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Aman Ullah Face Book

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Dr Thibaut D'hubert And Bengali Language and Literature in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U



Dr Thibaut D'hubert

By Aman Ullah

Our perception of cultural identities and their geographical location is often biased by arguments that treat modern nations as a timeless frame work, whereas the boundaries of modern nations actually conceal the different structures that predate the modern world. In this essay, I propose to study some aspects of the literary culture and history of Arakan in the seventeenth century, an area which has not been considered as a cultural and political unit of its own because of its interstitial geographical location between modern Bangladesh and Myanmar. My central concern will be the use of languages in this highly multicultural area and the formation of a literary corpus using one of these languages, namely Bengali. We will see that the Bengali language served as an intermediary between the local sphere and the networks of the Bay of Bengal, in which the kingdom occupied a place of growing importance.

The Kingdom of Arakan was located in the northwestern coastal area of modern Myanmar and, at the climax of its expansion at the end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, extended from Bassein to Chittagong (Leider 2002 and 2004: 503). In the last ten years, studies have dealt with the history of trade in the Indian Ocean, as well as the political history of the kingdom of Arakan during the Mrauk-U period (1433-1785). [1] These have allowed us to raise new questions regarding the cultural background and functions of the agents participating in the Bengali literary milieu in Arakan during the seventeenth century.

Before dealing with the status of the Bengali language in Arakan, it is necessary to give a general overview of the literary material available to us.

We have a very limited idea of the texts produced in the Arakanese language: [2] Speeches of ministers and a few poems have been reproduced in later chronicles, but no corpus of Arakanese literary texts is extant. [3] Pali language and literature were studied in this Theravādin kingdom, but very few original works in this domain can be labeled as products of the Arakan court. [4] Similarly, according to the historical records dealing with the fall of the kingdom in 1784, it seems that the Burmese king Bodawphaya (r. 1782-1819) was interested in Sanskrit scholarship in Mrauk-U and ordered the translation into Burmese of Sanskrit texts looted from Arakan (Leider 2006).

The most important testimonies to literary culture in seventeenth-century Arakan are found in the Bengali texts composed in Chittagong, which was part of the Arakanese kingdom from 1578 to 1666, and in the capital city of Mrauk-U (Ben. Rosāng). In Chittagong, the bulk of this literature was written by Muslim authors who settled in the rural areas around the harbor. [5] The texts composed in the Chittagong area were concerned with religious matters such as the Jives of the prophets of Islam or Islamic doctrine and practices with a strong Sufi inclination. The authors do not claim affiliation to any Sufi order (tariqa) and their Persian and Arabic literary models are not precisely attributed. These texts were apparently aimed at newly converted Bengalis and provided them with the fundamentals of Islam.

The Bengali literature composed in the capital shows different features. [6] The religious dimension is still present in the texts composed in the capital city but the focus is not on stories of the prophets and proper Islamic behavior. Rather, the authors gave more importance to "Sufi romances" and they made direct references to famous tariqas (i.e., the Chishtiyya and the Qādiriyya) which denotes their integration into supra-regional Sufi networks. The language of these poems is very scholarly and more sophisticated. Their Awadhi, Persian, and Sanskrit literary models are clearly mentioned, thus showing the acute consciousness the authors had of their activity as men of letters. Furthermore, the patrons of this literature were not only Sufis, but also members of the gentry. The Bengali literature of Mrauk-U is mainly represented by two poets, Daulat Kājl (fl. 1622-38) and Ālāol (fl. 1651-71), who worked under the patronage of Muslim nobles employed in the royal administration, and consists of translations of Awadhi and Persian texts into Bengali.

Among the authors who lived in the Arakanese kingdom during this period, Ālāol provides the most vivid and complete picture of the aspirations of the Bengali literati of his time. [7] As we will see in the following pages, the nature of his oeuvre and the fact that he was first and foremost a poet-translator, when resettled in the context of seventeenth-century Mrauk-U, afford preliminary answers to explain the functions of the Bengali language in the cosmopolitan kingdom of Arakan.

