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Life and Work of a Scholar of Arakan: Pamela Gutman, 1944–2015

Bob Hudson

Pamela Gutman was born in Adelaide, South Australia. Her tertiary education was at the University of Vienna, where she studied German, Philosophy, and Art History, and then at The Australian National University, where she studied Bahasa Indonesia, Old Javanese, and Sanskrit. Studying in Canberra, the national capital, Pamela noted in her memoir *Moonlight Reflected in the Emerald*, “we felt that we were close to the political process, and would have a real contribution to make when we finished our degrees. The Faculty of Oriental (later Asian) Studies had been conceived as the focal point for the undergraduate study of Asia, and eminent scholars from the great European schools were attracted to it.” In search of a doctoral topic, Pamela contacted G.H. Luce, who suggested that as she had some Sanskrit, she should take up the study of Arakan. After surveying the sparse historical data available, she later said, she realized that to write a history of the art of Arakan, she would first have to write the history.

By 1972, Pamela had managed to acquire what was then exceedingly rare permission to undertake research in the self-isolated nation of Burma. The result was the first Australian PhD on Asian Art, “Ancient Arakan, with Special Reference to Its Cultural History, 5th to 12th Centuries.”

She surveyed ancient sites in Arakan with the Archaeological Survey of Burma, often with a military escort to ward off possible bandits or insurgents. Working on the pioneering data of scholars such as Forchhammer and Johnston, she



Pamela Gutman on a field trip in Arakan, 1970s, with military escort.



Pamela Gutman at the Maharani, Rakhine, 10 April 1975 with U Tin Oo, U Maung Maung Thein and U Sein Lin.

Colour online, B&W in print

catalogued and edited all the inscriptions that were known at the time, to establish a chronology for the period that would illustrate the nature of royal cults, state organization, and popular religion. A detailed study of coinage, monuments, religious imagery, and art helped fill out the picture of agrarian kingdoms whose rulers drew on Indic traditions of a leadership “possessed of righteousness and fortune.” The thesis placed Dhanyawadi, the home of the Mahamuni shrine, from around the mid-fourth century, and Vesali, the other walled site in the Kaladan Valley, from the sixth. The key to the strength and longevity of this thesis, never published but passed around in photocopy, and more recently made available online, was its focus on original sources and field research that was not constrained within modern political boundaries.

The thesis quickly became a key resource for local historians of Arakan, though it was treated by some as a resource that needed no acknowledgement or citation. The author wryly commented that after her initial displeasure at being plagiarized, she accepted that her work was at least reaching a wider audience.

Pamela Gutman was a policy adviser to the Australian government on refugees, immigration, education, culture, and strategic issues. Between 2001 and 2010, she was a member of Australia’s Refugee Review Tribunal. She maintained an academic focus on Burma/Myanmar, publishing the book *Burma’s Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* in 2001. She advised several galleries on their collections and exhibitions including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, The Hermitage St. Petersburg, and Asia Society New York, publishing often with their curators.

Pamela Gutman’s research ranged from Arakan to the “Pyu” system of Upper Burma, and from the first millennium CE to the nineteenth century. She was an art historian who studied art, where possible, in its original setting. Since her early forays into Arakan, she remained an indefatigable field researcher. Picture her, for example, in 2009, sitting cross-legged (as politeness dictates in such a situation) for hours

on a monastery floor in Yazagyo, on the India/Myanmar border, examining a series of bronzes excavated from some nineteenth-century pagodas. The visit to Yazagyo had been inspired by a 1942 note by G.H. Luce, who had passed by the remote village while being evacuated to India ahead of the advancing army of Japan. Pamela was researching material for a biography of Luce, and his brief mention of the moated village had ended with the comment "something for future researchers to investigate." "That's us," Pamela said as she organized her colleagues for the field trip.

Pamela Gutman died in March 2015. She is survived by two sisters, Christobel Munson and Katy Munson, daughter Tara, and three grandchildren, Maxim, Remy, and Saskia Gutman. She was remembered at a ceremony in Sittwe by the Arakanese archaeologists and art historians she had taught, worked with, or inspired. In Sydney, her hometown for many years, family and friends met on the edge of the harbor to pay tribute, personally and professionally.

A line in a message of condolence sent by a colleague in Thailand to the Sydney gathering would surely have pleased her. Referring to her BEFEO paper from 2013, "I am inclined," the message said, "to agree with Pamela's revised chronology for the Sriksetra stele." This is one more indication that Pamela Gutman's research, embedded in a strong personal and institutional background of scholarship, and integrated within the collegial framework of past and present South and Southeast Asian studies, remains vital to scholars of Arakan and Upper Burma.

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