

From Exclusion to Assimilation: Late Precolonial Burmese Literati and "Burman-ness"

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The "Burman" identity in precolonial Burma was interpreted by both middle eighteenth century literati and their European contemporaries as an exclusive identity. In the European view in particular, cultural assimilation in Burma was impossible. Language and culture were inextricably tied to the nation. Any evidence of steps towards assimilation then, thus had to be artificial and coerced. If European observers and early Burman literati found potential advantages in a Burma defined on the basis of race or ethnicity, a kind of ethnic house of cards, late eighteenth-century indigenous literati were looking in other directions. Bò-daw-hpayà's reign (1781-1819) witnessed a change among some literati in the way in which they treated the "non-Burmans" in their texts. Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, in his *Shwei-bon-ní-dàn*, for example, treated Burman culture not as a peculiar complex, but an assimilationist product of borrowing from Mons and others. This grant to significant borrowing by the Burmans from Mon and other cultures contrasts sharply with the more hostile attitudes of earlier Kòn-baung writers. Those literati sought to hegemonize the cultures of opposing courts in favor of their own kingdom. In addition to Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, other Upper Burmese literati likewise toned down the ethnic rhetoric. "Non-Burman" materials were now being used more heavily from Bò-daw-hpayà's reign, the new literati making conscious use of both Mon and Arakanese texts in their analyses of Burmese historical events. Some of the new literature used by Kòn-baung literati provided models for rationalizing ethnic and cultural origins. This new understanding of Burman-ness emerged that proved remarkably well suited for the assimilation of people from other ethnic groupings. This paper will attempt to explain why this intellectual change occurred and how it impacted inter-ethnic relations in late precolonial Burma.

In 1810, Dr. Francis Buchanan, an old hand when it came to reporting the "local situation" in India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, made a report on what to do if Burma went to war with the "English nation." That "arrogant" and "despicable enemy" he explained was weakened to the core because of the ethnic heterogeneity of the kingdom and the poor ethnic relations between the subject peoples and the master Burman race. These were clearly weaknesses that could be exploited to British advantage. As he explained:

"the Burmese Empire contains a variety of distinct nations conquered by the Burmas, and held under the most severe bondage. Not to reckon several large countries ... which occasionally ... pay tribute when the Government is sufficiently strong to force it, and not to reckon those numerous Cussay [Manipuri], Siamese & Chinese captives, who form a great part of the population of many of the principal towns: there are five considerable nations subject to the Burmas, some of them but lately subdued, and most of them ripe for revolt and breathing revenge.

The most numerous nation of them is the people called by the Burmas Malat Syan ... These people are of the same nation with the Siamese, speaking a dialect of the same language. They have been long subject to the Burmas, enjoy considerable privileges, and are I believe the best contented of their Subjects... The next most considerable Nation subject to

the Burmas, is that named by us Peguans...This wretched people more civilized than the Burmas have been lately conquered, and have been most cruelly used...the whole are ripe for rebellion, and anxiously wait for some opportunity of assistance ... the Burmas and people of Aracan being of the same nation and language. Still however frequent commotions have taken place...the original inhabitants have been removed from their homes to different parts of the Empire, all of whom would readily runaway, and assist any invader...The next nation ... is the Tanansaree...They have in general been subject or tributary to the Siamese, and have made several attempts to be restored to that connection. The Siamese like the people of Pegu being a more polished race than the Burmas, and better Masters. The last of these 5 nations is named Yo...and like the Malat Syan enjoys considerable privileges. It must be easy to perceive that an Empire so constituted is liable to be dissolved with the first attack of any European force...."[1]

Buchanan's views were not new among European observers of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. Portuguese Catholic missionaries had been similar observations, as had British observers of the 1740-1757 War.[2] In his work on the 1740-1757 War, Lieberman demonstrated that an interplay of four factors – “personal loyalty, Buddhist universalism, and regionalism,” and ethnic tendencies – characterized the war between Ava and Pegu.[3] This argument was made in the context of a prevailing literature that portrayed the rebellion as a Mon national struggle against the Burmans, anachronistically identifying Southeast Asian ethno-nationalism in the eighteenth century. In Lieberman's view, in addition to ethnic and regional sympathies, one could be considered a “Peguer” by their political affiliation with the Southern Court at Pegu and a “Buraghman” by taking the side of the Northern Court at Ava. Colonial historians mistook these designations as hardened ethnic (and even racial) terminologies, that is, as “Mon” and “Burman.”[4]

Burmese literati played a substantial role in changing the ways in which Kòn-baung Burmese thought about ethnicity and, in their own way, contributed to the problematic treatment by colonial historians of Burmese history. Moreover, the literati role was complex, representing both diverse and dynamic thinking. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not so much to prove exactly what the average Burmese thought about ethnic identities and identifiers, if the source materials are even available for such a project, but rather to demonstrate that Burmese thinking about their society and the people in it, at least among those who have left written records, was complex and in constant flux in tandem with the changing political and social context of their times.

Burman-ness

Burmese records use the term Burman/Myanma in the Pagan period and Chinese sources referring to Burma as M'ien presumably do the same. From the beginning of sustained European contact with Burma in the early sixteenth century, Europeans applied some version or another of this term, such as Buraghma, Brama, Birma, and a seemingly endless list of variations, to the main population group of the kingdom of Burma.

The Kòn-baung Burmese do not appear to have understood Burman (Myanma) to mean race in the Western sense of the word. Burmese did indeed refer to *lu-myo* (*lu* meaning people) but this does not help us much in determining its meaning. The etymological roots of *myo* may be taken to mean seed or “in the local metaphor,” sperm.[5] However, *myo* is a very elastic term that

could really mean a number of things. Today, it describes a category, a class, a type, a kind, a breed, a species, a strain, and even, as the above author suggests, a seed.[6] Early nineteenth century understandings of the term certainly allowed for *myo* or its other form, *a-myo* to be the root of family, race, as well as class or “a set of beings or things,”[7] the Burmese equivalent of “seed” being *a-sei*, as it is still referred to today, or *myo-sei*. This usage, however, applied only to plants. It did not apply to the seed of animals (including humans) which Kòn-baung era Burmese called *thout*, the “seed...of animals” or “sperm.”[8] At least in the early Kòn-baung period, *lu-myo* lacked the same kinds of biological connotations that Europeans would give to “race” later in the nineteenth century. As indigenous texts from the period indicate, *myo* was taken to mean, as suggested above, simply a “type” or “kind” and, when combined with *lu*, meant that this was simply a classifier rather than a statement on the biological origins of ethnic groups.

