuscript text of Ṅa Mañ or the chronicle compilation of Ashin Candamālalaṅkāra. His indigenous language sources were Aung Tha Oo, who wrote a short popular history of Arakan based on Candamālalaṅkāra's work, and U Nyana, who compiled an Arakanese chronicle first published in 1956.[34] Among his references, he also mentions Burmese history books and the standard British histo-

33 The historical background of the Rohingya movement is presented in Jacques Leider, "Rohingya: The Name, the Movement, the Quest for Identity," in *Nation Building in Myanmar* (Yangon: Myanmar EGRESS/Myanmar Peace Center, 2013), 204–55. From a political center perspective, the Rohingya claims also raised the threat of territorial separatism. See Anthony Ware, "Secessionist Aspects to the Buddhist-Muslim Conflict in Rakhine State, Myanmar," in *Territorial Separatism and Global Politics: Claims, Methods and Problems,* ed. Damien Kingsbury and Costas Laoutides (London: Routledge, 2015).

34 Aung Tha Oo, *Rakhuiṅ rājavaṅ—A Short History of Arakan* (Rangoon: Myayatana Printing, 1955); U Nyana, *Dhañña̱vatī rājavaṅ sac* (Yangon: Arakanese Sagyi Sape, 1996, 1st ed. 1956).

ries of Burma, including A.P. Phayre, G.E. Harvey, and D.G.E. Hall.

Ba Tha interpreted the exile story in the sense that Arakan, following Maṅḥ Co Mvan's return, did not only become a tributary of Bengal but was also politically Islamicized. He explained that the sultan of Bengal (whom he identified, in line with the state of knowledge of his time on Bengal's dynasties, as Ahmad Shah[35]) agreed to the request for military help under the following six conditions: "(1) To return the twelve towns of Bengal; (2) Muslim title must be used by the king of Arakan; (3) The court emblem must be inscribed with Kalima Tayuba in Persian;[36] (4) The coins and medallions must be inscribed with Kalima Tayaba in Persian and be minted in Bengal, (5) To use the Persian as the court language of Arakan; and (6) To pay taxes and presents annually."[37] In Ba Tha's interpretation, uncontroversial and debatable points overlap. While coastal trade along the northeast Bay of Bengal brought culturally and religiously diverse people together, there is no written Persian, Bengali, or Ara-

35 Many writers on early modern Arakan failed to keep track of the research done on Bengal's early modern history so that their hypotheses on the identity of the sultan at whose court the Arakanese king could have taken refuge were misguided. See Jacques P. Leider, *Le Royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie, Son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle (*Paris: Publications de l'EFEO, 2004), 50 and n77; and "These Buddhist Kings With Muslim Names—A Discussion of Muslim Influence in the Mrauk U Period," in *Etudes birmanes en hommage à Denise Bernot*, ed. Pierre Pichard and François Robinne (Paris: EFEO: 1998), 189–215. For earlier discussions among scholars in Bengal, East Pakistan, and Bangladesh, see Alamgir M. Serrajuddin, "Muslim Influence in Arakan and the Muslim Names of the Arakanese Kings: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 31, no. 1 (1986): 17–23; S.M. Ali, "Arakan Rule in Chittagong," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 12, no. 3 (1967): 333–51; Vasant Chowdhury, "The Arakani Governors of Chittagong and Their Coins," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)* 42, no. 2 (1997): 145–62.

36 Kalima Tayyiba, i.e., "There is no god but God: Muhammad is the Prophet of God."

37 Ba Tha, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma,* 21.

kanese evidence about high-level political contacts, political subjection, or tax payments.