In this essay I will first investigate the conditions behind the rise of Bengali literature in Mrauk-U. In the second part I will use Ālāol's biography and literary activity as a lens for tracing the evolution of Bengali literary culture in Mrauk-U between the reign of Satui: dhammarājā (r. 1645-52) and Candasudhammarājā (r. 1652-84). Finally, I will situate Mrauk-U in the larger cultural context of the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth century and I will focus on the role of the "court poet" as a cultural mediator between the local power and the cosmopolitan networks of the ports around the Bay of Bengal.

The Functions of the Bengali Language in Arakan

As mentioned above, some Bengali Muslims functioned as translators to smoothen maritime affairs. The value placed on their linguistic skills brings us to the next topic: the specific functions of the Bengali language in the Arakanese political and cultural context. In this multicultural milieu, it is necessary to understand the different functions of languages in order to locate Bengali more specifically.

Considering that all of the records written on palm leaves and paper are now lost, we rely mainly on inscriptions and travel accounts to identify which languages were used at the Arakanese court. From the available material, we know that Arakanese, Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, and Bengali were all participants in a complex literary system. A more precise classification of these languages according to the different fields of activity in the kingdom would require an accurate study of the content of the inscriptions, which has yet to be undertaken. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish to what extent each language was considered administrative or literary.

First and foremost, the local language, Arakanese, in its literary form, which is equivalent to classical Burmese, was used on coins, for epigraphic records, and other official documents. In its oral form it was also spoken by the king and his dignitaries, whether Arakanese or not.[8] No extensive literary texts produced at the royal court have been preserved in manuscript form.[9] Arakanese was the language of the local elite and was central in the administration of the kingdom. But it seems that no active support was provided by the local elites towards fostering a literary tradition in this language.

The two classical languages originating from India (Sanskrit and Pali) were learned in Arakan from a remote past. We have proof of Sanskrit scholarship for the ancient period (fourth-eighth centuries) in the form of various inscriptions. [10] The most important ancient Sanskrit inscription was kept in the Shit-thaung pagoda built in the sixteenth century (Johnston 1944: 373-82). This suggests that it was still relevant to preserve a record in Sanskrit even during later periods. But the main evidence for the study of Sanskrit in Arakan during the seventeenth century stems from the presence of court Brahmins called *punaya* (Leider 2006). Their activities at the court show that Sanskrit was a technical language useful for various matters connected to statecraft, such as coronation rituals, astrology and the interpretation of omens, and more generally what falls under the category of *nfti* (political wisdom).[11] Ālāol's constant references to Sanskrit literary culture show its relevance in the Arakanese context outside Brahman circles. If Sanskrit was no longer an administrative language during the seventeenth century, it was still learned by some members of the court for purposes besides religious ones and was present in the cultural background of Bengali Muslims, Brahmins, and Buddhist scholars. The Pāli language was mainly used in the religious field. Unfortunately, no study of the history of Pāli literature in Arakan has yet been undertaken. The dynamism of Buddhist institutions is attested by various embassies sent to Sri Lanka to bring back copies of the Tipitaka-the Pali Canon-and the construction of libraries to store these texts (Raymond 1995). Through its interaction with Arakanese, Pali also played an important role in the composition of chronicles, and in a broader sense as a lexical stock for Arakanese courtly and administrative language. But, contrary to the case in Burma, no poetical work seems to have been composed at the court or in one of the important monasteries of Arakan. Similarly, in the case of the Arakanese language, the local power left no hint of literary patronage though all the material texts, scholars, wealth-was available to build up such a tradition.

As regards to Persian, we have evidence of its functioning both as an administrative and a literary language. To be more specific, Persian was used in order to garner some visibility from neighboring Muslim Bengal and in diplomatic affairs. During the sixteenth century Arakanese kings struck coins with Persian names alongside their Pali titles, which were also given in Arabic and Sanskrit. This was not a sign of the Islamic influence of the Arakanese kings, but rather a way to be culturally understood by their nearest neighbors and by the sultanates that were then emerging around the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, Persian letters sent to European merchants and Mughal courts simply testify to the presence at the Arakanese court of secretaries and translators who could read and write Persian.[12]

Persian was then one of the important diplomatic languages of the time, and clearly instrumental for full inclusion in the economic and political exchanges with other powers around the Bay of Bengal. Except for these letters and one inscription, no original Persian literature has been produced in Arakan, and if we wish to find clues regarding Persian scholarship in Arakan, we have to turn to the Bengali literary tradition of the kingdom.