If “Burman” (or Burmese) was not an exclusive blood-defined category, in the later European sense of the word, what was it? One important hint can be found in the 1820s meeting between Adoniram Judson, the American Baptist missionary, and King Ba-gyì-daw. During their conversation, Judson told the king, as he had told many others, of the progress he had made in converting Burmans to the Christian religion. The king, evidently concerned that “Burmans” might be abandoning Buddhism, asked: “Are they real Burmans? Do they dress like other Burmans?”[9] Religion and culture were the cornerstones of Burman-ness by at least the late early modern period, although they presumably had much older roots. Cultural practices such as hairstyles, language, and body tattooing or piercing were important practices that gradually helped define ethnic belongingness. Burmans tattooed themselves, while Peguers did not,[10] leading Alexander Hamilton to observe that “the Natives of each Nation are easily known by the distinguishing Mark of Painting or Plainness.”[11]

Early modern Burma seems to have not been far different from early modern Europe, before the rise of the nation-state, in this regard. We can piece together a picture of different ethnic groups, “nations,” speaking certain languages, participating in certain religions (or the same religion in peculiar ways), sharing hairstyles, myths, and other cultural practices. This did not necessarily mean that such ethnic markers motivated people to act. In Smith’s conceptualization of “ethnic categories” and *ethnie* (ethnic communities), he suggests that in the case of the former, “to an observer, (certain people) possessed many of the ethnic elements ... but little or no sense of community or solidarity.”[12] Indeed, the cellular organization of early Burmese society meant that people were primarily organized into essentially vertical, patron-client type relationships.[13] From the Pagan period, Burmese society was organized around occupational cells or guilds. Specialists in particular technical knowledge or functions were found within villages or even formed entire villages themselves. Likewise, the state also organized royal service people along similar, cellular lines.[14] This made the management of manpower resources easier. A local great man, who would serve as the intermediary between the court officials and the members of the cell, headed these cells and conduct supervisory functions within his cell. But certainly, over the course of the early modern period, those of Burman, Mon, and other cultures/ethnic markers had moved closer to *ethnie*. As Smith explains of such a later formation:

“To qualify ... as an ethnic community or *ethnie*...there must also emerge a strong sense of belonging to an active solidarity, which in time of stress and danger can override class, factional or regional divisions within the community...if we are to speak of a genuine *ethnie*, this sense of solidarity and community must animate at least the educated upper

strata, who can, if need be, communicate it to the other strata and regions in the community. It is quite possible for ethnic solidarity to be overlaid by other types of allegiance for certain periods...but, where ethnic solidarity is concerned, we should expect the periodic re-emergence of ethnic solidarity and institutional co-operation in sufficient force and depth to override these other kinds of loyalty, especially in the face of external enemies or dangers.”[15]

Certainly, Burma, by the mid-eighteenth century, witnessed the mobilization of people, if only as one element of mobilization as Lieberman has shown, on the basis of at least rudimentary ideas of shared ethnic identity.

Among the pre-Kòn-baung literati, ethnic belongingness was implicit in the rankings of cultural achievements that they articulated in their texts. Kalà and other pre-Kòn-baung literati, for example, included in their histories and other texts, references that sought to hegemonize those of the court they wrote for and to belittle those of its rivals. Stories denigrating cultural objects of a rival kingdom were one way to do this. Such accounts relate that attempts to introduce cultural items from the Mrauk-U court into the Avan court were frowned upon by Avan royal advisers. The connection between the adoption of certain cultural signifiers and political allegiance was a view not limited to texts. It does appear to be the case that ministers were generally worried about Tabin-shwe-htì favoring Mon subjects by adopting their hairstyle and manners in the sixteenth century.[16] Given the numerous independent political centers that dominated fourteenth to the sixteenth century Burma, it is not surprising to find literati engaged in different projects of ethnic hegemonization as well. Kalà, writing in early eighteenth century Ava, claimed that the Arakanese on the western side of the Arakan Yoma mountains were descended from war captives that the Pagan-era Burmese king Alaùng-sithu had placed there after his wars. By contrast, an Arakanese literati claimed that the Arakanese were the progenitors of the Burmans who lived in Ava and the Delta Burmans (the Aukthas) who lived in Pegu. As this account explains, three Mro chieftains had come downriver and intermarried with the indigenous queen. The youngest of the three men, when he came to the kingship, was embarrassed by the uncivilized dress of his fellow Mro tribesmen. He thus ordered them to remove their headdresses and adapt the ways in which the Pyus dressed. After some time, the Mros migrated down the eastern slopes of the Arakan Yoma mountain range and in working their rice fields; they expanded up to the village of Pagan. The Mros became known as Maramas [Burmans] and those who continued to expand southwards, were eventually known as the “Aukthas.” As the text explains, “Auktha and Marama are actually the same.”[17]

Ethnic origins and cultural hegemonies aside, “ethnic categories” could translate into hardened ethnic identities in certain contexts. Daily contact between different groups naturally produced perceptions of difference. The scattering of war captive settlements, or “colonies,” among the general population also meant that service groups and village communities came into daily contact with groups organized around ethnic identifiers. One can only conjecture that it was probably the case that the kinds of inter-village disputes over water or arable land rights, thefts of cattle or crops, or even disputes between aggressive village headmen that were to be found in all societies divided into tight exclusive communities sometimes, or even frequently, were allied to perceptions of ethnic difference. Such local conflicts could easily provide a framework for understanding the workings of the larger world, but only partly so, for temporary exigencies would probably not lead to sustained animosities.

