

**Buddhist or Muslim Rulers?  
Models of Kingship in Arakan (Western Burma) in the Fourteenth to Fifteenth  
Centuries**

**By**

**Michael W. Charney<sup>1</sup>  
(National University of Singapore)**

**Introduction**

Southeast Asianists have, over the past half-century, discussed in great detail issues related to the emergence of the state and of kingship in Southeast Asia. J. C. van Leur sparked much of this debate with the posthumous publication in English of a collection of his works in 1955. Van Leur argued against the idea that Indians had imposed ideas of state and kingship upon Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> This view has been extended to the rest of Southeast Asia. Research by Renee Hagesteijn and Oliver Wolters has provided models of the emergence of sophisticated polities autonomously in

---

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised version of a chapter from the author's dissertation. The author wishes to thank Liu Hong, Vic Lieberman, John Whitmore, Nancy Florida, Juan Cole, Atsuko Naono, and Jacques Leider, for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. The author received financial support and office space and facilities for the writing of this article from the Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore, and the Department of History, University of Michigan. The author would like to thank the following institutions for allowing me access to their collections: the library and museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Calcutta), the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), Central Library of the National University of Singapore, the British Library (London), the Southeast Asia Library of Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, Illinois), and the library of the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). Through microfilm collections, the author was also able to obtain additional copies of archival palm-leaf manuscripts from the Central University Library and the National Library, both in Yangon, Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955).

Southeast Asia, whose ruling elites then localized vocabularies and symbols of state and rulership from India to articulate local ideas with which these vocabularies and symbols were sonorant.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of what appears to be Indianized states in Southeast Asia's classical period, roughly the ninth to fourteenth centuries, then really signifies a complex process in essentially autonomous political development.

For the early modern period, however, models of rulership have generally been left unquestioned. Robert Heine-Geldern, in a seminal essay written almost a half-century ago, laid the groundwork for much of this view, focussing our attention upon the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the symbolic structure of early (and later) Southeast Asian courts.<sup>4</sup> Stanley Tambiah has also discussed at great length the Hindu and Buddhist ideological underpinnings of mainland Southeast Asian kingship, without questioning the essential religious component of the "Hindu" and "Buddhist" elements.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Anthony Reid, having taken on the immense project of laying the groundwork for analyses of the "Age of Commerce" in Southeast Asian history, was understandably less inclined to investigate the cultural identities of early modern

---

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Revised edition, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1999); Renee Hagesteijn, *Circles of Kings: Political Dynamics in Early Continental Southeast Asia* (Dordrecht, Holland: Foris pub. 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Conception of Universal King and Its Manifestation in South and Southeast Asia*, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1987); idem, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

rulers. Reid discusses the nature of Buddhist and Muslim ruler-ship, like Tambiah, without questioning the religiousity of the identity of ruler-ship.<sup>6</sup>

The prevailing literature does not adequately address the question of what happens in the cases where the division between Hindu-Buddhist and Muslim is not so clear. In this article, I use the case study of early modern Arakan. A very confusing aspect of early modern Arakan, for example, is the heterogeneous models of kingship that rulers in the Arakan Littoral adopted, depending upon the time and place and the people on whom the ruler wished to make a good impression. These models are often explained in terms of religious identity by contemporaneous observers (and even scholars of the present). Sometimes, first-hand observers identified the same king as a Buddhist king and at other times a Muslim sultan. Yet, extrapolating from models of kingship in order to arrive at conclusions regarding the religious identity of a king and a people is problematic. If one is to penetrate the veneer of self-presentation and examine the underlying religious context, a better understanding of what, at least on the surface, appear to be the royal court's religious affiliations will first have to be established. Such a project is attempted in this article.

### **Early Modern Arakan: A Brief Overview**

The early modern kingdom of Arakan hugged the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Although it had important cultural interactions with the Irrawaddy Valley to its East over the Arakan Roma Mountains, Arakan's early modern prosperity depended largely upon maritime trade, and that generally with Muslim traders. The

---

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. II, *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993): pp. 169-173.

Arakanese kingdom centred around three chief capitals, from which the periodisation of precolonial Arakanese history has derived: Vesali (seventh to ninth centuries, followed by political fragmentation and a break up of the kingdom until the thirteenth century), Launkret (thirteenth to early fifteenth centuries), and Mrauk-U (1430 until 1785).<sup>7</sup> As a cultural crossroads between South and Southeast Asia, Arakan was home to heterogeneous religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Mahayana, Tantric, and Theravada Buddhism. As a result, art historical, epigraphic, and material evidence could be used to support claims that the Arakanese were traditionally Muslim or that they were traditionally Buddhist, giving rise, in part, to the religious communal conflict between Muslims and Buddhist in Arakan today.

