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A tale of two kingdoms: Ava and Pegu in the fifteenth century

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Over a half century after the great 'classical' kingdom of Pagan that produced the 'golden age' of Myanmar had declined in the first decade of the fourteenth century, the kingdoms of Ava and Pegu appeared. Thereafter, for the next century and a half, both dominated the land. While Ava was an 'upstream' agrarian kingdom ruling mostly Upper Myanmar, Pegu was a 'downstream' commercial polity with hegemony over Lower Myanmar. However, and contrary to convention that the history of fifteenth-century Myanmar was an ethnic struggle between two irreconcilable Burmese and Mon populations, their relationship should be characterised more as a dualism of different geo-political and economic factors instead. Indeed, the history of that 'upstream–downstream' relationship between Ava and Pegu established lasting patterns that became, thereafter, part of the fabric of Myanmar's history until today.

Introduction

When the great kingdom of Pagan declined politically in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, mainly because of internal structural reasons, Upper Myanmar separated into three main centres of power, each held by a member of the ex-royal family, while Lower Myanmar began the slow process of state formation as it was now independent of Upper Myanmar's hegemony. For the next half-century or so, this transitional situation continued until two new kingdoms emerged. In Upper Myanmar, the First Ava Dynasty and Kingdom rose, and in Lower Myanmar, it was the First Pegu Dynasty and Kingdom. Both had their immediate origins in the second half of the fourteenth century, reached their pinnacles in the fifteenth, and declined before the first half of the sixteenth century was over.

They, and the 'period' they occupy, represent the only gap left in the historiography of the state in Myanmar. The probable reason for this neglect is that both Ava and Pegu were situated between the two most exemplary kingdoms in the country's history: Pagan and (so-called) Toungoo. The first held sway between the ninth and fourteenth centuries while the second occupied nearly all of the sixteenth. And

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whereas Pagan is considered the 'classical' period in Myanmar's history, ruling for over 400 years, the latter was the most territorially extensive and militarily accomplished, having conquered most of Western and central mainland Southeast Asia during the sixteenth century.[1] Sandwiched between these two exemplary models, Ava and Pegu were relegated to the standard 'default' role of a (European) 'medieval' period with all the negative judgements appertaining thereto.[2] This image has only been exacerbated as historical research on Pagan and 'Toungoo' continued to receive more and more attention while Ava and Pegu, less and less. Imagine an account of Italy following the Roman collapse that skips to the Renaissance (attractive though that may be), without first having dealt with the early and late medieval periods in European history.

The primary purpose of this essay, then, is to summarise the trends and patterns that best characterise this nearly 200-year gap in the country's history while redressing some important historiographic problems created by that gap. The details belong to a much larger manuscript on the narrative and institutional history of Ava and Pegu, hence its (and the present) title. That manuscript is divided into two parts. The first deals with Upper Myanmar and Ava, the second with Lower Myanmar and Pegu. The Ava section has 10 chapters and Pegu six, organised chronologically around three circumscribing topics: origins, development and decline.

In the 'origins' sections, both the legendary and historical beginnings of each kingdom are discussed, not only to separate history from myth, but also to analyse the historical significance of those origins, and the political and historiographic issues that inevitably arise from conducting such scholarship. The 'development' phase, focused on the fifteenth century, is a more straightforward narrative of known kings and queens, princes and ministers, their lives and activities, their contributions to each kingdom and to the country's history. Much of the information for this part comes from the chronicles which are not without their sense of humour, irony and irreverence. The narrative of this section, therefore, is closer to that of a historical novel than heavy social science analysis. It is not fiction, however, to say that during this 'development' phase Ava and Pegu interacted most intimately, creating a 'dualism' that is central to understanding their relationship. The 'decline' phase traces the remote and immediate, internal and external factors that brought about the political 'end' of both Ava and Pegu. It also attempts to recapture some of their historical legacy in Myanmar's and Southeast Asia's overall history in a general conclusion.

The framework of analysis in the above manuscript as well as the present essay is 'the state'. The reasons for that choice are compelling. Most important (and basic), there is little or no original and contemporary evidence for a 'stateless' focus, as all (or nearly all) written sources of pre-colonial (indeed, also colonial) Myanmar derive from the state. Without these, we are left with modern conjectures of pre-colonial

1 For the most comprehensive and scholarly account of the 'Toungoo' Dynasty in English, see Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese administrative cycles: Anarchy and conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

2 I am aware of the large amount of scholarship that has successfully questioned some of the negative images of the 'medieval' world during the past several decades in the field of European history. For a good, representative example, see Brian Tierney's *The Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (New York: Knopf, 1974). But that kind of scholarship has yet to influence 'Burma' studies.

Myanmar based on one's imagination and ideological bent, 'documented' by nineteenth- and twentieth-century British ethnographies written in English and projected backward in time, all embedded in an analysis designed to be commensurate with its desired consequences. Indeed, if the state were not the main focus, we would not be able to reconstruct a history of that period at all.

Besides, can one imagine what early Southeast Asian historiography would look like without a Pagan, Angkor, Sukhotai-Ayuthaya, Dai Viet, Sri Vijaya or Mataram/Majapahit? It would be tantamount to an account of classical Europe without Athens or Rome. This is not to say that the 'periphery' does not count; only to say that there is little or no original evidence to reconstruct it, and to suggest instead, following the late Paul Wheatley, that the periphery exists largely in terms of the centre, not in opposition to it.[3]

Ava and Pegu: A symbiotic dualism

On one level, Ava and Pegu's relationship was a symbiotic dualism of time, while, on another, it was one of space. Not only was Ava a reformulation of something old and Pegu the creation of something new, Ava was located in the agrarian dry zone while Pegu, on the commercial coasts. And whereas the Kingdom of Ava was essentially Pagan writ small – virtually resurrecting the latter *in toto* except for size and scale – Pegu was a kingdom that emerged anew, each occupying regions of the country that were ecologically and materially quite distinct.