More severe situations would lend themselves to sustained ethnic mobilization. As

Smith observes:

“it is not society or ethnicity that determines war, but conflict itself which determines the sense and shape of ethnicity. War may not create the original cultural differences, but it sharpens and politicizes them, turning what previously were ‘ethnic categories’ into genuine integrated ethnies, aware of their identities and destinies.”[18]

This appears to have been the case in Burma during the 1740-1757 War. Alaung-hpayà's early ideas of kingship upon which he modeled himself drew heavily from popular Upper Burmese stories of Pyu-zàw-htì. This did not mean though, that when he lifted his hand and pulled it back, claiming that he could “wipe away [the Mons] as thus,” that he was not also emphasizing Burman feelings of physical superiority.[19] However much this is open to interpretation, significant evidence is available, much brought to light by Lieberman, that Alaung-hpayà referred to a Burman ethnic belongingness, among Lower as well as Upper Burmese, to motivate support for his cause. Ethnic slurs, denigrating Mons, was the order of the day. Alaung-hpayà clearly identified as a Burman, he did not distinguish between Upper Burmese Burmans and Delta Burmans (*Auktha*), and he was possessed of great animosity toward the Mons generally.[20] The demands of the war encouraged this feeling, as winning over support from Delta Burmans would also necessarily undercut the regional basis of the Peguan court. Thus, Alaung-hpayà corresponded with Delta Burman officials in Pegu, attempting to win them over to the “Burman” cause. It is true that Alaung-hpayà had promised not to alter the status of anyone, Mons included, who defected from Pegu in 1756.[21] Even then, those Mons who did take his oath remained not of the “Burman's own kind” (*Myanma zat-du*).[22] Such views were strengthened in the first year of Naung-daw-gyì's reign (r. 1760-1763), when the former Mon general, Dalabàn, appointed to a “high office” by Alaung-hpayà, rebelled, taking advantage of problems in the north. [23]

Eighteenth century sources indicate that the heightened awareness of ethnic identity prompted by the 1740-1757 war lingered on for decades. The scholar Myat San was in his thirties when he joined Alaung-hpayà's camp. He was a first-hand observer of many of Alaung-hpayà's campaigns and his accounts of the war and of his patron's reign were very personal, using “We” to refer to the northern Burmans fighting against Pegu.[24] He was also a poet and his writings were given to creative writing that he used to embellish accounts, laud heroes, and even to redefine events. Although the “Alaung-mìn-tayà-gyì Ayei-daw-poun,” does not bear a composition date, it appears to have been written in the early decades after Alaung-hpayà's death in 1760.

Myat San portrays Alaung-hpayà's campaign against Pegu as an ethnic struggle. To build a base in the north, Alaung-hpayà is said to have written to other northern Burmans to remind them of their ethnicity and thus provoke loyalty based on a transregional Burman identity. Despite contemporaneous evidence that Alaung-hpayà accepted Mons into his service, Myat San claims that upon Alaung-hpayà's victory at Myaung-wùn, early in the campaign, “we” did not kill those “Burmans, Shans, Yuns, and Kadus” captured from the southern army, only those who were *lek-lun* (“beyond redemption”), apparently the Mons, died.[25] One problem, however, was how to treat those Mons whom Alaung-hpayà had taken into his service. Among these was Dalabàn, the Peguan general who had deserted the Peguan court in its last days and whom Alaung-hpayà later appointed to a “high position.” Dalabàn is thus treated Myat San's text as a special case. When

Dalabàn was the Peguan court's garrison commander (*sik-thu-gyi*) at Ava, Dalabàn, Myat San claims, had put the Burman captives to work (that is, he had not killed them) and did not force them to cut their hair in the Mon fashion. Dalabàn's generous treatment of ethnic Burmans was then contrasted in the text with the ethnic-minded intentions of Banyà-dalá. As we are told, Banyà-dalá replaced Dalabàn as the Peguan commander at Ava shortly afterwards because the latter had not forced the Burmans to adopt Mon ethnic markers, namely cutting their hair, again, in the Mon fashion. It is unclear whether there is more to these accounts than the imagination of the writer. No Peguan, "Mon," source or European account refers to the recall of Dalabàn, he remained one of the chief Peguan commanders, and this account is only corroborated by the biography of Alaung-hpayà written decades later by Tun Nyo under his then title, the *Twìn-thìn-taik-wun*, Maha-si-thu.[26]

Assimilation

European visitors of Ba-gyì-daw's time found Burmese accepting as their own Anglo-Burmese children of itinerant British garrison troops and Burmese mothers. The widow of the famous Dr. Helfer, upon finding a Burmese man stroking the hair of his wife's Anglo-Burmese child as if the child were his own, was so impressed that she suggested that British rule would lead to the evolution of a new race drawing together the best features of both of the parent stocks.[27] As culture and not blood determined ethnic belongingness in pre-colonial Burma, however, Burman-ness proved remarkably well suited for the assimilation of people from other ethnic groupings. The idea implicit in Buchanan's account provided at the beginning of this chapter, however, is that even cultural assimilation in Burma was impossible. Language and culture were inextricably tied to the nation. Any evidence of steps towards assimilation then, thus had to be artificial and coerced. As Buchanan explains of the Mons: "The greater part of them have taken refuge with the Siamese, and the remainder have assumed the Burma dress and language in order to avoid extortion." [28]

