

Forging Buddhist Credentials as a Tool of Legitimacy and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Arakan's Subjection in Nineteenth-Century Burma

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Abstract

The kingdom of Arakan was conquered by the Burmese in 1785 and annexed by the British after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-6). Resistance to the occupation was followed by campaigns of pacification that entailed social disruption. Starting with an analysis of the religious motives for King Bodawphaya's quest to conquer Arakan, this article focuses on the use of local religious traditions to bolster ethnic self-identification and resist the process of integration. Based on little explored indigenous and Western primary sources, this essay attempts to make a contribution to the social history of Buddhism in Arakan.

Le royaume d'Arakan fut conquis en 1785 par les Birmans. Après la première guerre anglo-birmane (1824-6), il fut annexé par les Anglais. La résistance arakanaise aux occupants provoqua des campagnes d'oppression qui eurent un impact considérable sur la société. L'article que voici propose une analyse des motifs religieux qui sous-tendent la conquête par le roi Bodawphaya (1781-1819). L'attention se porte ensuite sur le recours aux traditions locales qui étayaient l'identité communautaire et permettaient de résister au processus d'intégration. Cette enquête fondée sur des sources primaires indigènes et occidentales offre ainsi une contribution à l'histoire sociale du bouddhisme en Arakan.

Keywords

Arakan (Burma), Theravada Buddhism, colonial history, ethnic identity, monastic historiography

"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal;
nor between what is true and what is false.
A thing is not necessary either true or false; it can be both true and false."
Harold Pinter

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For kings in Southeast Asia, Buddhism provided the cosmological props of a regal ideology which was sustained by a brahmanical discourse on kingship and ritual.¹ However, the conventional approach which claims that Buddhist credentials and brahmanical concepts were used as tools of political legitimacy restricts their analysis to an elite context.² But the his-

¹) There is an abundance of scholarly material on the relation between the temporal and the spiritual power in Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms some of which I discuss in the notes or refer to in the bibliography. The latest contribution to the field is Ian Harris, ed. *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London: Routledge, 2007).

²) Steven Collins's discussion of "kingship and its discontents" in his land-mark *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) contributed to a "new vision of Buddhist history" because his analysis leads beyond earlier approaches such as Melford Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), and Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Collins argues that "most ethnographies and histories do not make [...] a separation" between "Buddhism as constructed by scholars" and the "socio-cultural life... lived historically, first in the conditions of pre-modern agrarian states, and then in the context of modernization, nation-building, colonialism and capitalism": Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*: 568. It is also of great importance (for this study in particular) not to blur historical and socio-cultural differences between the kingdoms in Siam, Burma, Arakan, or Hamsavati-Pegu while at the same time acknowledging that the "Pali *imaginaire*," to use Collins's term, was indeed shared by all. Earlier studies on the legitimacy of power and the relations between the king and the *saṅgha* (see for example Michael Arthur Aung-Thwin, "Kingship, the Sangha, and Society in Pagan." In *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976), Michael Arthur Aung-Thwin, "Divinity, Spirit and Human: Conceptions of Classical Burmese Kingship." In *Centers, Symbols and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, ed. L. Gesick (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), and Bardwell Smith, ed. *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma* (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1978)) made important contributions to the study of the history of Buddhism in continental Southeast Asia, but due to the lack of scholarly research, they did not sufficiently emphasize differences, say between Siam and Burma. Aye Kyaw's 1978 unpublished Ph.D. "Thai-Burmese institutions in the nineteenth century" (Monash University) marked a step toward a greater differentiation. Recent research calls for greater attention to local complexity. As for Arakan, Alexandra de Mersan in her study of the construction of ritual space highlights the conceptual difference between the royal palace and the Arakanese capital Mrauk-U and provides new insights into the ritual relations between the Arakanese king and local divinities, see Alexandra de Mersan, "Espace rituel et construction de la localité – Contribution à l'étude ethnographique d'une population de la Birmanie contemporaine: les Arakanais." (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Thèse de doctorat, 2005): 336-48. Peter Skilling's study of the idealization and the

tory of late colonial and post-colonial times indicates that Buddhism also functioned as a source of inspiration for anti-colonialists and social revolutionaries who opposed those who were reputedly in control of the imperial religion.³ So if the political predilections of both left-leaning

self-conception of kingship in “King, *Sangha* and Brahmins: Ideology, Ritual and Power in Pre-modern Siam.” In *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Routledge, 2007): 182-215 illustrates the complexity of “hybrid” ritual relations. He reminds us that the *cakkavatti* concept is frequently referred to in Ayutthayan texts, Ibid.: 194. But this was not the case in the kingdom of Arakan and in contemporary Burma. In the *intitulatio* of the early modern Burmese kings (seventeenth-nineteenth centuries) the term *cakkavatti* is not frequently found. The *intitulatio* is part of the protocol of royal proclamations and is thus a reliable source for studying the self-conception of kings. Certain attributes of the *cakkavatti* king, such as the *arindama cakka* or the white elephant are variously referred to, but the term itself (Burmese: *cakravate*) is rare in the late Burmese royal chronicles and is not found in the *intitulatio* of Konbaung kings. I also have problems with fitting Tambiah’s simple equation *cakkavatti*=*bodhisattva* into a historical context and the historical amalgam of Sinhalese and Thai traditions on kingship, see Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*: 96-7. Neither can the self-conceptions of Mon and Burmese kings be entirely fused into a single identical notion in the framework of the kingdom of Burma. There is an interesting exchange of letters that took place intermittently between June 1755 and December 1756 between Banyadala, the king of Hamsavati-Pegu, and Alaungphaya, the Burmese king, see Than Tun *The Royal Orders of Burma (1598-1885)* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 1985): vol. 3: 98-177; hereafter *ROB*. Both were *homo novi* in their palaces, men who needed legitimacy. Although both made the customary allusion to predictions of the Buddha regarding their ascent to power, the *intitulatio* in their letters is strikingly different: Banyadala saw himself as a *bodhisatta* while Alaungphaya did *not* expressly claim himself to be a future Buddha.

³ Terms such as “imperial religion,” “state religion,” or “national religion” generally reflect a top-down perspective. For a discussion of this matter, see Oliver Freiberger, “Staatsreligion, Reichsreligion oder Nationalreligion? Überlegungen zur Terminologie.” In *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie. Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien*, ed. P. Schalk (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2001): 19-36. On relations between Buddhism and the social order in Burma, the impact of Marxism, and the matter of nationalist monks during the British colonial period, see Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Background of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, “Buddhist Backgrounds of Burmese Socialism.” In *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell Smith (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1978a), Frank Trager, “Reflections on Buddhism and the Social Order in Southern Asia.” In *Burma Research Society Fiftieth Anniversary Publications* no.1, ed. Burma Research Society (Rangoon: Burma Research Society, 1961), G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824-1942* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946): 25-9, Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); for the political use of Buddhist categories in post-1988 Burma, see Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999).

revolutionaries *and* nationalistic authoritarian monks or laymen can be linked to the fundamentals of the Buddhist tradition in recent times, why should historians not hypothesize that Buddhist concepts fed into the expression of contentious cultural and social dynamics at earlier periods as well?

Covering the pre- to early colonial times, this essay offers a case study which focuses on the Buddhist kingdom of Arakan from its conquest by the king of Burma in 1785 until the fall of the Burmese kingdom itself a hundred years later. The main subject I would like to explore here concerns the rhetorical embodiment in religious terms of both confrontation and subjection which were the result of the resistance of the Arakanese in the aftermath of the Burmese conquest. I will first look at the conqueror's use of Buddhist credentials to legitimate his conquest and his intrusion into local religious affairs. Then I will turn to the subjected Arakanese who contested this conquest and resorted to an ethnic-cum-religious self-representation which was rooted in the myth of Buddhism's origins in Arakan and its dynastic traditions. As far as Western and local sources allow, I will give a brief description of the diminished state of the Buddhist institutions in nineteenth-century Arakan. This will lead us to a mid-nineteenth-century Arakanese text which builds on the malleable notions of doctrinal continuity and gives a very particular representation of Arakanese Buddhism in the context of the intra-monastic discussions on the transmission of Theravada orthodoxy.

The themes broached in this paper lie at the intersection of studies concerning the inculturation (or localization) of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and a critical discussion of Burma's political-center-focused historiography. In the "ritual states" of Southeast Asia, kings together with leading monks contributed to the localization of Buddhism by building temples and monasteries, acquiring and honoring relics, and implementing monastic reforms. In doing so they not only expressed their power but also authorized their political actions. However, the ever lively peripheries were not political vacuums and the *dramatis personae* involved tapped into similar sources for Buddhist credentials. Arakan is a particularly interesting case as it looks back to a largely autonomous history in Burma's periphery.⁴ The

⁴ On Arakan's early modern history and the issue of autonomy, see Jacques P. Leider, "Arakan's Ascent during the Mrauk U Period." In *Recalling Local Pasts: Autonomous History in Southeast Asia*, eds Sunait Chutintaranond and Chris Baker (Chieng Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002) and Jacques P. Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie: Son histoire politique*

last part of the paper is based on a typically local Buddhist text and its interpretation as a politically significant source can be contextualized against the background of my ongoing Arakanese textual studies.⁵

The Conquest of a Kingdom

After a short, well-planned military campaign, troops led by the Burmese crown prince completed the conquest of Arakan in early January 1785. Three years after ascending the throne, King Badon *aka* Bodawphaya—the longest reigning monarch of the Konbaung dynasty (1782-1819)—revealed his high-flying ambition of becoming a truly great Buddhist king by embarking on this glorious military quest. The weak and divided kingdom of Arakan was an easy prey and offered an excellent opportunity for territorial expansion. Economic interests may additionally have functioned as an incentive as the possession of Arakan provided a closer access to Bengal's maritime trade. But the royal order to invade the country did not dwell on such reasons and instead emphasized purportedly higher motives: the king intended to put an end to the country's anarchy and to re-establish the purity of the *sāsana*, the Buddhist religion.⁶ However, in

entre le début du XV^e et la fin du XVIII^e siècle (Paris: Publications de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004a).

⁵ This article is based on a conference paper presented at the Burma Studies Conference "Communities of Interpretation" in Singapore (13-15 July 2006) in a panel called "Simple Beliefs and Uniform Truths: Questioning the Historical Reconstruction of Burma's Past." I am indebted to Ven. Rammawadi Pinyasara of Sittway, Rakhine State (Myanmar) for kindly making available a copy of the manuscript of the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana in Arakan*. Saya Tin Win of the *Universities Historical Research Centre* deserves a special mention for the kind reception he gave me at the Microfilm section of his institution in Yangon. Kyaw Minn Htin was as usual a great support. During my stay in Bangladesh in March 2006, I gained a better understanding of the history and the Buddhist culture of the Arakanese communities in Cox's Bazaar and Moshkali and my gratitude goes to Venerable Bodhinyana (Tek Naf) and the *Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association* who made this stay so productive.

⁶ The term *sāsana* as used in Burmese and Arakanese texts conveniently translates as "religion." It encompasses the principles and the practice taught by the Buddha and, socially speaking, the community of all those, monks and laypeople, who adhere to the teaching and its precepts. Thus the "purification of the *sāsana*" a standard expression in Burmese chronicles, refers to the action taken by the king to expel undisciplined and rogue monks and to further the accurate copying of canonical texts so as to ensure institutional continuity and monastic orthopraxy. On Bodawphaya's religious policy, see Jacques P. Leider, "Text,

the rhetoric of Burmese warfare, such a motivation is rather commonplace.⁷ It signals a fundamental belief in a rightful political order and shows concern for the welfare of the Buddha's teaching; it thus matches an understanding of the king as a just ruler who cares for the continuity of the *sāsana* and the prosperity of the monkhood. On the other hand, dismissing such a religious motivation as either cynical or merely symbolical would fail to give due credit to the king's own sense of predestined vocation that sprang from his Buddhist *Weltanschauung*. In the case of Arakan, the military triumph legitimized, *ipso facto*, the rightful war of a just king, but also functioned, *a posteriori*, as a handy justification for his acclaimed religious goals.

Religious and spiritual motives comprised a complex set of factors that played an important role in Bodawphaya's policies in general and in Arakan's invasion in particular. They formed an integral part of the king's lifelong vision of himself as a just ruler which was inspired by the model characters of Buddhist *jataka* and the Ashoka of the Buddhist tradition;⁸ this thus meant striving toward the ideal of Buddhist kingship and acting as a reformer of the ceremonial traditions of Hindu-Buddhist court culture.⁹ Arakan was home to the famous Mahamuni statue, said to be

Lineage and Tradition in Burma—"The Struggle for Norms and Religious Legitimacy under King Bodawphaya (1752-1819)." *Journal of Burma Studies* 9 (2004b): 80-127.

⁷ The above mentioned correspondence between King Alaungphaya and King Banyadala, written while both were waging war against each other (1755-57), offers amazing insights in this regard. In Than Tun's pointed rendering of one of Alaungphaya's letters we read: "The campaign south is not exactly a military expedition. It is a kind of tour to find out how the propagation and extension of the Buddha's religion could be made more effective in a land where normal conditions were much disturbed recently due to war" (25 October 1756, *ROB*: vol. 3: 37).