For Ava, it was a familiar situation: the same material environment and demographic base, the same economic, social and political institutions, the same language, writing system, cosmology and culture. For Pegu, although it also shared much of the same cosmology and conceptual system of, and built upon the physical infrastructure laid there earlier by Upper Myanmar, the kingdom *qua* kingdom was the first in Lower Myanmar, located in a new geo-economic setting, and led by newcomers: the Mon speakers.

Indeed, the city of Pegu itself had been a governorship under the Kingdom of Pagan, first mentioned in Old Burmese epigraphy around the 1260s; there is no dated, original evidence that it is any older. Also, under Pagan, Pegu existed as part of Upper Myanmar's provincial structure; its governors were appointees of the Pagan court (occasionally members of the royal family) and were clearly Burmese speakers. They served at the pleasure of the king, administering the kingdom's needs on the commercial frontier. Administratively and politically, then, Pegu of the mid-thirteenth century was a relatively new settlement and an extension of the interior, not an old polity representing an independent coastal culture of the early first millennium CE, as convention has it in the myth of Ramannadesa.

And it is on that thirteenth-century Pegu that the more famous fifteenth-century Pegu of Queen Shin Saw Bu and King Dhammazedi was built. It represents the first genuinely independent maritime kingdom of Lower Myanmar and belongs to the

3 Paul Wheatley, *Nagara and commandery origins of the Southeast Asian urban traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Geography, 1983). In the present case, neither Ava nor Pegu was 'the periphery' anyway; both were centres.

fifteenth, not the eleventh or twelfth centuries when it was still an appendage of Pagan. We cannot confuse, or for current political purposes, conflate the two.

But for nearly two centuries, academic convention had reversed that history by making Pegu old instead of new (in the myth of Ramannadesa) and Ava new instead of old (in the myth of a Shan Ava), skewing any contingent interpretations thereof.[4] It further turns out that the relationship between Ava and (Dhammazedi's) Pegu was not an irreconcilable, binary antithesis of two antagonistic ethnicities, regions and cultures (as convention also has it) but a workable synthesis in a dualism of differences.[5]

Indeed, that dualism between Ava and Pegu in the fifteenth century is an example *par excellence* of the old 'upstream–downstream' paradigm, a near-universal principle in pre-colonial (and in some respects, also modern) Southeast Asian history. In Myanmar, it created as much centrifugal as it did centripetal energy, providing an equilibrium that defined the period. Equilibrium, of course, need not imply harmony, so that however contentious their relationship may have been at times, both invariably sought to maintain the *status quo*.

Part of the reason is that the true competitors of the agrarian states in Southeast Asia were not their maritime counterparts but other agrarian states that were more like them, such as Pagan and Angkor.[6] So also the maritime states: the powerful maritime kingdoms rarely, if ever, destroyed their agrarian counterparts but went after one another instead — the Cholas attacked Sri Vijaya, Arakan destroyed Pegu, Champa and Dai Viet were often at war. The primary reason is that both the agrarian and maritime states needed each other in the most important ways.

More specifically, and especially with regard to Ava and Pegu, this dualistic relationship was based on economic necessity, whereby luxury goods and other imported and maritime specialties were exchanged for the basic products of the interior, particularly rice. The famous rice lands of Pegu were not developed until the twentieth century, so that Lower Myanmar was not self-sufficient in it and depended on imports from Upper Myanmar and elsewhere. The interior also provided products which grew only, or mainly, under dry zone conditions, such as the large variety of pulses (peanuts, soyabeans, sesamum) important to the people's diets, along with sugar (cane and palm) and other foodstuffs in exchange for ocean-related and other tropical products. This 'upstream–downstream' exchange system was shaped and facilitated by the country's main north–south artery, the Irrawaddy, where a well-established infrastructure had been operational since early historic (if not also pre-historic) times.

4 Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth and history in the historiography of early Burma paradigms, primary sources, and prejudices* (Athens, Singapore: Ohio University Center for International Studies. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998). See also Aung-Thwin, *The mists of Ramanna: The legend that was Lower Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

5 The theoretical inadequacies of such binary treatments have been demonstrated well in Victor B. Lieberman, *Beyond binary histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

6 Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Spirals in Burmese and early Southeast Asian history', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21, 4 (1991): 575–602. Also his 'Lower Burma and Bago in the history of Burma', in *The maritime frontier of Burma: Exploring political, cultural and commercial interaction in the Indian Ocean world, 1200–1800*, ed. Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider (Leiden: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2002), pp. 25–7, addresses the issue.

That economic symbiosis, in turn, shaped Ava and Pegu's political and military relationship, which was largely a *modus vivendi* that was in both their interests. Unless Pegu were willing and able to conquer the dry zone, keep it, and maintain its agricultural economy along with its infrastructure – and it was not – it had little choice but to preserve the *status quo*. Ava, despite political and military behaviour that suggest designs to take control of the maritime areas, in fact could not, so ended up preserving the *status quo* as well.