If European observers found potential advantages in a Burma defined on the basis of race or ethnicity, a kind of ethnic house of cards, later Kòn-baung literati were looking in other directions. Bò-daw-hpayà's reign witnessed a change among some literati in the way in which they treated the Mons and the Arakanese in their texts. Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, in his *Shwei-bon-ní-dàn*, a study of the cultural and mythic origins of the traditions, terminologies, and structures of the Burmese court at Amarapura, treated Burmese culture not as a peculiar complex, but an assimilationist product of borrowing from Mons and others. Many of the royal boats used by the Kòn-baung court were of Mon origin and nomenclature, including the Kamakaw, Kuyup, and Zalagabin boats, as were musical instruments used in the palace, and other court practices. Moreover, Zei-yá-thin-hkaya stressed that from the reigns of Bò-daw-hpayà, during the First Taung-ngu Dynasty, up through Nyaung-yan Min, the founder of the Restored Taung-ngu dynasty, an equal mixture of Mon and Burman language and culture defined the courts of Bayín-naung and Nan-dá-bayin.[29] The Arakanese were not without their contributions to Kòn-baung court culture as well.[30]

Nowhere does Zei-yá-thin-hkaya suggest cultural hegemonies *per se*, although he does indicate that regional kings paid political homage to the Kòn-baung royal ancestors. This grant to significant borrowing by the Burmans from Mon and other cultures contrasts sharply with the more hostile attitudes of earlier Kòn-baung writers. Those literati, such as Kalà, sought to

hegemonize the cultures of opposing courts in favor of their own kingdom. In addition to Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, other Upper Burmese literati likewise toned down the ethnic rhetoric. Tun Nyo, who wrote a history of Alaung-hpayà after Myat San, follows Myat San's general narrative. However, he did not include at least some of the episodes that put Mons in a negative light (it may have been too bold of a step to revise everything). This does not appear to have been an oversight: non-Burman materials were now being used more heavily from Bò-daw-hpayà's reign. Writing about 1800, Tun Nyo's *Ya-zawin-thet* made conscious use of both Mon and Arakanese texts in his careful analysis of the historical events of Upper Burmese history.[31] One reason that borrowing from other literatures was easier than before was that many of the political centers from which they were derived were now under Kòn-baung rule; Pegu was from 1757 and so too Arakan after 1784.

Some of the new literature used by Kòn-baung literati provided a model for rationalizing ethnic and cultural origins. One of the texts that Nyana used was the "Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn," mentioned above.[32] This text appears to have reached literati circles in the late 1770s, shortly after it was composed (c. 1775). This text, which seems to have earlier borrowed from Indian texts, described in detail how the kings descended from Mahasammata, the first king of the world, divided the people of the world into 101 ethnic groups. As the text explains, after a smaller number of countries had evolved, more followed:

"When the countries divided again, due to the increase of princes and grandsons (of the royal dynasty), the rightful races of kings and ministers was not ended, there were 101 countries and 101 parasols, and each with a king, These kings gave special consideration to the people of the countries and regions. They gave 101 names to the seven kinds of Maramas, the three kinds of Talaings [Mons], the twenty-three kinds of Shans, the fifty-six kinds of Kalas [Indians], the nine kinds of Tayoub [Chinese], and the three kinds of Chins." [33]

Although vague references to the 101 kinds of peoples may have been circulating among some Burmese as early as the seventeenth century, and possibly earlier,[34] this text provides an elaborate and detailed account. As a result, the "Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn" account becomes more significant.

In his early twentieth-century study, the *Myan-ma-mìn Ok-chok-pon sa-dàn*, Ù Tin, referring to the "Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn" as the old Arakanese chronicle (as does Pe Maung Tin), discusses the influence of this model for the emergence of peoples in nineteenth-century Kòn-baung literature. As he explains, Nò, the Monywè *hsaya-daw*, who compiled a history separate from that of the *Hman-nàn* during Bò-daw-hpayà's reign, modified the list. In his modified formula, Nò claims that there were seven kinds of Myanma, four kinds of Talaings (Mons), thirty kinds of Shans, and sixty kinds of Kalas, amounting to a total of 101 *lu-myo* (races of people). However, he did not include Chinese or Chins as separate categories. Later Kòn-baung writers who accepted the 101 divisions followed Nò's modified version of the model provided in the "Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn." [35] The import of this view is that it suggested a kind of equality to the emergence of different ethnic groups and did not imply the same kind of hegemonization of ethnicity found in earlier literati treatment of the peoples of rival states. It also suggested that ethnic divisions were part of the natural human condition that defied change or assimilation.

This view was in contradistinction to that of other literati in Upper Burma, including the

Lower Chindwin literati compiling the *Hman-nàn*. Certainly, we know that Nyana read the “Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn,” for the *Hman-nàn* committee refers to it several times (under the title of *Old Yakhaing Chronicle*) in order to help determine the historicity of certain stories included in the Great chronicle. The *Hman-nàn*, however, does not include the 101 races of mankind. Instead, it emphasized and further developed the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth. In its final form, as related in the *Hman-nàn*, the founders of Pagan provided the kings for the states that were gradually absorbed into the Avan and its successor the Kòn-baung polity. In the story of Abhiraja (and later Dhajaraja), Indian kings had brought their people to Burma and established the first kingdom at Tagaung. When Kan-ra-za-grì and Kan-ra-za-gei had their dispute, Kan-ra-za-grì took his people around the Irrawaddy Valley, establishing his son as the ruler of the Thet, Kanyans, and the Pyu, before he entered Arakan and intermarried with the local royal line. Burmans were thus descendants of the Indian race, with a right to rule over other ethnic groups within Burma. Moreover, the *Hman-nàn* also did not codify the seven different kinds of Marama or Myanma as the *Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn* had, or as the line of scholars who followed Nò’s narrative would. The people of western Burma, among whom were those who self-identified as Marama, remained Arakanese, the same people whom Alaung-sithu had created out of translated war captives as discussed earlier. Thus, the *Hman-nàn* gave hegemony to the kings of Upper Burma, but it also implied that ethnicity was not set in stone and it could be changed.

