

# Arakan's imagined place in the Theravada world

## Between Burma, Sri Lanka and the debate on the continuity of the *sasana*

Jacques P. Leider<sup>1</sup>

**Burma Studies Conference**  
Asian Research Institute, Singapore  
15-17 July 2006

IMAGINED: ARAKAN AS A MAINSTAY OF THE SASANA.....	3
DESCRIBED: TRACING THE SASANA IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY ARAKAN.....	9
REPRESENTED: ORDINATIONS, SCRIPTURES AND POLITICS OF LEGITIMACY .....	16
CONCLUSION .....	25
BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES .....	27

Both in the East and the West, and for a long time, textbook knowledge nurtured a perception of Theravada Buddhism as a monolith that had been little eroded by time. But anthropological and historical studies of eighteenth and nineteenth century institutional reform, intellectual flexibility and homogenizing processes that were shared inside the Theravada world demonstrate change and have opened up new perspectives, especially in Sri Lanka and Thailand, less so in Burma, though.

The present paper's subject falls into this broad theme of the complex relations between Theravada countries during the early modern period and the representation of these relations. It focuses on Arakan, a previously independent Buddhist kingdom that forms Burma's northern Bay of Bengal rim. Arakan is an admittedly marginal quarter on the map of Southeast Asian Theravada lands, but has its own history of Buddhism that did not attract any scholarly attention. It was conquered in 1785 by the Burmese and soon its *sangha* was caught up in the monastic reformation process started by King Bodawphaya (1782-1819)

---

<sup>1</sup> Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, Yangon, Myanmar.

(Leider 2004c). What we may call the “reform movement” was a drift among leading monastic circles and by Buddhist courts to put greater emphasis on the observation of the *vinaya* rules and the textual acquisition of the scriptures by the monks. In Burma, the inclination for more discipline and higher textual knowledge produced court-supported policies in the field of monastic education, new *gaings* and campaigns of monastic re-ordination. The reform movement developed in various forms in Sri Lanka, Burma and the Tai countries and it took on quasi-nationalist colors reflecting the pride of one’s own brand of excellence in the adherence to Buddhist orthodoxy. Among Burmese monks and laity, the pride of having well preserved the true *dhamma* nurtured the well-known and extremely common belief that Burma was a mainstay of the *sasana* and a country that had been favored by the Buddha. In the *Sasanavamsappadipika* (*The Light of the Buddha’s Religion*; Law 1959, hereafter SV) written in 1861, the Venerable Paññasami (third Maung-daung Sayadaw) was just one in a row of Burmese authors to demonstrate the unflinching continuity of the *sasana* in Burma. An interesting view on the frontline of monastic discussions during the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878) is provided at its beginning where the author states that he wrote it in Pali for Sinhalese monks to make it clear that the *sasana* had not only been well preserved in Burma, but rather better than in Sri Lanka.

The first part of this paper starts with the analysis of a nineteenth century text that tries to posit Arakan with regard to its merits for the continuation of the *sasana* (See full text in the appendix). Next we will survey what information we have on Buddhism in Arakan during the critical period from the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. Finally we will investigate the historical background of claims made in our source text as its author invokes Arakan’s major role in preserving the continuity of the *sasana* in Sri Lanka.

Our investigation will thus delve into matters of religious identities, historical facts and claims as well as literary representations and rhetoric strategies of legitimacy that will be studied within the harsh political and social background that shaped the destiny of Arakan until the middle of the nineteenth century.

As the questions addressed in this paper are historical and anthropological rather than philological and doctrinal, the term “Arakanese Buddhism” should be understood in two complementary ways. On the one hand, its use locates, geographically, the acclaimed Theravada Buddhist tradition of the Mahavihara mould in the former kingdom of Arakan.

On the other hand, it refers specifically to monastic institutions and common religious practice in Arakan in the sense that these were or may have been distinctive with regard to forms of institutional Buddhism found in Burma or elsewhere.

A few words need to be said on the microscopic approach taken in this paper. Focusing on a particular situation, a particular moment or a particular text and trying to explore the complexities of a context that is not prone to excessive generalizations appears to me as a methodologically sound way for historians to explore the deeper strata of the past. This is a method close to the description and the analysis of the finds of an archaeological excavation. It demands precise descriptions, attention to detail and a fresh stream of creative imagination to reconstruct the past and write history. In the absence of detailed investigations and reliable findings, broader frameworks arguably fail to give due emphasis to the connected position of Arakan at the frontier between the Indian Muslim and the Burmese Buddhist cultural spheres. Economic and cultural historians have already presented interesting considerations on Arakan's hybridity at the maritime frontier of South and Southeast Asia (Gommans/Leider 2002). But while better descriptions enhance our intuitive perception of historical contexts, they have no heuristic value per se. The "frontier" position does not speak out its own truth, unless we take it as a concept that needs to be questioned and further explored. There is an obvious need to address the issue of "Arakanese Buddhism" in the context of the overarching general questions that scholars put concerning the historical and social development of Theravada Buddhism in the early modern period in Southeast Asia. But at this juncture, when it comes to the case of Arakan and what little we know about it, small-scale investigations offer the best chance to produce solid and enduring results in a hitherto uncharted territory.