Arakanese chronicles, and generally we only have Buddhist Burmese- and Pali language pesa manuscripts at the moment, describe an ideal model of a Hindu-Buddhist state, especially during the Mrauk-U period. There was a king at the center, four chief ministers, and four chief queens around him. The king was a dhamma-*raja* and was personally devoted not only to Buddhism *per se*, but especially to the royal cult of Maha-muni, that is, a cult of the Amitaba, the future Buddha. Many of the religious buildings dated from the period and attributed to these kings are today Buddhist, although these buildings have been re-built over and over again and no one is really certain of what they originally looked like or in what capacity they functioned. This evidence has been used to substantiate the view of a solid Buddhist or Hindu-Buddhist kingship.

But what appears so solidly today as Buddhist kingship can be questioned with other evidence. Certainly, as I have mentioned, monuments were built over and over

---

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of Arakanese history in the precolonial period, see Jacques Leider, *Le Royaume d'Arakan (Birmanie): Son Histoire Politique entre le Debut du Xve et la Fin du XVIIe Siecle*", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Paris, 1998); Michael W. Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom

again. To my knowledge, we have fewer than one hundred inscriptions from the period, many of them unreadable. Persian inscriptions found in the “Buddhist” pagodas have been removed in recent years and one anonymous source who recently attempted to visit the Santikhan mosque has informed me that it either no longer exists or that no one is allowed to see it. Numismatic evidence reveals that the kings of the early Mrauk-U dynasty, from 1430 to 1638, used coins in which their names were written in Persian script and articulated the style of Muslim sultan-ship. Finally, contemporaneous European visitors to the Mrauk-U court refer to the Arakanese kings by their Persian, Islamic-style titles, so that the Min-raza-kri of the Buddhist chronicles, for example, becomes Selim Shah. Indeed, even the Buddhist chronicles admit that the Arakanese rulers had submitted as vassals to the Sultanate of Bengal in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Two views have generally emerged concerning the Arakanese ruler-ship. One holds that the Arakanese rulers were Hindu-Buddhist rulers. The other view, held by Europeans of the period and by Arakanese Muslims today is that these rulers were, expectedly, not Buddhist, but Muslim.<sup>8</sup> But, in either case, the titles, practices, and general organisation of the Arakanese court appears static, from their ‘snapshot’ presentation in European and indigenous sources, throughout Arakan’s pre-1785 history

### **Strengthening Central Rulership**

---

Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)”.  
<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Abdur Razzaq & Mahfuzul Haque, *A Tale of Refugees: Rohingyas in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Centre for Human Rights, 1995), 15.

Despite the polarization of views the religious identity of Arakanese rulership, Arakanese rulers were actually quite dynamic in the ways in which they presented themselves (that is, the ‘model of kingship’). Over time, Arakanese kings accumulated many images that they utilised depending upon the audience they wished to impress. The model of kingship was a vital part of the political, cultural, and religious landscape in early modern Arakan, as it reflected how the king and his entourage wished to be portrayed at different times to different audiences.

I think we can apply to Arakan’s adoption of multiple models of rulership Philip B. Wagoner’s theory regarding the partial appropriation of Islamic culture for occasions when such appropriation is highly opportune. Wagoner has examined Vijayanagara and based upon his research he has provided the best theoretical approach to understanding the process of cultural Islamicisation (as opposed to religious Islamisation). As Wagoner structures his understanding of this process:

“[T]his process of cultural change may be understood in terms of three characteristics. First, Islamicization refers to a political strategy, by means of which indigenous elites attempt to enhance their political status and authority through participation in the more ‘universal’ culture of Islam. Second, this participation is effected through the adoption of certain Islamic cultural forms and practices, which . . . largely pertain to the broad sphere of secular culture, as opposed to the narrower domain of formal religion. . . . Finally . . . Islamicization does not necessarily occur at the expense of indigenous cultural traditions.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Phillip B. Wagoner, “ ‘Sultan Among Hindu Kings:’,” Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996), pp. 851-880.

But more than this, the model of kingship helped influence the court's agenda. Specialists in appurtenances, rituals, behaviour, language, and other matters related to one or another model of kingship had to be brought to the court. Important symbols of ruler-ship also had to be captured (conquest), received (vassalage), or borrowed (localised) abroad. The Arakanese conquest of Pegu in 1599 is a good example of this pattern at work. In this campaign, the Arakanese king won for himself the symbols of the First Toungoo kingship, including the regalia, the white elephant, a daughter of the fallen house, and the chief images of the First Toungoo palace. Thereupon, the Arakanese ruler called himself 'Lord of the White Elephant,' and stationed the other symbols he had taken around his palace.<sup>10</sup>

Incorporating aspects of external models of kingship also had implications for religious patronage and necessarily set some of the parameters for royal behaviour. It would have been inconceivable, for example, for a king portraying himself as a Bengali-style sultan to slaughter the Muslims of the royal court or to raze to the ground, as Bayin-naun of the Irrawaddy Valley's First Toungoo dynasty did, mosques within the royal domain.<sup>11</sup> We certainly do not find such campaigns against Muslims in Arakan until the mid-seventeenth century, after the rulers of Mrauk-U ceased to aspire to Bengali sultan-ship. Finally, the model of kingship borrowed was also an attempt to enhance the authority or magnetism of the king and the court. As I shall

---

<sup>10</sup> This campaign is discussed in detail in Michael W. Charney, "The 1598-99 Siege of Pegu and the Expansion of Arakanese Imperial Power into Lower Burma", pp. 39-57.