Stewart once attempted to make the case that the *Hman-nàn* sought to minimize the role of non-Burmans in Burmese history. As Stewart explained:

“Just as the great Alison rewrote the history of Europe with the object of showing that providence was on the side of the Tories, so the compilers of the Hmannan Yazawin seem to have treated the Arakanese and Talaing chronicles somewhat cavalierly, and to have admitted only so much of them as conduced to the honour and glory of that part of the province in which they were more immediately interested.... I must ... discuss rather fully a passage in the Hmannan which is obviously based on the Razadirit Ayebon. In the fighting around Prome a Talaing named Upakong performed prodigies of valour and was invited by Minyekyawzwa to come to the Burman camp and display his prowess. The Talaing general gave permission, and the Ayedawbon describes how on the appointed day Upakong dressed himself with great care and looking every inch a soldier mounted horse and rode to meet Minyekyawzwa; who received him on the bank of the river opposite his camp and accompanied him across. The Hmannan omits to state that Upakong was met on the near bank of the river by Minyekyawzwa and makes no mention of his soldierly appearance. His reception in fact becomes merely an act of princely patronage instead of a well-deserved tribute from one brave man to another. And the romance goes completely out of the story.”[36]

Stewart was writing in the context of colonial-era views that conflated ideas of race, ethnicity, nationalism, and culture, so his consideration of Burmese history should be interpreted in that light. Stewart, for example, mixes a number of elements that should be considered separately. For one thing, he begins by correctly stating that the *Hman-nàn* takes the perspective of Ava, the state perspective. Stewart then errs when he assumes that “Ava” is equivalent with Burman and, furthermore, that the Burman perspective at the time *Hman-nàn* was written was anti-Mon. The

example provided by Stewart, however, is a weak one indeed. It does not amount to a denigration of the Mons as an ethnic group, or an erasure of Mons from the historical narrative, but rather a failure to include all the details from a very large Mon text into a broad history of Burma that had many other equally substantial narratives to work with as well. Everything could not be included and certainly, as with the Mon hero discussed by Stewart above, not all details available on Bayín-naung, a “Burman” hero, were included in the *Hman-nàn* either. Stewart also fails to trace the lineage of this narrative sufficiently, for the *Hman-nàn* borrowed from readings of *Razadhirat Ayei-daw-bon* made by Kalà, included in his *Maha-ya-zawin-gyì*. It is not clear if the *Hman-nàn* committee was able to work with Mon texts or even had access to an independent copy of the *Hman-nàn*.

Later Kòn-baung literati were thus creating a Burman ethnic category that was not exclusive, but one that could easily assimilate the diverse peoples the state now ruled. The purpose of the *Hman-nàn* committee was indeed to establish an authoritative history of Burma that by implication meant that it would be useful for its patron, the Burmese throne. As discussed, from Bò-daw-hpayà’s reign, court perspectives that were hostile to the Mons had given way to literati reconstructions of the Mon contributions to Burmese culture and to understandings that ethnicity was not hard and fixed, but flexible. In the eyes of the court and the literati, the Mons were assimilating and their resistance to Kòn-baung rule was becoming more part of Burma’s past than its present or future. The *Hman-nàn* committee, unlike Myat San, took non-Burman texts (Arakanese histories being the chief example) seriously and relied upon them heavily to verify or disprove historical episodes referred to in earlier “Burman” histories.

By the end of the Kòn-baung period, when colonial surveyors began to look for the old “ethnic groups” that had divided the Burmese population in Kòn-baung court documents, they found, at one level, a fairly homogenous population that was Buddhist, Burmese-speaking, and Burman. Lieberman has drawn attention to a number of long-term developments that fostered significant cultural and religious homogenization in late early modern Burma that led to the absorption of ethnic minorities into an overarching “Burmese” identity (or Burman-ness). Lieberman has discussed in-depth the evolution of the three main core states of mainland Southeast Asia – Burma, Vietnam, and Thailand, that swallowed up and integrated the smaller states of the region. In this process, larger and more integrated societies experienced the spread of core cultures, religions, and languages, in the context of domestic economic growth, political centralization, and administrative sophistication.[37] These developments had a homogenizing effect on Burma’s diverse population, without relying on forceful conversions of people of different ethnic groups.

One such long-term development was more widespread court influence over the religion. When Bò-daw-hpayà began to sponsor monastic missions throughout his realm, for example, he relied on Upper Burmese Buddhist monks who were largely Burmese-speakers, the language of the court and political centers throughout Upper Burma. A related development was the transition from Pali-language discourses to Burmese-language discourses in monastic recitations and texts. Although senior Buddhist monks were sometimes well versed in Pali, the religious language of Theravada Buddhism, most of the lower rungs of the monastic population were probably illiterate in Pali. This also reflected the increasingly popular-oriented focus of late early modern Buddhism in Burma in which Pali discourses were translated into Burmese and Burmese became the language of public recitations. As one observer commented in the 1830s of the central Burmese monks at Martaban: "Few of them understand the Pali language, although it is the vehicle of their religious doctrines . . . their discourses . . . are chiefly Burman versions from the Pali." [38]

Throughout Bò-daw-hpayà's kingdom (and those of his successors), then, the centers of learning and the schools of literacy that were supported by the state also used Burmese. This produced a bifurcation monasteries, so that those based in the towns used Burmese and those in rural areas outside of Upper Burma tended to use the local vernacular. As Low commented in the 1830s, confusing language and ethnicity, the "Burmans" had assumed "all the sacerdotal offices in" Southeastern Burma.[39] Recognition that language was one of the remaining obstacles to full assimilation of the Mons became clearer in the First Anglo-Burmese War. After the Mon rebellion of 1826 and 1827, either the Kòn-baung court or its local representatives forbade the use of the Mon language in the Lower Delta.[40] This may also explain why "Mon" histories began to be translated into Burmese about the same time. Other considerations must also have played a role; the fact that local administrators spoke Burmese and the usefulness Burmese would have in finding an important patron in the Kòn-baung hierarchy must have played a role as well. Certainly, the use of Burmese became a kind of *lingua franca* in the Delta and as its use became universal, there was no turning back.[41] The movement of Mons to Burman-ness continued beyond the end of Kòn-baung rule in Lower Burma after 1852. As the *Census of Burma for 1872* reported:

"Since our occupation, any oppression of Talaings [Mons] which may previously have existed has, of course, disappeared. But another process—that of absorption by the more powerful race – is effecting the obliteration of the Talaings as a distinct people quite surely and rapidly as the most vigorous persecution could. Already the language is disappearing. The rising generation speak Burmese, and in dress and manners there is practically no difference from the latter race...it is probable that all the mixed race of Burmese and Talaings, and possibly many pure Talaings, are returned as Burmans." [42]

So too, for other ethnic groups, assimilation continued beyond 1885, not so much because it was the beginning of the colonial era, but rather because assimilation had become an ongoing, self-sustained development.[43]

Assimilation into Burman-ness, did not necessarily mean the abandonment of non-Burman ethnic identities, but rather, at least at first, a layering of ethnic identifications. Colonial surveyors found everywhere in lowland Burma people who lived like Burmans, spoke Burmese, and were good Burmese Buddhists. Nonetheless, these "assimilated" or "assimilating" Burmans also, perhaps in other contexts, identified themselves as members of non-Burman ethnic groups.[44] This is in keeping with Lehman's classic study of ethnic categories in Burma, "'Ethnic Categories & Theory of Social Systems.'" Lehman suggests that ethnicity is a flexible reference system that people use selectively to interpret the world around them. In Burma, ethnic categories are roles in a system of many other roles. Different groups have access to more than one ethnic role and thus, one's "ethnicity" changes as one interacts with different people in different contexts.[45] Lehman's focus is on minority groups, such as the Chins and Karens (and most recently the Tai), but his theoretical model applies as easily to the "Burmans" or Burman-ness.

One caveat to the encouragement of assimilation, however, was that primary religious superiority had to be posited in the Upper Burmese heartland of the Kòn-baung kings. Rather than a "Burman" oriented view, for example, the *Hman-nàn* provides a throne-centered approach to Burmese history. This meant, as discussed in the previous chapter, that the Upper Burmese courts, the forebears of the Kòn-baung dynasty, were granted hegemony in Burma's political and religious evolution. Bò-daw-hpayà argued that the pure texts of Buddhism had not come from

Lower Burma. Likewise, the important religious objects of conquered peoples were brought to Amarapura, such as the Mahamuni image from Arakan. What could not be moved physically was then patronized where it was. Kòn-baung kings who followed Bò-daw-hpayà, for example, continued the practice begun by Hsin-pyu-shin of placing a new finial atop the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon at least once during their reigns.[46] The compilers of the *Hman-nàn* generally cooperated with this state project. For coverage of much of Burma's early modern period, it meant that autonomous religious developments in Western and Lower Burma were neglected. We find that both the *Hman-nàn* and the *Tha-thana-lin-ga-yá Sa-dàn* (as well as the *Sasana-vamsa*) do not include local histories of the religion after the late fifteenth century and until the eighteenth century, almost as if nothing occurred in either area at all until they were brought under Kòn-baung rule, again an effort to privilege one political (and religious) center. There were limits, especially when the state project interfered with Nyana's ideas of how religion in Burma had evolved. He thus ignored Bò-daw-hpayà's earlier attempts to disenfranchise Lower Burma of the origins of the Burmese *sangha*. The *Hman-nàn* retained, for example, the standard account that Shin Araham had come up to Pagan from Thaton with the correct teachings. In doing so, the Mon status as intermediaries in the *sangha*'s evolution was preserved, the *Hman-nàn* stating that the Pali *tipitika* sets later taken from Thaton to Pagan were written in Mon script (Mon/Talaing *akkaya*) and had to be translated into Burmese script (Myanma *akkaya*).[47]

Long-term impact of the Kòn-baung texts

Michael Aung-Thwin has made a strong case for challenging the ethnic frameworks provided by the colonial scholars for understanding the nature of pre-colonial historical developments.[48] Aung-Thwin's chief example is the myth of the Three "Shan" Brothers. Upon the supposed collapse of the classical Burmese state of Pagan, the indigenous chronicles explain that three brothers assumed rulership in Upper Burma. Although earlier European observers accepted that the brothers were of the "true royal stock," Phayre and those who followed claimed that they were Shan.[49] Thus, the fall of Pagan, a Burmese state, and the political problems that followed could be periodized along racial lines, race being at least one determinant of the course of Burmese history.

This corrective is necessary because of the ethnicization of Burmese history found in the colonial histories that still influences scholarship today. This process had early roots. British rule in parts of Burma from 1826 invited new, European views that mistook what it was to be Burman or Burmese with European notions of race. Later colonial historians misunderstood ethnic identifiers in the indigenous histories they used as sources as evidence of strong identities that prompted on their own historical developments. [50] Buchanan purposefully over-emphasized ethnic hostilities for political purposes, but later generations of Europeans writing on Burma, like Stewart, having grown up in a Europe influenced by Charles Darwin's *Origins of Species* (1859), may have been more sincere, but equally misleading. One of the first to do so was the scholar-official and first Commissioner for Lower Burma, Sir Arthur Phayre. In a small series of articles written in the late 1860s, entitled "On the History of the Burma Race," Phayre provided a narrative of Burmese history that was oriented around racial migrations and conflicts:

“...it is evident from the history that the whole power in the country which constituted Ava from A.D. 1364 until A.D. 1554, was held by Shans, or persons of Shan descent...These tribes of the Thai branch ... had been pouring down from their highlands by various routes through a long period of time. They gradually accomplished in the countries watered by the Irawati and the Lower Salwin, a plantation and revolution similar to what had been worked out by the north men, in the British islands, and on the coasts of Western Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries...The successful attack on Ava in the year 788, A.D. 1426, by the Shan chief of Mo-nhyin, renewed the Shan race and spirit in the kings of Ava. But the monarchy was weakened. From this time for more than a century, the kings of Ava were rather the heads of a loose confederation of Shan chiefs... than sovereigns of a Burmese kingdom...”[51]