Indeed, the history of Ava and Pegu's intentions to preserve rather than change the *status quo* is demonstrated by the following kinds of activities. At the end of major campaigns (which were usually half-hearted stalemates), public and sensationalised peace accords were held at famous religious sites to mark their respective boundaries at places already recognised as the limits of each side's respective domains anyway. Marriage alliances were forged with each other to create fictive kinship ties, enhancing diplomatic solutions over military ones. Knowingly and deliberately each side harboured the other's 'dissidents' more as a means to keep the other off-balance than inflicting any kind of permanent damage. In one case, Pegu desiring to maintain stability even requested (and received) Ava's endorsement of its 'front-runner' candidate for the office of king in a succession dispute. In other words, the history of Ava and Pegu's political and military relationship does not suggest any genuine desire to finish off each other; rather, it was to ensure each other's continued presence and the preservation of the *status quo*.

Demographically too, Ava and Pegu depended on each other's ability to attract labour in labour-scarce early Southeast Asia. Emigration appears to have occurred at both ends: hill peoples were moving down into the lowlands of the dry zone for the benefits of 'civilisation' (religion, literacy, art, 'Burmese' culture) as well as for material and socio-political benefits (rice, jobs, status, power), while Lower Myanmar's commercial economy also seemed to have attracted people to it, both from overseas and other parts of central mainland Southeast Asia. As Ava was an agrarian state with a land-based army, it probably needed more labour than did Pegu, whose viability was contingent instead on the size and scale of its maritime commercial operations. Part of Pegu's excess labour therefore probably migrated to Ava. There, sophisticated irrigation infrastructure based on perennial rivers and streams ordinarily produced an annual surplus, while a continuous temple construction industry provided well-paying jobs for the services of skilled artisans and craftsmen which kept dozens of related industries humming.[7] All this tended to encourage voluntary emigration to both places. There is no contemporary evidence that under normal conditions people fled the centres of the lowland valleys; it was the other way around: they most often gravitated towards them. Centres in early Southeast Asia tended to attract rather than repel people.[8]

7 Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985).

8 This is clearly contrary to the most recent work of James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Agrarian Studies Series, 2009). It argues for populations headed in the opposite direction; that is, away from the centres. That notion is quite contrary to the best primary evidence we have on the situation, where, if people fled at all, it was during enemy attack, and even then, they fled to other centres, not to the hills. And data he used

One of the most cordial, cooperative and non-violent areas of this dualistic relationship was in the sphere of religion. Although Ava's claim to pre-eminence in Theravada Buddhism outstripped any Pegu could muster, King Dhammazedi's fifteenth-century reforms at Pegu were nevertheless reason enough for respect and perhaps even envy at Ava. And while Dhammazedi publicly invoked famous Upper Myanmar kings as exemplary models to emulate, Ava also invited learned monks from Lower Myanmar to grace the capital with their presence.

This was not ideologically difficult for either kingdom, as both believed that they had received their orthodoxy from Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka, even if each traced the lineage of its own Sangha to different religious exemplars who were eminent figures in Asoka's Third Buddhist Council, also considered by both to be the most orthodox. Thus, for example, when two famous monks returned from Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century, even during a period of antagonism between the two kingdoms, their decision to accept Ava's invitation to reside there rather than in Lower Myanmar was nevertheless honoured by Pegu, which, with great pomp and ceremony, escorted them to Prome, the accepted border between the two kingdoms. In the sphere of religion, the 'upstream–downstream' relationship was more than dualistic: it was singular.

Preserving the *status quo* and sharing the same conceptual system, however, does not mean that they were not competitive, nor that their views of, and dependence on, the outside world were the same. In fact, Ava and Pegu's were quite dissimilar, the result mainly of their respective material environments and the priorities that they engendered. While Ava as a society appears to have been more provincial, homogeneous and conservative, Pegu seems to have been more cosmopolitan, heterogeneous and less conservative. As Pegu's economy was dependent upon international and regional commerce, it had to be acutely aware of, and concerned with external political and economic trends and patterns in India, China and the rest of Southeast Asia; its survival depended on that awareness of the outside world. Hence, it was more flexible, adaptable and willing to change, with an outward-looking view.

Ava's perspective, on the other hand, was nearly the opposite. Its concerns were focused on the domestic environment: the maintenance of irrigation works and its cultivated lands, control over its precious stones and interior products, and the retention of its valuable population of cultivators. As a result, Ava was far more cognisant of rainfall patterns and agricultural production, and that members of its population remain in their socio-legal and occupational categories, than it was (say) of Muslim invasions of North India or the rise of the Ming in China. In other words, the commercial and political affairs of the outside world had little or no affect on Ava's most important priorities, so it also did not see it and its influences (or today, its counsel) as particularly that important. In that sense, one could say that Ava was predominantly inward looking, with less (not no) need for the outside world.

as 'evidence' for flight during normal times in Myanmar were actually references to changing one's occupation from (say) crown service to non-crown service, not geographical flight from the centre to the periphery. Scott's treatment is an example *par excellence* of what I have earlier called 'privileging the periphery'.

However, that is quite different from saying that Ava was xenophobic, as so often claimed by modern Western observers. The term is not only pejorative, cultural-centric and anachronistically modern, it fails to understand (or refuses to recognise) that such an attitude was directly related to Ava's priorities. To Ava (and in general, also Myanmar throughout most of its history), the 'outside world', its 'front door' (so to speak) faced north towards China, not the coasts (and Pegu), which was the 'back door'. So when Myanmar was looking out of its 'front door' (to its 'outside world'), from the perspective of the West who came in through the 'back door' (or the bath-room window) but assumed it to have been the country's 'front door', Myanmar did indeed appear to be 'inward looking'; that is, it was not looking in the direction of the West.