⁸ Bodawphaya's orders make direct references to particular *jataka* stories to support the king's stance on political and ethical issues. According to a Buddhist tradition found in the Sinhalese chronicles and the North Indian *Ashokavadana*, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka actively contributed to the dissemination of the Buddhist teaching, built monasteries and stupas, and convened the third council. Although the emperor's sympathy for the Buddhists is beyond doubt, Ashoka's inscriptions leave a slightly different picture of the political, social, and ethical codex (*dhamma*) that he propagated. See John Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka: A Study and Translation of the Asokavadana* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Freiburger, "Staatsreligion, Reichsreligion oder Nationalreligion?"

⁹ A biography of King Bodawphaya is a desideratum of Southeast Asian historiography. Bodawphaya was not only one of the longest reigning and most powerful monarchs in Burmese history (1782-1819), but also a man of great intellectual curiosity who was deeply engaged in ethical, historical, and philosophical questions. The sources for the study of his

a true copy of the living Buddha which was made with the help of God Indra at the moment of Gautama Buddha's visit to the kingdom of Dhanyavati. Considering the magical power ascribed to this statue, the act of coming into its possession figured as another undeclared, but certainly desirable objective of the conquest. Put into courtly style: Bodawphaya sent his son to Arakan to "invite" the precious statue to Amarapura and the Mahamuni obliged by graciously following the invaders on their return to the motherland.

Arakan bordered on India which was, even in official Burmese records of the nineteenth century, referred to as "Majjhimadesa," a geographical term found in the Pali scriptures. Consisting of sixteen countries which were located in relation to the Buddha's place of enlightenment, Majjhimadesa was linked in the Buddhist *imaginaire* to the hagiographic accounts of the Buddha's travels and the area in which his missionaries lived. Building on the traditions that neighboring lands, such as Burma, which had similarly been graced by numerous (though not canonized) visits of the Enlightened One, Burmese kings saw themselves as the natural protectors of the holy places of Buddhism in India as well. Bodawphaya once planned to visit India, but was probably dissuaded *in fine* from doing so by his advisors.¹⁰ In those days in which the British hegemony was steadily expanding, the political overtones of any kind of pilgrimage would have functioned as an obvious impediment. Although it would be difficult to extract this notion in an unambiguous sense from our sources, in the king's mind "Majjhimadesa" may have represented the *summum bonum* in terms of his ambition to rule the Buddhist world.

After taking control of the country, the Burmese uprooted the political, military, and religious elite of Arakan. The tax and revenue system that the Burmese introduced followed the standards of the contemporary Burmese district administration. Burmese people were appointed as chief officers but they also had to rely on local men to pass on their orders at the village

reign are abundant. Sixty percent of the circa 3200 royal orders in the *ROB* date from Bodawphaya's reign. The preambles of his orders reflect the king's perception of his royal duties and the religious and cosmological dimensions of kingship as understood at the court of the Konbaung kings.

¹⁰ In 1813, Bodawphaya wanted to visit the Mahabodhi temple in India (*ROB* 13 April 1813); see also Tilman Frasch, "A Buddhist Network in the Bay of Bengal: Relations between Bodhgaya, Burma and Sri Lanka c. 300-1300." In *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous Notes*, eds C. Guillot, D. Lombard and R. Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

level. Just as in other districts of Burma, census and revenue inquests were made.¹¹ The Arakanese king and his inner court were sent into exile to Amarapura, the Burmese capital. The country also lost its ritualists and masters of ceremonies because the Arakanese court Brahmins, the so-called *punna* who were men of Bengali origin, had to follow in their footsteps. Together with their families they numbered in the several hundreds. King Bodawphaya was keen to use their expertise, especially in the field of astrology and of king-making ablution ceremonies. As I have shown elsewhere, the Arakanese *punna* played a dominant role at the court of King Bodawphaya and they remained at the top of the strictly hierarchized *punna* group until the end of the Burmese monarchy (1885).

Obviously it was India that was the source *par excellence* of Sanskrit manuscripts and knowledgeable Brahmin astrologers. But such manuscripts and astrologers were at first more readily available in Arakan. Because Bodawphaya wanted to reform kingship in Burma by turning to its Indian Sanskrit roots,¹² he was keen to study the cultural heritage of Arakan as well. In Sandoway (or Thandwe, southern Arakan), Ashin Kawissarabhi, a Burmese missionary monk, compiled the *Dhanyavati Ayedawpon* which soon became one of the best known sources in central Burma on ancient Arakanese kings and their counsellors. One of the most ardently pursued reform projects of Bodawphaya was the calendar reform¹³ and the king also wanted to learn about the calculations of time in Arakan. The king further instructed monks and royal officers to collect medical treatises¹⁴

¹¹ I deal extensively with the political aspects of the Burmese conquest of Arakan in Jacques P. Leider, "Politics of Integration and Cultures of Resistance—A Study of Burma's Conquest and Administration of Arakan (1785-1825)." In *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*, ed. Geoff Wade (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008 forthcoming).

¹² See Jacques P. Leider, "Specialists for Ritual, Magic and Devotion—The Court Brahmins (*punna*) of the Konbaung Kings (1752-1885)." *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2006). On Bodawphaya's missions to India, *Ibid.*: 193-8.

¹³ Thirty percent of Bodawphaya's surviving orders deal with his religious reforms. Half of these concern the reform of the calendar which was relevant for both the ritual curriculum at the court and monastic life. Arakan's time-honored calendar is mentioned in *ROB* 23 June 1810.

¹⁴ See *ROB* 28 August 1807, in which the former secretary of the Dhanyavati district was requested to send a list of all the Arakanese medical experts to the king and *ROB* 24 November 1807, in which four Arakanese doctors were allowed to return to Arakan.

and texts with prophecies of the Buddha.¹⁵ At the same time he decided to deport the abbots of the major monasteries of Mrauk-U (Arakan's former capital) together with the *vinayadhara* (overseer of monastic discipline) of the Arakanese *saṅghā*. By establishing leading Arakanese monks and learned *punṇa* in Amarapura, the king thus succeeded at gathering the exegetical expertise for the texts that he collected.

By deporting the contemporary and former royal offspring,¹⁶ the king rid the country of potential leaders who could challenge the Burmese rule in Arakan. The expatriation of Brahmins and prominent monks further achieved the result that challengers were denied access to traditional knowledge on ritual ceremonies, and had thus lost the means of gaining a degree of legitimacy in case they revolted—as some did unsuccessfully.

The Transmutation of the Mahamuni

Barely a week after they had occupied the Arakanese capital, the Burmese made preparations to transport the giant Mahamuni bronze statue from the site of Dhanyavati, a former Arakanese capital north of Mrauk U, to Amarapura.¹⁷ According to a wide-spread belief, the Mahamuni was made at the time of the visit of Lord Buddha to Arakan and was thought to be a physically identical copy of the Awakened One. The Buddha “inspired” the statue to life, called him his “younger brother,” and endowed him with the mission to protect the sacred teaching in Arakan until the time when Metteya (Maitreya), the last Buddha of the cycle, would appear. Arakanese kings prayed at this sanctuary at the beginning of their reign and did not undertake any major campaign without invoking the support of the Mahamuni; in fact, in times of disaster, prayers to the Mahamuni often

¹⁵ See ROB 10 May 1810. While stressing the Arakanese origin of the document referred to as *kyauk-yo-thamaing*, Than Tun is mistaken in translating the title as “History of Mining Stones.” The *kyauk-yo* texts, confusingly called *yazawin* or *thamaing*, contain prophecies.

¹⁶ Arakan had known a lot of dynastic confusion together with political and territorial divisions during the eighteenth century.

¹⁷ For descriptions of the transport of the statue, see Candamalalankara, *Rakhaing Mahayazawindawgyi [The New Great Chronicle of Arakan]* vol. 2. (Yangon. [2nd ed. Yangon: PEAL, 1997]) (henceforth *CL*): vol. 2: 310 and Than Tun, “Paya Lanma (Lord’s Highway) over the Yoma (Yakhine Range).” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 25 (1983): 233–40. On the pagoda slaves attached to the statue and taken to Amarapura, see ROB 21 August 1787, 21 June 1799 (3), and G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Frank Cass, 1925): 268.

functioned as a final recourse.¹⁸ The chronicle further mentions earthquakes and wondrous manifestations at the sanctuary as signs of acute political crises. The cult of the Mahamuni was, however, not merely a royal cult; it was popular throughout Arakan and spread in various forms and beliefs to south-east Bengal and Tripura.¹⁹ The simultaneous eradication of kingship and the departure of the statue symbolizing the collective political and religious identity of the Arakanese thus meant both a loss of power and protection. Kingship had authenticated the cosmological unity of the social and political system in accord with the presence of the Mahamuni whose magical protection was to last five thousand years. A political and social order that had lasted for hundreds of years was thus shattered²⁰ when the ritual connection between the Mahamuni and the king, which was a crucial factor for ensuring the prosperity of the country, was broken.

From a Burmese perspective, the political-cum-religious significance of the transfer of the Mahamuni statue from Arakan to Amarapura can barely be underestimated. For Bodawphaya, the possession of the sacred statue functioned as an eminent confirmation of his own glorious destiny. His pride was immense when his son brought home a statue that “former Burmese kings had never even dreamed to be able to worship,” as a bell inscription of 1798 notes.²¹ In 1810, at the time that the king had declared himself to be a *bodhisatta* (or future Buddha), he stressed that, though the Arakanese “history” of the statue stated that the Mahamuni had been established by Lord Buddha to defend the *sāsana* in Arakan for five thousand years, the statue had now actually come to him!²² The king’s interpre-

¹⁸ An excellent analysis of the Mahamuni cult in Arakan and the traumatic experience of its loss are found in Mersan, “Espace rituel et construction de la localité”: 356-82. About the Mahamuni cult in Upper Burma, see Juliane S. Schober, “In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Mahamuni Image.” In *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

¹⁹ See Willem van Schendel, ed. *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)* (Dhaka: Signum Press, 1992): 59, 68, 92 and Rabindra Bijay Barua, “Some Important Festivals of the Buddhists in East Pakistan.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 10,1 (1965): 28-31.

²⁰ On the cosmological function of kingship, cf. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (quoting P. Mus): 73-4.

²¹ *Shwegugyi bell inscription BE 1160* in Halin, collection of the author, following a handwritten transcript made *in situ* by Kyaw Minn Htin (November 2005).

²² *ROB* 23 June 1810. The Mahamuni statue was not the only Buddha statue taken from Arakan to Burma. The royal order of 19 January 1811 mentions three “Mahagi” Buddhas from Kyauk-pan-taung that were “rediscovered” and ceremoniously taken away.

tation delegitimized Arakan as a Buddhist heritage site and proportionally enhanced the patrimonial importance of Burma. As the Mahamuni had become the most revered Buddha statue in Burma in the last two centuries and its temple in Mandalay the most eagerly visited place by both local and foreign visitors and pilgrims, its appropriation by the Burmese entailed a transmutation of the status of the statue. It thus became the object of a national cult of all those who adhered to the Burmese Buddhist culture. “Nowhere, even at the Shwedagon or Shweseztaw,²³ is the devotional atmosphere more intense,”²⁴ wrote G. E. Harvey eighty years ago. The Mahamuni temple was a national sanctum and, whatever its loss may have meant for the Arakanese in hindsight, the Mahamuni’s new “life” in Upper Burma greatly symbolized Arakan’s integration into a larger Burmese environment.

The statue did not leave Arakan without its written biography. Texts of the *Mahamuni Phaya-thamaing* were among the first Arakanese texts brought to Burma.²⁵ The way in which the Mahamuni’s biography was streamlined to fit the Burmese context (its cultural integration!) has received little scholarly attention although the adaptation of the text by Burmese monks should be considered as an object worthy of further study.²⁶

²³ The Shwedagon is the major Buddhist pagoda of Yangon, Myanmar’s former capital. It is famous for its reliquary containing a few of the Buddha’s hairs. Its history emerged with the Mon kingdom of Lower Burma. The Shweseztaw is a site near Minbu (Upper Burma) where two *buddhapada* have been revered since the seventeenth century. A *buddhapada* is a “Buddha-foot”; in the case of the Shweseztaw, there are visibly two giant marks in the rock.

²⁴ Harvey, *History of Burma*: 268.

²⁵ *Mahamuni Phaya-shin Thamaing* (dated 1785; Yangon: University Historical Research Centre): palm-leaf ms. n° 577.

²⁶ A conspicuous difference between Arakanese and Burmese ways of looking at the “departure” of the statue from its sanctuary is evident in the text that accompanies the pictorial representations at the Mahamuni Museum of its Mandalay shrine. The statue is said to have graciously followed an invitation of the Burmese king to come to Amarapura. See for example *Mahamyatmuni Thamaing-pyo* by Mon-ywe U No, written in 1786 (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission Library): palm-leaf ms. n° 762 and *Mahamuni Phayagyi Thamaing-sa*, dated 1786, Ibid.: palm-leaf ms. n° 1244, *Mahamuni-yadu*, ms.; Sittway, private collection.

