

Mranma Pran: When context encounters notion

Michael Aung-Thwin

The geo-political and cultural-historical context, more than any other single factor, has shaped the notion of Mranma Pran in pre-colonial times. It is derived from a longstanding reality embodied in the term anya ('upstream'), representing Upper Burma (hence, the term anyatha, 'offspring of Upper Burma'). Although Lower Burma also has an equivalent in the term akriy ('downstream'), it was Upper Burma more than any other region in the country that initially exemplified the term Mranma Pran, the 'heartland' of the country's culture and society for over a millennium. The meaning of the term Mranma Pran (or its colonial term, 'Burma'), therefore, depends on the context in which and by whom it is viewed.

Introduction: Some issues and problems

Relegated to analysing the notion of '*Mranma Pran* / Burma' as envisioned by its historians, I began by jotting down their names, starting with the Pagan and Ava periods (ninth–sixteenth centuries) and ending with 2007, just to see who might belong to that 'community of interpretation'. The task turned out to be more daunting than first imagined, not because the list was so long, but because of the many questions raised.

One of these is whether or not the term 'Burma' should even be used, a foreign word imposed by a colonial power without the knowledge and consent of the governed, and never part of everyday speech amongst the vast majority of the people in the country. Even during the height of the colonial period, if a Burmese speaker were asked the name of his / her country, the reply would have been *Mranma Pran*, not 'Burma'. Given the theme of this volume, the issue is not trivial, for the use of either word reveals to which universe one belonged: the Burmese or English-speaking world.

Another problem is determining what constitutes a 'historian'. Is it only someone who has earned a Ph.D. in the discipline of history at a western (or westernised) academic institution? What about pre-colonial, indigenous scholars who neither trained as 'historians' in a 'discipline' nor received any degrees? The decision restricts which texts qualify as 'history' and which do not.

In traditional Burma, since neither the training nor the knowledge obtained was dissected into modern western categories, little or no distinction existed between a 'historian' and other kinds of scholars and between history and other kinds of knowledge. There were clerics who wrote on the 'history' of Buddhism for religious

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purposes, where successful political and military leaders and historically important events were considered only incidental. Ministers wrote *ayedawbon* (literally, ‘important royal accounts’) of certain kings they considered exemplary, whose contents, however, were as much ‘history’ as ‘biography’. Scribes kept accounts of daily events at court that became the basis for chronicles’ narratives. Provincial governors maintained administrative data, while headmen and headwomen kept censuses of the villages and towns in their charge – the stuff of which socio-economic history is made. Generations of abbots maintained unofficial accounts of their respective monasteries that often shed light on the local scene.

In short, one’s definition of what constitutes a historian and history – indeed, even the fact that this volume is the product of a twenty-first-century academic panel organised around western academic disciplines and their categories of knowledge – determines who is to be excluded from the ‘master list’, a decision that ultimately decides whose ‘voice’ will be heard.

There are other subtle ways in which this selection process occurs. Since many early historical texts are undoubtedly lost, only those that survive will be ‘heard’; of these, most are relatively late and usually of the *yazawin* genre (literally, ‘royal genealogy’). This means texts belonging to the last several centuries (and dynasties) and of a particular ‘community of interpretation’ – the court elite – are favoured. Indeed, even though the Burmese word for ‘history’ today is *thamaing*,¹ texts called *thamaing* (accounts of local religious sites and events) are not, by and large, the source material for the writing of Burma’s history; *yazawin* are. Thus, even if this study were based on all *yazawin* that have ever been written and not only those that have survived, it would still represent only a particular ‘community of interpretation’. Moreover, the explosion in the production and distribution of electronic printing during the past few decades favours the recent past as well as the technologically advanced world. From the outset, then, certain periods of history, certain genres of sources, and certain cultures are automatically ‘privileged’.²

1 According to renowned Burma historian, U Tun Aung Chain, the switch from *yazawin* to *thamaing* occurred recently, in 1962, when the Revolutionary Government’s socialist ideology favoured the less elite view of history represented by the latter term. See U Tun Aung Chain, ‘The broken glass: Changes in the perception of the Myanmar past’, *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, 6 (2000): 33–43. The word *thamaing* itself, of course, existed earlier than 1962.

2 Of the historians representing the post-colonial period, I focus on those trained in departments of history mainly in England and the United States. Part of the reason is that I know less about those trained in Europe and Japan – although those who participate in Burma Studies at the international level are usually known in any case and are included – but it is also because the vast majority of the higher degree holders of Burma history stem from either England or the United States. For a synopsis of Burma studies in Japan, see Toru Ohno’s ‘Burmese Studies in Japan’, in *Burma and Japan: Basic studies on their cultural and social structure* (Tokyo: The Burma Research Group, 1987), pp. 31–43; and *Japanese contributions to Southeast Asian Studies: A bibliography of English-language publications 1945–1991*, comp. Shiro Saito, Southeast Asia Paper no. 36 (Honolulu: CSEAS, 1992), pp. 70–6. The list of ‘Burma historians’ and ‘histories’ I have compiled – from the Ava period when the earliest surviving chronicle was written, to the twenty-first century and the latest Ph.D. in the history of Burma as of 2007 – exists as a draft. Although it is surely not definitive, it is a comprehensive list and quite an interesting one. It consists of about a dozen individuals from the pre-colonial era, about 23 from the colonial to the post-Independence periods, approximately eight from the 1970s, nearly 10 from the 1980s, less than half a dozen from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and an even smaller group (no more than two) historians of Burma who have currently just completed their dissertations in the United States (there have been altogether over 100 dissertations written between 1920 and 2007 on the history of Burma).

Yet, rectifying the situation is not simply making a case out of the absence of evidence; we still need to approach the problem from the presence of evidence. I have therefore defined 'historian' and 'history' more broadly, gone back to original stone inscriptions that represent a larger spectrum of the population than *yazawin* do, and given more attention to religious 'histories' that offer another perspective. Further, I have included on my 'master list' one active, indigenous scholar of Myanmar to represent all those not trained in the dominant western tradition, a group I call the 'ignored community of interpretation'. Hopefully, this will help redress the exclusion of such individuals and their interpretation of Burma's past by the westernised field of Burma Studies which invariably shares what Edward Said has called a 'consolidated vision', regardless of individual differences on particular historical issues.

One final problem needs further discussion. Sometime during the early phases of the British colonial period it appears a false dichotomy was created between the national group and the majority ethno-linguistic (or 'racial') group, represented by the words 'Burmese' and 'Burman' respectively.³ Yet, there is no such distinction in the Burmese language. *Mranma* (or its informal synonym, *Bama*) is the only pertinent word, and there is nothing in it that implies a distinction between the 'racial' and 'national' group. Just the opposite; the word *Mranma* (or *Bama*) is a reference to both the ethno-linguistic and national group.

But because *Bama* and *Mranma* are interchangeable synonymous adjectives that modify the nouns following them, when speaking in English, it is not incorrect to use the terms 'Burmese' or 'Burman' (whichever is preferred) also as synonymous adjectives, as long as no national-ethnic distinction between them is being implied. Thus, '*Mranma* [or *Bama*] *saga*' is 'Burmese [or Burman] language', '*Mranma* [or *Bama*] *lu myo*' refers to the 'Burmese [or Burman] people', while '*Mranma* [or *Bama*] *sasaya*' is 'Burmese [or Burman] food'.

None of this is to say that no distinction exists in the Burmese language between the term (and people called the) *Mranma* and other ethno-linguistic groups. But that is not the same as saying an empirical and linguistic distinction exists between the terms 'Burmese' and 'Burman'. Marc Bloch warned us many years ago in his work on feudal Europe not to allow these kinds of divisions that we ourselves have created for analytical purposes to deceive us later into thinking they have a reality outside that analysis.

And this is precisely what has happened. This artificial, exogenous false dichotomy between 'Burmese' and 'Burman' became, in time, the framework of analysis for reifying ethnicity and nationality as if they were distinct, concrete, empirical, and of course, adversarial phenomena. They are not, and do not exist outside of western academia's framework of analysis.

Not only is the differentiation artificial, it is also selective, for none has been made for the Shan, Chin, Arakanese, Mon, and other ethnic groups in Burma. If it exists as an intrinsic feature in one ethnic group, why does it also not exist in the others? The reason, I think, is that British colonial scholars were thinking in terms of their own history and society, and projected onto the major ethnic group in Burma their

³ British academics reverse this usage, but the distinction remains.

framework of analysis that distinguished English from British. (I realise we have all been caught up in this convention, but that does not mean we should perpetuate it any longer).

When context and notion meet

The geo-political and cultural-historical context, more than any other single factor, has shaped the notion of *Mranma Pran* in pre-colonial times. It is derived from a longstanding reality embodied in the term *anya* ('upstream'), representing Upper Burma;⁴ (hence, the term *anyatha*, 'offspring of Upper Burma'). Although Lower Burma also had an equivalent in the term *akriy* ('downstream'), it was Upper Burma more than any other region in the country that initially exemplified the term *Mranma Pran*, the 'heartland' of the country's culture and society for over a millennium.