<sup>11</sup> On Bayin-naun's razing to the ground of Muslim mosques in Pegu, see "Nidana Ramadhipati-katha", H. L. Shorto (trans.), unpublished typescript translation kindly provided to the author by Dr. Victor Lieberman, p. 98.

argue below, models of ruler-ship changed in reaction to changes in the local political climate.

Without becoming lost in a myriad of details that the chronicles offer, we can make some general characterisations of models of ruler-ship based upon Arakanese perceptions of their own past and the admittedly less rich, but more reliable data that comes from the few inscriptions, coins, and other materials which we do possess. An important characterisation regarding Arakan from the tenth to fifteenth centuries does emerge from a comparison of the evidence available: the important symbols of pre-tenth century ruler-ship were abandoned. It is not difficult to demonstrate that, at least on one level, the Vesali model of kingship had broken down, although I am willing to entertain more subterranean continuity of ideas of Arakanese ruler-ship. Coinage provides evidence to a certain degree. The minting of commemorative coronation coinage, for example, was an important part of Bengali and later of Muslim ruler-ship in establishing a ruler's claim to authority and this was begun only when a ruler felt secure enough to claim central authority for himself. The minting of coins was one step in establishing political legitimacy in Muslim states: "The right to mint coins . . . was a government monopoly in early Islamic society and there was no equivalent to the private coinage of western Europe; the mention of a caliph or other ruler's name on the coinage was, along with the mention in the sermon or *khutba* at Friday prayers, one of the ways in which sovereignty was acknowledged".<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East From the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986), p. 388. For this role of coins and the Sultanate of Bengal, see Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 33. Although some Bengali Muslim coin issues bore images, earlier Muslim Arabic coinage, which may have served as a model for Muslim coinage elsewhere,



Although we find coronation coinage in Arakan for the Vesali period and then again for the Mrauk-U period, during the period between the fall of Vesali (mid-tenth century) and the fall of Laun-kret (1406/7), we find no such coronation coins. Similarly, in Banga, we find no coinage minted from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup> Another category of evidence is less equivocal: although the Vesali kings had earlier adopted Bengali-Hindu style regnal names,<sup>14</sup> later, during the period between Vesali and Laun-kret and into the early Laun-kret period, regnal names seem to have been of purely local origin.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Spread of the Irrawaddy Valley (Burman) Model of Kingship**

When power was diffuse and it was difficult to assert authority by force alone, the enhancement of one's royal aura likely was an important objective of the petty rulers of this period. Unfortunately, it is for this period (thirteenth-fourteenth centuries) which we lack much of the data that render both the Vesali and Mrauk-U periods much easier to study. The Arakanese and Burmese chronicles conflict irreconcilably, for example, on a number of critical features of the Arakan Littoral's history during this period, and even then, the information that is provided is sketchy and hardly informative. But this does not mean that the sources are not useful at all.

---

“was to be . . . purely epigraphic with an inscription giving the date, the caliph's name and a religious slogan”. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> See Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 95-6.

<sup>14</sup> This is clear from the list in G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 the Beginning of the English Conquest* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), pp. 370-371.

<sup>15</sup> I have searched without success for a Bengali- or Pagan- familiar to any of the regnal titles of Arakanese rulers during this period.

From the Arakanese chronicles and even those of the Burmans, we can arrive at some understanding of how they viewed their history during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and how they related it to their own time. These indigenous perspectives revolved around several ‘themes’ which I think are relevant here: (1) some rulers in the Arakan Littoral sought to enhance their prestige by adapting a high-status model of Pagan-Buddhist kingship, while the Burmans (and British colonial historians following their lead) have interpreted this as actual Pagan rule of Arakan and (2) continued political and cultural influence, but not religious change, emanating from the Irrawaddy Valley outweighed that emanating from the north-west in India.

It seems to have been in the context of the emergence of competing men of prowess, as described by Wolters,<sup>16</sup> that the petty chieftains of the Arakan Littoral looked to the closest powerful state for assistance and association—Pagan, east of the Arakan Roma. Several kinds of evidence are available which strongly indicate this development: inscriptions, coinage, and dynastic lists. Inscriptions, for example, ceased to be written in Deva-nagari and instead, inscriptions from the Laun-kret period were written in Burmese script, Pagan-style. The earliest reliable example of Burmese script, derived from Mon script, is found in a Pagan inscription of 1058. Some inscriptions bear earlier dates, but these are copies and there is good reason to doubt the authenticity of their dates.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of coronation coinage may also suggest that, in the context of other trends, Laun-kret (and earlier) kings had begun to emulate the pattern of Burman kingship (wherein no coronation coinage was necessary). At the very least it indicates that the patterns of kingship prevalent in Bengal were less emphasised in Arakan during this period. Increasingly in the Laun-kret period, Arakanese rulers borrowed

---

<sup>16</sup> Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, pp. 16-21.