To label Myanmar 'xenophobic' for the direction of its gaze, then, is a self-centred and conceited statement that considers the observer's world-view as more enlightened and superior, as anything but the 'outside world' (or in today's terminology, the 'international community'), and could not have been anywhere else but at the 'front door' of someone's place. That kind of attitude probably belongs to a much later colonial (and neo-colonial) age, for one cannot easily find earlier European travellers going around calling Southeast Asian societies that had such domestic priorities 'xenophobic' (or its equivalent). Most appeared to have accepted Southeast Asia for what it was. The former concern, then, is a modern one shaped by images that the West had of itself mainly during the last 200 years or so. In any case, and in whichever direction the front and back doors of Ava faced, it was the interior of the house that mattered most.

To this 'upstream–downstream' dualism must be added a third, complicating component, namely, the hills (perhaps the side windows?), so that one might call the whole scenario a 'tripartism'. These hill regions were the real 'interstices' of the Ava–Pegu dualism. But that does not mean they were unimportant; they were, and comprised a distinct, geo-economic, political and demographic component of the whole with a discrete cultural and ethno-linguistic space. In fact, for Ava, especially during the fifteenth century, these hill regions of the north were nearly as important as the maritime coasts, and, at particular times, even more so.

Economically, their habitat provided the gems, soft woods, cool-weather crops and much of the precious metals, while their location was the conduit for new technology from China (such as firearms),[9] in exchange for lowland rice and other crops of the plains, certain manufactured materials, and (to reiterate) 'high culture'. The hills also replenished the labour pool of the plains, particularly in the agricultural and military sectors. When politically allied with Ava, they supplied valuable reinforcements in times of war, while during peacetime, were a permanent buffer that blocked the traditional (northern) paths of invasion. Their elite intermarried with Ava royalty to forge some of the more lasting political alliances, whose offspring in time came to be regarded as members of the Burmese court. For Pegu, however, the hills were only of secondary concern.

9 Laichen Sun, 'Military technology transfers from Ming China and the emergence of northern mainland Southeast Asia (c. 1390–1527)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34, 3 (2003): 495–517.

Thus, it would be fair to say at this juncture that although the 'upstream–downstream' relationship was more important economically in the fifteenth century, in the long run, the political relationship between the dry zone and the hills may actually turn out to be more significant. But as this study is focused on the 'upstream–downstream' paradigm rather than the tripartite scenario, the latter is not dealt with here in any detail, even if that were possible. For the history of this 'interstice', particularly during the 'early modern' period, has not been very well reconstructed, mainly because there are virtually no primary sources that belonged to it. Much of what we know about it derives either from late colonial ethnographies or from Ava and Chinese sources, and thus, from those perspectives.

Yet, such a conclusion – that the political relationship between the dry zone and the hills of Upper Myanmar may be more important at times – may be difficult to accept for some, given nearly two centuries of convention in 'Burma studies' that have depicted the Mon of Lower Myanmar to have been the *sine quo non* of, and conveyors of, civilisation in Myanmar, as the 'Greeks of Southeast Asia', as well as the alleged ultimate 'victims' of majority 'ethnic cleansing', all of which automatically appeals to our modern sensitivities. But one needs only to look at the evidence – which does not support such undocumented, emotional and politically motivated modern assertions – to better appreciate the far longer and stronger ties the Shan speakers have had with the Burmese speakers of the dry zone. As the largest minority group in Myanmar with about 9 per cent of the current population (and millions more in Thailand), their future relationship with the majority Burmese speakers is also bound to be more important.

The Ava–Pegu dualism in motion: The fifteenth century

As the above characterisation of the Ava–Pegu dualism has been largely a synchronous analysis – that is, as if it were standing still – let me place it in a more diachronic framework and context – that is, as it moved through time – using the conventional periods in Myanmar's historiography, although there are some important problems with them also.

In order to do that properly, we need to first remove Pegu (and Lower Myanmar) from the conventional context of the pre-classical and classical age, in which nearly two centuries of convention had placed it, and return it to the fifteenth century where it belongs. When that is done, Pegu's significance to the overall history of Myanmar also changes. Certainly no 'ancient traditions' can be attributed to it, particularly the Indic influences that were making their way to Southeast Asia prior to and during the first millennium CE. There was no Pegu at that time, and Lower Myanmar was probably still a swampy area whose delta had not yet formed completely (if at all). Back then, the region was most probably dotted with fishing villages and port towns in which a hodge-podge of different ethno-linguistic groups eked out a living. There is no evidence of anything larger than a town or village, certainly nothing like a kingdom.

It was only from the mid-eleventh century onward, with the continued southward migration of, and conquest by the Burmese speakers from Upper Myanmar, that evidence first appears of large-scale urbanisation in Lower Myanmar, providing the wherewithal for eventual state formation. And it was only then that the place

names of towns and villages first appear in the contemporary epigraphic sources of Lower Myanmar, all written in Old Burmese, not in Old Mon. (Indeed, we do not find such place names written at all in Old Mon, until 200 years later when they were finally written in Middle Mon.)[10] Similarly, the conceptual basis for the state in Myanmar found first in Indic culture, most notably in Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism, was already deeply entrenched in the culture of Upper Myanmar for nearly a millennium before making its appearance in Lower Myanmar. In other words, the development of civilisation in Lower Myanmar was largely late and derivative, not early and original: it was part of what anthropologists call secondary, not primary state formation.

That means the evidence for the present study of Pegu must come from the correct period – the fifteenth century and subsequently – not from undated art objects that appear to look similar, and remains of settlements based on conjectural assumptions of an 'ancient Lower Myanmar', a tautological and self-serving exercise in any case. The Pegu of fifteenth-century Lower Myanmar was a contemporary of Ava, Mrauk-U, Ayuthaya and Melaka, not Pagan, Angkor and earlier Dai Viet and Champa. Our analysis of Pegu, therefore, must come from a period where there is evidence of interaction with peoples, cultures and technologies that were present during the time that Pegu also existed.