Lest this analysis – restricting the notion of *Mranma Pran* to Upper Burma – inspires Burma political activists to celebrate prematurely, it needs to be qualified. Although Upper Burma epitomises *Mranma Pran*, in reality there were many more and far longer occasions when *Mranma Pran* included Lower Burma: during most of the Pagan, Toungoo / Pegu, the Second Ava, and the Konbaung periods. Together they represent approximately 85 per cent of the 1,100 years that make up pre-colonial *Mranma Pran*.

In contrast, the only time Lower Burma was not included in the notion (and reality) of *Mranma Pran* was during its history's 'interstices'. That includes (a) part of the fourteenth and all of the fifteenth centuries when the newly arisen kingdom of Pegu remained independent of the First Ava Dynasty; (b) 28 years after the 'fall' of Ava to the Shan; (c) approximately a dozen years at the end of the sixteenth century when Arakan conquered Pegu and left Lower Burma in anarchy; and (d) a few years during the mid-eighteenth century when Pegu took Ava but shortly thereafter was itself conquered once again. Altogether, these occasions when Lower Burma was not part of Upper Burma amount to little more than 15 per cent of the total number of years in *Mranma Pran*'s pre-colonial history.

This means both the notion and reality of *Mranma Pran* expanded during extended periods of unification, and contracted during the 'interstices', the historical context actually corresponding fairly well with its perception. Thus, although this was an oscillating phenomenon, its expanded version was by far the rule, and its shrunken version, the exception.

Mranma Pran during the Pagan and Ava periods

One of the first occurrences of the word *Mranma* can be found in an early twelfth-century inscription of King Kyanzittha written in Old Mon that celebrated the building of his palace. There, the word was a cultural identifier in the phrase '*Mranma sichan*' ('*Mranma* songs') which was being contrasted to '*Mwan sichan*' ('*Mon* songs').⁵

4 Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Principles and patterns of the precolonial Burmese state', in *Tradition and modernity in Myanmar: Proceedings of an international conference held in Berlin from May 7th to May 9th, 1993*, ed. Uta Gartner and Jens Lorenz (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität Fakultätsinstitut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften, 1994).

5 *She Haung Mon Kyauksa Paung Chok* [Collection of ancient Mon inscriptions], ed. and trans. into Burmese by U Chit Thein (Rangoon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1965), 2, p. 27.

Mranma was also used in an ethnic sense in a later twelfth-century inscription⁶ where *Mranma pantya* (*Mranma* musicians)⁷ were being contrasted to musicians of other ethnicities. (In other words, their music was not being contrasted, their ethnic backgrounds were.) Later, in a thirteenth-century stone,⁸ *Mranma* appears as a politico-administrative word in *Mranma Pran*,⁹ the issue at hand.

During the Pagan period (ninth–fourteenth centuries AD), the word *pran* (of *Mranma Pran*) usually meant ‘country’ or ‘state’, and sometimes also ‘capital’ and ‘centre’.¹⁰ *Mranma Pran* can therefore be interpreted in two closely related ways: (a) the ‘state’ [‘country’, ‘centre’] of ‘the *Mranma*’ [people]; or (b) the ‘state’ [‘country’, ‘centre’] of *Mranma*, that is, the proper name for the entity itself, no different from Cambodia, Thailand, France, or Germany. (Today’s official name of the country, ‘Myanmar’, is meant to be the exact equivalent of the second meaning of *Mranma Pran*.)¹¹ And although it is true that an analytical distinction can be made between the two, in reality there is little difference for, like Germany and Thailand, the name of the country derives from the dominant and largest ethno-linguistic group.

Another noun that modifies the term *Mranma* is pertinent here, especially in contrast to *pran*, and that is *nuinnam* (romanised in current usage as *naingnan*). The verb *naing* means ‘to conquer’, ‘to win’, ‘to have control over’, while the noun *naingnan* means ‘dominion’, ‘nation’, and ‘state’, similar in use to the word *pran*. Indeed, both *Mranma Naingnan* and *Mranma Pran* are used interchangeably for the country today, much like ‘America’ and the ‘United States’ are interchangeable. This current interchangeability between *pran* and *nuinnam* reflects their etymological and historical relationship which also goes back to the Pagan period.

In an inscription dated to 1196–98, both *pran* and *nuinnam* appear together. In it, Arimaddanpura (Pagan’s Pali title) was referred to as *pran*, while the larger entity ruled by that *pran* was referred to as *nuinnam*,¹² which included distant cities and provinces

6 It is found in the Tonguni inscription of 1190 AD. See *She Haung Myanmar Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], vol. 1 (Rangoon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1972), p. 50.

7 *Pantya* is more correctly translated as ‘drummer’. But the context of the inscription suggests that *pantya* here was a general term for a musician, as other drummers and musicians with their different instruments were also listed in the same category.

8 This is found in 1235 AD in the Ratanakumthan inscription. See *She Haung Myanmar Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], 1, p. 262.

9 See Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 226, note 1.

10 Indeed, the word *pran* had developed to such an extent that in one thirteenth-century inscription, we hear of *pran mhu* (‘affairs of state’), while in another it was used as an abstract analog in the phrase ‘the state [*pran*] of nirvana’.

11 However, ‘Myanmar’ as a stand-alone noun sounds awkward to Burmese speakers even though it is being used as such today.

12 Not only did the inscription identify these place names, the kingdom of Pagan erected inscriptions in these far flung places declaring its authority, appointed governors, stationed troops, built temples, donated land and labour, and exempted taxes. These activities can be found as far south as Muttama (Martaban), Taway (Tavoy), and even at the tip of the Tenasserim Peninsula at Mergui (Myeik). I would find it difficult to believe that it did not have at least hegemony over these areas. See Michael Aung-Thwin, *The mists of Rāmañña: The legend that was Lower Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005). For the inscription, see *She Haung Myanmar Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], 1, pp. 65–7.

such as Tavoy and Mergui in Tenasserim, the southernmost ‘tail’ of Burma. The distinction being made between *nuinnam* and *pran*, therefore, was not one of centre versus periphery, but centre and periphery, both belonging to the same entity. *Pran* was the ‘heartland’, *nuinnam*, the ‘frontier’; the former was physically, culturally, and psychologically closer, the latter, more distant. Yet, whenever the ‘heartland’ expanded to better integrate the frontier regions, *nuinnam* became, in effect, part of the *pran*. And since this scenario happened often enough and endured long enough each time it occurred, the two terms came to be interchangeable and accounts for their current near-synonymous relationship.

Zatatawbon Yazawin

Similar sentiments are expressed in a text called the *Zatatawbon Yazawin* (‘Chronicle of Royal Horoscopes’) some of whose earliest sections clearly belong to the Pagan period. Its original (and subsequent authors) are anonymous and it survives only as a copy.

In its published version, the text is divided into several distinct sections. The first is labelled *Buddhavamsa Kanda* (‘Phase regarding the Buddha’s genealogy’), the second deals with the different Buddhas that preceded the last and ‘current’ one, Gaudama. The third section is the *Mahavamsa Kanda* (‘Phase concerning the genealogy of the kings of Sri Lanka’). The fourth section is titled ‘*Mranma Yazawin Kanda*’ (‘Phase regarding the genealogy [or history] of Mranma’s kings’).

The narrative thus moves from general to specific, from *Jambudipa*, the ‘Southern Island’ of Buddhist cosmology to where the Buddha will return as Maitreya, to *Majjimadesa* (Buddhist India), Sri Lanka, thence to *Mranma Pran*. Thus, first and foremost, *Mranma Pran* exists within a much larger Buddhist universe where its *raison d’être* lies. Importantly, ethnicity is already no longer the most important identifier as it was in King Kyanzittha’s 1102 inscription.

The use of Burmese terms for the sections on India provides clues to their meaning in Pagan and also Ava. India is described as being composed of the ‘16 great *Taing*’. As these are the well-known *Mahajanapada* (‘chief kingdoms’) of Pali literature that include the political units of Buddhist India such as Kosala and the famous Magadha (later integrated into the Mauryan Empire), the Burmese word *taing* at the time must have also meant something like ‘kingdom’ or at least ‘province’.

The text then mentions ‘the 19 great *pran*’ of India. These include Varanasi, Vesali, Midhila, and the famous Rajadhaha, the capital of Magadha, the Buddhist kingdom *par excellence*. The Burmese word *pran* here, then, must have meant ‘capital’ or ‘centre’. In today’s usage, the combination of *taing* and *pran* in the term *taing-pyei* means ‘country’.

Thus, in Burmese usage, while the word *pran* attached to specific place names (such as Magadha or Pagan) meant ‘centre’ or ‘capital’, when attached to a much more inclusive word representing a whole culture and people (such as *Mranma*) it seems to indicate a larger entity also, such as ‘country’. *Pran*, then, is essentially an identifier of the adjective it follows.

Finally the text gets to *Mranma Pran*, which is placed in a separate section; so is perceived as an entity distinct from India and Sri Lanka. The initial sentence of the

Mranma section reads: ‘Within this our *Mranma Pran*...’¹³ It is an unambiguous statement about an ‘ours’ as opposed to a ‘theirs’. Then the *min set* (literally, ‘sequence of kings’) of the Tagaung dynasty, considered to be the origins of the Mranma people and culture, is given. Next, the kings of the Sri Ksetra, Pagan, Pinya, and Sagaing are listed. Then, in a separate section, those of the Inwa (Ava) Dynasty are also enumerated. Since all these are placed as sub-categories under *Mranma Pran*, they were clearly regarded as belonging to, and subordinate parts of, that bigger whole.