<sup>17</sup> See Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 29, 29f.

their regnal names from Pagan and post-Pagan era Burman dynastic lists, and the names as a whole begin to fit more and more the pattern of Burman kingship.<sup>18</sup> Localising a Pagan-style model of kingship had its limitations, however, for although Arakanese kings also claimed lineage from the first king of the world, Mahathamada,<sup>19</sup> I have found no evidence that Arakanese kings drew from the Irrawaddy Valley's parallel and important tradition of royal descent from the half-god Pyu-zaw-hti. Pyu-zaw-hti, according to the two traditions of Burmese kingship, was the progenitor of the kings of the Pagan dynasty. Victor Lieberman suggests that the tradition may have been "an early origin myth later challenged by Buddhist orthodoxy".<sup>20</sup>

In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, post-Vesali Arakan shared in a cultural exchange with the Irrawaddy Valley.<sup>21</sup> Both the Burmese and Arakanese chronicles assert that, during these centuries, Arakan was brought under Burman political and religious influence and into Pagan's political orbit by two rulers of Pagan: Anaw-rata

---

<sup>18</sup> Michael W. Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Michigan, 1999): p. 333.

<sup>19</sup> "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", [palm-leaf manuscript, number 1632] Ams. n.d., p. 33b, National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar; Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", [palm-leaf manuscript, number 2297] Ams, n.d., p. I, National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar.

<sup>20</sup> Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 83, 83f.

<sup>21</sup> Pagan's connections with Arakan were facilitated by a road called the "Burekmanyoo," which connected the Danra-waddy plains with Pagan. "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", p. 8a; Maurice Collis & San Shwe Bu, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 15 (1925), p. 38.

and Alaun-sithu. Much of what we know about the early rise of Pagan as the pre-eminent political, cultural, and religious centre of western mainland Southeast Asia has been ascribed to the first of these kings, Anaw-rata.<sup>22</sup> However, there is much to suggest that Anaw-rata, whom some regard as only semi-historical, has been credited with a range of longer-term developments all lumped together by the process of human remembrance into one man's reign. A number of scholars, for example, have pointed to the curious lack of evidence for the story of Anaw-rata's conquest of Thaton and taking the Tipitika and Mon monks back to Pagan.<sup>23</sup> Even so, the processes attributed to him are relevant to our discussion here.

In both the Irrawaddy Valley and the Arakan Littoral, the establishment of Pagan's authority was realised through the acquisition of the symbols of local religious beliefs and their relocation to Pagan, under the Pagan kingship's control. Arakanese and Burmese chronicles, as well as colonial histories based upon these chronicles, portray Pagan's campaign against Arakan and elsewhere as religiously-inspired conquests. Anaw-rata's looting of Thaton allowed for Pagan's acquisition of Buddhist texts, Theravada Buddhist monks, and artisans from this town.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Anaw-rata is said to have sought out the chief religious symbols of the lowland Indian societies of the Arakan Littoral. After the acquisition of a Queen from Pateikkaya, for example, Anaw-rata is reputed to have tried, unsuccessfully, to carry off the Mahamuni Buddha image, a religious centrepiece of the kingdom of Vesali.<sup>25</sup> According to

---

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 29-30, 34, 45-6; Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", pp. 17a-17b, 18a, 19a-19b.

<sup>23</sup>E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the chronicles, in 1072, when Anaw-rata tried to move the Maha-muni image, the Buddhas flew through the sky and frightened him so that he trembled, writhing on the platform of the temple for three days. He was not relieved until he placed relics in the relic chamber as was usual, and then he prospered.<sup>26</sup> In any event, Anaw-rata was placated by Arakan's nominal vassalage to the Pagan and a royal princess, Hti-lain-pru, whom the Arakanese king, Min-kala, sent to Anaw-rata as tribute.<sup>27</sup>

The Arakanese chronicles also stress, perhaps more usefully for our discussion here, that political competitors in the Arakan Littoral, when they otherwise failed to achieve their political aspirations, sought aid from Pagan. After a usurper removed their father, Min-bilu, from the throne, for example, Min-nan and his brother Min-rei-tara fled to Pagan and took shelter under the protection of Kyan-zittha and his successor, Alaun-sithu, in 1110. Arakanese chronicles claim that Alaun-sithu sailed around Maw-tin Island and put Min-nan on the Arakanese throne at Vesali,<sup>28</sup> although more colourful traditions differ over details of this event. An account found in a nineteenth century chronicle of Arakan, for example, claims that Min-rei-tara was Minnan's father. While in exile, Min-rei-tara and his sister-queen had a son, Leira-min-nan, and a daughter, Shwei-guthi. Leira-min-nan, after his father's death, made his plight known to his patron, Alaun-sithu, by wearing his hair in the fashion of Vesali during the headwashing ceremony. Angered, Alaun-sithu was prepared to punish him, until Leira-min-nan used this opportunity of gaining the king's attention, to ask for his help in recovering the Arakan Littoral. Having been provided with an army of Burmans, Mons, and Pyus, and having been made military commander,

---

<sup>26</sup> Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", p. 17a.