Other colonial historians after Phayre shared his racial paradigm. These historians mistakenly equated the “national” histories of the Kòn-baung period with racial histories. When criticizing the Burmese bias, relative to the Arakanese and the Mons, of the *Hman-nàn*, for example, J. A Stewart argued in 1923 that:

“In the Hmannan Yazawin the implication is that, up to a point, everything did happen for the best, and the authors of compilers are therefore insufficiently sympathetic towards other kingdoms and other races. The modern Burman is of exceedingly *mixed descent*. It is hardly possible to point to a single district even in Upper Burma whose inhabitants can claim to be of *pure Burman race*. It seems to me therefore *wrong and unnatural* that Burma of the present day should take the word of Ava for its history.”[52]

In this view, the easy assimilation of ethnic minorities to Burman-ness is a transgression of the norm, the norm being exclusion based on genetic roots. In other words, easy cultural assimilation among the Burmese became a kind of mongrelization that weighed against the purity and thus authenticity of Burmese civilization.

European impressions of “Burmans” as an exclusive ethnic or racial group also meant that they interpreted other population groups in the same way. One of the main confusions about the Bengal-Western Burma border problems in the late eighteenth century and up to the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) is that they indicated a sort of ethnic nationalism that bound Arakanese migrants together and provided the chief motivating cause for incursions into Kòn-baung territory. Colonial scholars were especially given to this interpretation, largely because of a colonial “liberation” myth implicit in the documents that such historians relied upon as their primary sources and the colonial society of which they were a part. This myth, that border raiders such as Chìn-pyan, were primarily interested in the “liberation” of Arakan, from “Burman” rule, helped justify the British role in the First Anglo-Burmese War and their following annexation of the province.[53] A “self-conscious nation suppressed” provided legitimacy to British expansion. Arthur Phayre, for example, attributes to the best-known of the Arakanese invaders, Chìn-pyan, an “intense hereditary hatred” of the Burmans and implies that this helped attract other Western Burmese migrants in Southeastern Bengal to his standard.[54] D. G. E. Hall saw Chìn-pyan’s invasion as an attempt not to oust rival elites and gain power for himself, but rather simply as an attempt to “liberate his country.”[55] One observer has described Chìn-pyan’s campaign as “the just cause of fighting for Arakanese independence,” while another scholar labels one of the rebel groups as the “Arakanese liberation army.”[56] As was the case with misunderstandings of

Burman-ness, these too were foreign impressions.

Thus, assimilation was not a new development of the colonial period, but an extension of trends of cultural assimilation begun during the Kòn-baung period, perhaps earlier. What was apparent though was the long term and complicated impact of the work of the Kòn-baung literati. European treatment of ethnic categories in their histories as strong identities was only made possible by the general existence (with the occasional exception of such references as the three “Shan” brothers) of such terms in the indigenous histories they relied on. Colonial historians erred not so much because they invented an ethnic history of Burma but because they did not understand why the ethnic references were there and, more importantly, did not pay careful attention to how these references changed as Burmese history moved, and was changed, from one text to the next.

[1] Dr. Francis Buchanan, “Account of Burma and Pegu and the Steps necessary in case of a Rupture,” HM 388, no. 21, ff. 599-613.

[2] See Rev. A. Saulière (tr.), “The Jesuits on Pegu at the End of the XVIth Century,” *Bengal Past and Present* 19 (1919): 64-80; the various British accounts of Burma in this period in Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*, 1.133-217.

[3] Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” 462.

[4] *Ibid*, 455-82.

[5] Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 88.

[6] *Myanma-Ingalei-Abhidan* (Yangon: Ministry of Education, 2001): 359.

[7] These are the meanings found in the dictionary made by Charles Lane and Makkara in the 1830s and later published as Charles Lane, *A Dictionary, English and Burmese* (Calcutta: Ostell and Lepage, 1841): 61, 338, 367.

[8] Lane, *A Dictionary, English and Burmese*, 367, 386.

[9] Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1883): 204.

[10] Hamilton, 27; See also Hunter, *A Concise Account of the Kingdom of Pegu*, 29. While commoners among the Burmans were tattooed “jet-black” over the thigh and the hip, elite Burman men had their thighs tattooed “with the representations of tigers and other wild beasts.” Hunter, *A Concise Account of the Kingdom of Pegu*, 29-30.

[11] Further, somewhat dubious claims were made of biological differences, typically that the Peguers were olive colored. Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, 27.

[12] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 30.

[13] Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, 92, 93. Such patron-client relationships remained relevant to popular loyalties throughout the early modern period at both the local and “national” levels. Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma,” 459.

[14] Aung-Thwin, *Pagan*, 91-93.

[15] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 30.

[16] *Mani-yadana-poun*, 95; Kalà, *Maha-ya-zawin-gyì*, 2.215.

[17] Sithu-gammani-thinkyan, “Rakhine Ra-zawin” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 2297] AMs, 1886 [circa 1870s], National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar, f. 16a.

[18] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (London: Blackwell, 1986): 39.

[19] Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*, 1.151.

[20] On the “Ramanya Mons,” see Royal Order, 4 March 1755, 3.92; 9 April 1756, 3.144.