The most flourishing period of Muslim presence in Arakan took place from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Muslims played an important role at the court of Mrauk U as servants, guards, officers, artists, treasurers, and ministers. Their role within the administration of the kingdom was linked to the expansion of Arakan in the late sixteenth century towards the north where the kings of Arakan controlled the port of Chittagong for eighty years. Contemporary Portuguese sources would suggest that Pathans (Muslims of Afghan descent) had fled to Arakan after the Mughal conquest of western and central Bengal. In the east and the southeast of Bengal, the Mughal advance ran into the resistance of regional Hindu and Muslim lords who simultaneously tried to fight off the hegemonic ambitions of the Arakanese kings along the coast of the northeast Bay of Bengal. The Arakanese kings controlled the port of Chittagong approximately after 1580. The important Portuguese community in the vicinity of Chittagong (Dianga) had to ensure its own commercial and political interests by negotiating compromises or serving the interests of these rulers. Military competence, mainly in the field of gun-making and artillery, naval skills, and commercial networks of the Portuguese traders were key assets that the Arakanese kings were keen to embed in their own military-cum-commercial networks in the northeast area of the Bay of Bengal. The infamous slave trade was to a large extent a by-product of Arakan's territorial expansion and policy of depopulating the coastal land up to the Feni River to protect the kingdom against the Mughal threat.[38] Thibaut d'Hubert

38 For detailed overviews of Arakan's early modern political history, see Jacques Leider, *Le Royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie, Son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de l'EFEO, 2004); "Arakan's Ascent during the Mrauk U Period," in *Recalling Local Pasts: Autonomous History in Southeast Asia,* ed. Sunait Chutintaranond and Chris Baker (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 53–87; Stephan Van Galen, "Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom (Burma) from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century AD" (PhD diss.,

has recently provided new insights into the booming multilingual court culture in Mrauk U that was inspired by Muslim and Indian literary networks in the Bay of Bengal.[39] As the population in the kingdom was multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual, the minting of trilingual coins highlights the sovereign rule of Arakanese kings over a diverse population.[40] It is against this historically later background that Ba Tha's embellishment and interpretation of the relationship between Maṅḥ Co Mvan and the sultanate of Bengal calls for some further explanations.

Persian was one of the languages practiced by educated members of the court. Yet it is a matter of speculation to suggest that the Muslim declaration of faith would have appeared on the "court emblem" and that so-called Muslim titles would have been used by fiat of the Bengal sultan. The expression "to return the twelve towns of Bengal" raises several questions that cannot be exhaustively dealt with in this paper. The term "twelve towns of Bengal" has been used in certain Arakanese historical texts and can be interpreted narrowly as the part of East Bengal that was not conquered by the Mughals in the sixteenth century, but which came under their control only around 1613. This was, as we have explained above, the area of the so-called Bharo Bhuyas, Hindu and Muslim lords who resisted the Mughals for several decades. Yet the term can also be understood more broadly as referring to an extended space of coastal South and East Bengal where the Arakanese fleets roamed and Arakanese kings established at times their hegemony. It is uncer-

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Leiden University, 2008); Thibaut d'Hubert and Jacques P. Leider, "Traders and Poets at the Mrauk-U court—On Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth century Arakan", in *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 77–111.

39 Thibaut d'Hubert, "Histoire culturelle et poétique de la traduction Alaol et la tradition littéraire bengali au XVIIe siècle à Mrauk-U, capitale du royaume d'Arakan" (PhD diss., Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, 2010).

40 See also d'Hubert's article in this volume.

tain whether the expression "twelve towns of Bengal" was in use before the late sixteenth century.

Ba Tha's historical interpretation also raises another problematic issue which we have alluded to in the introduction, namely, the paradigm of Arakanese historiography that has argued that the political control over Southeast Bengal had been shifting back and forth from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. This historical perception implies that the southeast of Bengal (signified by the expression "twelve towns") was a contested territory between the Bengal and Arakanese rulers and that territorial control shifted according to political circumstances. When Bengal expanded, it would have claimed the "twelve towns" while Arakanese expansion towards the west would mean that it exerted hegemonic power over a certain zone of East Bengal. But the allusions are so vague and unspecific that it is difficult to see how the paradigm as expressed in historiography translates into a geopolitical reality.