Subsequently, the text moves to the Ava kingdom (1364–1527) and calls it ‘Ava Naingnan’ [Ava ‘nation’]. Because *naingnan* (*nuiinnam*) during the Pagan period referred to the entire country, ‘Ava Naingnan’ also must have meant that larger entity. However, one must be careful when dealing with texts such as the *Zatatawbon* – in contrast to dated, contemporary inscriptions – for later hands have added to it, with later meanings incorporated. Indeed, if this particular section on Ava in the *Zatatawbon* had been written later, then referring to Ava as a *naingnan* makes sense, particularly if it belonged to the Second Ava period when it in fact controlled both Upper and Lower Burma. But it likely was not a reference to the First Ava period when its hegemony was limited to Upper Burma most of the time.

Contemporary Ava inscriptions support the latter image. They mention *Mranma Pran* in conjunction with Yakhing Pran, Tanluin Pran, Shan Pran, and Kala Pran – that is, the *pran* of the Arakanese, Tanluin, Shan, and Indians. If the term *pran* here also means ‘state’ or ‘country’ (rather than just ‘centre’ or ‘capital’ since it was not attached to any specific place-name), then the four *pran* mentioned here must have also meant the ‘countries’ or ‘states’ of those ethno-linguistic groups. That would suggest the notion of *Mranma Pran* did not include Lower Burma at the time, but was the contracted version.

Thilawuntha’s *Yazawinkyaw*

In the early sixteenth century, a chronicle called the *Yazawinkyaw* was written. It is conventionally dated to 1502 and attributed to the famous Thilawuntha.¹⁴ The bulk of the work focuses on the kings of India and Sri Lanka and resembles the *Zatatawbon* and *Mahavamsa*, the latter well known in Pagan and Ava.¹⁵ Only the last sections of the *Yazawinkyaw*, comprising less than 10 per cent, are concerned with *Mranma Pran*.

But, in that 10 per cent, Thilawuntha revealed his idea of *Mranma Pran* quite clearly. The first part of the section deals with ‘the Mranma Dynasty’ (‘Mranma *min*

13 *Zatatawpon Yazawin* [Chronicle of royal horoscopes], ed. Hla Tin (Yangon: Ministry of Culture, 1960), p. 35.

14 The text states that the first part of it was finished on *Sakaraj* 864 or AD 1502 (Thilawuntha, Shin. *Yazawinkyaw* [Celebrated chronicle], ed. Pe Maung Tin (Yangon: Burma Research Society, n.d.). On p. 75, however, it states that the part of the chronicle which deals with the kings of Sri Lanka was completed in 1502 whereas the second part, dealing with Burma’s kings was finished only by 1520. This is a bit puzzling, for Thilawuntha may have been dead by then, in which case, someone else must have finished it for him. Either that, or the 1520 was a misprint for 1502. Pe Maung Tin in *Myanmar Sape Thamaing* [History of Burmese literature] (Yangon: Khettara Press, 1977), p. 97 accepts the 1502 date.

15 *She Haung Myanmar Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], 5: 21–33 records a list of 295 books donated to a library in which the *Mahavamsa* was mentioned while earlier in Pagan, one of its most important stories appear as a painting inside a twelfth-century temple.

set'). Here, as in the *Zatatawbon*, Thilawuntha writes: 'In this our *Mranma Pran*, the dynastic succession was...' ¹⁶ Once again, the idea of an 'our' political and cultural entity as opposed to a 'their' entity (referring to India and Sri Lanka) is unmistakable. And similar to the *Zatatawbon*'s usage, *Mranma Pran* here can also be interpreted either as a proper name (Mranma the country), or a descriptive one (the country of the Mranma [people]). The first would be equivalent to saying 'in this our America', and the second, 'in this our country of the Americans'.

He then referred to Sri Ksetra, Pagan, Sagaing, and Ava also as *pran*, but clarified the ambiguity between *Mranma Pran* and these other *pran* when he wrote that '*Mranma Pran* [is] the combination of Sunaparanta *taing* and Tambadipa *taing*...' the two larger regions east and west of the Irrawaddy that made up Upper Burma.¹⁷ Since all the *pran* mentioned above exist within these two *taing*, and these two *taing* made up *Mranma Pran*, the latter was obviously the enveloping unit even though it too was called a *pran*. The notion of *Mranma Pran* here, once again, was a reference only to Upper Burma, reflecting the reality of Ava during Thilawuntha's time.

Yet, and even in this contracted version, the fact of *Mranma Pran* comprised different ethno-linguistic groups, regional centres, and distinct provinces, representing a larger and more inclusive cultural and geo-political unit than the ethnonym *Mranma* suggests. During Thilawuntha's time as well, the term *Mranma* continued to be regarded as a unit composed of more than just the *Mranma* people.

Thilawuntha's idea of *Mranma* is also reflected in his view of history. Towards the end of his text, he wrote that 'this completes the section on the succession of kings in Mranma's history'¹⁸(*Myanma Yazawin*). It is the earliest appearance of this phrase that I can remember. It can be interpreted as the country itself, or 'of the Mranma [people]'. Either way, it is apparent that Thilawuntha no longer thought of *yazawin* in its convention sense – a genealogy of great kings (*Maha Yazawin*) – but as a history of the country or its people (*Myanma Yazawin*).

In sum, during the zenith of the Pagan period, the term *Mranma Pran* was a reference to the entire country, while during the First Ava period, it was to only Upper Burma. During periods of unity and expansion, then, both the notion and fact of *Mranma Pran* grew; during periods of contraction, both shrunk, so that the perception of *Mranma Pran* oscillated in concert with the fact of *Mranma Pran*. And for the vast majority of the time, the expanded version, in fact, was the norm. But perhaps more important than size, since all (or most) of the ethno-linguistic groups we recognise today lived and worked in this *Mranma Pran* for nearly five centuries, it represented, both conceptually and empirically, something more than just a one-ethnic entity.

The end of the Ava period

In 1527, the capital city of Ava was captured by a Shan Sawbwa, and for the next 28 years or so, three Shan Sawbwaws in succession reigned at Ava, although they rarely seemed to have ruled. Ava probably controlled little more than the Kyaukse plains located on its east, while the major cities that were once under the Ava kingdom

16 Shin, *Yazawinkyaw*, p. 75.

17 Ibid., p. 81.

18 Ibid., p. 86.

remained independent *myosa*-ships, some still held by members of the deposed royal family. Later Burmese language chronicles record that during this period Buddhism was persecuted, monks murdered, books burned, and temples desecrated for their treasures.

There is some independent and contemporary corroboration for such conditions. The number of religious donations made to the *sangha* – perhaps the best index for determining stable society and legitimate government in Burma – declined dramatically to a paltry three records: two inscriptions in the Mandalay area, one in a rural location, but importantly, none at Ava – and that, during a period of 28 years!¹⁹

People of letters, skilled artists and craftsmen, merchants, crown service groups including elite soldiers, and monks – on whose presence the population depends for their accumulation of merit – fled to another centre, Toungoo, a governorship once under Ava, located farther to its southeast.²⁰ Literature and the fine arts all but disappeared at Ava.

And when poetry was written during this period, it was to lament the end of Ava and Burmese culture, the arts, and the sad state of affairs in general.²¹ Most renowned authors left Ava to write elsewhere.²² Indeed, no *yazawin* or any other ‘history’ appears to have been written at Ava during these 28 years – at least none survives in Shan or Burmese of which I am aware. With such a collapse of Burmese culture in the heart of Upper Burma, one wonders whether the idea of a *Mranma Pran* even survived. Perhaps as important, no equivalent notion of a ‘Shan Pran’ arose to take its place.

By 1551, the third and last Shan Sawbwa was overthrown and Burmese leaders recaptured the Ava seat. But by then, Ava had lost its integrative ability that had held it together for nearly 200 years and so became just one of many centres. Besides, power had already shifted to the Toungoo Dynasty centered at Pegu, and under kings Tabinshwehti and Bayinnaung, all of Burma was subsequently reunified by 1557.

The Toungoo / Pegu period in Lower Burma: 1538–1599

Bannya Dala

If the notion of *Mranma Pran* virtually disappeared in Upper Burma during the reign of the three Shan sawbaws, what happened to it when the country was once again recovered by Burmese speakers, but its centre was no longer located in the Dry Zone of Upper Burma to which the concept of *Mranma Pran* was so closely tied? How was it conceptualised during the Toungoo / Pegu period when its centre was in Lower Burma?

As far as I can ascertain, only one original *yazawin* was written during the Toungoo / Pegu period called the *Toungoo Yazawin*. The author is anonymous, and it is not certain whether the original was contemporary or written later, as only an eighteenth-century copy survives. Even had it been a contemporary account written at, or about, Toungoo (as the name suggests), it would have been an Upper Burma

19 *She Haung Myanma Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], V, p. *gha*; 127–9.

20 Virtually all such flights in Burma’s history were from centre to centre, not from centre to non-centre.

21 This was by Shin Aggathamadhi, only one of two poets of note who remained at Ava.

22 See Pe Maung Tin’s *Myanma Sape Thamaing* [History of Burmese Literature] pp. 129–38.

product in any case, for Toungoo was physically and conceptually part of the Dry Zone and would not have represented a genuinely Lower Burma notion of *Mranma Pran*.