Now let us consider the case of Bengali. Firstly, it is important to note that Bengali was the culture language used for administrative and literary purposes in many courts in northeastern South Asia.[13] Thus it is no surprise to find Bengali literature in Arakan, which was culturally and politically contiguous. Authors living in Arakan during the seventeenth century left behind a fairly high number of literary texts, which was not the case for the other languages mentioned above. Before mapping

the production of Bengali literature in Arakan, it is necessary to say a few words about its use in the administration. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Sanskrit titles written in the Bengali script are found on some Arakanese coins (Leider 1998). The addition of Bengali script on coins can be understood as an attempt to be more visible at the regional level, whereas Persian and Arabic, mentioned above, addressed an even wider audience.[14] Dutch and Portuguese sources also provide evidence of the use of Bengali language for diplomatic and commercial activities.[15] Thus we observe that Bengali was used in the domains where the Bengali Muslims were active; that is to say, in businesses requiring any kind of interaction between the local and the regional or supra-regional levels.

Bengali literature was mainly written in two places in the kingdom: Chittagong and Mrauk-U. The properly Bengali-speaking area of Arakan that was Chittagong was an important center of literary activity. The Bengali texts composed there have to be examined in the context of Islamic influence in the rural areas during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They reflect the necessity of building an Islamic corpus in Bengali in order to educate the recently converted rural populations. The themes center on religious matters (Jives of the prophets, Sufism, and so on) and, though the authors note their reliance on Arabic and Persian sources, they very rarely mention them specifically. Otherwise, the capital city of Mrauk-U, where the Bengali Muslim community was very prosperous, provided a suitable environment for learned men seeking patronage. Until the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Bengali language was restricted to the realm of administration and no literary text produced before this period is available today. Note that it is when Bengali disappeared from the coins minted in Arakan, that the language acquired the status of a literary language. To put it differently, when the local power claimed its Arakanese Buddhist identity, Bengali Muslims felt the necessity to support the composition of literary texts. The Bengali literature composed during this period can be seen as testimony to the cultural awareness of a community which had reached the highest point of its economic prosperity, and whose role in the administration of the kingdom as an intermediary between the local power and the outside world had been clearly established.

At this point the status of Bengali in Arakan, both as an administrative and a literary language, appears to be connected to communication and mediation. We will now see how essential it is to understand this role, in order to grasp the dynamics that led to the constitution of the corpus of Bengali literature in Arakan during the seventeenth century. The biography and literary career of the Bengali poet Aläol provides a specific example of the ideological developments of the Bengali milieu, revealed through the literary tastes of the poet and of his patrons.

Reference: -

1. Gormans and Leider 2002, Leider 2004, Subrahmanayam 2005,
2. The literary language of Arakan used in the inscriptions and chronicles was similar to classical
3. An introduction to the available Arakanese historical literature is given in Leider 2004: 464-n
4. For instance, in the classic monograph written by Mabel Haynes Bode (1909), Arakan is not presented as a cultural center where Pali literature was composed.
5. Sharifzoo3 [1969] and 1999 [1983], Saiyad Sultän 1978, Roy1983, Karim 1997, and Bhattacharya 1999.
6. Only one monograph published in Calcutta in 1935 by A. Karim and E. Haq is devoted to the subject of Bengali literature in the Arakanese capital. Their study was based on the manuscripts collected by A. Karim in the Chittagong area. They identified five poets who composed texts in Mrauk-U during the seventeenth century, namely Daulat Käji, Mägana Thäkura, Aläol, Mardan, and SämSir Äll (Haq and Karim 1993).
7. For the editions and manuscripts used to write this article, see Aläol 1975, 1977, 2002 [1985], and 1992. Extracts from his *Ruga-tiu.la-ntimä* can be found in Sharif 1967: 16-7, 81-2, 92-3. The padas of Aläol are given in Bhattacharya 1984: 38-42. And for *Saptapaykar* 1 derived the text of the prologue from two manuscripts of the Bangla Academy (Dhaka) eferenced B. A. ii.lokacitra 4 and 33 and one that is kept at the Dhaka University (Abdul Karim collection, ms. 499). Two monographs deal exclusively with Äläol's works: one in English-Ghosal 1959-and one in Bengali-Bala 1991. Fora recent analysis of Äläol's works focusing on his socio-cultural environment and the poetics of translation, see d' Hubert 2010.
8. Aläol specifies that Mägana, his first patron, knew magh, that is to say, Arakanese (2002 [1985J:17).
9. This does not mean that no literature was composed in Arakanese at the royal court during this period. For instance, poems attributed to some king or queens are quoted in the chronicles. In the episode relating the events leading to the succession of