The Alignment of the Saṅghā

After the conquest, King Bodawphaya's religious policy went hand in hand with the controversial process of political and administrative integration. Being a keen critic of monastic laxity,²⁷ Bodawphaya ordered monks to be trained and specifically examined in the *vinaya* rules and sent them to peripheral regions to propagate his reforms and re-ordain the local monkhood.²⁸ Such *sāsana-pru* (missionary) monks were also sent to the four districts of Arakan. With the support of the local Burmese governors, they built new ordination halls, standardized monastic behavior, and set educational standards.²⁹ Burmese monks further also went to the Khami mountaineers in the northern Arakan hills in order to convert them to the Buddhist faith.³⁰ As distinctive features of the former monastic practices in Arakan are no more recognizable today, the royal intervention in the monastic affairs of Arakan appears to have been a successful policy of progressive assimilation.³¹ The considerable impact of the reinvigoration of

²⁷ Early in his reign, Bodawphaya put an end to a long lasting quarrel between competing lineages about the monastic dress worn in public by novices. On the quarrel and the condemnation of Atula Sayadaw, see Alexey E. Kirichenko, "History in the Retrospect of Discipline: Constructing the Genealogy of Transmission of the Buddhist Teaching in Nineteenth-Century Myanmar." In *Religious Traditions of the Orient: Prof. Evgeny A. Torchinov 50th Anniversary Commemoration Volume* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University, 2005) and Leider, "Text, Lineage and Tradition in Burma."

²⁸ Leider, "Text, Lineage and Tradition in Burma."

²⁹ A list of these monks is found in Maung Maung Tin, *Konbaungzet Mahayazawin* (Yangon): II: 33. The names that are given there, however, do not match any found in *CL*: II: 339-40. Information on the *sāsana-pru* monks is found in *ROB* 25 July 1787 (2), 3 October 1787, 3 January 1788 (containing a detailed list of missionary monks and the roads taken to Arakan). One document that was not available at the time this paper was written is a British Library manuscript, *Rakhaing Yazawin-nge (Abridged Arakan Chronicle)* OR 3413, a text which deals with the propagation of the *sāsana* in Arakan (Information kindly received by Zaw Lynn Aung of Aichi University, Japan.)

³⁰ Robert Robinson, *Among the Mughls or Memorials of the Rev. J. C. Fink, Missionary in Arracan* (Calcutta: The Light Press, 1871): 98.

³¹ Officially the Arakanese monks of today belong either to the Sudhamma or the Dwaya *gaings* (on these Burmese *gaings*, see E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). The Sudhamma absorbed the majority of the so-called *kam-gaing* monks. The Arakanese Dwaya had already emerged in the nineteenth century when Sumana, a disciple of the Samkhyau Sayadaw, after being ordained in the Dwaya tradition in Burma, attracted a dissident monastic faction at Myebon. *Gaings* of ancient Arakanese origins are still said to exist although there has been no scholarly research on this issue.

monastic discipline—enforced in the capital and propagated throughout the kingdom—is also discernible in a development in Arakan a few decades later when Arakanese monks were instrumental in a revival of Theravada Buddhism in south-east Bengal.³²

While King Bodawphaya's missionaries concentrated on the discipline of the monks, the Burmese governors tried to legitimate the new rule by publicly performing works of merit such as pagoda foundations, restorations, transfers of relics, constructions of monasteries, and donations to the *saṅghā* members. In 1802, the Burmese governor rebuilt the Mahamuni temple in Dhanyavati that had been ravaged by a fire at the time of the conquest.³³ Orally transmitted stories and stone inscriptions in Arakan testify to a considerable number of religious works that were initiated by the Burmese governors. Such inscriptions not only commemorated, in the name of the king, particular acts of piety but also recalled Bodawphaya's monastic reform program.³⁴

³² The religious practice of the nominally Buddhist Barua and Chakma communities of Chittagong and its mountainous hinterland, up to the eighteenth century, is generally described as a form of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism. The Arakanese monk Saramedha (1801-81), respectfully called "*sangharaja*" by the faithful of Akyab, was invited by Bengal Buddhists in 1856 to Pahartali-Mahamuni, a pilgrimage site in southeast Bengal, where a Mahamuni statue had been erected in 1813 by a Barua monk on his return from Arakan. With the support of the chief of the Chakma, Kalindi, Saramedha initiated a re-ordination of monks that marked the beginning of the *Sangharaja-nikaya*, the congregation of monks to which the majority of Chakma and Barua monks in Bangladesh belong today. Cf. Rabindra Bijay Barua, *The Theravada Sangha* (Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1978), Sitangshu Bikash Barua, *Buddhism in Bangladesh* (Chittagong: Prajna Printers, 1990), Heinz Bechert, "Zur Geschichte des Theravāda-Buddhismus in Ostbengalen." In *Beiträge zur Indienforschung—Ernst Waldschmidt zum 80. Geburtstag gewidmet* (Berlin: Museum für Indische Kunst, 1977).

³³ A short account of the four fires that allegedly ruined the site at the Mahamuni temple between 1760 and 1824 is found in S. R. Tickell, "Extracts from a Journal up the Koladyn River, Aracan, in 1851." *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 24: 98-9.

³⁴ The "Ramree inscription" in H. Esq. C. S. Walters, "Translation of an Inscription in Pali and Burma Languages on a Stone Slab from Ramavati (Ramree Island) in Araccan." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 3 (1834) and the "Inscription on a Stone formerly in a Temple at Ramree" in *Indochinois* 27 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscrits orientaux) are copies of the same inscription dated 1787 and record Bodawphaya's monastic reform missions. The "Translation of an Inscription on a Stone at Cheduba" in *Indochinois* 4: f°63-5 and *Indochinois* 28 commemorates the construction of religious edifices by its governor Letya Shwe-daung between 1795 and 1800; cf. the "Rammawadi Sittan" in Frank N. Trager/William J. Koenig, *Burmese Sittans (1764-1826): Records of*

Humiliation under the Burmese—Dereliction under the British

The forty years of Burmese rule were not a happy period for northern and central Arakan. Driven to despair by forced labor requirements and by the quantity of rice that the rural population had to contribute to Burma's war provisions, the Arakanese deserted their country in great numbers and took refuge in the British territories of south-east Bengal. Estimations vary, but contemporary British observers thought at times that over half of the population had fled their home-country. Many thousands settled in Cox's Bazaar, a settlement named after Hiram Cox, the officer who had been appointed to take care of the starving refugees in 1798-9. A number of them had no intention of going peacefully and some even committed atrocities before leaving Arakan. After 1795, the British authorities consistently refused to turn over rebels who had led raids into Arakan. Between 1810 and 1815, English administrators tolerated the raids by Chin Byan, an ambitious leader whose followers, numbering in the thousands, did not feel any remorse about ruining their homeland under the pretence of fighting the Burmese.³⁵ Both from a military and political perspective their fights were hopeless and the ruthless treatment of their own countrymen by chiefs such as Chin Byan serves as an illustration of the loss of ethnic

Rural Life and Administration (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1979). William Foley, "Journal of a Tour through the Island of Rambree, with a Geological Sketch of the Country, and Brief Account of the Customs, etc. of its Inhabitants." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 4 (1835): 204-5 mentions the large tanks and remarkable monasteries and pagodas built by the Burmese governors in Ramree. In 1821, governor Mingyi Kyawswa restored the tank between the second and third outer palace walls that had been built in the sixteenth century by King Min Phalaung, see E. Forchhammer, *Papers on Subjects Relating to the Archaeology of Burma* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1891): 17-9. The last Burmese governor, San Pyaw, is said to have repaired the Phara-baw pagoda in Mrauk-U. Regarding the repair of old religious buildings in Sandoway ordered by King Bodawphaya, see *ROB* 18 August 1787; on tanks, bridges, and rest houses constructed by Arakanese eunuchs, see *ROB* 20 July 1806.

³⁵ On the Arakanese settlements in southeast Bengal, see Lucien Bernot, *Les paysans arakanais du Pakistan oriental – L'histoire, le monde végétal, et l'organisation sociale des réfugiés marma (Mog)*. 2 vols. (Paris/La Haye: Mouton, 1967), G. E. Harvey, "Bayinnaung's Living Descendant: The Magh Bohmong," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 44,1 (1961); on the Arakanese refugees in the Chittagong area at the end of the eighteenth century, see B. R. Pearn, "King Bering," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 23,2 (1933), Captain W. White, *A Political History of the Extraordinary Events which led to the Burmese War* (London: W. Sams, 1827), Gangadharan Padmanabhan Ramachandra, "Anglo-Burmese relations 1795-1826." (University of Hull: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 1977).

links and social disruption. However, in their later representation of the events, colonial historians focused on the tribulations of the newly subjected Arakanese and the border conflicts between the British and the Burmese.³⁶ Arakanese nationalists occasionally overstate the facts when they speak of genocide. Though Burmese rule with its misguided policies severely affected life in Arakan, the new masters were never seriously challenged because the Arakanese rebels lacked efficient leaders and means to weaken the growing integration of Arakan into the Burmese kingdom. Containing less bad news after 1816, the sources even imply that the general situation in the country eventually improved.

When the British declared war on the Burmese on 5 March 1824, the magistrate of Chittagong took the initiative to raise a levy of men ("Mug battalion") in the Arakanese settlements who followed and supported the British at the time that their Indian sepoys entered Arakan.³⁷ In 1826, after the Treaty of Yandabo with the Burmese kingdom, Arakan remained in British hands and scores of Arakanese refugees returned from southern Chittagong to their native lands. Dealing with Arakan as if it were merely an extension of Bengal, the first generation of British officers failed to settle the country peacefully.³⁸ In 1824, the leaders of the Arakanese refugees were fooled into believing that the English would restore their kingdom. Soon after their return to Arakan, these men failed in their personal ambitions and ensuing political intrigues were unsuccessful.³⁹ Although these circumstances did not lead to a popular revolt, the overall misery bred discontent and crime along the trade roads to Burma. Between 1826 and 1840, the population was further impoverished by a mistaken taxation policy which was based on a revenue settlement that did not correspond with the local traditions. This entailed considerable hardship for the common lot of the Arakanese rice farmers. But the increasingly stable political

³⁶ Harvey, *History of Burma*: 280-3.

³⁷ Shwe San Bu, "The Arakan Mug Battalion." *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 13 (1923): 129-35 and E. H. L. Seppings, "Arakan a Hundred Years Ago and Fifty Years Later." *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 15 (1925): 53-72.

³⁸ Jacques P. Leider, "Arakan around 1830—Social Distress and Political Instability in the Early British Period." *Arakanese Research Journal (Bangladesh)* 2: 5-24.

³⁹ According to Siri Okkantha, there were monks who "assisted in the pacification, others took part in the rebellions." He characterizes the early British period as one "of considerable religious disorder and indiscipline so far as the saṅghā was concerned," but quotes no sources for this allegation; see Siri Okkantha, "History of Buddhism in Arakan." (University of Calcutta: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 1990): 121.

conditions under British rule were, on the other hand, also favorable to a demographic recovery. After the second Anglo-Burmese War (1852) and the annexation of Lower Burma, Arakan was in even further danger of becoming a backwater of British India, slumbering in the shadows of bustling Bengal and the truncated kingdom of Burma where King Mindon pushed a reform agenda against the odds in order to modernize the administration of the country.⁴⁰

The major interest of the *East India Company* in Arakan lay in the extension of rice cultivation in the Kaladan and Lemro valleys. This plan succeeded because of the scores of Bengal Muslim laborers who had been imported from Chittagong and in the middle of the nineteenth century, Akyab, the new capital, had indeed become a major port of export of rice for Europe. But apart from this commercial growth, there are few to no reasons to glorify the British rule in nineteenth-century Arakan. One of the rare sources which provides information on this period is the *Report on the Progress Made in the Arakan Division from 1826 to 1869*. Being a somewhat disparate collection of administrative papers, this document ironically illustrates how the British colonizers did little else than maintain public order and exploit the country's agricultural resources, while they did nothing to further the economic and social development of the country.

As no road, no bridge, nor canal had been built in fifty years, one officer concluded that the "Government (with all due respect be it said) has done so very little for the improvement of Arakan, that the people have had but scant opportunity of seeing, for instance, what English engineering can do for a country, . . . how we can improve land; how we can reclaim swamps; how irrigate, . . . multiply the comforts of life and develop and increase the sources of wealth." The disregard of the British for modernization was unfortunately coupled with a keen sense of raising more government revenue by introducing hitherto forbidden alcoholic drinks and opium. This development had a pernicious effect on Arakan's Buddhist society and drug addiction became a curse which ruined public morals and disrupted social relations on a large scale. Writing in 1869, one assistant commissioner stated that "full one half of the male population between the ages of 17 and 35 are opium-eaters and/or smokers, and [. . .] full one half of these principally exist on the earnings of the other portion of the population not by gifts but by thefts." His observations led him to conclude that "the

⁴⁰ Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset Press, 1962); Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*.

natural result of this state of thing is, that the population must degenerate year by year, and eventually become useless to themselves and the world around them. The people who were a honest, hardworking and truthful people when the British Government took the place, are now, so far as the opium eaters and smokers especially are concerned, the very opposite of their fathers...⁴¹ Such a degree of self-abandonment suggests that a large part of the population had been demoralized by the collapse of the ancient political order and the ensuing loss of social values. However, the lack of in-depth research on nineteenth-century Arakanese society prevents us at this moment from further investigating the questions that this gloomy picture entails.

This short description of the political, social, and economic circumstances in Arakan under the Burmese and early British regimes broadly sketches a historical background that may help us to create an image of the position and development of Arakanese Buddhism in those times of subjection to foreign rule. But they also provide a framework for analyzing the use of Buddhist categories in order to express and defend Arakanese ethnicity and religious identity.