However, there exists another text written during this period within the Pegu court that provides some information. It is said to be a translation of the *Mon Yazawin* into Burmese by Bannya Dala, a famous Mon minister under King Bayinnaung. If true, that places the *Mon Yazawin* a little earlier than the second quarter of the sixteenth century. After translating it, the work was said to have been renamed the *Yazadarit Ayedawpon*, celebrating one of the most famous Mon kings of Burma, Yazadarit of Pegu (1385–1423).²³ The text begins with the origins of the first Mon dynasty in the country, establishes Yazadarit's links to it, and ends with his death. As such, however, it does not represent the Toungoo / Pegu period but an earlier time.

Yet, it is also evident that Bannya Dala used concepts and terminology of his time which did not exist before amongst the Mon in Lower Burma. Yazadarit's kingdom, for example, was called the 'great Hanthawaddy *pran*', contrasting it (in the same sentence) to *Mranma Pran*, an obvious reference to Upper Burma. On another occasion, he also called Upper Burma 'Mranma Naingnan'. But as both *pran* and *nuinnam* are Old Burmese terms found in Pagan prior to the genesis of any Mon state in Lower Burma, and since no equivalent can be found in the Mon language between the sixth and sixteenth centuries,²⁴ it must have been Bannya Dala's own interpolation of the Burmese word. He had Yazadarit make a distinction between 'his *naingnan*' (referring to Mingaung I of Ava, contemporary antagonist of Yazadarit) and 'my [Yazadarit's] *naingnan*'.²⁵ Thus these notions are not the *Mon Yazawin* speaking but the *Yazadarit Ayedawpon* speaking.

What is most interesting and important about the *Mon Yazawin* is what it did not say. Even though it was probably the earliest history of the Mon of Burma written by themselves in their own language about their origins in the country, neither Lower Burma as a region, Muttama as their first centre, nor Pegu as their first exemplary capital was proclaimed as 'this, our land of the Mon', in the way the Burmese language texts had done with *Mranma Pran* and Upper Burma several centuries earlier. It suggests that no Mon regional identity existed at the time the text was written; not entirely unreasonable, for the first Mon kingdom in Burma was not established until the late thirteenth century.²⁶

Indeed, the notion of a 'Mon Pran' had to wait another 200 years, until 1479, when King Dhammazedi of the same dynasty finally envisioned it and first coined the phrase 'Ramannadesa, the realm of the Rman'. It was also the first time the idea of a

23 Amatkyi Banya Dala, *Yazadarit Ayedawpon* [The royal crisis account of *Yazadarit*] (Yangon: Swesa Press, 1974), p. 179.

24 H. L. Shorto, *A dictionary of the Mon inscriptions from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), has no equivalent of *nuinnam*, although in *A dictionary of modern spoken Mon* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 129, he defines the modern Mon word *nikem* as 'group, confederation, of localities', and *reh nikem*, as 'empire', from the Sanskrit / Pali '*nigama*' meaning 'market town'. Robert Halliday, *A Mon-English dictionary* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1922; reprint, Rangoon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1955), p. 260 has 'kingdom' or 'country' for the modern Mon word *nikem*. But neither suggested that *nikem* was related to *nuinnam*.

25 Amatkyi Banya Dala, *Yazadarit*, p. 175.

26 Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Rāmañña*.

Mranma Pran had a countervailing notion. But before the idea of a Ramannadesa could take hold, Pegu was conquered by Tabinshwehti of the Toungoo Dynasty in 1538, effectively postponing such a development for another several hundred years.

To Bannya Dala, then, the fact and notion of *Mranma Naingnan* or *Mranma Pran* was limited to Upper Burma. But that was not to last, for it changed once again when King Bayinnaung reunified the country in 1557. He announced it on a bell inscription placed at the Shwezigon Temple of Pagan, the palladium of the Burmese state. There he expounded in Pali, Burmese, and Mon his own notion of *Mranma Pran*, calling himself ‘wielder of the white umbrella throughout all of *Mranma Pran* Tuin Nuinnam and Tanluin Pran Tuin Nuinnam’,²⁷ a reference to the whole country he had just conquered, using the Burmese words *pran*, *taing*, and *nuinnam*. Once again, we see the close relationship between the notion of *Mranma Pran* and its reality, for before his conquest and unification of the country, both were perceived as Upper Burma; now, it was the whole country.

At the end of that century, around 1599, Pegu was destroyed by a newly arisen Arakan. However, the destruction of the centre did not end the dynasty itself, for by then some of its members had been holding fiefs in Upper Burma for nearly half a century. After the destruction of Pegu, one of them, Nyaungyan, a son of Bayinnaung who held Ava, simply resurrected the seat of the dynasty there around 1600. It subsequently became the capital of the new ‘Second Ava Dynasty’, as it is known in indigenous historiography.

The second Ava period, U Kala, and the *Maha Yazawingyi*: 1600–1752

Once again centred in the ‘heartland’, it was easier for the second Ava dynasty to resurrect both the notion and reality of *Mranma Pran*. Records in the Burmese language reappeared, as *yazawin*, religious treatises, law codes, cadastral and demographic surveys, administrative documents, and a whole range of literature, prose as well as verse, began to proliferate once more.

Indeed, it was during the second half of this period, in the first decade or two of the eighteenth century that the *Mahayazawingyi*, arguably the most thorough, comprehensive, and ‘historical’ *yazawin* to have survived was written by U Kala (‘Mr Indian’).²⁸ The work comprises three published volumes, the first 109 pages devoted to the standard legitimation scheme linking *Mranma Pran* with Buddhist cosmology and Asokan India. Only thereafter does the history of *Mranma Pran* begin.

And when it does, unlike the *Zatatawbon* and *Yazawinkyaw* of the Pagan and Ava periods, U Kala refrains from phrases such as ‘in this our *Mranma Pran*’. Instead, he remains neutral,²⁹ simply noting that he ‘will discuss the genealogy [or history] of the

27 See the Burmese text (lines 13–14b) reproduced in Sein Myint’s ‘The bell inscription of Bayinnaung (Hsinbyushin Mintayagyi)’, *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*, 8 (2001): 7–28. The Mon version of the same text on the bell has *khalwa* (‘domain’), not *naingnan* (Halliday, p. 83). See also *She Haung Mon Kyauksa Paung Chok* [Collection of ancient Mon inscriptions], 2: 105–8.

28 Although the date of writing is not certain, his last entry dates to 1729. See U. Kala, *Mahayazawingyi* [Great Chronicle], vol. 1, ed. Saya U Khin Soe (Yangon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1960).

29 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

kings from Tagaung to Pagan', providing Tagaung with the standard 'two brothers' origins and a good Buddha prophecy.³⁰

Although U Kala's name suggests Indian parentage,³¹ there is nothing in his text – style, vocabulary, syntax, orthography – to suggest he was anything but culturally Burmese, and very refined at that. Perhaps the reason for his detachment was something other than ethnic background. For by his time, it was not as compelling to celebrate Burmese culture, since *Mranma Pran* had been considered a self-evident truth now for several centuries. In fact, terms such as *Naingnan Taw* (literally 'royal nation') that he used actually became part of the phrase, the 'Union of Burma' (Pyidaungsu Myanma Naingnan Taw). What this suggests is that by U Kala's time, the notion of *Mranma Pran* had already crystallised into a socio-cultural and political entity that went beyond a particular ethnic group and geographic region.

Not too long after U Kala died, the Second Ava Dynasty was also ended by a rejuvenated maritime Pegu. However, it did nothing to convey a vision larger than simply playing the role of 'spoiler'; there was no attempt to reunify the country even under its own auspices. And it was a familiar pattern: the Shan Sawbwas of the early sixteenth century with the First Ava Dynasty and Arakan's Mrauk-U at the end of the sixteenth century with Toungoo / Pegu Dynasty had done the same thing. They showed little or no indication of reintegrating the country militarily or culturally once they had the upper hand. Both took the loot and returned home. This raises an intriguing question in Burma studies: why did only the Burmese speakers have such a unifying vision and why were they the only ones who acted on it?

Pegu appointed a governor at Ava and returned to Lower Burma with nearly the entire court, its books, treasures, and other paraphernalia, but leaving Upper Burma's agrarian and human resources intact. That was a mistake, for such were the material and demographic foundations upon which Pagan, Ava I, and Ava II had been built. Almost immediately, a charismatic village headman named Aung Zeya (later Alaunghpaya) harnessed these resources and reunited not only Upper but ultimately, all of Burma, starting with Pegu in 1757. Once again, the notion of *Mranma Pran* expanded to correspond with its reality.

Although there is some controversy regarding the identity of the original author(s) of Alaunghpaya's *ayedawbon* (one of the major texts regarding this king), the most knowledgeable Burma scholar with regard to this issue (U Hla Tin, who edited the published version) believes that there are two accounts, one written by Twinthin (who wrote the *Myanma Yazawin* discussed below), and the other by a minister named Letwe Nawyahta who served under Alaunghpaya. Both accounts are published together.³²

What is striking about the two texts is that, whereas Letwe Nawyahta traced Alaunghpaya's genealogy to the standard legendary Buddhist and Burmese links, Twinthin dispenses with all of that, and after the Buddhist invocation consisting of a single line, ties Alaunghpaya to the legendary founder of Pagan, Pyusawhti, thence to

30 Ibid., p. 108.

31 It appears that at least one of his parents, his father, was Indian, named Devasehta ('noble Deva').

32 *Alaunghpaya Ayedawbon: Two parts*, ed. U Hla Tin, alias Hla Tha Mein (Yangon?: Ministry of Culture, n.d.).