<sup>27</sup> "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", pp. 8a, 35a-35b.

<sup>28</sup> "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", pp. 8b, 35b; Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", pp. 19a, 19b; Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 45.

Leira-min-nan took back the Arakan Littoral, married his own sister Shwei-guthi, and ascended the palace.<sup>29</sup> Again, however, the conflict between Arakanese religion and the Burmans from Pagan is stressed. After securing Min-nan's place on the throne, for example, the Mons and the Pyus are said to have looted the Arakan Littoral of its religious objects, including the Maha-muni image, with severe consequences for the thieves. The Mon barge that held the Maha-muni image, for example, was sunk by the Nagas and taken away by them, while the Mons and Burmans were "afflicted with leprosy."<sup>30</sup> Again, the chronicles stress the exchange of princesses with the rulers of Pagan as a sign of vassalage: Alaun-sithu is said to have left Arakan upon receiving Min-nan's daughter, Mra-ban, as tribute.<sup>31</sup>

The Burman chronicles, perhaps expectedly, claim cultural hegemony in the relationship between Pagan and the Arakan Littoral. The clearest example is the suggestion in the Burman chronicle tradition that the name "Rakhine" can be ascribed to Alaun-sithu's campaigns. According to the Burman chronicles, during a period of political fragmentation, Alaun-sithu's *sik-su-kris*, Nga Yeidan and Nga Ran-nain, campaigned against the tributary king of the Sak, Kadon-kyo, whom they summarily defeated.<sup>32</sup> The war captives who were sent back to Alaun-sithu as tribute from this campaign, are said to have been taken by Alaun-sithu and his armies to Lan-pya, where they "forced the prisoners whom had been taken to form villages in this place [and] because all those who had been taken ["ra" to take] had been placed and

---

<sup>29</sup> Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", pp. 19a-19b.

<sup>30</sup> Sithugammani-thinkyan, "Rakhine Razawin", p. 19b; and "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", p. 8b.

<sup>31</sup> "Rakhine Min Raza-kri Arei-taw Sadan", p. 8b.

<sup>32</sup> U Kala, *Maha-ya-zawin-kyi*, vol. 1, Hsaya U Khin Soes, ed, (Rangoon: Hantha-waddy Press, 1961), p. 229.

controlled [“kain,” to place and control], it is called ‘Ra-kain’ to the present day”.<sup>33</sup> This etymological reasoning appears to me to be extremely specious, and it should be noted that there are numerous other explanations for the name “Rakhine” even in the same Burman sources that include the above explanation. But, again, this is an example of Burman chronicles stressing a subordinate role for the Arakanese in the Burma-Arakan relationship.

In any event, Pagan’s power, although perhaps not its cultural identity, dissipated rapidly after the Chinese attack on its kingdom in the early thirteenth century; sometime after 1286, Rakhine-Danra-waddy, as one of many outlying areas supposedly maintaining a faint tributary relationship with Pagan, “refused to send tribute, rebelled, and seceded.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Sultan-ship: Islamic or Bengali Model of Ruler-ship?**

The Arakanese kings had other models of ruler-ship as well, especially that of Bengali ruler-ship. A misunderstanding has developed in the prevailing literature, however, regarding the early Mrauk-U dynastic utilisation of Muslim regnal titles, inscriptions on coins bearing these titles and sometimes the Muslim *Kalimah*, and the temporary vassalage to the Muslim sultan of Bengal. It is generally assumed that this borrowing represents one of two developments: (1) the Arakanese kings needed to propitiate Muslim communities that lay within areas under Arakanese rule, such as

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> U Kala, *Maha-ya-zawin-kyi*, vol. 1.; pp. 307-8; The Arakanese chronicles also tell us that in the thirteenth century, the “authority of the overlord kings [of Pagan]” had receded. Sithugammani-thinkyan, “Rakhine Razawin”, p. 24b.

Chittagong or Banga,<sup>35</sup> or (2) as the requirement by the sultans of Bengal as part of Arakan's supposed vassalage to the same.<sup>36</sup> These positions, however, share a similar flaw in that they reflect the link between cultural and religious identities that exist in the twentieth century. The prevailing work on early modern Arakan, in other words, assumes that the symbols of kingship which the early Arakanese kings borrowed were essentially Muslim and implies that they were seen as such by the Arakanese kings. The logical conclusion of this line of reasoning is that early Mrauk-U rulers were indeed Muslim. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise: many of these so-called "Muslim" Arakanese kings were highly devoted to Buddhism and permitted the exclusion of Muslims from the most important activities.<sup>37</sup>

There is another problem here, of hastily applying terminology interchangeably. Marshall Hodgson suggests this at a more general level when he argues that the terms 'Islam' and 'Islamic' have been applied "casually both for what we may call religion and for the overall society and culture associated historically with the religion".<sup>38</sup> Looking at the case study of Arakan, this problem involves the use of Arakanese participation in what is assumed to be Muslim material and political

---

<sup>35</sup> San Baw U suggests that the Arakanese usurpation of Muslim titles was for the purposes of their Muslim subjects: "the title [was] assumed . . . as Lord of his Mahomedan subjects". San Baw U, "My Rambles", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 13 (1923), p. 104; Alamgir Serajuddin, "Muslim Influence in Arakan and the Muslim Names of Arakanese Kings: A Reassessment", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 31 (1986), pp. 17-23.