Exploring the State of Arakanese Buddhism in Troubled Times

Unlike Burma, Arakan does not boast the type of religious chronicles that provide a more or less coherent—though often artificially coherent—description of the lineages of the monkhood including its hagiography, the occasional monastic reforms, and records of donations to royal monasteries. Unfortunately, there are no collections of *metta-sa* (submissions to the king) which, like in Burma, could offer a wealth of source material for exploring religious questions and points of debate. Drawing on the social and political context, the historian of Arakan thus has to resort to a body of Western and local sources in order to piece together a picture of Arakanese Buddhism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

After 1750, the authority of the Arakanese kings declined steadily because the rulers lacked sufficient revenues to support the navy which had functioned as the backbone of their power since the early seventeenth century. Political life at the court in these days was characterized by contests of

⁴¹ *Report on the Progress Made in the Arakan Division from 1826 to 1869* (Rangoon: Government Stationery, 1870): 11, 47.

power among the elite, chronic break-downs of central control, and intermittent revivals of the power exercised by the king.⁴² Although the *saṅghā*, the core Buddhist institution of learning and religious tradition, did not always need a king to flourish—Buddhism did quite well in British Burma (1852-86) and in other places without political interference or royal protection⁴³—it cannot do without a stable village society with an economic surplus which would ensure the continuity of monastic life and learning (*kyaung* in Burmese denotes both a “monastery” and a “school”). In the decades preceding the Burmese conquest of 1785, Buddhist institutions and practice had already suffered. Bearing in mind that the annual cycle of court ceremonies, celebrations, and donations served as a model for village elites, political instability did not bode well for the royal support of the monkhood or for the very existence of village monasteries. Over the twenty years that preceded the Burmese conquest, the Arakanese chronicle recorded a constant deterioration of the political order. The increase of violence was accompanied by a loss of social norms: bands of pretenders to the throne roamed the countryside, villages were burnt to the ground, pagodas were destroyed, and reliquaries desecrated.⁴⁴ In an intimidating letter of 12 September 1774, King Sinbyushin (1763-76) asked Arakan’s Candasumanaraja (1773-7) why he, unlike other kings, did not submit although he knew that the Burmese armies had even crushed the Chinese invaders.⁴⁵ Candasumanaraja replied that Arakan was a country in which the Buddha had left famous relics and had appointed the Mahamuni to protect his teaching; the king of Burma should therefore, like other kings,

⁴² I have summarized the eighteenth-century Arakanese chronicle account in Jacques P. Leider, “An Account of Arakan Written at Islaamabad (Chittagong) in June 1777 by Major R. E. Roberts—Présentation et Commentaire.” *Aséanie* 3 (1999).

⁴³ The matter of Buddhism in Lower Burma in the early colonial period is a controversial issue and calls for a more extensive discussion than can be undertaken here. As an example of a contrary view to my own appreciation, let me cite Edward Sladen, a British officer, as quoted by Harvey, *British Rule in Burma*: 26. Sladen wrote in 1884: “The result . . . is that the power of the priesthood to regulate church affairs is almost nil, their influence for good has vastly deteriorated, and Buddhism . . . is broken up into numerous sects and schisms. [...] The worst of it is, that the members of all these sects divide themselves socially as well as religiously. . . .”

⁴⁴ *CL*: vol. 2: 261-96.

⁴⁵ Yingcong Dai, “A Disguised Defeat: The Myanmar Campaign of the Qing Dynasty.” *Modern Asian Studies* 38,1 (2004), gives an excellent overview of the Sino-Burmese wars of the late 1760s.

pay obeisance to him since he was the lord of such an important country. Even in those days in which the power of the Arakanese kings was but a shadow of its former greatness and the survival of the kingdom itself was under immediate threat, Arakan's claim to being a "Buddha-land" was invoked and the Mahamuni was viewed as its supernatural bulwark.⁴⁶

How did the Arakanese, after the conquest, respond to the loss of the Mahamuni and the de-legitimizing of their tradition? According to oral tradition, the Arakanese laypeople refused to offer food to the Burmese missionary monks so that they had to break the rules and cook food for themselves. People further responded by flat out refusing to acknowledge the manifest evidence. Together with the transport of the Mahamuni statue to Upper Burma, the legend was born that the Burmese had been unable to take away the real Mahamuni statue which had refused to follow the conquerors. In his chronicle of Arakan written in 1846, Nga Me notes the existence of manuscripts which described how the statue, when taken to a raft by the Burmese, had fallen into the river. The statue recovered by the Burmese from the bottom of the water was *not*, they claimed, the true Mahamuni.⁴⁷ It is further noteworthy that the Mahamuni temple in Dhanyavati was not abandoned and pilgrims kept on visiting the site. As has been mentioned earlier, it was even put under repair by a Burmese governor. A Buddha statue replaced the one taken away by the Burmese and, judging by its popularity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the statue has successfully established a solid reputation of its own. This sanctuary benefited from a belief that may be called a rationale for the

⁴⁶ *CL*: vol. 2: 276-80. It is true though that Arakan was, in the eighteenth century, not only a country of Buddhists and Buddhist standards. There were villages on the Upper Kaladan and in Ramree that were predominantly inhabited by Muslims of Bengali origins; the chronicle refers to "Indian" (partly of Persian or Turkish origin) and "Mon" chiefs who were descendants of prisoners of war or mercenaries. By 1750 they had most probably been arakanized. Diverse systems of beliefs coexisted in pre-colonial Arakan and although we know little of their cohabitation, we assume that social cohesiveness depended on a hierarchically constructed political order.

⁴⁷ Candamalalankara, an Arakanese monk who wrote the standard compilation of Arakanese historiography with comments (the *Rakhaing Mahayazawindawgyi*) in the early twentieth century, generally follows Nga Me's chronicle, but conceded that, as far as one could learn about the statue seen in Mandalay, it was indeed the real Mahamuni, see *CL*: vol. 2: 310. On Arakanese historiography, see Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie* and Jacques P. Leider, "The Emergence of Rakhine Historiography—A Challenge for Myanmar Historical Research." In *Myanmar Historical Commission Conference Proceedings*, ed. Myanmar Historical Commission (Yangon: Universities Historical Research Center, 2005).

dissemination of sanctity. Some Buddha representations in the wider region inhabited by ethnic Arakanese (i.e. Arakan proper and the southern district of Chittagong)—such as the statue in Dhanyavati and the one in Chitmoron (in Arakanese: Sein-Mraung), a major pilgrimage place of the Marma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts—are *mahakyan*, which means that they were allegedly made from the metal that was left over (*kyan*) when, at the time of the visit of Lord Buddha to Arakan, the original Mahamuni statue was made. The absence and the transmutation of the Mahamuni were thus countered by legends that denied the reality of the theft or preserved a link between the land and the original myth through iconic substitutes.

Arakanese chronicles contain very little information on the Arakanese *saṅghā* and leave us in the dark as far as local monastic lineages are concerned. We therefore know relatively few things about internal debates on and practical consequences of the Burmese conquest for the Arakanese *saṅghā*. Ashin Candamalalankara's critique of King Bodawphaya's interference in the monastic tradition of Arakan only went as far as the forced disrobing and re-ordaining of monks, a procedure which was also used to overturn the monastic hierarchy.⁴⁸ As the Burmese monks who were sent to Arakan were there on missionary tours, they returned to Burma at the end of their mission and were relayed by other monks. The evidence at hand does not suggest that the former religious elite was replaced by a new one. It rather seems that the Arakanese monks who had stayed and studied at the capital for decades introduced on their return to Arakan a stricter observance of discipline, Pali studies, and probably also a uniform dress code. Candamalalankara, the authoritative compiler of the *Rakhaing Mahayazawingyi*, was undoubtedly an Arakanese patriot, but he was also a monk who had been educated amidst the late nineteenth-century Upper Burman monkhood of self-imbued Theravadin scholar-monks.

British officers and American missionaries were the first Westerners to describe the people of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century and they draw a picture of Arakan's Buddhism that is in marked contrast with the rest of Burma. To my mind, this matter also reflects on the society

⁴⁸) The most senior monk is the one who can boast the longest uninterrupted time in monkhood. Disrobing annulled anterior seniority; thus, if younger, politically more compliant monks were first re-ordained, they were *illico* promoted to the top of the monastic hierarchy. Candamalalankara dates the forced re-ordination of Arakanese monks to early 1788. *CL*: vol. 2: 340.

at large which had suffered from the end of monarchical rule and decades of violence and insecurity.

Lieutenant William Foley's "Journal of a Tour through the Island of Rambree, with a Geological Sketch of the Country, and Brief Account of the Customs, etc. of its Inhabitants," presented to the Asiatic Society in 1834, gives short descriptions of Arakanese Buddhist practices and offers an altogether sympathetic account of Buddhism. The author briefly portrays the daily lives of the monks, their quest for food, their dress and outer appearance, their "extremely rigid" discipline, their courteousness, and hospitality. While evoking the voluntary nature of monasticism, he explains that young men took the monastic garb "either from a religious feeling or for the purpose of performing some expiatory service" being enabled to do so "through the assistance of some persons who deem it an act of piety to defray the expenses consequent to their ordination." Although he is positive about the monks and introduces a few notions on Buddhist cosmology, Foley also refers to the superstitions of the Arakanese that were "part and parcel of this benighted land." He writes: "Was I to credit all that is said of ghosts and goblins, it would appear wonderful how this poor people contrived to pass through life unscathed."⁴⁹ Foley's kind description stands in marked contrast with the accounts of three Baptist missionaries of the *American Board for Foreign Missions*: G. S. Comstock's "Notes on Arakan," Howard Malcolm's *Travels in Southeastern Asia, Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China; with Notices of Numerous Missionary Stations, and a Full Account of the Burma Empire*, and Robert Robinson's biographical sketch of John Christopher Fink published as *Among the Mughs or Memorials of the Rev. J. C. Fink, Missionary in Arracan*.⁵⁰ Their

⁴⁹ Foley, "Journal of a Tour through the Island of Rambree": 30, 86. A comprehensive study of the Arakanese spirit cult is given in Mersan, "Espace rituel et reconstruction de la localité": 222-335.

⁵⁰ G. S. Comstock lived as a missionary in Arakan from 1834 to 1844. H. Malcolm visited Arakan in 1836 during a deputation to Baptist missions all over Asia. John Christopher Fink was a Dutch missionary from Ternate who started to live among the Arakanese refugees in the southern district of Chittagong after 1821. He lived in Arakan from 1825 to 1838. See Robinson, *Among the Mughs: passim*, Comstock, "Notes on Arakan": 238-40, and Howard Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia, Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China; with Notices of Numerous Missionary Stations, and a Full Account of the Burma Empire* (London: G. Routledge & Co, 1848): 146-7 for the following quotations. The term "Mugh," "Mug," or "Magh" is a common Bengali word of unknown origin used to refer to the Arakanese who resent its use; see Bernot, *Les paysans arakanaïs du Pakistan oriental*: 47-54.

descriptions are often richer than the more scholarly accounts found in other contemporary publications that focus mostly on Buddhist doctrines. Since the missionaries were competitors in the same trade, they had a more professional and pragmatic look on Buddhist practice and education than other authors.

Fink thought that “the influence of Boodhism is sensibly on the decline while no other system takes its place.” Commenting on Fink’s experience, Malcolm writes:

Though the Arracanese are Boodhists and as tenacious of their system as others, yet they seem less devoted to its prescribed observances. Little money or time is spent in religion. I saw no pagoda in the province, except a small one, left half built, near Akyab; nor any person carrying offerings, or attending to his religion in any other way. The *kyoungs* which I saw are but wretched huts.

Comstock further notes that “the days of worship of which there are four in every month, one at each quarter of the moon, are observed by very few in Arakan and the same may be said in reference of all the Boodhist rites.” He could state three reasons “to account for the decay of Boodhism”: “Idolatry flourishes only when supported by the Government,” and this, he remarks, was no more the case under the British government; “as every man is secure in the possession of all he has” [which had not been the case under the Burmese administration], “the people prefer to invest their money in trade;” finally, “the lack of confidence and interest in the religion of Gautama, clearly [is] discernible more and more among the people.” “On the whole Boodhism is evidently far from flourishing in Arakan, [t]here are, *however*, about six hundred Poongees [monks] . . . in the province for whom the inhabitants erect comfortable dwellings . . . sufficient for their comfortable support.” Comstock’s conclusion is thus somewhat ambiguous and raises the question if the missionaries were merely speaking out their vain hopes and wishes to see Christianity triumph in Arakan or if there was some grain of truth in their description. These missionaries knew either indirectly through fellow missionaries such as the famous Adoniram Judson⁵¹ or through direct experience about the flourishing

⁵¹ On Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), his missionary associates, his equally famous wife Ann, and the American Baptist mission in Burma, see Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1883), Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Mission for Life: The Story of the Family of Adoniram Judson, the Dramatic Events of the First American Foreign Mission, and the Course of Evangelical Religion in the Nineteenth Century*

situation of Buddhism in Burma itself, and Arakan did not compare favorably in that regard. Comstock argues that “the Mugs [Arakanese] are more ignorant and superstitious than the Burmese” and [that they] “are far more parcimonious in expending money in honor of Gautama than their neighbours on the eastern side of the mountains [*i.e.* the Arakan Yoma dividing Arakan and Burma].” One may comment on this by recalling that decades of political disorder and economic oppression could explain that there was still little material surplus in the 1830s and 1840s to invest in religious works of merit. “In the mute majesty of decay stood the lone *jedi*,” writes Captain S. R. Tickell on his trip to the Upper Kaladan, while passing the famous pagoda of Urittaung that had also caught the eye of the first Portuguese travellers three hundred years earlier.⁵² Mrauk U’s old pagodas had indeed been left in abandonment and were overgrown by the jungle until some restoration work was done in the early twentieth century. Johan Fink, says Malcolm, saw only three pagodas built in the whole district of Akyab between 1825 and 1836.