Narapatisithu's daughter, skipping even the great heroes of Burma's history, Aniruddha and Kyanzitha. None of the usual 'in this our *Mranma Pran*' kind of sentiments were expressed,³³ rather, they were taken for granted. It is a very straightforward account of this king who reunited the country and went on to found the Konbaung Dynasty, *Mranma Pran*'s last.³⁴

The Konbaung period: 1752–1885

Vamsadipani

In contrast to *yazawin* and *ayedawpon*, there is another genre of literature called *thathanawin* (literally 'genealogy' or 'lineage of the Religion') that has a bearing on our topic. The tradition is exemplified by two texts: the eighteenth-century *Vamsadipani* ('Lineage of the Elders')³⁵ and the nineteenth-century *Sassanavamsa* ('Genealogy of the Religion'). Basically religious histories, their notion of *Mranma Pran*, not surprisingly, reflect that priority. Its world was broader, an extended Buddhist ecumene (that Stephen Collins calls the 'Pali Imaginaire'), in which Buddhist Burma, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand were the main players.³⁶ Although we do find such religious sentiments represented in the 'secular' *yazawin* as well, for the *thathanawin* tradition, it was the primary focus.

In this scheme, *Mranma Pran*, especially during the Pagan period, was considered the exemplary centre of a larger Buddhist universe. This was not just a perspective of Burmese texts but also endorsed by the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka and Thailand. The image was not entirely unwarranted either, for between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Pagan was the Theravada Buddhist 'superpower' on mainland Southeast Asia (if not in all of Asia), and considered to be the most orthodox by the Theravada Buddhist world in terms of its relics, *sangha*, texts, and society. Certainly, it was the centre of Pali scholarship, and most conspicuously of Theravada Buddhist devotion as attested by thousands of temples and monasteries, far surpassing that of any other member of the 'Pali Imaginaire'.³⁷

Written in 1799, the *Vamsadipani* attempted to portray eighteenth-century *Mranma Pran* in a similar manner, calling it 'the Myamma Mandala' and 'the Myanma Empire'. Its inclusion of Lower Burma in the notion of *Mranma Pran*, therefore, comes as no surprise, for it reflects the political reality of the early Konbaung period during the time the text was written.

In the *thathanawin* tradition, then, the criteria for acquiring such stature in the broader Buddhist world were mainly religious and partly political and military

33 Although it was made clear that the primary contest was with the Mon of Pegu, p. 176.

34 *Alaunghpaya Ayedawpon*, p. 155.

35 Patrick Arthur Pranke, 'The "treatise on the lineage of elders" (*Vamsadipani*): Monastic reform and the writing of Buddhist history in eighteenth-century Burma' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2004).

36 Geok Yian Goh, '*Cakkravatīy Anuruddha* and the Buddhist *Oikoumene*: Historical narratives of kingship and religious networks in Burma, Northern Thailand, and Sri Lanka (11th–14th centuries)' (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 2007).

37 For the status of Pali literature at Pagan, see Mabel Haynes Bode, *The Pali literature of Burma* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1909; reprint, London, 1966). For the most thorough and comprehensive list of Pagan's religious buildings, see Pierre Pichard, *Inventory of monuments at Pagan*, 8 vols. (Gartmore, Scotland: Kiscadale and Paris: UNESCO, 1992–2001).

(although the latter is only implied). What is not a criterion for certain is ethnicity. In short, what was once an ethnonym, *Mranma* had acquired a much broader religious and national connotation, corresponding rather well with that of the more secular *yazawin*.

Twinthin's *Myanma Yazawin*

Around the same time that the *Vamsadipani* was written, another important 'secular' Burmese *yazawin* appeared. It was written by Twinthintaikwun Mahasithu mentioned above, a highly educated and cultured minister under King Bodawpaya. Learned in language and literature, poetry, religion, and history, Twinthin was a versatile scholar. He had been a renowned monk and teacher before he became a minister at court, and as a young man in his twenties, lived through King Alaungpaya's reunification of the country when *Mranma Pran* went from its 'contracted' to its expanded version.

The first volume of his history was published as *Twinthin Myanma Yazawin* [*Twinthin's new history of Myanma*] or *the Myanma* [*people*] which revealed certain 'mentalities' working on him during that particular period.³⁸ If the title given to that first volume accurately represents the one on the original manuscript,³⁹ he may have been the first to write a genuine 'history of Burma'. Let me explain.

As noted, the word *yazawin* literally means 'genealogy of kings', while *Myanma* can refer to both the people and the country. However, the contents of his work reveal more precisely what he meant. First, his *yazawin* took a 'modern' approach to history using historical periods,⁴⁰ something not evident before,⁴¹ so that, to him, *yazawin* was no longer just a genealogy of kings. Second, his work was not simply of the *Myanma* people but also of the other major ethnic groups and their leaders. Together, it was truly a history of the country.⁴²

38 Twinthintaikwun Mahasithu, *Twinthin Myanma Yazawin* ['Twinthin's new chronicle of Myanma' or 'of the Myanma'], vol. 1 (Yangon: Mingala Pon Hneik Press, 1968). Apparently these kinds of forces may also have been working on Thilawuntha during the First Ava period for he too used the phrase *Myanma Yazawin*.

39 The original has not been found since the mid 1960s; only several near-contemporary copies.

40 See *Twinthin Myanma Yazawin*, 'Matika' ('Table of Contents') and the text itself. In the copy of the manuscript located at the National Archives, Twinthin begins each dynasty with a clearly demarcated introduction, indented and set apart from the rest by using only half the palm-leaf and centring it, so that his intent for organising the text according to dynasties (rather than individual kings as U Kala did), is quite clear. The purpose is reflected in the published version of vol. 1, even though it followed modern publishing protocols such as chapters, titles, and sub-titles. In other words, the published version seems to have faithfully reproduced the original in terms of organisation into 'periods' determined by dynasties, as far as it could with modern formatting and binding considerations. However, to be certain, we need to find the original.

41 To be sure, there is another: the much earlier *Zatatawpon Yazawin*. However, whether or not the original manuscript itself was organised around 'periods' is not certain, for the published version may have taken liberties with the original manuscript for the benefit of modern readers.

42 One might argue, so was U Kala's. But he traced the lineage and activities of individual kings chronologically, so that it was still a *Maha Yazawin* rather than a *Myanma Yazawin*. That Twinthin's was the latter is clear in his 'opening statement' regarding the '*Mranma Pran*' section after he had dealt with the standard legitimating Buddhist legends. He wrote: 'now [I] will recount the sequence of the dynastic history that occurred in Myanma Taing Naingnan...' (Twinthin, *Twinthin Myanma Yazawin*, 1: 14).

Thus the title Twinthin gave to his history, *Myanma Yazawin*, appears deliberate. He seems to have been already thinking of *Mranma Pran* as an inchoate ‘national’ entity, going well beyond the original meaning of the narrower ethnonym.⁴³ It is this integration of both the national and ethnic concepts in the single term *Myanma* that obviated the need for the distinction between ‘Burmese’ and ‘Burman’ that became so important in the colonial reconstruction of Burma.

Hmannan scholars

For the most part, the historians who followed Twinthin preserved the expanded notion of *Mranma Pran* as long as the reality remained viable. A few years before the next major *yazawin*, the *Hmannan*, was written by a group of scholars in 1829,⁴⁴ Upper and Lower Burma was still a unit, and had been for nearly three-quarters of a century, so that these scholars had every reason to think of *Mranma Pran* as the expanded entity even though three years earlier, in 1826, the British in another war had taken most of its coastal provinces. And much like U Kala’s work, the *Hmannan* authors also assumed *Mranma Pran* to be a self-evident truth and did not agonise over its *raison d’etre*.

In fact, with the *Hmannan*, ‘this, our *Mranma Pran*’ became ‘this, the country ordained by our lord Buddha’,⁴⁵ hence, one’s identity had come to be associated also with one’s religion. Indeed, the *Hmannan* (along with only one other late chronicle, *The New Pagan Chronicle*), traced the lineage of Burma’s kings back to Sakyamuni’s tribe, the Sakyans, thence to Gaudama the Buddha. None of the earlier ones did that.

By the time the *Hmannan*’s two sequels were written as the *Dutiya Mahayazawin* (Second *Mahayazawin*) in 1854 and 1869, all Lower Burma south of Prome, usually regarded as the general boundary between Upper and Lower Burma, had been taken by the British in yet another war, so that the fact of *Mranma Pran* had once again shrunk back to the Upper Burma Dry Zone, more or less what the First Ava Kingdom was in the fifteenth century.