- [21] Royal Order, 18 January 1756, 3.143.
- [22] Royal Order, 2 January 1755, 3.91.
- [23] Symes, *Account of an Embassy to Ava*, 63, 65.
- [24] Let-wè-naw-yahta. “Alaùng-mìn-tayà-gyì Ayei-daw-bon,” in Û Hlá Tin, (ed.), *Alaùng-hpayà Ayei-daw-bon Hnasaung-dwè* (Yangon: 1961): 28-29; this is also indicated in his 1790 poem, “Pyuha-sakki-myó,” where he refers to Pegu-thà/Talaings (Mons) fleeing from “our” power. Let-wè-naw-yahta, “Pyuha-sakki-myó” in Û Ba Thaùng (ed.), *Thenanga-pyuha-sit-thamaing hnín Pyuha-sakki-pyó* (Yangon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1943): 83.
- [25] Let-wè-naw-yahta. “Alaùng-mìn-tayà-gyì Ayei-daw-poun,” 28-29.
- [26] Let-wè-naw-yahta. “Alaùng-mìn-tayà-gyì Ayei-daw-poun,” 28; Tun Nyo repeats the same episode in his biography, “Alaùng-mìn-tayà-gyì Ayei-daw-poun,” 161.
- [27] Countess Pauline Nostitz (formerly Madame Helfer), *Travels of Doctor and Madame Helfer in Syria, Mesopotamia, Burmah, and Other Lands*, translated by George Sturge (London: Richard Bentley & Sons, 1878): 2.132. These, of course, were the days before the denigration of Burmese in British eyes in later high colonial times.
- [28] Buchanan, “Account of Burma and Pegu and the Steps necessary in case of a Rupture.”
- [29] Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, *Shwei-bon-ní-dàn*, 33, 65, 83, 98-99,
- [30] *Ibid*, 34.
- [31] See for example, his reference to the Kalyani inscription at Pegu (1.90 and 1.127), the *Mon Ya-zawin* (1.250), the Yakhine Ya-zawin and the *Maha-muni Thamaing* (1.89), and the *Yakhine Mìn-thamì-eigyìn* (1.105) in Twìn-thìn-taik-wun Maha-si-thu, *Myanma-ya-zawin-thet*.
- [32] “Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn,” f. 34a.
- [33] “Rakhine Mìn-ra-za-grì Arei-daw sa-dàn,” f. 34a.
- [34] Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 88.
- [35] Tin, *Myan-ma-mìn Ok-chok-pon sa-dàn*, 2.24.
- [36] John Alexander Stewart, “Note on some Authorities for the History of Burma,” *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 13.2 (1923): 71.
- [37] Lieberman, “Local Integration and Eurasian Analogies,” 475-572.
- [38] Low, “History of Tennasserim,” 329
- [39] Low, “History of Tennasserim,” 255. European observers tended to see the political situation of Mons in Lower Burma in similar terms. Since Upper Burmese appointees governed Lower Burma, one would have found few Mon speakers holding such appointments. This helps to explain Symes’ claim that between the Burmans and the Mons the only difference was that the former dominated the political offices.
- [40] According to the First Commissioner of Lower Burma, Phayre, writing in 1873: “After the war with the British, the language of the [Mon] people who had welcomed the [British] invader was furiously proscribed: it was forbidden to be taught in the Buddhist monasteries or elsewhere. The result was that, in little more than a century, the language of about a million people has become extinct. It is probable that there are not now one hundred families in Pegu Proper in which it is spoken as their vernacular tongue.” Phayre, cited in Government of India, *Report on the Census of British Burma Taken in August 1872* (Rangoon: government Press, 1875): 30.
- [41] Malcom observed in the 1830s that although most of the rural population of Pegu was Mon “nearly all of the men understood Burman” and, moreover, the “Mons had ceased to “a distinct people.” Malcom, *Travels in South-eastern Asia*, 1.83.
- [42] Phayre, cited in *Report on the Census of British Burma Taken in August 1872*, 30; See also H. P. Hewett & J. Clague (comps.), *Burma Gazetteer: Bassein District*, vol. A (Rangoon: Office

of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1916): 25; W. S Morrison, *Burma Gazetteer: Henzada District*, Vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1915): 37; A. J. Page, *Burma Gazetteer: Pegu District*, vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1915): 52; B. O. Binns, *Burma Gazetteer: Amherst District*, vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1934): 27.

[43] R. Grant Brown, *Burma as I saw it 1889-1917, With a Chapter on Recent Events* (London: Methuen & Co, 1926): 18-19; R. B. Smart, *Burma Gazetteer: Akyab District*, vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1917): 84; H. F. Searle, *Burma Gazetteer: The Mandalay District*, vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1928): 77.

[44] See, for example, the discussion in Grant Brown, *Burma as I saw it 1889-1917*, 18-19.

[45] F. K. Lehman, "Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems," in Peter Kunstadter (ed.). *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): 105-107, 110-111.

[46] Horace A. Browne, *Reminiscences of the Court at Mandalay: Extracts From the Diary of General Horace A. Browne, 1859-1879* (Woking): 15.

[47] *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, 1.269.

[48] Michael Aung-Thwin, "The Myth of the 'Three Shan Brothers' and the Ava Period in Burmese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55.4 (1996): 881-901.

[49] Arthur Phayre, "On the History of the Burma Race," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2 (1869): 29-30.

[50] Aung-Thwin, "The Myth of the 'Three Shan Brothers'," 881-901.

[51] Phayre, "On the History of the Burma Race," 77. As Phayre further wrote of the founder of the First Taung-ngu dynasty, Tabinshwehti: "At Ava, the defeat of king Tho-han-bwa had increased his difficulties. His Shan followers had always been hated by the Burmese, whom they equally oppressed. In the palace there were both Shan and Burmese guards. The Shan officers had long wished to clear the palace of all Burmese..." Phayre, "On the History of the Burma Race," 65.

[52] Stewart, "Note on Some Authorities for the History of Burma," 74. Italicization is mine.

[53] This view is best reflected in Arthur Phayre's suggestion that "[Arakanese] pride even makes them affect to regard the occupation of [Arakan] by the British, as a national re-conquest from the Burmese, achieved by themselves, because a number of Arakanese refugees ... accompanied the British invasion, and fought by its side." Phayre, "On the History of Arakan," 23-24.

[54] Phayre, *History of Burma*, 223.

[55] D. G. E. Hall, "Anglo-Burmese Conflicts in the 19th Century: A Reassessment of their Causes," *Asia* 6 (August 1966): 39.

[56] Jacques Leider, "Between Revolt and Normality: Arakan After the Burmese Conquest," *Rakhaing Review* 2 (November 1995): 17; Ashin Okkantha, "History of Buddhism in Arakan" (PhD dissertation: University of Calcutta, 1990): 108.