The accounts further mention the traditional schooling offered to the young boys during their stay in the monastery. Although Robinson describes it merely in terms of a challenge for the missionaries who could not provide free education on a similar level⁵³ and Foley praises it as a system that did not make a distinction between rich and poor,⁵⁴ Comstock presents an altogether negative conclusion on Arakan’s system of education while comparing it with Burma:

... they are far less inquisitive and intelligent than the Burmese. The proportion of men here who cannot read is far greater than in Burma. Intelligent Burmese have told me that in their country nine out of every ten can read; in Arakan, I should think, that less than one half of the men can read, and am not sure that one fourth can.⁵⁵

This lack of literacy is basically explained by the low number of village monasteries and monks in Arakan. The percentage of monks in the general population was decidedly lower than in Burma and it was apparently even lower than in Tenasserim, a region that had similarly suffered during

(New York: Free Press, 1980), and Stacy Reuben Warburton, *Eastward: The Story of Adoniram Judson* (New York: Round Table Press, 1937).

⁵² Tickell, “Extracts from a Journal up the Koladyn River”: 89.

⁵³ Robinson, *Among the Mughs*: 29-30, 84-6.

⁵⁴ Foley, “Journal of a Tour through the Island of Rambree”: 31.

⁵⁵ Comstock, “Notes on Arakan”: 241-2.

Bodawphaya's reign (1782-1819).⁵⁶ Based on estimations and calculations found in Malcolm's and Comstock's accounts (dating to 1836 and 1841 respectively), we find that in the whole of Arakan the ratio of monks in the general population was no more than 0,24% and in the district of Akyab, where more than half of the Arakanese population lived, it was even as low as 0,16%. By comparison, the ratio in Tavoy was 1,59%.⁵⁷ According to Arthur P. Phayre's *Account of Arakan* which documents the administrative situation in 1840-1, the whole province counted 960 villages.⁵⁸ Apart from the fact that there may have been villages that were entirely populated by the descendants of Bengali Muslim slaves on the Upper Kaladan—although it was actually more common that the village population was mixed—one could reasonably assume that, just like in Burma, each village had at least one monastery with a permanently residing monk so as to give the lay people the opportunity to make merit. But this was definitely not the case in Arakan at the time. Reverend Comstock, who can be characterized as a credible source since he lived ten years in Arakan (1834-44), gives the number of six hundred *pongyis* (monks) for the whole of Arakan. But it is very well possible that this figure may even have been too high. Although Malcolm reports that in Ramree "which is the Episcopal residence and religious metropolis of all Arracan, there are no more than two hundred," Comstock documents 214 as the number of teaching monks for the whole district of Akyab.⁵⁹ They additionally had no more than 1066 "scholars,"

⁵⁶ Tenasserim had once more become a Burmese province in 1793. Its mixed population was severely oppressed during the years when Bodawphaya invaded Siam (1785; 1809-10) and tried to extend Burma's control over the southern trade; see Sunait Chutintaranond, "Myanmar Southward Political Extension of the Early Konbaung Kings." In *MHC Conference Proceedings* Part 1, ed. Myanmar Historical Commission (Yangon: Universities Historical Research Center, 2005). But Tenasserim never was an independent kingdom and, in comparison with Arakan, lacks the profile of a geographically coherent history. This may also have been the reason why the suffering of its population has never been represented in the categorical terms that historians of Arakan have used. But in both regions, a large, if not the largest part of the population fled (in this case to Siam) when Burmese generals oppressed the local Mon population. According to Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*: 45, Mergui numbered, as a district, only ten thousand people, but this was only because forty to fifty thousand had fled to Siam due to Burmese oppression!

⁵⁷ Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*: 45.

⁵⁸ Arthur P. Phayre, "Account of Arakan." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2 (1841): 679-712.

⁵⁹ Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*: 146. The important role of men from the island of Ramree in Arakan's political and religious history of the eighteenth and nineteenth

which is a meagre total indeed. Visiting the ancient Mahamuni shrine near Kyauktaw in 1851, Captain Tickell found only two “officiating” monks and he speculated that the place was “not much coveted as a ‘cure’ by the yellow robed sacerdotals who find more gain at Akyab itself.”⁶⁰ But it should be noted that while the old administrative center of Mrauk-U was declining, Akyab, the new capital, did not actually count more than twenty monks in 1836. Compare the “wretched huts” the American preacher saw in Arakan with his description of the monasteries in Moulmein (Tenasserim) that were *flourishing* under the same indifferent English rule in Arakan:

Still Boodhism is as yet by no means a neglected system. New pagodas are making their appearances in different parts of the city; there are twenty-nine *kyoungs* [monasteries], containing somewhat more than five hundred priests, including novitiates, who are plentifully supported. The *kyoungs* are vastly superior to the dwellings of the common people, and some of them are situated in delightful groves with ample grounds. Here and there is a sacred banyan-tree, carefully nurtured, and occasionally lighted with lamps at night. In the city and suburbs are seventy-eight pagodas.⁶¹

True, all things considered, even in Arakan, Buddhism had not lost all its vigour. As a result of the dissemination of a more orthodox brand of Buddhism, monks such as the Venerable Saramedha exemplified the renewed appeal to monastic discipline and Pali textual studies. But on the other hand, Arakanese Buddhism had been impoverished and had diminished due to several decades of disorder, oppression, and neglect. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Arakanese Buddhists, monks, and laypeople alike, may also have suffered from the opprobrium of being subjected to non-Buddhist rulers who did not care to uphold Buddhist morality, check monastic discipline, or sponsor the monkhood.

The Monastic Reform Movement

Reaching back to the eighteenth century, the monastic reform movement emerged among leading monastic circles and Buddhist courts to put greater

centuries is noteworthy. The religious center Malcolm refers to here is the Sam-khyaung monastery whose head monk belonged to the *Kam gaing* and officiated as the superior of the monks in southern Arakan since the reign of King Bodawphaya.

⁶⁰ Tickell, “Extracts from a Journal up the Koladyn River”: 98.

⁶¹ Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*: 48.

emphasis on the observation of the *vinaya* rules and the textual acquisition of the scriptures by the monks. In Burma, the inclination for more discipline and higher textual knowledge produced court-supported policies in the field of monastic education, new *gaings*,⁶² and campaigns of monastic re-ordination. The reform movement developed in various forms in Sri Lanka, Burma, and the Thai countries and it took on quasi-nationalist colors which reflected the pride of one's own brand of excellence in the adherence to Buddhist orthodoxy. Among Burmese monks and laity, the pride of having well preserved the true *dhamma* nurtured the well-known and extremely common belief that Burma was a mainstay of the *sāsana* and a country that had been favored by the Buddha.⁶³

Historically, the reform movement was first of all an internal process of change and adaptation, but it gained pace with the exposure to the challenges posed by Western colonialism.⁶⁴ It thus provoked a crisis of identity and at the same time prepared the ground for a new process of identity building.

As regions and countries grew closer to each other, and as monks from Sri Lanka, Arakan, and Burma—all countries belonging to the same British Empire—traveled to various parts of the wider “Theravada-land,” there emerged a sense of unity which was also perceptible in Pali textual studies and in a shared sense of “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy.” However, at the same time, there seems to have been a rivalry between fellow Buddhist

⁶² A *gaing* is a monastic group formed around a spiritual leader, often the founder of a monastery which is sometimes established in dissidence with other monks. Members are essentially bound by the community of formal monastic acts and distinct disciplinary interpretations rather than particular doctrinal views.

⁶³ Kirichenko, “History in the Retrospect of Discipline.”

⁶⁴ For Sri Lanka, see K. M. da Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (London: Hurst, 1981); Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley, 1976); Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); for Burma, see Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*; for Siam, see Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in Thailand* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1986) and Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*. The impact of Christian missions and ideas on discussions in the Theravada Buddhist countries and emerging Buddhist movements can also be referred to in this context; see Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, “Fragen zum Problem des chronologischen Verhältnisses des buddhistischen Modernismus in Ceylon und Birma.” In *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries*, ed. H. Bechert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978b): 127-8 in which he compares developments in Sri Lanka and Burma.

countries to prove that their textual tradition and monastic lineages had always been in line with the “original” Buddhist teaching which could be traced through the Mahavihara tradition of Sri Lanka. In Burma and Siam, the twin efforts of King Mindon and King Mongkut to reform the monkhood invigorated the textual tradition and led to the boasting of Pali learning. Although such reform efforts were always local and not connected in their implementation, they in fact stretched beyond “political” borders and particular interests in an increasingly connected world.

After the convening of the Fifth Buddhist Synod by King Mindon (1853-78), the pride in having reviewed the Canon and inscribed it on marble stones stimulated the emergence of nationalist strains in Burmese Buddhism.⁶⁵ The increased opportunities for exchanges with monks from Sri Lanka and Siam were positively thought-provoking as far as matters of discipline and text tradition were concerned, but they also produced a spirit of competition regarding leadership in the Buddhist Theravada world.

Traditional accounts of the initial contacts of Burma with the teaching of the Buddha suffer from the fact that Buddhism obviously did not successfully take root in those early days. They state that the Enlightened One himself had visited the country at the invitation of a local, Shin Punna, that relics of the Buddha had been kept for centuries (cf. Tapussa/Bhallika and the foundation myth of the Shwedagon and its sister pagodas such as the Sule and Botathaung in Yangon), and that King Ashoka’s missionaries (Sona and Uttara) had come to Burma to propagate the teaching. Clear lines of monastic and textual transmission are difficult to retrace but later

⁶⁵ The convening of a Buddhist synod at Mandalay by King Mindon, which earned him the title *pañcama-sanghayana-pyu-min* (“king who convened the fifth council”), and the erection of 729 marble tablets containing the full Canon (finished in 1868) are linked to the king’s aim of properly preserving the scriptures. Generally speaking there was an insistence on textual knowledge: a monk was considered to be a good monk if he could recite the scriptures and was able to follow the full set of rules because he could recite them perfectly. Another important objective of organizing the monkhood hierarchically and introducing a system of examinations (the *pathama-pyan*) was to gain a better control of the monks. However positive the effects of the reform movement may be viewed, it also led to a bureaucratization of the monkhood and, with its focus on the memorization of Pali texts, it strongly influenced the common understanding of what Buddhist knowledge meant. The creation of reform *gaings* such as the Shwegyin, the Dwaya (with its division into Maha- and Muladwaya), and the Hnget-twin has to be seen as a separate development of the reform movement which was partly linked to the particular political situation in Lower Burma under the British after 1852.

religious chronicles such as the *Vamsadipani*, the *Sasanalinkaya-satam*, and the *Sasanavamsappadipika* emphatically stress master-pupil lineages that were all somehow tied to the key story of the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Upper Burma: the mission of Shin Araham to Pagan and the support he enjoyed from King Anawratha (eleventh century). In short, although Burmese chronicles had no difficulty in explaining the genesis of Theravada Buddhism in Burma, they do not in any way mention Arakan, the neighboring kingdom.

We can easily imagine that Arakanese Buddhist monks who came for monastic training and higher education to Ava around 1850 or to Mandalay in 1860 or 1870 may have felt uncomfortable about the fact that Arakan was completely left out in a general picture that was dominated by unrivaled Burmese claims. The monastic reform movement which was so highly-praised in Burma in all likelihood undermined the self-confidence of Arakanese monks and the sense of their own Buddhist identity. In these times when Burmese monks felt superior to all other Theravadin monks, what kind of credentials could an Arakanese provide to defend the historical record of Buddhism in Arakan as there were no local chronicles at hand and the history of Arakanese Buddhism had received no mention in standard Burmese royal chronicles? What argument could be brought forward in the eyes of the faithful to bolster the international reputation of the staunchly Buddhist Arakanese? In the next section I will argue that an anonymous nineteenth-century text entitled *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan* can be interpreted as a response to these challenges.

The *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan*

In the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan* dated Buddhist era 2316, i.e. AD 1872, its unknown author, most likely a monk, makes the unexpected statement that Arakan had helped to preserve the continuity of the Buddhist religion in the land that the Theravadins respected as the cradle of the written canonical tradition, that is Sri Lanka.⁶⁶ The text could either have been written in Arakan itself or in Upper Burma.

⁶⁶ On Sri Lanka's relations with Southeast Asia between 1000 AD and 1500, see W. M. Sirisena, *Sri Lanka and South-East Asia Political, Religious and Cultural Relations from AD c. 1000 to c. 1500* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); no mention is made by Sirisena of relations between Sri Lanka and Arakan. For the Pagan period in particular, see G. H. Luce, "Some Old References to the South of Burma and Ceylon." In *Felicitations Volumes of Southeast Asian*

At this point, the Buddha's own words consecrate a crucial link between the *saṅghā* and the temporal power that made the survival of the *sāsana* dependent on benevolent kings:

He saw King Candasuriya [of Dhanyavati] who was a donator [king] and had been his friend [in former lives] and decided to go [and see him]. (^f*kû*)

⁶⁷¹ “Mahavihika” or “Mahavihimka” is a term which is used to refer to Arakan that appears only after the conquest of Arakan by the Burmese in 1785, for example in the Burmese *Konbaungzet Mahayazawin* by Maung Maung Tin: vol. 2: 26. It cannot be traced in older Arakanese accounts. We may possibly ascribe it to King Bodawphaya’s taste for “classic” sounding names which he applied to the various domains of his realm.