<sup>36</sup> A. B. M. Habibullah, "Arakan in the pre-Mughal History of Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 11 (1945), pp. 33-38.

<sup>37</sup> Sebastião Manrique, *Itinerario de Sebastião Manrique*, Luís Silveira, ed., vol. 2 (Lisboa: Agência Geral das Colónias, Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1946), p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1: p. 57.



culture as evidence of participation in Islam as a religion. A glance at early modern Arakan, for example, quickly reveals communities who were of the Muslim faith, but who did not appropriate (or retain, in some cases) the material or political culture that seemingly prevailed in the early modern Dar al-Islam, as well as groups who did participate in this material and political culture, but who were not Muslim. A review of the primary source materials, both indigenous and European, has led me to consider the symbols of kinship that early Mrauk-U kings adopted as not essentially Muslim. What, then, were they?

It is fairly clear that court cultures that developed in the Middle East had, by the ninth century, attained such a high level of sophistication, articulation, and prestige that they became models to be emulated, adopted, and localised by other Muslim courts throughout the Mediterranean world. In Cordoba, for example, the spread of Islam and Muslim rule preceded the spread of Abbasid-style court cultures.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that ‘Muslim rule’ *per se* and ‘highly prestigious court cultures’ (that characterised particular Muslim courts) were separate phenomena.<sup>40</sup>

Wagoner’s theoretical approach to the process of cultural Islamicisation, as I discussed earlier, is helpful here and can explain much, though not everything, about the ‘borrowings’ of the early modern Mrauk-U court of things Islamic. If we can interpret Wagoner’s approach as applicable to any high court culture, I would suggest that the Arakanese borrowing of things Islamic did not mean the same thing to the Arakanese as it did to the Hindu rulers of Vijayanagara. As it would have been understood to the early modern Arakanese, for example, the material and political

---

<sup>39</sup> Jessica A. Coope, “Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in the Ninth-Century Umayyad Cordoba”, *Journal of World History* 4 (1993), pp. 52-3.

culture in question was not Muslim *per se*, but rather it was that political and material culture which had come to characterise the Bengali royal court.<sup>41</sup> Arakanese chronicles admit all kinds of relationships with rulers and cultural influence that we would interpret today as Muslim. But closer inspection of the sources reveals that the writers of the *razawins* viewed these rulers and influences as Indian or Bengali and not as Muslim. Shin Kawi-thara's "Rakhine Arei-taw-poun," an 1839 palm-leaf manuscript copied from a 1787 original (and reprinted with many textual changes in the twentieth century), for example, casts aspersions upon "Mussalamans" (Muslims) as 'monkeys' and suggests that those people who become friends with them become 'ruined'. But this same source finds no problem in admitting that the Arakanese rulers were vassals of the *suratan* (sultan) of Bengal or that Arakanese kings used what is described in the text as 'Kala' (Indian) names, such as Mubarak Shah or Iskander Shah, that we today identify as Muslim.

Looking at the 'Muslim' symbols of ruler-ship adopted in the Arakanese court, which have been used specifically to underline the argument suggesting the Muslim religious identity of that court, I suggest a different perspective appears to be at work. The so-called Muslim symbols of ruler-ship, I argue, should be viewed as Bengali, or rather as symbols of Bengali ruler-ship that had been influenced by Persian ideas of ruler-ship in the fourteenth century. Arakanese 'Muslim' regnal names, for example, were not drawn freely from the Islamic world, but seemingly from the Bengali

---

<sup>40</sup> See also a distinction between 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate' in Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, v. 1: pp. 58-59.

<sup>41</sup> National Library, Ministry of Culture, Rangoon, MS 136913, Shin Kawi-thara, "Rakhine Arei-taw-poun" [Palm-leaf manuscript number 136913] Ams, 1839 [copy of 1787 original], p. 21a, National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, union of Myanmar.

sultanate's regnal lists.<sup>42</sup> These Bengali regnal titles, however Muslim they may appear, fit into a prevailing pattern of kingship in the Arakan Littoral, whereby Arakanese kings borrowed symbols of kingship from powerful states to the north-west and the east, that is from Bengal and Burma. The question, regarding these symbols, which is never asked, for example, is why Arakanese kings also maintained essentially Burmese titles and included Burmese regnal titles in the inscriptions on their coins, alongside the supposedly 'Muslim' regnal titles.