Narapati, a bard recited a *fl. a cafl*, that is, a versified narrative about the great deeds of the past (Leider 2004: 272). Manrique also refers to songs in Arakanese (Magh): *uTo this accompaniment many ditties were sung most skillfully, alternately in the Magh, Brama, and Peguan dialects, but they were in such high Mflown language that I could scarcely understand a word ~ (1927: 36).*

10. Concerning Sanskrit inscriptions from the Candra dynasty (fourth-eighth centuries), see Johnston 1944.

11. In his study of the sources of the Burmese *Niti kyan*, Lud'Nik Sternbach points to the role of Arakan in the transmission of Sanskrit anthologies dealing with *nfti* (1963: 330).

12. See the letter to the Annenian merchant *jeorge Christiano* in van Galen 2008: 2n. Regarding epistolary relation between the Arakanese kings and the Mughals, see Askari 959 •

13. Bengali literature was patronized in the peripheral kingdoms of Nepal, Kamata and Kamrup, Tripura, and Orissa (Sen 1999-2000 [1975-78]: vol 1, 214-24; Brinkhaus 2003).

14. The multilingual coin bearing Arakanese, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit inscriptions dates from 1622. After that the Arakanese kings minted only unilingual coins in Arakanese. The multilingual coins are contemporary with the military expansion of Arakan and reflect a will to be understood as an emerging power at various levels: the local one—the one of Arakanese language, the regional—the area of the Bengali language and regional Sanskrit literacy, and the superregional one—the realm of the Persian and Arabic speaking world

15. For instance, the term *loscloy*, sometimes found with the spelling *lascorusil* (Manrique 1927: 373), clearly shows that Dutch and Portuguese heard this word from a Bengali speaker, because the phonetic rendering is the one of eastern Bengali (Persian [a] becomes [o], initial syllable [va] becomes [u], [z] becomes [ʃ] in Western Bengali and remains [z] in the East). The Bengali pronunciation is also found in the case of shrines typical to eastern Bengal and Arakan, called in Persian *Badr maq'im* but spelt *bodermo'om* in Dutch sources { similarly the short [a] of Persian became [o] and the consonant cluster [dr] became [d] when followed by the Bengali genitive mark *-er(a)* }. Other such examples could be given, but at present it seems enough to ascertain the fact that Bengali was occasionally used as a medium between Europeans and the local authority.

Dr. Thibaut D'HUBERT is Associate Professor South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) in the the University of Chicago. He did his B.A on Sanskrit, M.A on Bengali and Ph. D on Oriental Languages, Civilizations and Societies.

His interests include Indic and Perso-Arabic poetics, Middle Bengali philology, scribal practices, traditional South Asian hermeneutics, literary multilingualism, and the history of translation. His monograph *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* explores the oeuvre of the prolific Bengali poet and translator Ālāol (fl. 1651-71), who rendered five narrative poems and one versified treatise from medieval Hindi and Persian into Bengali. The book maps the genres, structures, and themes of Ālāol's works, paying special attention to the poet's own discourse on poetics and his literary genealogy. The monograph operates on three levels: as a unique *vade mecum* for readers of Middle Bengali poetry, a detailed study of the cultural history of the frontier region of Arakan, and a contribution to the poetics of South Asian literature.

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