For the fifteenth-century case examined here, we are challenged to accept that Arakan would have ruled over Southeast Bengal and that in a show of gratitude, Maṅḥ Co Mvan ceded the area to Bengal upon his return. Ba Tha writes: "Since that time onward Arakanese Maghs[41] had to learn the Islamic history and the meaning of the triumph of Islam and how it arrived that the Chief Moslem protagonists were Mongolians. For a hundred years, Arakan was a vassal state of the Muslim Bengal and paying tribute to Bengal."[42]

On the one hand, it is unlikely that Arakan's power extended towards the northwest before the sixteenth century; on the other hand, there are no material proofs of a political dependence on Bengal. The paradigm is actually best understood in reference to a later event, namely, King Maṅḥ Pā's warfare in the 1530s, which testifies to Arakan's political and territorial ambitions one hundred years *after* the foundation

41 Magh, Mugh, or Mug are derogatory terms used by people in Bengal to refer to the Arakanese.

42 Ba Tha, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma,* 21.

of Mrauk U. When the Arakanese chroniclers (within the *Dhañña̱vatī areḥ tō puṁ* textual tradition) tell us about King Maṅḥ Pa's attack against Chittagong (undated), they say that the king claimed back the area that had been graciously ceded a hundred years before by the Arakanese king and explained that this act of gratitude had now come to an end.[43] It is difficult to come up with a historical rationale to substantiate this explanation. Yet an argument can be made that it served as a legitimizing strategy of Maṅḥ Pā's aggression against Chittagong. Maṅḥ Pā's push towards Bengal started several decades of coastal warfare, which ultimately led to the Arakanese control over Chittagong around 1580. A succession of events was read back into time by the chroniclers to make more recent developments understandable and acceptable as they would match a historical pattern. In sum, the "hundred year bracket" (ca. 1430–1530) of a supposed Bengal hegemony over Arakan does not in itself have a sound historical foundation, but works as a rhetorical transition to Arakan's territorial expansion under King Maṅḥ Pā.

Rationalization and Mythification

Our investigation has shown that the success of the exile story was due to various processes of adaptation that ultimately satisfied diverse audiences. First of all, the structure of the story mirrors similar narrative blocks in the chronicle tradition where foreign interventions in local politics are presented as a recurrent phenomenon of fifteenth-century Arakanese history. The genealogy of the variant stories from precursor narratives to Ṅa Mañ's version further demonstrates the needs to adjust and enrich the narrative account so as to keep it attractive to a traditional readership with a widening access to information about Asian history. Still, fictional elements that would not have raised the eyebrows of local readers provoked disproval and analytical comments from Western readers who tried to reassess the story during

43 *Mranmā maṅḥ areḥ tōpum* (Rangoon, 1967), 43.

the colonial period within their own understanding of history. The reading of the exile story by British colonial writers has been described here as a process of rationalization as it tries to extract historical facts, exclude elements of fantasy, and re-interpret or contextualize points of historical or geographical ambiguity. This "modern" reading gave satisfaction to an increasingly educated Arakanese Buddhist audience in the twentieth century as it recognized and validated its traditional historiography. In the context of an unprecedented process of Muslim identity formation in the north of Arakan in the aftermath of Burma's independence (1948), the exile story gained an entirely new lease of life as it became a cornerstone for arguing the antiquity of a Muslim community in pre-colonial Arakan. The embellishment and imaginative retelling of the story could be characterized as the mythologizing of a narrative that, in its earliest form, stated barely more than the flight of the king after his fall from power. Both rationalizing and mythologizing have thus empowered the exile story rather than diminished its relevance. Most importantly, thanks to adjustments, explanations, and amplifications, the exile story has kept on making historical sense to successive audiences.

Beyond the critical investigation of the narrative devices of the chronicle, our work demonstrates the need for further clarification of the historical past of fifteenth-century Arakan against the challenge of deeply entrenched popular beliefs. Inscriptional evidence suggests a greater political role of the Mon overlordship along the coast than has hitherto been considered. Still, it is towards local agency within the increasing process of political emancipation of the Arakanese kingship that future scholarly attention should be directed. Further research in art and archaeology could hopefully lead to a better understanding of the mysterious beginnings of the Mrauk U kingdom.

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