Next our author uses merely two sentences to refer to the Buddha's journey to Arakan—in the company of five hundred followers who moved in flying pavilions which had been offered by the god Sakka—and the establishment of the *sāsana*. Following a request from King Candasuriya, the Buddha accepts to have a life-size statue made of himself, the Mahamuni, which functioned as a palladium for the Arakanese kings as described above.⁶⁸ Since the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan* was probably meant for a predominantly Arakanese audience, there was no need to elaborate on this well known story. Our author's text concludes this part with the Buddha's return to India and the *parinibbana* and immediately turns to King Ashoka's Buddhist missions to various countries. As we know, Arakan is not mentioned among these.⁶⁹ But in the eyes of our anonymous author, there was indeed no need to receive new missions as "the *sāsana* had already been spread by the Buddha himself." Reading between the lines, we have to understand that this direct transmission guaranteed that the *dhamma*, the Buddha's teaching, would not be corrupted or altered in Arakan and that the religion would not be destroyed.

This last point becomes clear when our author abruptly turns our attention to the four instances in which, as he states, Arakanese kings helped their Sinhalese counterparts to reinstate the *sāsana* in Sri Lanka.

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Arakanese monk leader</i>	<i>Sinhalese king</i>	<i>Arakanese king</i>
1	AD 82	Jina-Man-Aung and 12 monks	n.a.	Suriyasiri
2	AD 1207	Atula-Vijaya and 16 monks	n.a.	Dasaraja
3	AD 1273	Uttaradhamma and 36 monks	n.a.	Nga Ran-Man-Raja
4	AD 1481	Siddhat-thana and 50 monks	n.a.	Bhasaw-phru

Four times in Sri Lankan history, "Indians holding wrong beliefs" (*micchayū-mha kye:-kulā:*) destroyed the *sāsana* and each time, noble Sinhalese

⁶⁸) Maung Maung Tin, *History of Mandalay Mahamuni* (Yangon: 2004).

⁶⁹) Thai and Burmese Buddhist chroniclers had identified countries mentioned in the Sinhalese *Mahavamsa* chronicle such as "Yonaka" or "Suvannabhumi" with the land of the Thai or the Mon and "Aparanta" with Upper Burma. Curiously enough, Candamalankara equated "Mahimsaka" with Arakan in his *Rakhaing Mahayazawindawgyi*, published in 1931, but in a geographical treatise of India published in 1920, the *Jambudipa-Indiya-nay Pum-kyam*, he had rejected such fanciful identifications, see Candamalankara, *Jambudipa-Indiya-nay Pum-kyam*.

kings rose up and appealed to Arakan to send monks to spread the *sāsana* as it had been preserved in that country.

Beyond these stereotypical explanations on the renaissance and the survival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, our text does not provide any details on the missions. As I will explain below, exchanges of monastic missions between Arakan and Sri Lanka were a historical reality. But the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana in Arakan* is a poor and superficial source for exploring that subject; it looks as if the author did not have the least interest to provide his audience with historical details and names. He finishes his presentation by stating in an authoritative manner that “ancient Arakanese chronicles and histories tell us these facts.” However, the first mission can barely claim a historical character as this period of Arakanese history is still shrouded in mystery. The second and third missions meet with faint confirmations in other sources, as we will see below. Although we do not have any details concerning the fourth mission, it is confirmed by the Arakanese chronicle tradition and fits into the better known context of Arakan’s early modern history.

However, the main interest of this text is not solely connected to the question of how true its claims are. It is noteworthy because it tries to outdo Burmese and other discourses concerning the legitimacy of the local Buddhist tradition: it establishes the integrity of the Buddhist tradition in Arakan and underlines the kingdom’s status as a stronghold of the Buddha’s teaching. Obviously, the date of its writing is a matter of concern. The text moreover contests the generally acknowledged role of Sri Lanka as the country that had guarded the original teaching of the Buddha and it conveys two core messages.

(1) The Buddha had come to Arakan because he wanted to establish a community of faithful followers who would preserve his teaching in a safe environment as India (or *Majjhimadesa* here including Sri Lanka) had failed to offer one. A nineteenth-century Buddhist audience would have known that Buddhism had disappeared from India and had met with trouble in Sri Lanka. The fact that the Buddha had come to Arakan would not have raised anyone’s eyebrows; the Enlightened One had not merely left relics behind that could have remained hidden or a so-called footstep (*buddhapada*) to commemorate his visit, but he had consecrated a life-size image of himself which he had called his “younger brother” and had promised that it would remain until the period of five thousand years had elapsed. The many miracles ascribed to the Mahamuni strengthened the claims of its sanctity. A

contemporary Burmese or Arakanese audience would undoubtedly have been familiar with this information. Bypassing the fact that the Mahamuni had been requested to leave (read: taken away) after an invitation (read: conquest) of the Burmese king in 1785, the author meaningfully connects two separate facts, namely the continuity of Buddhism in Arakan and its decline in India. It was the Buddha himself who had foreseen these developments and had wisely provided for the survival of the *sāsana*. We are thus offered a message of comfort and reassurance about Arakanese Buddhism in general and Arakan's pivotal role in its transmission.

(2) The proof that orthodox Buddhism had been faithfully transmitted in Arakan is provided by the fact that virtuous donor kings from Sri Lanka appealed to Arakan to re-establish the *sāsana*. This second message is corroborated by some historic evidence as well as the historicity of relations between Sri Lanka and Arakan which can be dealt with as a matter of fact. However, these relations are presented in the text as radically one-sided: Arakan was the giver and Sri Lanka merely functioned as the receiver. Such a portrayal of affairs is astonishing and does not conform to the Arakanese chronicle tradition itself which refers to missions during which Arakanese monks were to collect copies of the *Tipitaka* in Sri Lanka. This thus shows that our author did not feel any need to balance or adjust his message but apparently merely wanted to counter the Sinhalese claims of seniority in religious matters.

The first message seems to discard any criticism that the Buddhist teaching in Arakan could not claim a direct connection with the Buddha and thus implied that Arakanese monks did not need any lessons from the Burmese Theravadin monks. The second message deals with the important relationship with Sri Lanka and establishes Arakan's superiority with regard to the country that had produced the written Pali Canon. Although to our modern ears, the naïve claims of the *Explanation* sound hollow, the question nevertheless remains, how did the author try to further the credibility of his claims with his audience? Like other apocryphal texts, this text proceeds by means of non-contradiction from the authorized canonical tradition: the biography of the Buddha is impeccable and the core message is embedded in an orthodox discourse. Moreover—similar again to other apocryphals—the text does not seek controversy: it neither criticizes nor rejects other perspectives. It does not contest any other claims; it merely states its own. This self-absorbed quality of the text makes it likely that the author was first of all addressing a home audience. His home-oriented mes-

sages could be understood and appreciated by an audience of Arakanese monks who would have welcomed them because they fitted pre-existing expectations and already well-established notions. With regard to our erstwhile question, we can briefly summarize that at the time when the Burmese monks eagerly portrayed Burma as a mainstay of Buddhist religion—thus disregarding Arakan's part in the propagation of the *dhamma*—an Arakanese author juxtaposed a similar claim for Arakan and championed an even broader message by invoking the Buddha's stay in Arakan and the Arakanese monastic missions to Sri Lanka.

As has become clear from the preceding discussion, neither Arakan nor Arakanese monks figure in the Burmese monastic chronicles. Nor are there any known Arakanese texts that state a connection between the spread of Buddhism in Burma and Arakan. This is puzzling, for without knowing much about the historical details, one would surmise that if neighboring regions are ethnically and culturally akin (such as Arakan and Burma are) and boasted the same type of religious tradition, such relations must have existed. One would also expect that accounts concerning the monastic tradition would provide hints with regard to forms of exchange, confrontation, or mutation. However, this is not the case and thus confirms the well-known self-centeredness and narrow focus of the chronicle tradition. Regarding Burmese-Arakanese Buddhist exchanges, we are hence merely left with conjectures. Historically speaking, it is reasonable to assume that since the heyday of the kingdom of Pagan (eleventh-thirteenth century), there must have been contacts between monks in Burma and Arakan. Although the evidence from literary history is scarce, changes in Arakanese pagoda design and architecture in the middle of the seventeenth century nevertheless function as a clear sign of Burmese-Mon influence. Hypothesizing from what the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana* does *not* say, we might go too far by interpreting this text as essentially anti-Burmese. But, on the other hand, there is little else than a general dislike of the Burmese to explain why Arakanese sources neither acknowledge nor even hint at contacts with Burma.

The *Explanation* constructs a relation between Arakan and Sri Lanka in which Arakan is presented as the guardian of the orthodoxy of Buddhism. When put in the context of nineteenth-century monastic debates on the legitimacy of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the usefulness of producing such a self-congratulatory historical account immediately becomes apparent. Moreover, even if Sri Lanka was merely presented as a *receiver*, the dated references to exchanges with this ancient Buddhist land nevertheless remained a source of prestige.

After having made sense of the text, we now have to move on to a critical reading of the evidence that exists on the religious contacts between Arakan and Sri Lanka in the early modern period. I would suggest that the factual character of these contacts accounts for the claim of the author of the *Explanation* that such relations did indeed exist even at much earlier periods of Arakanese history. The author's audience (the Arakanese audience at least) would not have considered such an extrapolation of historical memory into the further past as a distortion of the truth because it matched the way in which the Arakanese contextualized their past and identity in the light of the Buddha's visit to Arakan and the supernatural protection they were granted by the presence of the Mahamuni. Although the author's claim was not true in terms of facts that could be proven historically, it was real when seen from a religious perspective and thus conveyed a structurally coherent message. Such entanglements of fact and fiction are also found in the Sinhalese and Arakanese sources on the "historical" missions between the kingdoms of Arakan and Kandy, a subject we will investigate in the final section.⁷⁰

Ordinations, Scriptures, and Politics of Legitimacy

Catherine Raymond's examination of a Sittway collection of Sinhalese Buddha statues from various places in Arakan⁷¹ has brought a material confirmation of the historicity of religious contacts between Sri Lanka and Arakan.⁷² Her dating of these statues as ranging between the thirteenth

⁷⁰ Discussing the very early period would lead us too far back. The earliest (and only epigraphic) reference to contacts between Arakan and Sri Lanka is found in the eighth-century Anandacandra Pillar inscription at the Shitthaung Temple in Mrauk U. King Anandacandra, a Buddhist king, states (v. 61) that he sent gifts to the noble congregation of monks in the land of King Silamegha. This king has been tentatively identified as Aggabodhi IV by Pamela Gutman, "Ancient Arakan with special reference to its cultural history between the 5th and the 11th centuries." (Australian National University: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 1976): 43 on the basis of W. Geiger's dating of this king as 727-66. But Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Colombo: Gunasena, 1956) gives Aggabodhi's dates as 658-74 while Da Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* has 667-83.

⁷¹ These statues are now in the Buddhist Museum at Sittway (Rakhine State, Myanmar).

⁷² Catherine Raymond, "Etude des relations religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle: documentation historique et évidences archéologiques." *Journal Asiatique* 283 (1995) and Catherine Raymond, "Etude des relations religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle: documentation historique et évidences archéologiques." *Journal Asiatique* 283 (1999).

and the eighteenth century establishes a rather large chronological framework and the small size statues can therefore not be connected to one particular exchange of missions with Sri Lanka. Textual sources, both Sinhalese and Arakanese, only mention such missions if they were undertaken at the initiative of kings. Individual pilgrimages of monks are not recorded in the chronicles. The available texts moreover dedicate very little attention to the missions and provide only some bare statements. Arakanese sources do not reveal the names of the Sinhalese kings and Sinhalese sources similarly tell us nothing about the kings of Arakan. This overall lack of information makes it difficult to study the exchanges in detail or to extrapolate from known facts.

However, we are relatively well informed on the latest exchange of monastic delegations involving two Sinhalese and one Arakanese mission. We are going to deal with these missions that took place in the years 1693 to 1697 and discuss earlier missions later. The 1693 Sinhalese embassy to Mrauk U was an unfortunate moment for entering into cordial relations with an Arakanese king as the political instability at the court was notorious during the last decade of the seventeenth century. The fact that Sinhalese and Arakanese sources supply startlingly contrasting information makes the analysis of the events a fascinating task.

In his article on the Sinhalese embassies to Arakan in the seventeenth century, D. B. Jayatilaka introduces the motivation of the 1693 mission by saying that as “religion [had] gradually lost its hold upon the people and religious observances and practices fell into disuse” in the second half of the seventeenth century, King Vimaladharmasuriya II (1684-1707) felt that “the saṅghā had become thoroughly corrupt and unworthy to be the custodians of that Faith,” and he therefore decided to send a mission to Arakan.⁷³ For Jayatilaka, the object of the 1693 mission was to “obtain information as to the state of Buddhism in that country,” while P. E. E. Fernando’s formulations are more precise, arguing that the purpose of that mission was to find out “the state of the latter country” and examine “the possibilities of obtaining the services of some competent Buddhist monks to re-establish the *upasampada* [ordination].”⁷⁴ But neither do the Sinhalese

⁷³ Sir D. B. Jayatilaka, “Sinhalese Embassies to Arakan.” *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 35,93 (1940): 2.