Sasanavamsa

It was in this context that another *thathanawin* was written in 1861, the *Sasanavamsa*, during the reign of King Mindon (1853–78). By then, *Mranma Pran* was effectively landlocked by the British and the whole world around it seemed to be collapsing into something it had never seen before. ‘Elder brother’ China had been the victim of the Opium Wars and was being carved up ‘like a melon’. ‘Master teacher’ India was securely under Britain’s control after the last religious revolt, the Sepoy ‘Mutiny’, had been brutally crushed. Once ‘subordinate’ Thailand was modernising

43 I first raised this issue in the mid-1990s amongst several colleagues before it appeared as ‘Burmese historiography – Chronicles (*Yazawin*)’, in *A global encyclopedia of historical writing*, ed. D. R. Woolf (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), and reaffirmed it later in 2005 in *The mists of Rāmañña* cited above.

44 For a brief synopsis of the circumstances around which the *Hmannan* was written, see Michael Aung-Thwin, *Hmannan Mahayazawindawgyi* [The great royal chronicle of the glass palace] in *A global encyclopedia of historical writing*, ed. D. R. Woolf (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 417–19.

45 *Hmannan Mahayazawindawgyi*, vol. 1 (Yangon: Pyigy Mandaing, 1329 [1967]), p. 153.

and had become more powerful than *Mranma Pran* could ever remember. And Sri Lanka, the quintessential bastion and guardian of the Faith was hopelessly colonised.

The *Sasanavamsa*'s notion of *Mranma Pran* reflects this pessimistic context. It distinguished Upper Burma (which it called Aparanta), from Lower Burma (which it named Suvannabhumi). The *Sasanavamsa* also used the oft-repeated phrase: 'in [this] our Mranma country...' ⁴⁶ but only when referring to Aparanta. When referring to Suvannabhumi, no such emotions were expressed, for its author regarded the latter as a separate region. Yet, when the *Vamsadipani* used the same kinds of phrases earlier – 'as for the Sasana in our land...' or 'in our Myanma country...' ⁴⁷ – they included Lower Burma, precisely because it had been written under optimistic, unified, and integrated circumstances. Clearly, notion and context went hand in hand.

Even though the historical context in which the *Sasanavamsa* was written was hardly an optimistic one, *Mranma Pran* was still the only viable Theravada Buddhist kingdom left that could satisfactorily protect, preserve, and perpetuate the religion, as none of the others had the independence, will, or prestige to do it. Thus, King Mindon initiated and hosted the Fifth Buddhist Synod in 1871 in the traditions of Asoka and other exemplary Buddhist monarchs.

Such religious priorities in the definition of *Mranma Pran* did not end with the monarchy either. Even after a devastating Second World War and subsequent civil war, Prime Minister U Nu held the Sixth Buddhist Synod in 1955–56, thereby twice making Burma the centre and champion of the Theravada Buddhist world in less than 100 years. The notion of *Mranma Pran* by then was once more the expanded version reflecting independent Burma. And much like the *Vamsadipani*'s perspective, the country's religious stature exceeded its political reality, something about which the majority of its citizens, regardless of ethnicity, class, region, and political affiliations, would have been proud.

Religion was thus another criterion by which *Mranma Pran* was defined, and that was as true in Konbaung *Mranma Pran* as in U Nu's parliamentary democracy of twentieth-century Burma, and also today's military government.

After the British formally annexed the whole country in 1886, another small group of scholars from the now defunct court continued the narrative of the 'Second Chronicle' to the year 1885 when Mandalay fell to the British. This third segment, along with another written in 1922 by Wundauk U Tin, a minister of the Burmese court, brought the narrative up to 1916 when the last king of Burma, Thibaw, died while under British-forced exile in India. This was published as the *Konbaungset Mahayazawindawgyi* ('the Great Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty') in three volumes. Since all of Burma by the time it was written was under colonial rule, the reality had reverted to its expanded version once more, the same manner in which U Tin defined *Mranma Pran*.

46 Paññasami, *Sasanavamsa* [History of the religion], trans. Bimala Churn Law (London: Pali Text Society, 1952), p. 61.

47 Patrick Arthur Pranke, 'The "treatise on the lineage of elders" (*Vamsadipani*): Monastic reform and the writing of Buddhist history in eighteenth-century Burma' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2004), p. 138.

There was another contemporary with the same name known as ‘Pagan’ U Tin who also needs to be considered. Knowledgeable and competent, he was a scholar under the tutelage of Kinwun Mingyi, chief minister of Burma’s last two kings, Mindon and Thibaw. The British retained U Tin after annexation to compile a work on the administration of Burma from the palace records that survived three days of looting and burning. What was left filled about 30 cartloads that were hauled down to Rangoon.⁴⁸ U Tin’s approach to his work is quite instructive. He wrote:

In writing this book I have worked upon the principle that it must not serve to puff the Burmese people up with vainglory. I will set down all sorts of things just as I saw them, leaving out nothing, just as an annalist at the Court used to set down each day whatever happened as he saw it ... Authorities upon which the book is based include the daily record of miscellaneous orders, along with the monthly and yearly summaries, dating back to the accession of Min-gyi-swa Saw-ke of Ava in 729 BE up to the fall of the kingdom in the reign of King Thi-baw.

He then listed his sources by name, consisting of nearly 30 titles, to which he added the following: ‘Records of the old kings, up to the establishment of the capital at Mandalay, with their orders and enquiries; various inscriptions on stone and in ink, bell inscriptions and collections of archaic Burmese. Based upon these sources, I have written the book according to the Burmese custom, dividing it into six parts, thirteen sections and 623 chapters.’⁴⁹

His present notion of *Myanma Naingnan* was the entire country composed of eight great provinces [*taing*].⁵⁰ But as he considered both (Mon king) Dhammazedī of Ramannadesa and (Arakanese king) Min Raza-gri of Arakan as ‘king[s] of Myanma Naingnan’, his notion of historical ‘Burma’ was also the whole entity including Arakan and Ramannadesa.⁵¹

In sum, from the late Pagan Period onward, *Mranma Pran* was increasingly perceived as a common political, administrative, religious, and cultural entity with generally accepted geographic boundaries. By the end of the Pagan period, neither the notion nor the reality of *Mranma Pran* was any longer just an ethnic entity. Thereafter, it was more often viewed by its scholars as an inclusive one in which were numerous traditions, ethnic groups, languages, and customs. This pre-colonial notion and reality of *Mranma Pran* did not change much in colonial and immediate post-colonial Burma either.

48 It was published in five volumes called *Myanma Min Okchokpon Sadan with appendix to King Bodaw Phaya’s Yazathat Hkaw ‘Ameindaw Tangyi’* (Rangoon: Ministry of Culture, 1963–70) [reprint]. For a translation of this work and synopsis of U Tin’s role, see Euan Bagshawe’s *The royal administration of Burma* (Bangkok: Ava House, 2001).

49 Bagshawe, *Royal administration of Burma*, pp. 1–2.

50 *Myanma Min Okchokpon*, vol. 2, pp. 80–1. For Bagshawe’s translation, see *Royal administration of Burma*, pp. 165–6.

51 *Myanma Min Okchokpon*, vol. 3, pp. 90–2. For Bagshawe’s translation, see *Royal administration of Burma*, pp. 341–5, 347–8.

The colonial and post-colonial communities of interpretation

The historical community of interpretation during the colonial period is epitomised by Sir Arthur Phayre, Godfrey Eric Harvey, and Daniel George Edward Hall. Since Phayre wrote during the last decades of the Burmese monarchy when the reality of *Mranma Pran* had shrunk back to Upper Burma, he saw it in a similar vein: as composed of separate ‘nations’ consisting of an Upper, Lower, and Western Burma, inhabited by Burmans, Mon, and Arakanese. But by the time G. E. Harvey published his history of Burma in 1925, the expanded version of ‘*Mranma Pran*’ had been resurrected once again, the whole country long ruled as a discreet colonial unit. Indeed, by his time, not only was this whole entity considered a nation, it was seeking independence as one. When D. G. E. Hall wrote the next comprehensive English language history of Burma in 1950, he too viewed it as Harvey had done: an encompassing, discreet unit, much like the expanded version of pre-colonial *Mranma Pran*. Thus, the British did not ‘invent Burma’ (as has been argued), they only built a new box for, and rearranged some of, the old contents.

The next several generations of Burma historians continued this notion of *Mranma Pran* into the second half of the twentieth century. Among those who chose to study the modern era, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism and their consequences on Burmese society were the compelling subjects, while for those who focused on the pre-colonial period – the overwhelming majority – the ancient Pyu, Pagan’s art and architecture, the Konbaung Dynasty, Buddhism, and Burmese and Pali literature were preferred. Besides, post-modernism that asked the kinds of questions being asked here was still decades away, so that for this generation, ‘Burma’ was a self-evident truth.

One example from the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (JBRS) should suffice. Two well-known articles in it by Than Tun and Tin Hla Thaw, although entitled ‘History of Burma’ were, in fact, discussing only Upper Burma.⁵² Although it is true that Than Tun was writing about the Pagan dynasty when it controlled both Upper and Lower Burma, little or nothing was said of the latter, while Tin Hla Thaw was specifically writing on the First Ava period, which was certainly not the entire country. As with the rest of this generation, pre-colonial *Mranma Pran* (either the expanded or contracted version) was synonymous with Burma the modern nation. And neither did this conceptualisation change much amongst Burma historians who immediately followed them.

