

speak with each other, making this a significant addition to existing scholarly knowledge about ethics, aesthetics and politics in the Indian and larger South Asian contexts.

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Thibaut D’Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxi + 378 pp.

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The author identifies two interrelated ambitions: to analyse the poetics of the Bengali author of Arakan Ālāol (*floruit* [*fl.*] 1651–71), and to provide a non-presentist historical account of Arakanese Bengali literature as ‘one of the most fascinating instances of cultural encounter that took place in the pre-modern world’ (p. 1).

The book has an introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. The introduction and Chapter 1 lay out methodological considerations. D’Hubert clarifies that by ‘tradition’ he means ‘the dynamic process of transmission of generic models’ (p. 14), implying ‘the recourse to a methodology mapping the intertextual nexus in which each text is located’ (p. 14). From such a vantage point, the formation of a ‘composite’ literary tradition in the Arakan (ca. 1430–1638) has to be understood with reference to the early modern shift from agrarian inland to coastal states relying upon trade and tax collection. This was accompanied by the emergence of what D’Hubert calls the ‘vernacular kingdoms of the Bay of Bengal’ (p. 24) and the formation of several supraregional languages: Dakhani (in various spellings) in the Deccan, Bengali in Eastern South Asia and Malay in the Indonesian Archipelago. By emphasising the very different regional organisation of pre-modern eastern South Asia that does not map onto the boundaries of modern nation states, and by locating Arakanese Bengali literature within the ‘long-term geographical and cultural continuum’ (p. 45) constituted by coastal Myanmar and southeastern Bengal, D’Hubert seeks to counter presentist narratives narrowly focused on ethnic and religious categories. Although the focus of the book is on Ālāol and literary ‘urbanity’ in the capital city of Mrauk-U, Chapter 1 also includes a broad overview of developments in the rural areas of Chittagong, Dhafñavati and Bhulua.

Chapters 2–4 form the book’s core. They lay out the general features of ‘literary urbanity’ at Mrauk-U (Chapter 2), and Ālāol’s personal trajectory during 1651–71 (Chapters 3 and 4). D’Hubert insists that the specificity of ‘urbanity’ lies in its engagement with the multilingual court poetry of eastern South Asia represented by Avadhi romances and Brajabuli lyrics, and in its mirroring of the ‘world of merchants and courtly sociability that characterized the thriving community of the Bengali-speaking Muslims who lived in Arakan’ (p. 47). He discusses in detail the social location of

Bengali Muslims, and highlights their role as mercantile intermediaries between the Arakanese nobility and the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC). The role of Muslim poets in the 'economy of the *sabdhā* (court)' (p. 65) is analysed with reference to both the royal court at the Golden Palace and the many secondary courts in its 'shade'. D'Hubert identifies the key principles of courtliness in Ālāol's discourse as grandeur (*mahattva*), distinction (*śiṣṭatā*) and social elevation conveyed by *bhāgyodaya* ('rise of fortune'). Ālāol's understanding of courtliness and the poetic strategies he used to make a name for himself in the courtly milieu are shown to be building upon the earlier work of Daulat Kājī (*fl.* 1622–38) and Māgan Ṭhākur (*fl.* 1651–56).

With this background, Chapters 3 and 4 argue for a noticeable shift in Ālāol's recourse to different literary traditions during his career. Broadly, D'Hubert claims that the earlier influx of a Bengali population and the important role of Muslims as trade intermediaries meant that at the beginning of his career in 1651, Ālāol borrowed freely from Sanskrit literary models, which played the role of a shared reference in the composite courtly culture in Arakan. Although Ālāol was deeply attached to Islam and can in no way be interpreted as a syncretistic author, the influence of Persian literary models was less important in the early stages. A 'crystallization of religious identities' (p. 142) occurred in the 1660s, however, expressed in Ālāol's move away from Sanskrit loan words and towards Persian lexical items, and the increasingly infrequent occurrence of Puranic characters and themes. D'Hubert locates this transformation in political contingencies of the time, specifically the Mughal-Arakan conflict that moved decisively in favour of the Mughals with their conquest of Chittagong in 1666, and the unwillingness of the Dutch to deal with intermediaries from 1656 onwards, culminating in the closure of the Dutch factory in 1665 and hence a marked fall in the social importance of Muslim nobles.

Chapters 5–7 shift registers and focus on technical concepts used by Ālāol, and on how such usage may help us to locate him 'within larger trends of Indo-Persian culture' (p. 224). Chapter 5 argues that Ālāol contributed significantly to the extension of the scope of the *pācālī* tradition, and that his comments on the 'language of signs' (*inṅita vacana*) constitutes his most important contribution to poetics. Chapter 6 studies Avadhi romances and Persian chronicles of the Indo-Afghan period (1451–1612) as possible influences on the Mrauk-U tradition. The final chapter discusses the works of Vidyāpati (ca. 1370–1460) and treatises on the lyrical arts to explore musicological influences on the eastern tradition. Chapters 6 and 7 aim to 'shed light on the deep historical currents that led to the making of [Ālāol's] oeuvre' (p. 228).

The strength of D'Hubert's book is that it will appeal to both social historians interested in literature as well as to literary critics and literary historians. Unfortunately, the thematic organisation of the chapters occasions a degree of repetition, and makes the central arguments difficult to follow. The final three chapters are also ill-integrated into the narrative of chapters 2–4, and perhaps shorter versions of chapters 6–7 inserted before the discussion of Ālāol's career may have been helpful. Most importantly, however, the general conclusion to be drawn from D'Hubert's non-

presentist reading remains unclear. If, as he claims, ‘the taste for formal diversity and poetic experimentation became the hallmark of vernacular literature in eastern South Asia *up to the colonial period*’ (p. 289, emphasis mine), are we to conclude that the rise of literatures grounded in territorial sovereignty, ethnicity or religious identity in the region can be adequately understood only with reference to colonialism? If so, how? The problem is complicated further by the discussion of pre-modern multilingualism in chapter 6, where D’Hubert claims that the transition into the Mughal from the Indo-Afghan period already witnessed a weakening of multilingualism and a move towards Persianisation (p. 244). By grounding his narrative in the world of early modern commercial and literary networks, and by implicitly valorising the world of formal diversity and multilingualism, D’Hubert necessarily raises these questions about how to account for the transition from the early modern to the modern. It would be too much to expect answers to all such questions from D’Hubert, but it is clear we do not yet know what such answers can be.

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