This historical context includes the presence of: (1) Europeans (mainly Portuguese and Genoese) and their technologies (including their version of firearms) and beliefs (such as Christianity); (2) South Indians of the Vijayanagara Empire and their resurgent Hinduism, not that of the earlier Cholas; (3) Sri Lankans, not of classical, powerful and ascending Polonnaruwa with Vijayabahu I and Parakramabahu I, but of Kotta with Parakramabahu the VI and VII during an age of decline; (4) Muslims, not fresh from the Middle East but those who had already lived in North India and Southeast Asia for at least two centuries; (5) the outward-looking and sea-faring Ming and their cutting-edge technologies in long-distance navigation, oceanography, 'jumbo' ship building, along with their culture embedded in Confucianism and Taoism, not in the Buddhism of the Sui, T'ang and Yuan; and finally, (6) a revived Malay world under Melaka, the major and certainly indispensable player in all this maritime activity of the region of the time, not that of an earlier Sri Vijaya.[11] In other words, fifteenth-century Pegu was a different entity that existed in a different context from mythical, first-millennium CE 'Pegu' where it had been placed heretofore in conventional Burma–Myanmar historiography.

Geo-economically and politically, this later Pegu (and Lower Myanmar) of the 'early modern' period were very much an integral component of maritime South, Southeast, and East Asia, a crescent-shaped swath that hugged the coasts and

10 Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*, pp. 58–67.

11 For a recent, scholarly, and comprehensive treatment of this region, one should consult Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the same tree: Trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). There are others who have dealt with this maritime region and period in Asia, all of whom cannot be cited here. To mention a few that are most pertinent to this particular point, one should see Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime trade and state development in early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985) and Romila Tharpar, *A history of India*, vol. I (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1966).

encircled mainland Southeast Asia on the West, South and East, stretching from Northern Arakan to North Vietnam. At the time, it was physically, conceptually and structurally a connected zone, the habitat of similar coastal settlements involved in common commercial and cultural activities all well known to each other.

To be sure, neither that zone nor its activities was new; both had been there and operating in similar fashion a millennium earlier when South Asian (and even Mediterranean) cultures made their way to Southeast Asia. So it was part of an old–new world. However, the 'kingdoms' one found there, the port towns they taxed, the communities they controlled, the people that inhabited them, the languages they spoke in them, their overseas contacts, and most notably the scope and scale of these entities and their activities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not those of the millennium before. Fifteenth-century Pegu (and perhaps Lower Myanmar in general) had never been as strong and wealthy, its economy based almost wholly on the trade and commercial revenues of the region where cash rather than *padi* was king.

The fifteenth century was also the first time in the country's documented history where two distinct dynasties ruled two discrete kingdoms that were coterminous, more or less equal in strength, each dominating opposite ends of the main political, economic and demographic artery of the country: the Irrawaddy valley's north–south axis. That situation of two distinct kingdoms had not existed before, so that their relationship and the consequences of that relationship on the history of the country were also new.

One of these was Upper Myanmar's lack of control of the coasts, which compelled Ava to focus more on its relations with the highland powers in Upper Myanmar, notably the Shan speakers, the 'newcomers' there. That turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, some became reliable allies of the Ava court that helped in numerous ways, including repulsing the Ming twice in the fifteenth century, and thereafter becoming more or less a permanent buffer in the north against future (mainly Ch'ing) invasions. On the other hand, some of these Shan Sawbwas became strong enough to challenge Ava; indeed, to eventually take it in 1527, especially as Ava always had to worry about the coasts and was therefore constantly looking over its shoulder at Pegu.

For Pegu, a consequence of this new, two-kingdom situation was the experience of having been independent in Lower Myanmar during the fifteenth century. That left a taste for it, which further contrasted that autonomy to the more usual and long-standing Upper Myanmar dominated single-kingdom situation. As a result, one of the most important long-term historical patterns in Myanmar's history – 'Dry Zone Paramountcy' – was successfully challenged for the first time and postponed for nearly two centuries. And although ultimately both 'Dry Zone Paramountcy' and its concomitant, Burmese rule, prevailed in the long run, nonetheless, because the latter's successful challenge was linked (also for the first time in the country's history) to the idea of an ancient homeland of the Mon (in the fifteenth-century concept of Ramannadesa, the 'realm of the Rman'), it created historical, historiographic and political consequences that went far beyond the fifteenth century to remain thereafter a *cause célèbre* for aspirations to autonomy by both Lower Myanmar and Mon speakers.

The history of Ava and Pegu between the mid-fourteenth- and early sixteenth-century Myanmar, then, is much more complicated than a simple ethnic rivalry between the 'Burmans' of Upper Myanmar and the Mon of Lower Myanmar since time immemorial. Yet, for nearly two centuries, that kind of simplistic, ethnic framework has been used to analyse the entire early history of Myanmar. Not only has it skewed the chronological contexts in which Ava and Pegu existed by reversing them, it also depicted their relationship as binary and adversarial, rather than dualistic and symbiotic. Such historiography had serious consequences for the misunderstanding of Myanmar's history to this day.

The 'upstream–downstream' dualism and the 'age of commerce'

By the sixteenth century, Southeast Asia was in the famous 'age of commerce', part of a worldwide phenomenon with important repercussions on the region, especially the maritime areas. One must ask, then, to what extent the earlier decades of the 'age of commerce' affected the history of Ava and Pegu, particularly since both declined around the first quarter of that 'long sixteenth century'? Tentatively, whereas I see Ava's decline more as an Upper Myanmar affair (three Shan Sawbwas took it in 1527 and ruled for about 24 years), Pegu's conquest by the Toungoo Dynasty in 1539, and the latter's decision thereafter to make Lower Myanmar its centre rather than return to the southern part of the dry zone where Toungoo was located, were both probably shaped by economic factors stemming from the age of commerce.