⁷⁴ P. E. E. Fernando, “The Rakkhanga-Sannas-Curnikava and the Date of the Arrival of Arakanese Monks in Ceylon.” *University of Ceylon Review* 17,1-2 (1959): 41. Jayatilaka based his paper on a Sinhalese manuscript about which he does not provide any material

sources say anything on Arakan's political condition nor did the later Sinhalese historians pay any attention to that matter. This lack of curiosity has hitherto veiled a part of the historical truth.

The monastic delegation⁷⁵ left Kandy in July 1693, and then embarked for Tuticorin (South India) from where a Dutch ship took them to Arakan in eighteen days. As the arrival of both the ship and its delegation were unexpected, the Sinhalese had to overcome many ceremonial and practical obstacles in Arakan. However, they were finally given a splendid and generous reception and were granted an audience by the king to whom they delivered a message written in Pali explaining the purpose of their visit. With an official reply in which the Arakanese king pledged his support—so we are told in the Sinhalese manuscript—they returned to Kandy where they arrived in June 1694. The *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava*, another Sinhalese source, gives an account of the elaborate ceremonial procedures for the presentation of the royal letter to King Vimaladharmasuriya II.

This reassuring account of a *successful* mission is, however, contradicted by the Arakanese chronicle. In 1693, the effective power in Arakan was in the hands of the commanders of the royal palace guards. At the time of the death of King Candasudhamma in 1684, they had wrested the power away from his successors whom they installed on the throne and dethroned at will and at an appalling speed. These puppet kings were constantly faced with revolts by dissident lords and local military commanders. In 1692, Manidatta, an elder son of Candasudhamma who had earlier been bypassed, was crowned King Manisudhamma.⁷⁶ In less than two years, he was three times installed in the palace and three times dethroned, while he alternated with his predecessor, Waradhamma, a much younger brother. In the light of these circumstances it is no surprise that the Sinhalese ambassadors ran into unforeseen complications. When “the ambassadors of the King of Lankadipa-sihala” arrived, the men in power were not only suspicious of the embassy's motives, but apparently also had no idea how to react. Hence

information. Fernando's source document, the *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* only deals with the first, 1693 mission. Although he notes a number of differences in dating, Fernando concludes that both documents “agree substantially” on the main events. Unfortunately, Jayatilaka and Fernando's articles contain a number of factual errors regarding Arakanese history and geography as the authors seemed unable to differentiate clearly between Arakan and Burma.

⁷⁵ It consisted of Bāminivatte Disayanaka Mudiyanse, Dodamvela Herat Mudiyanse, Sivagama Pandita Mudiyanse, and an entourage of twenty people.

⁷⁶ On his reign, see *CL*: vol. 2: 228-9.

the delay of the royal audience which was emphasized by Jayatilaka's Sinhalese source, for the so-called "wise men" (royal counsellors) at the court had to discuss with Manisudhamma how to handle the situation. They finally decided to improvise an audience with a fake king, in which Mahajeyya, a general, starred as the protagonist. He kindly received the embassy and let the ambassadors make their request, a request, says the Arakanese chronicler, that Manisudhamma, from his position behind the scenes, then straight refused to grant! The Sinhalese embassy thus apparently had to return home unsuccessfully, but how could a highly distinguished Sinhalese embassy return to Kandy with empty hands? Although the elaborate description in the *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* indicates that a letter was indeed presented to King Vimaladharmasuriya II on their return, it must unmistakably have been a fake.

The Arakanese chronicle description raises more questions than we are able to answer.⁷⁷ For what reasons were the Sinhalese ambassadors sent away? Were there no competent monks at hand? Why did Manisudhamma not meet the ambassadors himself? Was he too incompetent to do so? In 1693, he had already been dethroned and re-installed a first time. If Mahajeyya really was one of the strong men in the background who preferred to handle this sensitive matter himself, why does the chronicle refer the responsibility of the refusal to the nominal king?

Considering the confusing political situation at the Arakanese court, one may conclude that Arakan was, in the first place, not the country to go to. The political conditions were shaky and the court was unreliable. One may assume that the king of Kandy's advisors had not been aware of all this beforehand or were lulled by false reports and that the monastic embassy was disinclined to spread these unfavorable facts on their return. So who had initially suggested Arakan as a place to find monks to revive the *upasampada*? The Dutch are the first suspects as the Sinhalese traveled by Dutch ships and the *Dutch East India Company* (VOC) had been involved in the preparation and the organization of the mission. It has generally been understood that the VOC strongly supported the revival of Buddhist monasticism at Kandy as part of a strategy to contain Portuguese Catholicism. But the VOC's diplomatic role in these religious matters may also have been part of a goodwill policy to compensate for the rigors of their monopolistic policies which damaged Kandyan trade interests.⁷⁸ It thus

⁷⁷ CL: vol. 2: 228-33.

⁷⁸ On Dutch-Kandyan relations, see Da Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*: 151-7.

seems that the Dutch traders had suggested Arakan to the king of Kandy as a bastion of Buddhist orthodoxy even though they must have known that Arakan's political situation was completely unpredictable at that time.

Although the king of Kandy was given a letter of reply, he still needed a full chapter of monks to re-instate the *upasampada* ordination. So a second mission was sent in 1696-7. Although this one was more successful, it kept a lower profile and did not receive the elaborate attention which the Sinhalese sources had paid to the first embassy.⁷⁹ Once again the Arakanese chronicle contributes information that balances the Sinhalese representation. Two years later, Vimaladharmasuriya II sent another delegation to Arakan⁸⁰ with valuable presents and 550 sets of the eight requisites that an ordained monk is allowed to possess. They were received in audience by King Marumpiya and instructions were given to send a sizable group of fully ordained *bhikkhus* to Sri Lanka. Together with the Arakanese monk delegation, the Sinhalese envoys returned to Kandy, most probably in two Dutch ships.⁸¹ The Sinhalese source states that the Arakanese monks, numbering thirty-three *bhikkhus*, were escorted in a magnificent procession to the capital, lodged at Malvatte Vihare, and were received in audience by the king in front of the Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Tooth.

To tell the truth, the political conditions at the court of Arakan had not really improved by then. At the time that the Sinhalese envoys left Kandy in 1696, Noratha, a prince of fourteen years of age, was forced into monkhood after spending two weeks in the palace as the king. An elderly monk, Gu-phru, who was not of royal ascendancy, was then disrobed and installed as the king and was given the title Marumpiya.⁸² He started his reign by disrobing and killing the young Noratha just a few days after taking power! When the Sinhalese embassy arrived on board of two Dutch ships, Marumpiya agreed to their request to send a group of Arakanese *sāsana-pru* (missionary) monks to Kandy. They left in December 1696

⁷⁹ The *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* contains no information at all and Jayatilaka's manuscript is, as he writes, "exceedingly brief" on this second mission.

⁸⁰ The delegation consisted of the above mentioned three monks who had experienced the disaster in 1693 and included two more monks: Gampha Vijetunga Mudiyanse and Galagama Mohottala.

⁸¹ The Arakanese monks returned later on a Dutch ship to Arakan. See Fernando, *The Rakkhanga-Sannas-Curnikava*: 46 and fn. 36. Candamalalankara (quoting Nga Me's chronicle) mentions the arrival of the Sinhalese delegation on two ships.

⁸² Various spellings exist: Mayuppiya (Phayre), Moraopi (Paton), Moeroepia (Dutch sources). On the reign of this king, see *CL*: vol. 2: 230-4.

under the leadership of the Sattathana Sayadaw Indamañju and the Laungkrak Sayadaw (respectively the “Santana” and the “Lokaraga-pudgala” of Jayatilaka’s manuscript). According to the chronicler, after purifying the *sāsana*, they ordained a great number of monks. When they wanted to visit the famous Tooth relic in the city of Anuradha,⁸³ the guardians refused to open the locks to let them see it. But when the Sattathana Sayadaw paid reverence to the Enlightened One by reciting the “*gatha* starting with the verses *rajanatala-ākāsam-nakkhattāraparikkhittam*,” the locks opened automatically and the monks could pay homage to the Tooth relic.⁸⁴ Before returning to Arakan, the missionary monks also paid a visit to the Buddha’s footprint on Mount Sumanakuta⁸⁵ and composed two stanzas (quoted in the chronicle) that were recited by the monks in homage to the *buddhapada*.

Although the description does elicit a smile, it does not tell us much about the general condition of Buddhism in Arakan in those troubled times. Nonetheless, the achievement of the 1696-7 missions reflects positively on the Arakanese *saṅghā* as it seems to indicate that the standards of monastic education and discipline had not yet been harmed by the political insecurity at the center of the kingdom. Referring to what is briefly stated on these missions and the re-ordination in the *Culavamsa*, Sinhalese historians have commented upon the fact that the higher ordination was specifically performed on the sons of noble families, which points to a general trend in the *saṅghā* to make class and caste distinctions.⁸⁶ Malalgoda notes that Gammulle Ratanapala, a Sinhalese author of the late eighteenth century, questioned the moral motives of the re-ordination which he linked with the economic interests of “a few influential monks.” He observes that the re-introduction of the *upasampada* ordination in 1697 had only a very limited temporary effect as it soon again became impossible for a *samanera* to obtain the higher ordination.⁸⁷ His *caveat* that “there is no evidence that the Arakanese monks remained in the island in order to instruct their Sinhalese pupils in the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*” is

⁸³ The Dalada Maligava (Temple of the Tooth) is at Kandy. The author confuses Kandy with the old capital of Anuradhapura.

⁸⁴ Our chronicler continues by saying that this earned the highly respected monk the epithet “Sattathana-Open-the-lock.”

⁸⁵ This is Adam’s Peak, Sri Lanka’s highest point.

⁸⁶ M. Ilangasinha, *Buddhism in Medieval Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992): 84.

⁸⁷ Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900*: 57.

nevertheless contradicted by the evidence in the Arakanese chronicle. The examination of the 1693-7 missions thus illustrates the historical character of the religious contacts between Arakan and Sri Lanka. Moreover, it provides an example of external validation for the process of rebuilding and passing on monastic legitimacy.

Set in a similar context of the decline of higher Buddhist monasticism in Sri Lanka, the *Culavamsa*⁸⁸ mentions an official request made a hundred years earlier by Vimaladharmasuriya I (1591-1604) to King Min Raja-gri (1593-1612) to send Arakanese monks to Kandy to revive the *upasampada* ordination. This request is also mentioned by the Arakanese chronicle which tells us that twenty *bhikkhus* led by the Myauk-tanzaung Sayadaw Candavilasa⁸⁹ and the Venerable Nandicakka (singularly mentioned in the CV) went to Sri Lanka.⁹⁰ In the early seventeenth century, Arakan was a powerful kingdom in the Bay of Bengal and it is therefore not so surprising that the Sinhalese turned to its king for such a request. During the reign of King Min Raja-gri, Arakan reached the peak of its territorial expansion toward the north and the south. In south-eastern Bengal, the port of Chittagong was fully under its control and trade revenues filled the royal treasury. Min Raja-gri took his troops to Lower Burma and profited from his share in the booty when Pegu, Burma's capital, fell after a protracted siege in 1599. For three decades Arakan was a regional power broker and controlled the slave trade in the northern Bay of Bengal. It is not difficult to understand that the news about this powerful Buddhist kingdom spread to Sri Lanka and that King Vimaladharmasuriya I viewed Arakan as an attractive place from which Buddhist missionary monks could be requested. But there is also another good reason for these developments. According to the *Min Raja-gri Satam* (hereafter *MRCT*), a contemporary Arakanese source, Min Raja-gri himself undertook a reform of the Buddhist *saṅghā* in Arakan after his return from war in Lower Burma.⁹¹ Favoring the forest-dwelling

⁸⁸ *Culavamsa: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahavamsa*. trans. Wilhelm Geiger (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (reprint). [1st ed. 1929-30], 1996) (henceforth CV): 94: 15-22.

⁸⁹ Raymond notes variants of this name: "Candivisala" and "Candadilasa," see Raymond, "Etude des relations religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle" and Raymond, "Etude des relations religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle."

⁹⁰ Confusingly, the dates of the two sources are not the same; the CV has 1596 and the Arakanese chronicle 1606. As it does not match the dates of the Kandyan king's reign, the latter date is probably wrong.

⁹¹ Jacques P. Leider, "The *Min Raja-gri Satam* of Mahazeya-thein: Making a 'History' for

monks who were rated as strict followers of the rules of the *vinaya*, the king forced thousands of so-called “village monks,” whose relaxed way of life did not comply with the monastic standard, to disrobe. But in order to legitimate his actions, the king did not only build on his fame as a powerful conqueror and dutiful sovereign. He also trusted the words of his religious advisor, a forest monk (*araññavasi*) called Dhammasami, who assured him that the canonical texts in Arakan were fully concordant with those as they existed in Sri Lanka. This claim of textual purity strengthened Min Raja-gri’s cosmological legitimacy as a *dhammaraja* king who had the most noble duty to preserve the orthodoxy of the Buddhist teachings. The question then rises if the lingering fame of this great period of Arakanese history could have influenced Vimaladharmasuriya II’s decision of a hundred years later to make a request for *bhikkhus* to an Arakanese king?