Subsequently, the coup of 1962 may have decreased the number of foreign historians studying the country’s history. However, the majority of those who entered the field during the 1960s and 1970s, both domestic and foreign, focused on the empirical history of pre-colonial and colonial Burma rather than on theoretical concerns such as the notion of Burma, even though in Western academia these issues had become important. Problems concerning the modern nation-state were being discussed by political scientists such as Archie Singham, then of Michigan, who called India a ‘pseudo-nation’, and Ben Anderson, whose path-breaking ‘imagined communities’ addressed the heart of such issues.

52 Than Tun, ‘History of Burma A.D. 1300–1400’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 42, 2 (1959): 119–34; and Tin Hla Thaw, ‘History of Burma: A.D. 1400–1500’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 42, 2 (1959): 135–51.

Yet, even these had little effect on the selection of topics by Burma historians (including those studying in the West), as their dissertations testify. Not because they were unaware of them – although it was partly that – but because there were more pressing concerns in the field that were considered priorities. The impact of British colonialism on Burma's political economy was a subject that needed more scrutiny. An institutional history of the kingdom of Pagan – the origins of the state in Burma – had yet to be written, especially within the framework of current social science theory. No dissertation on ancient Arakan and its ideological and intellectual significance with regard to the history of early Burma had been written. Neither had there been any dissertations written on the pivotal Toungoo Dynasty. The early Konbaung Dynasty, although perhaps better studied than the others, still needed further scrutiny at the Ph.D. level. All these were the foci of attention for this (1960s–1970s) generation of Burma historians living in the West.

By the time the next generation of Burma historians appeared (1980s–1990s), 'imagined communities' and 'pseudo-nations' had ample time to be debated and digested. Yet, they still were not central concerns of this generation. As a subject matter, pre-colonial *Mranma Pran* continued to receive priority, so that the majority of the Ph.D. dissertations written in the West (and Masters' theses produced in Burma) focused on that era.

Domestic political realities also had an affect on the notion of (especially modern) Burma by the 1990s. The 1988 political upheavals there caught and maintained 'world' attention like no other single issue in 11 centuries of the country's history. Yet, these political events and the issues they raised affected Burma historians only marginally and tangentially; it simply was not a compelling topic for those focused on the pre-colonial or colonial periods, as most were. For those in other disciplines and areas, however, the 'Burma problem' became (and remains) an obsession.

Only by the next generation of Burma historians (1990s–2000s) did such issues as the notion of Burma become important. And even then, they served more as background than as foreground. It was again a matter of priorities: the history of Arakan during the 'early modern era' had not been studied at the Ph.D. level; theoretical issues in the study of colonialism that needed to inform certain topics (such as rebellion) in the colonial history of Burma had not done so; the single dissertation written earlier on regional relations needed further in-depth scrutiny, particularly by younger historians familiar with the regional languages; and the Burmese monarchy on the eve of the colonial era was an intriguing topic for others. These subjects became the foci of attention instead. To be sure, this generation knew, liked, and utilised both anthropological and historical theories, especially the historiography of the Annales School, some of whose works had now been translated into English and become part of Southeast Asian studies.

Within Burma itself, the works of most historians during the later post-independence years reflect an obliviousness of the theoretical works produced in western academia, which, we disparagingly (and self-congratulatorily) call 'xenophobic'. Rather, it was probably their traditional and colonial-style training that placed more value on 'the facts' than on theory. In retrospect, this has been a blessing in disguise, particularly given the trend in recent years at several leading academic institutions in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, where American theoretical

concerns have been accepted uncritically as gospel and regurgitated rather superficially. Nevertheless, perhaps unfortunately, by the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, leaders among Myanmar's academic community had begun to break out of their previous mould, and have been addressing some of the concerns earlier raised in western academia.⁵³

But to this day, the notion of Myanmar is still not an issue of compelling concern amongst either the historians within the country or the newest generation of historians outside it, which, incidentally, comprises the smallest number ever to have obtained their Ph.D.s on Burma, at least in the United States. The reluctance to give undue credence to current trends – 'instant history' as the Annales school calls it or 'incidents of the moment' to use the late Paul Wheatley's apt phrase – may well be a characteristic not just of Burma historians but historians in general, who seem to value 'old-fashioned' hindsight as an approach to historical problems more than some of the trendy, 'new' methods.

The ignored community

The attitude, that those unfamiliar with our scholarship must surely be xenophobic, leads me to the 'ignored community of interpretation'. It consists of individuals who had not obtained their degrees at western or westernised academic institutions, nor were they trained by those who had, so that their epistemology of 'Burma' is quite different. And because their 'academic lineage' and interpretations of Burma's past are considered 'unorthodox' by those trained in the west, they and their knowledge have been marginalised by 'the modernising Burma project', keeping them outside mainstream (westernised) Burma historiography. Indeed, had they been an order of monks in pre-colonial '*Mranma Pran*', they would have been deemed heretics and ostracised, which more or less is happening, only in more subtle ways.

I focus on one of these individuals about whom I have personal and direct knowledge. This is U Win Maung, well-known in the country as a 'person of knowledge' regarding its history and culture. He has probably educated a larger segment of the common Burmese public about its history and culture, and in more effective ways using his specialty in the arts and crafts, than those trained in the dominant western tradition using their methodology have. Almost all his publications are produced at home and in Burmese. They are not intended for tenure or promotion, peer-refereed, or evaluated by publications committees.⁵⁴ And they contain fascinating, important, local information about pre-colonial Burma's history, geography, religion, art, and culture. Yet, virtually no Burma historian trained in the West that I am aware of has cited his works as supportive material.

Win Maung is best known in the country for reconstructing the Pegu, Mandalay, and Pagan palaces, for which he has been criticised for having 'invented tradition'. However, few of these same critics know what his sources, methodology, or rationale

53 The numerous annual international conferences on Myanmar studies that began in the mid-1990s are the best illustration of this. Much of the results have been published in the respective conference volumes as well as in the new *Myanmar Historical Research Journal*.

54 To be sure, he has co-authored a few articles with western scholars whose publications have gone through such processes.

are since most have not even spoken to him. Nevertheless they have summarily dismissed his interpretation of his own country's past on the basis of a western theory whose epistemology is rather far removed from the actual context.

I spent considerable time with Win Maung on each of several visits to Pagan to understand the basis for his epistemology. He was, at the time, totally oblivious of Hobsbawm's thesis that has become quite a fetish in westernised academia. I asked him the kinds of questions his critics should have asked before rushing to judgement but had not, either because of the language barrier, or because they did not want to bother (or both).

He said that his information was based on a variety of sources: written texts, local knowledge, and his own education in the arts and crafts tradition acquired from his teachers whose 'lineage' stretches back several centuries. In terms of the written texts, he used traditional *parabaik* (mulberry paper books) on myriad subjects including architecture. There are also detailed stone and chronicle accounts of palace construction which he knows virtually by heart.⁵⁵ He is also totally immersed in, and surrounded (at Pagan) by thousands of period designs, paintings, motifs, and styles.

With regard to the current construction of the so-called Aniruddha palace at Pagan, he first built a scale model a few metres long. The information for the model was obtained from the kinds of sources mentioned above, as well as from the actual excavated palace site across the road from the one he is building, thought to have been built by King Aniruddha's successor, Kyanzittha, whose detailed inscription also describes the event.

Win Maung then located the actual 'Aniruddha palace' to align with the original main (east) gate. (It follows an early plan of Pagan preserved on a recent copy of a *parabaik*.) Kyanzittha's palace (the excavated one), on the other hand, does not align with the original main gate but with the southernmost one of the three on the east face.⁵⁶ Perhaps because the Irrawaddy River had eroded large portions of the north section, the walled area of Pagan had become 'cosmically lopsided', which had to be rectified when Kyanzittha built his. (Perhaps there were other reasons for this about which we are totally ignorant.)

One more comment on the 'invention of tradition' criticism: all the teak logs that were used as posts for the main palace building had been delivered to the compound while I was there. And since these were colour-coded, I asked Win Maung the reason for it. He said, you cannot mix 'head' and 'feet' parts of the tree when using them to build the palace. (In Burma, one cannot put 'head parts' where the 'feet' are supposed to be, and vice versa, especially when building something sacred.) The logs are colour-coded to ensure the workmen do not make that mistake. He posted a large sign at their water-drinking station reminding them of this very important fact.

55 There are two well-known stone inscriptions that record the building of two royal palaces, one in 1102 at Pagan by King Kyanzittha and the other in 1510 by King Narapati of Ava. The chronicles also have numerous, detailed descriptions of several such building activities.

56 Each face of the square walls had a total of three main gates, making 12, each representing one of the zodiac signs. The capital city, therefore, represented not only cosmological space but cosmological time.

When he told me this, I immediately recalled the Old Burmese inscription of 1510 that records the building of Narapati's palace at Ava, a virtual replica of Kyanzitha's of 1102.⁵⁷ Amongst other rituals, it contained one that distinguished and separated 'head' and 'feet' logs. In other words, not only is Win Maung not inventing tradition, he is obsessively following it!

In the end, even if his reconstruction is conjectural and all 'wrong', who else in the world knows better than Win Maung what the 'right' version is? Besides, does not the assertion – that tradition is being invented – presume prior knowledge of that tradition? What is most 'epistemological-centric' about these criticisms is not whether his reconstructions are authentic, but our arrogance in presuming they are not.