Neither decision (to conquer Pegu nor to shift its capital there) was based on whim; the Toungoo Dynasty clearly sought to exploit the burgeoning trade and commerce in Lower Myanmar during the sixteenth century, and in order to do that effectively, its centre had to be located there. The resulting Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty's[12] wherewithal and decision to subsequently take Upper Myanmar and reunify the whole country by mid-century also appear to be based on its growth in wealth and power as a result of exploiting the trade and commerce of Lower Myanmar.

Making Pegu the exemplary centre of the country was extremely important in the '*longue durée*' of Myanmar's history, for it was the first time that the capital of a unified (or at least a politically integrated) 'Myanmar' was located on the coasts, something that had never happened before and would not happen again for another 300 years until Yangon (as Rangoon) was made capital by the British. All the other capitals in Myanmar's history, representing some 2,000 years, were located in the dry zone — hence my phrase above, 'Dry Zone Paramountcy', a theme to which we shall return.

This Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty (also called the Toungoo Dynasty)[13] had acquired enough wealth derived from the coasts as well as the interior to subsequently

12 I use the term 'Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty' deliberately, whose rationale is contained the next note.

13 That decision by the Toungoo leadership to make Pegu its capital inadvertently creates a modern historiographic issue which raises the question of whether this dynasty should be called the 'Toungoo Dynasty' and period, the current convention in the Western historiography of Myanmar. It also raises the question of whether 'its' successor, the Second Ava Dynasty (as the chronicles had it) should therefore be called the 'Later' or 'Restored Toungoo' Dynasty, terms used by D.G.E. Hall and Victor Lieberman, respectively. Yet, neither appellation ('Later' or 'Restored Toungoo') can be found in indigenous historiography for that dynasty. There, it is called the 'Second Ava Dynasty'.

conquer most of central mainland Southeast Asia in mid-century, taking Ayuthaya twice, and even Vien Chang, the centre of the kingdom that was to become Laos. Such ambitious and risky activities, never before attempted by 'Myanmar' (even under the Pagan kingdom), were surely motivated by goals more pertinent to the economic growth of rival centres in a larger Southeast Asia maritime region as a result of the 'age of commerce', than by domestic, in-land, agrarian concerns. One could say then, that the 'age of commerce' was indeed a crucial factor in Toungoo's initial decision to move to Lower Myanmar, establish Pegu as its capital there, and assert its power over its eastern neighbours in ways that we had not seen theretofore.

Yet, in a mere 60 years, in 1599, this most expansive kingdom ever known to Myanmar (and indeed to all of mainland Southeast Asia) was sacked by little Mrauk-U of Arakan, assisted (belatedly) by a resurgent Ayuthaya. Once Pegu fell, the surrounding area became desolate, and Lower Myanmar lapsed into anarchy, ruled by warlords, including a Portuguese adventurer, symptomatic of the heterogeneity of the place as well as the decentralised conditions of the age. Some of Pegu's population was taken captive to Ayuthaya and Arakan, while others must have migrated to Upper Myanmar where the bulk of the country's Burmese-speaking population was located.

In the context of Myanmar's history as a whole, such periods of anarchy and desolation following centre collapses are nothing new. And such collapses were not necessarily related to larger economic downturns in the region as a whole, as has been argued.[14] On the contrary, there are 'internal' factors that were probably more crucial to the collapse of the Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty that had little or nothing to do with external factors.

First, the kingdom was very much over-extended: the size of its population, military, and economic resources could not have sustained for long the large area it had conquered. In part, that also left its western flank exposed which allowed Arakan to grow militarily and do what it subsequently did to Pegu in 1599. These factors seemed to have been more directly responsible for Pegu's inability to maintain its empire and power, than 'global' economic downturns that occurred in the international arena.

Second, royal succession in Myanmar could be (and usually was) contested within the structure of the monarchy itself, involving princes and princesses, ministers

The reason for these two different perspectives is the criterion each considers valid in naming dynasties and organising Myanmar's history. In the Western historiography of Myanmar, genealogy is the ultimate criterion, whereas for indigenous chroniclers, it is sacred place. The term 'Later' and/or 'Restored' Toungoo Dynasty was used because it was begun by a member of Bayinnaung's royal family (hence, genealogical). The second, in contrast, was determined by the perceived visit of the Buddha to Ava. Any dynasty that rules from such a Buddha-prophesied city was given the name of that city regardless of who founded it. And because Ava became the seat of such a dynasty for the second time, the Burmese chronicles called it the 'Second Ava Dynasty'.

Since the differences in the criteria for naming dynasties, in turn, directly affect the organising of Myanmar's history into distinct periods (and hence, the way we understand, analyse and write about that history), the question that remains for us historians is whether our (exogenous) criteria should ignore and pre-empt their (indigenous) criteria in the conceptualisation and organisation of what is essentially their history.

14 For an extended and detailed critique of the 'watershed' thesis, see Victor Lieberman, 'An age of commerce in Southeast Asia? Problems of regional coherence — A review article', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, 3 (1995): 796–807.

and advisors, old queens and new queens, personal vendettas and jealousies. That also played a significant role in the fall of the Second Pegu Dynasty; it had less to do with regional or worldwide economic conditions which may have contributed in the sense that scarce resources often bring to a head underlying tensions that already existed amongst certain internal groups.