As our present attempt to explain why a king of Kandy sent a request to the king of Arakan in 1596 has hit on a key text of Arakanese historiography, we have to open a short parenthesis on the *Min Raja-gri Satam*, for its author uses a Sri Lankan connection to legitimate the canonicity of Arakan’s textual tradition.

After recalling the mythical ancestry of Buddhist kings, the *MRCT* gives a brief account of the Arakan royal genealogy. It extols virtuous kings, lists the duties of the court Brahmins, and refers to ancient laws and current practices at the Arakanese court. Because of its didactic stance, it may be described as a “royal manual” written for King Min Raja-gri. The author of the *MRCT* emphatically supports the rigorous measures taken by earlier Arakanese kings against heteropractic monks and against those monastic writers (in Lower Burma and in Lanna) who had falsified the canonical texts by fabricating their own stories.⁹² Earlier kings, says the author, had also sent missions to Sri Lanka to check the sacred Pali texts as they were kept in Arakan against the texts as they existed in Sri Lanka. They had concluded that the texts in Arakan had not been altered. It is not possible to date with much precision the three “earlier” kings who are referred to by name in the text and who probably reigned in Arakan between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. As these missions are merely listed and their context is unknown, their historicity rests on weak ground. But regardless of being fact or fiction, the question of their historicity does not distract

the King.” In *Traditions of Knowledge in Southeast Asia*, ed. Myanmar Historical Commission Jubilee Committee (Yangon: Universities Historical Research Center: 2004c): 100-20.

⁹² Leider, “The *Min Raja-gri Satam* of Mahazeya-thein.”

from their rhetoric and legitimizing function. The continuity of authoritative Pali texts being located in Sri Lanka, the “Sri Lanka missions” in the *Min Raja-gri Satam* encode a reference to a norm of textual accuracy that warranted the uninterrupted transmission of the Buddhist teaching in Arakan. We may close the parenthesis at this point by ending with the conclusion that the Arakan-Sri Lanka connection worked both ways and thus illustrates a need for external validation both in Arakan and in Kandy.⁹³

The requests for Arakanese monks by Vimaladharmasūrya I and II are also marginally mentioned in the *Sasanavamsa*. This text is a Burmese religious chronicle that was written in Pali in 1861 for Sinhalese monks in order to convince them of the validity, or even the superiority, of the transmission of the Buddhist teaching in Burma.⁹⁴ Recalling the missions sent to Arakan, the *Sasanavamsa* underscores Arakan’s merits in safeguarding the orthodox tradition in Sri Lanka. But strangely enough, the requests of Vimaladharmasūrya I and II are not mentioned in the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan*. Either its author did not know about them—which seems to be an unlikely hypothesis for an Arakanese monk writing in 1872—or he simply did not care about it. This would be surprising; for it is precisely these historically well attested missions that give some credibility to the claim that Arakan had made a contribution to the revival of regular ordination in Sri Lanka in earlier times.

In turning to an earlier period, we need to discuss the evidence on the fifteenth-century missions about which we only know from Arakanese sources. In his 1891 report on the Mahamuni pagoda, Forchhammer quotes an Arakanese text in Pali that has since become unavailable (the

⁹³ Only a few years separate the 1596 Sinhalese mission from the writing of the *Min Raja-gri Satam* (National Library Yangon): Palm-leaf manuscript NL 1537 (henceforth *MRCT*) (c. 1607), but the *MRCT* does *not* mention the fact that the king of Kandy had sent emissaries to request a chapter of Arakanese monks. Is this a surprise? Not really. The *MRCT* wanted to establish the textual purity of the Pali canon in Arakan claiming that again and again missions had been sent to Sri Lanka to check the canon against the standard scriptures. The fact that the Sinhalese were in need to send a mission to Arakan demonstrated to the Arakanese court that things had gone considerably wrong in Sri Lanka as the higher ordination ceremony had fallen into neglect. Referring to the text study missions stamped a mark of authority on the Arakanese claims. I would suggest that mentioning the Sri Lankan request in roughly the same context would have lowered the coded significance of the Sri Lanka reference.

⁹⁴ Victor B. Lieberman, “A New Look at the *Sasanavamsa*,” *Bulletin of the School of African and Asian Studies* 34,1 (1976): 137-49; Leider, “Text, Lineage and Tradition in Burma,” and Panyasami, *The History of the Buddha’s Religion (Sasanavamsa)* (London: Luzac, 1952): 30.

Sappadanapakarana).⁹⁵ It documents that King Min Khari (1433-59) obtained a *Tipitaka* from Sri Lanka. The Arakanese chronicle further states that King Bhasawphru (1459-81) also obtained a *Tipitaka* from Sri Lanka in 1475.⁹⁶ These missions thus place Arakan in the position of a receiver. The kingdom with its new capital Mrauk-U, founded in 1430, was a burgeoning but still rather weak principality during the fifteenth century and stood in the shadow of its powerful neighbors: in the west there was the prestigious sultanate of Bengal; in the south, the Mon kingdom in Lower Burma with its center at Pegu; and in the east, the Burmese kingdom of Ava. Obtaining a *Tipitaka* or claiming to have obtained a *Tipitaka* from Sri Lanka served the purpose of legitimating the claims of Buddhist orthodoxy and fulfilled the need for the king to establish himself as a protector and supporter of the *sāsana*. It is not unlikely that Arakanese monks did indeed go to Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century, but we have as yet no means to check the historicity of these missions. However, intuitively we may rate their historicity as high especially if we put them in the context of the 1475 mission sent to Sri Lanka by the Mon King Dhammazedi (*aka* Ramadhipati, 1472-92). This important mission led to the adoption of the Sinhalese style of ordination by the *saṅghā* of Pegu.⁹⁷ No earlier religious missions are mentioned in the Arakanese chronicles.

What does this review of the little known Arakan-Sri Lanka relations mean for understanding the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan*, written in 1872? The evidence essentially supports the historicity of Sri Lanka's missions to Arakan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there is also no strong reason to doubt that Arakanese missions were sent earlier to Sri Lanka to obtain and check canonical texts. True, the claim made in the *Explanation* regarding Arakan's essential role in preserving the *sāsana* in Sri Lanka is unwarranted as it cannot be substantiated with the help of other sources and bears little historical resemblance to well-known specifics. Our analysis clearly shows that its anonymous author did not care much about established facts, for he does not even mention the well proven exchange of missions in 1693 and 1696-7. Nevertheless,

⁹⁵ Forchhammer, *Papers on Subjects Relating to the Archaeology of Burma*: 2-5.

⁹⁶ Note that the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana of Arakan* ascribes to this king a mission sent to Sri Lanka to re-establish the *sāsana* there!

⁹⁷ For this purpose, a new ordination ground was established in Pegu in 1476 and significantly named "Kalyani," see *The Kalyani Inscriptions Erected by King Dhammaceti at Pegu in 1476: Text and Translation* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1892).

there are *some* hard facts to bolster the case of factual relations unless in our doubt we would consider all Arakanese references to Sri Lankan credentials exclusively as rhetorical devices to establish the credibility of Arakanese Buddhism.

We can thus briefly reformulate and conclude our earlier interpretation of the *Explanation*. In the nineteenth century, a war of rival claims raged among Theravada monks about which kingdom could boast the truest transmission of the Buddhist teaching. This challenge forced Buddhists from Arakan, whose homeland had suffered from political subjection and social disruption, to take a defensive stance. From a historical point of view, the *Explanation on the Sāsana of Arakan* does not offer a conclusive argument which is based on factual evidence. But when viewed from a psychological perspective, its blend of assorted facts and fiction bears witness to great pride in the face of the boisterous demonstrations of the Burmese Theravada as seen and heard in Mandalay's monasteries and temples in the times of King Mindon. Incidentally, as our digression on the *MRCT* has shown, the historical study of real or imagined Arakan-Kandyan exchanges provides further examples of the importance of external validation to insure religious credibility.

Conclusion

When the Burmese conquered Arakan in 1785, a small kingdom at Burma's western periphery disappeared and the expansion of the early Konbaung dynasty marked a further step in the process of building a powerful kingdom which was bent on turning once more against its arch-rival, Ayutthaya. However, for the Arakanese, Burmese rule did not only mark the end of their political independence; the exile of their king, the elimination of their local elite, and the interference in the monastic order aimed at the eradication of Arakan's cultural and religious autonomy. A core belief of the Arakanese Buddhists was further shattered when the Mahamuni was deported like a vulgar trophy. He, Lord Buddha's "younger brother," was supposed to protect the country and its kings until the end of the cosmic cycle. As physical resistance to the new rulers was doomed to fail, the Arakanese had no choice but to accommodate to the regime or leave as so many did after a few years. Forty years later, political degradation entered a new phase with the arrival of the *East India Company* and the massive influx of Bengali labor migrants. How did the subjected Arakanese cope with these physically threatening and mentally disturbing developments?

In this essay we have explored some aspects of the issues that were raised by this question. We have seen that despite their political impotency and the inevitability of institutional changes, the Arakanese tried to defend their cultural individuality. It goes without saying that the dismal social and economic conditions in the nineteenth century only allowed a modest degree of self-expression. But Arakanese monks and laymen still asserted themselves in terms of their Buddhist identity and claimed an independent tradition of their own. One may briefly recall that Burma's Pagan kingdom (eleventh-thirteenth century) referred its brand of Buddhism to an anterior Buddhist Mon kingdom. So in a way did the northern Thai tradition of the fifteenth century whose monastic reform movement was linked to Sri Lanka through Mon monks of Martaban. In the old Arakanese tradition, Burmese and Mon monks were rarely referred to and then only negatively.⁹⁸ The nineteenth-century *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana* forged "new" Buddhist credentials as it constructed an unlikely role for Arakan based on a claim of monastic orthodoxy and textual purity. The credibility of this admittedly weak claim was linked to the well acknowledged fact that Arakan had once been a power-broker in the Bay of Bengal and that monastic exchanges with Sri Lanka had indeed taken place at earlier times.

Arakanese and Burmese belong to the same ethno-linguistic group, the literary (written) languages are largely identical while the tongue spoken by the Arakanese has kept features of old Burmese. They had lived for centuries in neighboring Buddhist kingdoms and they both staunchly claimed their Buddhist identity. With such antecedents of things they had in common, it would be highly plausible that the Arakanese would have been culturally and politically assimilated over the years.

But after 1948, the Arakanese have never been portrayed (or presented themselves) as a little "sister" or "brother" nation of the Burmese. It is rather as one of the national minorities that the Arakanese figure beside other ethnic groups in the Union of Burma/Myanmar. In order to create an identity of their own, the Arakanese stress their disputes with the dominant ethnic Burmese and neglect what they have in common. Although Arakanese and Burmese chronicles tell us about wars and rivalries that

⁹⁸ The foremost examples are found in the early seventeenth-century *MRCT* with its anti-Mon diatribes; see the quotations given in Leider, "The *Min Raja-gri Satam* of Mahazeya-thein."

opposed their ambitious kings, they say little about regional trade, migrations, visits of monks, or mutual influences in art and architecture that would illustrate what had tied the Arakanese and the Burmese together over the centuries. But just like ethno-linguistics, these are subjects that are studied by contemporary Western historians. It is not a matter of holding a political agenda to try to understand the origins of an enduring and very real disparity where maybe, scientifically and culturally speaking, there should be none. It is a fact that the Arakanese have been subjected to but not absorbed into a Burmese nation. For better or worse, ethnic-cum-religious identities in Burma are not only part of a rich cultural heritage, but also function as highly politicized factors in current affairs. But this essay did not purport to look specifically at the roots of Arakanese nationalism, though it is obvious that some of the facts and assumptions that have underpinned our arguments are closely linked to the issue of an emergent “national” consciousness.

The approach taken here is aimed at past challenges in the circumscribed local Arakanese context. We have been interested in the legitimizing strategy expressing Arakanese self-perception which built on Buddhist credentials such as the Mahamuni myth and privileged connections with Sri Lanka. This legitimation functioned as an alternative voice, say even a counter-discourse, to the interpretation of Bodawphaya who, as a conqueror, saw in the same events the fulfilment of a higher destiny. The unifying strength of the Buddhist traditions and institutions could thus work at very different, eventually colluding levels. As the social history of Arakanese Buddhism suggests, localized Buddhist beliefs and practices proved to be flexible and adaptable. For the Arakanese, Buddhist practice and belief were powerful components of social cohesion and shared identity in times of crisis. These were not defeated in the aftermath of foreign subjection.

But the accommodation offered by Buddhist categories does not have a single color; it has many colors and shades. In conclusion, it is important to stress the complex and conflicting nature of the socio-historical developments we have sketched. The Arakanese *saṅghā* was integrated into the Burmese *saṅghā* and the consequence of this subjection has apparently not been contested. Read as a politically interpretable text of nineteenth-century Arakanese Buddhism, the *Explanation on the Venerable Sāsana* has a *raison-d'être* in a narrowly local Arakanese context regarding Arakanese self-representation. But the discourse was not merely inbound. As we have shown, it was also important to make oneself respectable amidst the discussions concerning the greater, reforming Theravadin monkhood.

Abbreviations

CL = *Rakhaing Mahayazawindawgyi [The New Great Chronicle of Arakan]*.
See Candamalalankara 1931.
CV = *CULAVAMSA: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahavamsa*.
MRCT = *MIN RAJA-GRI SATAM* (ms.)
ROB = *The Royal Orders of Burma*. See Than Tun, ed. 1983-90.

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