Thus, Win Maung represents a local, indigenous 'community of interpretation' about which few (if any) western historians know or care. With funding priorities during the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods earmarked for modern disciplines such as history and archaeology, those with western degrees and their characterisations of knowledge grew in numbers and legitimacy,⁵⁸ while those without were marginalised (however unintentionally) and never became part of modern Burma's mainstream historiography.⁵⁹

Yet, the fact that the community of interpretation Win Maung represents still lives today, and was not entirely eliminated when patronage effectively ended with colonial and independent Burma, testifies to the strength of the culture in preserving the system of knowledge it spawned. Then came the coup of 1962, which (perhaps unintentionally as well) bolstered that system, for had it not stifled the prevailing westernising trend and turned back the cultural clock, Win Maung's community of interpretation might not have survived at all.

Conclusion

Only after the political upheavals of 1988 did the notion of '*Mranma Pran* / Burma' suddenly become consequential and was challenged for the first time in 11 centuries. But since the contestation did not come from Burma historians for the most part, domestic or foreign, the question arises: by whom, why then, and why focus on Myanmar? The answer to the first question lies outside my purview, for the challenge came largely from political and other social scientists, especially journalists with a superficial interest (and expertise) in the country.

The more pertinent question is: why then and why only Myanmar? Why was the notion of Myanmar not a burning academic issue prior to 1988? Certainly, the historical facts regarding pre-colonial *Mranma Pran* and post-colonial Burma had not changed with 1988, nor were there any new discoveries made then that warranted such a challenge. And why is it not a compelling issue with regard to (say) the notion of Germany or Vietnam whose success in their own struggles for national supremacy

57 See *She Haung Myanma Kyauksa Mya* [Ancient Burmese inscriptions], vol. 5, pp. 99–107.

58 The largest number of Burma historians (more than 24) belongs to this period and has not been surpassed by any single generation.

59 In recent years, with sensitivity to 'local knowledge' better accepted in western academia, at least two western scholars in archaeology – Bob Hudson and Elizabeth Moore – who have been working closely with Win Maung, have helped legitimate his 'interpretive community' a little more.

similarly gave their respective ethnonyms to their countries? Why is it a problem only with the Burmese speakers and Myanmar?

Obviously, the issue was raised for political reasons; the political tail was once again wagging the academic dog. What is worse, however, is that Myanmar's past invariably gets subverted and revised to suit current notions of what Myanmar ought to be. To be sure, historical revisionism in academia for academic purposes is perfectly legitimate. But revisionism for political correctness, even if done sophisticatedly, is intellectually dishonest. In some cases, such political agenda attains legitimacy by concealing itself in certain academic trends; in others, it actually creates some of these trends from within academia.

There is one such academic trend in the field that I call 'privileging the periphery'.⁶⁰ It has become an informal school of thought that gives 'agency' to the 'interstices' and centrifugal forces of history, so that they are regarded as the rules rather than the exceptions, making the parts foreground and their sum background. Not only are peripheries, exceptions, and interstices *per se* championed but they are also seen in opposition to, rather than in terms of the whole. Indeed, they have come to define the whole, turning history on its head.

The trend is invariably anti-state, anti-centre, anti-elite, anti-mainstream, anti-majority, anti-integration, anti-centralism, and even anti-historical. Instead and almost as a matter of principle – in some cases, a matter of doctrine – decentralism and ahistoricism are celebrated and advocated. It is this anachronistic, political cum academic recreation, projected backwards to describe pre-colonial *Mranma Pran* that is the real 'invention of tradition' – not Win Maung's palaces.

Admittedly, most histories of Burma heretofore have focused on the *Myanma* people and their leaders so that some balance is needed. But that balance is not achieved by turning everything on its head. After all, the Burmese speakers did play the most significant role in the making of modern Burma, so that their history, by and large, is also the history of the country. Without them, there would have been no Pagan, First Ava, Toungoo, Second Ava, and Konbaung dynasties and periods, automatically eliminating 10 centuries of Burma's history. There also would have been no Anglo-Burmese Wars, no anti-colonial, nationalistic, and independence movements, and therefore, no modern Burma. What else is left?⁶¹

60 I am not referring to genuine academic concerns that honestly attempt to give voice to 'unheard voices'. Rather, I am referring to 'selective hearing' of only those 'voices' with a political agenda one wishes to champion. That is precisely why Win Maung's voice is unheard: he subcontracts for the Ministry of Culture, so is associated with the government.

61 I suppose one could argue that the history of the Arakanese, Shan, and Mon are left. But the latter histories were not made independently of the Burmese speakers. Thus, for example, one cannot speak of a kingdom of Arakanese speakers as if it were a distinct ethno-linguistic entity from one composed of Burmese speakers, since the language and people are the same. Initially, they were part of the same demographic movement into 'Burma', the *drang nach suden* of the Burmese speakers that diverged only later. The foundations of the first 'Arakanese' state in Arakan around the eleventh century was based on, and followed the development of Pagan's emergence around the mid-ninth century and so was part of the latter's expansion into its 'frontier' areas – the coasts. Prior to the advent of the Burmese speakers in Arakan, we do not know what the ethno-linguistic background of the people was, as they left mainly (or only) Sanskrit inscriptions which could belong to any ethno-linguistic group. Indeed, if the Arakanese

In other words, the history of *Mranma* (the people), in the making of Mranma (the country), is no different from the histories of the Spanish, English, French, German, Khmer, T'ai, and Vietnamese in the making of Spain, England, France, Germany, Kampuchea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Like it or not, the ethno-linguistic group that emerged as 'winner' in the struggle for national paramountcy is also the one after whom the nation is named, as it is virtually everywhere else in the world. Obviously, that does not mean the history and culture of the other ethnic groups were unimportant or that they contributed little or nothing to the making of modern Burma. It only means that they were not the main actors, just the supporting cast. And regardless of how unpalatable that reality may be to Burma historians advocating a larger share of the national stage for their people, the facts concerning the role of the Burmese speakers in the making of *Mranma Pran* are clear. Simply inflating the role of the unheard voices (for moral, political, or even academic reasons) does not necessarily make for a better and more accurate history.

At one extreme end of our spectrum, then, is the notion of '*Mranma Pran* / Burma' in its largest form – a major centre in an extensive Buddhist universe. Next to it is a smaller, geo-historical *Mranma Pran*, corresponding to the great plains, the adjacent hills, and the main coastal areas of the country, which, every so often, would

are combined with the Burmese speakers as part of the same linguistic group, they actually form a much larger percentage of the total number of Burmese speakers (about 75 per cent) than usually given by those who desire to minimise it (as 69 per cent) for political reasons. The real distinction between the Arakanese and Burmese speakers lies not in their ethno-linguistic differences but in their regional geo-political and historical experiences. Even Arakan's vaunted 'difference' in terms of the number of Muslims who are Arakanese amounts to about 12 per cent of the population today; the rest are still Buddhists.

Second, and with regard to the Burma Mon, its first centre in Lower Burma was Muttama, a city attributed to King Narapatisithu of Pagan by the Mon's own histories, while the rise and development of its first kingdom originates from the immediate physical and intellectual infra-structure built by the Burmese speakers of Pagan in Lower Burma. We can only guess what might have happened without Pagan, whereas we do know what did happen with it.

Third, in terms of the Shan in the making of Burma's history, they had their opportunities to make their role central and paramount, but did not, most probably because they could not unite under a pan 'Shan Pran'. Even had they such a notion and done so, they still would have had to contend with the numerically much larger Burmese speakers at both Pagan and Ava, both blocking their movement down the Irrawaddy river valley to the coasts unlike what happened in Thailand. Otherwise, 'Burma' today might be part of a much larger Thailand. (For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth and history in the historiography of early Burma: Paradigms, primary sources, and prejudices* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998).

Apart from such dependent historical relationships between the majority Burmese speakers and these three groups, the latter's combined contribution in terms of the number of years to the making of Burma's post-Pyu 1200-year history, amounts to less than 300: about 25 per cent. Although this is not an insignificant percentage, one can hardly say it was crucial, much less, paramount, especially when viewed individually. Despite the fact that the Burmese speakers contributed nearly 75 per cent of the total number of years to the making of post-Pyu Burma's history (and five out of its seven dynasties), there are still attempts to trivialise their role as if it were insignificant. Removing the Burmese speakers as the central actors in Burma's history is tantamount to removing the Javanese speakers from 'Indonesian' history, the T'ai from the history of Thailand, or for that matter, the German speakers and French speakers from the histories of Germany and France. Such a 'history' is not only subservient to politically correct agenda (an obvious attempt to de-legitimate the present scenario), but implies that historical evidence is not only irrelevant in reconstructing history but, to some, a nuisance.

shrink to just the great plains and perhaps some of the hills. Next to it is a colonial and post-colonial cum independent 'Burma', a close replica of an expanded '*Mranma Pran*'. At the opposite extreme is the most current populist and political notion; a discombobulated Myanmar where each of its parts is given equal 'rights'.

Whereas the first three notions reflect the fact of '*Mranma Pran* / Burma' fairly well, the last one does not. It exists largely in the minds and analyses of its creators. As Burma historians seeking historical accuracy, we must ensure the integrity of the discipline and the field by insisting that the notion of *Mranma Pran* accords with the fact of *Mranma Pran* over the *longue duree*, and not acknowledge politically driven studies that exalt 'incidents of the moment' and the fleeting present, as if they were enduring principles of Burmese society.