Third, the flow of taxable wealth to the tax-exempt Sangha, a permanent feature of merit-making and legitimacy in Myanmar, has always created regular, periodic economic problems for the state with political repercussions. Huge amounts of wealth were donated to the Sangha, not only during the earlier reigns of Shin Saw Bu and Dhammazedi but also during Bayinnaung's reign, especially after his successful campaigns that brought back much booty which ended up in Sangha hands. Besides, the worldwide and regional economic downturn of the seventeenth century was too late to have affected Pegu's fall in 1599. All these (and other) internal factors had already weakened the Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty, which was then vulnerable to the *coup de grace* provided by Mrauk-U and Ayuthaya.

Thus, the fall of Pegu was part of a periodic domestic pattern in Myanmar's history of oscillating spirals of integration and disintegration, even if in some smaller ways it was tied to larger, external patterns. Indeed, the ease with which Pegu fell after having conquered nearly all the important centres of mainland Southeast Asia and the brevity of its dynasty – the shortest in Myanmar's history – suggest that the effects of the age of commerce on 'Myanmar', although spectacular, were ephemeral and short-lived. When viewed from such a domestic perspective, the famous seventeenth-century 'watershed' in Southeast Asian history that has been attributed to 'global' factors should, in Myanmar, be considered background rather than foreground. And that foreground is the recurrence of a long-term indigenous pattern in its history: namely, 'Dry Zone Paramountcy'.

This pattern was once again resurrected when one of the princes of the Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty, whose fief was located in a strategic town in Upper Myanmar (Nyaung-yan), reformulated the old by making the city of Ava its centre, recreating a new dry zone dynasty out of the existing human and political resources that traditional indigenous historiography knows only as the Second Inwa (Ava) Dynasty.

The 'upstream–downstream' dualism in the second Ava period: The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Why did the country's leaders decide to resurrect a dynasty in the agrarian interior rather than making a go of it in Lower Myanmar, as Ayuthaya had done successfully, even after two apparently devastating conquests by Pegu? Ultimately, it was because the leadership as well as society at large remained, for the most part, interior farmers, not maritime merchants. The latter's way of life and thinking never became a dominant component of society's overall psyche and institutions. Rather, the bulk of the people's emotional and psychological attachment was to the dry zone, their 'heartland'. For after all, this was the place where: (1) the majority's origins commenced; (2) the state first materialised; (3) the bulk of the population resided continuously for two millennia; (4) the lion's share of the country's food supplies were produced and located; (5) the oldest sacred shrines and relics of the

Buddha could be found; (6) the most renowned masters of religious texts, secular literature, art and music lived and worked; and (7) the most visible and awe-inspiring remains of its origins (at Pagan) lay. To all of this was (and still is) a deep, psychological attachment for most of the people of Myanmar, reasserting itself in recent years.

Consequently, after consolidating its demographic, political and economic resources in Upper Myanmar, the Second Ava Dynasty (1600–1752) began the reunification of the rest of the country once again from the dry zone, re-establishing its authority over Lower Myanmar during much of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries. As nothing resembling a kingdom rose from the ashes of 1599 in Lower Myanmar, the situation was no longer a two-kingdom 'upstream–downstream' dualism. The country once again began to look as if it were under the Pagan kingdom and a one-kingdom scenario.

But towards the middle of the eighteenth century, a combination of external and internal factors enabled a newly arisen Pegu, which had been placed under an Upper Myanmar governor, to rebel. After some internal struggles amongst several Lower Myanmar contenders, a leader with a Mon royal title reasserted Pegu's independence one more time. By mid-century it had capitalised on several Upper Myanmar problems, eventually taking Ava in 1752. But rather than staying in Upper Myanmar, Pegu decided to place a governor at Ava and return to Lower Myanmar instead, taking back the entire court, including the royal family, its leading monks, scholars, ministers, books and records. (It is probably on these sources that many of the late Mon language texts such as the eighteenth-century *Slapat Yazawin* and the *Thaton Yazawin* were based.)

The mid-eighteenth-century situation could have returned to the two-kingdom dualism of old, as Pegu began to look as if it might become a new dynasty. But it did not have time to even create a second generation of leaders, for a headman by the name of Aung Zeya rallied the Upper Myanmar human and political forces to reformulate what became the last (Konbaung) Dynasty of Myanmar. Working out of Shwebo, his capital in the great irrigated valley of the Mu River, he retook Ava in 1754, and within two years had also taken Pegu. Known later as Alaunghpaya, he had once more reunited the country under an Upper Myanmar dynasty, thereby re-establishing 'Dry Zone Paramountcy' for the fifth time since the Pyu of the first millennium CE.

That situation was to last for over a 100 more years until the same kinds of economic and political forces that had led to the growth and development of Lower Myanmar in the sixteenth century and the age of commerce – with the Malay, Ming, South Indians and Portuguese – reappeared. This time, however, it was with the much more powerful British, who were not about to accept the subordinate, Lower Myanmar role in this resurrected dualism.

The 'upstream–downstream' dualism under the British: 1886–1942[15]

Britain conquered Myanmar in three phases, beginning with the maritime provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim (along with Assam) in 1824–26, followed in 1852

15 I use 1942 as the date for the effective end of British rule when the Japanese and Myanmar nationalist forces drove the colonial forces out of the country.

with most of the rest of the Irrawaddy Delta region including Pegu, finally annexing the entire country in 1885–86. Whatever the historical significance that this event may have had in the history of the British–Indian Empire, in the 'autonomous' history of Myanmar, annexation, amongst other things, also ended 'Dry Zone Paramountcy' for at least another half century[16] and resurrected a new kind of 'upstream–downstream' relationship. Although in a geographic sense, it was similar to the time when the entire country was ruled from Lower Myanmar by the Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty, it was different in several important ways.