The conditions that led to the adoption of the Bengali/Muslim titles and coinage seem to have been related to events occurring in Banga, rather than in Arakan.<sup>43</sup> To be certain, there were major developments occurring within the thirteenth and early fourteenth century Arakan Littoral that required this change. However, the character of the change itself, that is, the adoption of the Bengali symbols of ruler-ship, was due to changes in the Bengali (that is, all of Bengal and not just Banga) political and religious landscape. In other words, Bengali symbols of kingship became Islamicised because Bengali elites and many others in Bengali society were becoming Muslim. Thus, if an Arakanese king had localised a model of Bengali ruler-ship in the eighth century, for example, he might appear to us today as a 'Hindu' ruler. On the other hand, if an Arakanese ruler localised a model of Bengali ruler-ship in the fifteenth century, he would appear to us today as a 'Muslim' ruler (and thus we have the confusion regarding the religious identity of the early Mrauk-U kings). In short, Arakanese kings saw one 'Bengali' model, while today we might see two, one 'Hindu' and the other 'Muslim.'

---

<sup>42</sup> Habibullah, "Arakan in the pre-Mughal History of Bengal", p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> See the discussion of the rise of Muslim rule in Bengal and the Islamization of Bengali models of kingship in Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 22-70.

In exchange for the support of the court of the sultanate of Bengal in re-establishing Arakanese control of the Danra-waddy river-basin region, Nara-meik-hla and his successors accepted nominal vassalage to the Bengali sultanate and significant features of the Bengali model of ruler-ship (i.e. Bengali sultan-ship). According to one account, the early Mrauk-U kings ‘took the seal’ (accepted vassalage) of the Sultan of Gaur, Basa-min. The taking of ‘Muslim’ titles began with Nara-meik-hla’s successor, Ali Khan.<sup>44</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to characterise the early Mrauk-U kings as Muslim Sultans. The statecraft of early Mrauk-U rule was complex, and so was their identity. A large part of this stemmed from conscious attempt to attract traders of different cultures and religions, and to achieve status in the eyes of rival rulers to the east and north-west. The role of Muslim sultan was merely one facet of a multi-faceted kingship. Indigenes, especially in the outlying provinces (Rama-waddy, Mekha-waddy, and Dwara-waddy) for example, likely had no perception of any form of Muslim identity in their rulers.

As Arakan recovered from the Burman and Mon invasions, the new capital city of Mrauk-U developed and prospered, and the Arakan Littoral was tied to this royal city through a series of royal campaigns against outlying centres.<sup>45</sup> During this period, the symbols of Arakanese authority became increasingly, though not completely, Islamicised. The symbols I am considering here are the regnal titles, coinage inscriptions, and the periodic ‘Muslim’ royal audiences provided for Muslim

---

<sup>44</sup> See Sanda-mala-linkaya, *Rakhine Razawin Thet-kyan*, vol. 2, (Mandalay: Hantha-waddy Press, 1932): p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> This process is discussed in Michael W. Charney, “Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rahkaing Under the Early Mrauk-U Kings, c. 1430-1603”, *Journal of Burma Studies* 3 (1998), pp. 1-33 and Idem., “The 1598-99 Siege of Pegu and the Expansion of Arakanese Imperial Power Into Lower Burma”, *Journal of Asian History* 28, no. 1 (19994), pp. 39-57.

traders during the early Mrauk-U Dynasty. The Islamicisation process took several reigns to come to fruition. Indeed, Naramekhla, who the chronicles suggest was the Arakanese ruler most dependent upon the Bengali sultanate for his position on the throne, adopted no Muslim titles at all.<sup>46</sup> A Muslim mercenary force and the construction of a Muslim mosque in the royal capital are said to have been followed by the adoption of Muslim titles and coinage with Persian characters only in 1433. This coinage was followed by coins bearing the *Kalimah*, or Muslim confession of faith, only from 1459, issued by the Arakanese king entitled, appropriately enough, Kalimah Shah, although some coins bearing the *Kalimah* may possibly have been issued as early as the 1440s.<sup>47</sup> We do have undated coins, which some suggest can be dated to the 1440s, which also bear the Kalima, but without dates this can only be considered as conjecture.<sup>48</sup>

The act of stamping coins was one requirement of independent sultan-ship in the Bengali context.<sup>49</sup> Although portrayed later with Muslim overtones by scholars, this requirement was rooted in the pre-Islamic past and was inherited from the Buddhist Chandras, whose use of coinage benefited them in maritime trade.<sup>50</sup> The

---

<sup>46</sup> Ba Tha has tried to make the case that Nara-meik-hla's regnal name, Saw-mon, was Islamic and should be read as Samoon. Tha, "Roewengyas in Arakan", 34. This is unconvincing and, in fact, Saw-mon was a name used by other, clearly non-Muslims in pre-Mrauk-U Arakanese history.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur P. Phayre, *The International Numismata Orientalia: Coins of Arakan, of Pegu, and of Burma* (London: Trubner & Co., 1882), p. 1

<sup>48</sup> . Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> As suggested in the editorial notes of one volume, "[t]he recital of the Khutbah after one's name and the minting of coins, was regarded by Musalaman sovereigns as emblems of sovereignty". Salim, *Riyazu-Salatin*, p. 6f.