First, it was no longer a symbiotic 'upstream–downstream' two-kingdom dualism; it was more binary and oppositional. In making Yangon (as Rangoon) the *de facto* capital of the new colony rather than Mandalay which was the last capital of the Konbaung Dynasty, it was a clear rejection by Britain of domestic priorities and indigenous sentiments regarding the traditional heartland, for obvious (and practical) political, economic and military reasons.

Second, the country's capital in Lower Myanmar now conveyed and represented a different kind of 'newness' with serious (and negative) implications for the country's 'oldness'. Whereas earlier, 'oldness' and 'newness' were synthesised into a dualism, this new 'newness' of the 'downstream' region was not only synonymous with modernity, it also automatically associated the 'oldness' of the 'upstream' region with 'backwardness' and barbarism. The contrast (satirised in modern Burmese literature)[17] was expressed in the new political and economic system's avenues for upward mobility such as English language education, but also the mundane world: in manners, dress, food, language of state and of the ruling class, the writing system, elite culture and so on, found only or mainly in Rangoon. In other words, the notion of what was 'civilised' and where this civilisation lay had been reversed. It was no longer in Upper, but in Lower Myanmar.

This new image of Rangoon (and Lower Myanmar) was obviously not considered a positive one by the majority of the Burmese-speaking population who were rural farmers living in Upper Myanmar. Rather, it represented a very tiny minority considered by the majority as a hopelessly colonised 'collaborator class' of Anglo-Burmese whose mind-set was more Western than indigenous. Rangoon also looked, smelled, sounded and acted like a colonial city. Its purpose was no longer that of an 'exemplary centre' of a 'Threatre State' that belonged to the *mandala* of a traditional 'galactic polity'. Rather, it was a colonial centre that privileged and facilitated the colonial export economy for the benefit of the coloniser and its clients. That perception persisted well beyond Independence in 1948, perhaps ending only with the coup of 1962,[18] interpreted here as being as much a resurrection of the past as a revolution.

16 Of course, the number of years given depends on how one counts: beginning with the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–26 and ending with 1948 at formal independence, or beginning with 1885–86 at complete annexation and ending with 1942 when the Japanese invaded. I am using the latter.

17 See the 'introduction' to Ma Ma Lay's *Blood bond*, ed. Michael Aung-Thwin, trans. Than Than Win, University of Hawai'i Center for Southeast Asian Studies Translation Series (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), pp. 4–10. One can also find such satire in many other works. See, for example, Dr Hla Pe, *Burma: Literature, historiography, scholarship, language, life, and Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

18 I consider the coup of 1962, amongst other things, an expression of the desire to reject certain Western modernisms and a return to traditional norms, while at the same time to invoke other

In short, whereas Ava and Pegu had linked newness and oldness within a framework of tradition – thereby allowing accommodation of the past (and my reason for using the term 'dualism') – the colonial scenario had taken newness outside it; worse, in opposition to it, thereby turning what was once a symbiotic dualism into a binary antagonism.

Even in more recent times when infrastructural development by the state has significantly bridged the 'upstream–downstream' gap (literally and figuratively), the best of what is considered traditional culture – art, music, dance, literature, puppet theatre, food, politesse, learning, religious behaviour – is still perceived to be found mainly in Upper Myanmar. It comes as no surprise then, when in 2006 – uncannily, also after a mere six decades (as it was with the Second Pegu/Toungoo Dynasty) – the capital of the country was moved back to the dry zone of Upper Myanmar: adjacent to Pyinmana, an ancient (and long-settled) governorship that goes back to the eleventh–fourteenth century Pagan period; indeed, the site has Paleolithic and Neolithic remains as well.

Perhaps symbolically most important to the current government, Pyinmana is the city from which Aung San and his Burma National Army turned against the Japanese during the Second World War just prior to the arrival of the Allied Forces, thereby paving the way for, and directly linking the place with the country's subsequent independence. It is simply not true that the new capital has been 'carved out of the jungle', as often written by the Western (and dissident) media to create an image of barbarism and mindless discontinuity.[19]

But the reasons for this shift were as much symbolic as they were practical, as much psychological, religious and historical as they were economic, political and strategic. It was, once again, a synthesis of old and new. But perhaps more important with regard to the present topic and the '*longue durée*' of Myanmar's history, the move once again established 'Dry Zone Paramountcy'. The call of the agrarian interior has always been, and apparently still is, a compelling siren that has lasted for approximately 2,000 years.

In this long-term relationship between 'upstream' and 'downstream' Myanmar, and the attempts to accommodate both the old and the new, oldness seemed to have been the preferred value for most of Myanmar's history. It was favoured over newness for a variety of complex reasons, not least its longevity and link to a cherished tradition, to the predominant way of life of the majority of the population (agriculture), and to the political interests of those most often in control. The desire for, and the fact of, continuity almost always pre-empted that of change. Not that change *per se* was perceived as anathema, but genuine, structural change of a substantive nature implied transformations that were very difficult to bear and extremely uncomfortable to fathom for most of the people most of the time. What we see in Myanmar today is still, at root, a tension between oldness and newness.

modernisms such as 'revolution' and 'socialism'. See Michael Aung-Thwin, '1948 and Burma's myth of independence', in *Independent Burma at forty years: Six assessments*, ed. Josef Silverstein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 19–34.

19 The image created of the Myanmar government today by the Western media, even the vocabulary and some of the phrases used, are nearly synonymous with those found during the nineteenth century in the Western language media and British government reports regarding the Burmese monarchy. This is no mere accident; it is part of the demonisation process of 'the Other', invariably found in colonial (and in this case, neo-colonial) situations.