<sup>50</sup> Phayre, *International Numismata Orientalia*, p. 2. The exclusivity of coinage to maritime trade states during this period suggests that these coins were indeed maritime-trade related.

coins of the early Mrauk-U dynasty, however, do confirm the use of Persian and Muslim names and titles by Arakanese rulers from the mid-fifteenth century. Although the coins indicate Muslim and Persian influence, they coexist with Buddhist and Brahmanic symbols on the same coins. This does not mean that the coins would have been rejected by Muslims. In Bengal, for example, the early Turki Muslim rulers also retained pre-Islamic Brahmanic symbols on their coins, but with the inclusion of the ruler's Muslim name.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

In more recent centuries, religious identity is sometimes linked with material culture or personal adornment. Clothing, foods, and even hairstyles, for example, can symbolise many kinds of identities (such as family, village, ethnic, political, or status identities, for example), not simply religious affiliation. But in the early modern period, at least in the Arakan Littoral, if there were connections between religious identities and material culture or personal adornment, they were much more fluid than we might consider them to be today. Nineteenth century British administrators in the Arakan Littoral, for example, observed that save for their profession of Islam and observance of its requirements, Arakanese Muslims such as the Myedu were not distinguishable from the Buddhist population (that is, in terms of material culture).<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> As one such administrator claimed: "Except in their religion and in the social customs their religion directs, these Burman Mahomedans are not distinguishable from their Burmese and Arakanese neighbours". W. B. Tydd, *Burma Gazetteer: Sandoway District*, vol. A, (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1912), p. 19.

Similarly, many scholars today attribute a Muslim identity to early modern Arakanese rulers because they dressed ‘like Muslims,’ had ‘Muslim’ names, and used ‘Muslim’ symbols of rulership. It was not out of place for an Arakanese king of the fifteenth, sixteenth, or even early seventeenth centuries to dress as a ‘Muslim’ Bengali would dress, or to speak as a ‘Muslim’ Persian would, or to call himself by a ‘Muslim’ Persian name, and yet pay homage to an image of the Buddha, worry about *samsara*, or proclaim himself a Buddhist. This seems to have occurred at other levels of society as well, although evidence regarding society as a whole is sparse for this period, and we have to be careful with its interpretation. Certainly, many Muslim writers in Bengal did not see the Arakanese or their kings as Muslim, and to describe how un-Muslim the Arakanese were, they chiefly cited (and exaggerated) cultural practices that did not agree with their interpretation of how Muslims should act.<sup>53</sup>

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, although classical kingship in Southeast Asia is now viewed as a much more complex affair than was previously thought, the view of ruler-ship in the Hindu-Buddhist “world” of central and western mainland Southeast Asia has not. In this article, I have focussed upon Arakan because this is where the seeming hypocrisy between simultaneous “Muslim” and “Buddhist” elements within the same rulership was clearest and thus the most easily studied. Whether a similar reevaluation is possible for Burma or Thailand, or even Cambodia, where “Muslim” rule did occur in the early to mid seventeenth century, is beyond the scope of this paper.

---

<sup>53</sup> As one account reads: “Their religion is distinct from Islam and Hinduism. Barring their mothers, they can take all other women for their wives; for instance, a brother may marry his sister . . . and their males do not keep beard”. Gulam Hussain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin (A History of Bengal)*, translated by Abdus Salam (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 1975), pp. 14-15.

But why should the early modern period be so neglected as a target for reevaluation? I think a major reason is the power of the first-hand observer. Perceptions of religious identities in South and Southeast Asia during the early modern period, for example, are often heavily skewed in favour of first-hand accounts, which are largely unavailable for the classical period (and hence Classicists pay closer attention to material culture, numismatica, art historical, and epigraphic sources), of limited scope. Prevailing historiography on early modern Southeast Asia continues to anchor itself to these same perceptions.

Although Southeast Asianists have tended to look at models of kingship on an “either or” basis (Hindu-Buddhist or Muslim), and as a situation peculiar to Southeast Asia, work by Muslimists on polities in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and northern India, suggests theoretical approaches to understanding local ruler-ship in the Islamic world that may help to bring views of Southeast Asian ruler-ship into a broader framework, incorporating the early modern world, at least between Western Europe and East Asia.

In the Arakan Littoral, selective acculturation was autonomous to religious conversion, at least to a limited degree. The failure to distinguish between these two developments (acculturation and religious conversion), as I suggest, has contributed to a misunderstanding in the prevailing literature of the religious identity of the Arakanese court (whether portrayed as a clearly Theravada Buddhist court or as the centre of authority in an Islamic state). It is true that early modern Arakanese kings localised the practices, cultural objects, and vocabularies that today we might view as Muslim or Buddhist. This article has attempted to indicate, however, how these kings perceived such things not as ‘religious’ symbols, but rather as part of the cultural accoutrements of especially powerful and respected dynasties in other kingdoms.



Even so, the effort to localise the practices, cultural objects, and vocabularies of high-status courts sometimes indirectly influenced religious change.