### ***Imagined: Arakan as a mainstay of the sasana***

The question if the *dhamma* of the Buddha had been faithfully transmitted over the centuries and had been truly preserved in Burma was one of the key issues underlying the writing of religious chronicles in the Konbaung period<sup>2</sup>. The kings were keen to receive a positive reply to this critical question as it underpinned their own legitimacy as protectors of the *dhamma*, so called world rulers or, as variously claimed, future Buddhas. Traditional

---

<sup>2</sup> Mahadhamma Thingyan 1956; Mèthi Sayadaw 1966; Pranke 2004; Paññasami 1952; Lieberman 1976; Kirichenko 2005a, 2005b.

accounts of very early contacts of Burma with the teaching of the Buddha, going back to the times of the Enlightened One himself who allegedly visited the country at the invitation of Shin Punna, suffer from the fact that obviously Buddhism did not successfully take root in these early days, despite the establishment of relics (cf. Tapussa/Bhallika and the foundation myth of the Shwedagon and sister pagodas such as the Sule and Botathaung) and the arrival of King Ashoka's missionaries (Sona and Uttara). Clear lines of transmission were difficult to retrace so that later religious chronicles such as the *Vamsadipani*, the *Sasanalinkaya-satam* or the *Sasanavamsappadipika* emphatically stress particular master-pupil lineages all tied to the key story of the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Upper Burma: the mission of Shin Arahan to Pagan and the support that he enjoyed from King Anawratha (11<sup>th</sup> c.).

Expressions of national identities that may have had little relevance centuries earlier became important in the nineteenth century as regions and countries grew closer to each other, and as monks from Sri Lanka, Arakan and Burma, belonging to the same British empire, travelled to various parts of the wider "Theravada-land". In Burma and Siam, the twin efforts of King Mindon and King Mongkut to reform the monkhood invigorated the textual tradition and boasted Pali learning<sup>3</sup>. While such reform efforts were always local and not connected in their implementation, they stretched in fact beyond "national" borders and particular interests in an increasingly connected world. Historically, the reform movement was first of all an internal process of change and adaptation, but it gained pace with the exposure to the challenges posed by Western colonialism (and particularly Christian missions in Sri Lanka<sup>4</sup>). It provoked a crisis of identity and prepared at the same time the ground for identity building.

Neither Arakan nor Arakanese monks figure in the Burmese religious chronicles. Nor are there any known Arakanese texts that state a connection between the spread of Buddhism in Burma and in Arakan. This is for the least puzzling. Without knowing much of historical details, one could surmise that if neighbouring regions that are ethnically and culturally akin (such as Arakan and Burma) and boast the same brand of religious tradition, the representation of this tradition would provide hints at forms of exchange, confrontation or mutation. This is not the case and it underscores the well-known self-centredness of the chronicle tradition. For sure, to fulfil its proclaimed purpose and establish its legitimacy, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Mendelson 1975; Ishii 1986; Tambiah 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Silva 1981; Malalgoda 1976; Blackburn 2001.

Burmese Buddhist tradition as reflected in nineteenth century writings did not see fit to include the Arakanese Buddhist tradition.

Within the competing and apparently well establish claims, we may easily figure out that an Arakanese Buddhist monk who came for monastic training and higher education to Ava around 1850 or to Mandalay in 1860 or 1870 may have felt uncomfortable about the fact that Arakan was completely left out in the general picture. But what kind of credentials could, in these times when Burmese monks felt superior to all other Theravadin monks, an Arakanese provide to defend the historical record of Buddhism in Arakan as there were no local chronicles at hand and as it had received no mention in standard Burmese chronicles?

The text presented in appendix 2 which kicked off the writing of this paper provides an answer. In his *Explanation on the Venerable Sasana of Arakan dated Buddhist era 2316*, i.e. AD 1872, the anonymous author, most likely a monk, states that Arakan helped to preserve the continuity of the *sasana* in Sri Lanka. The text gives us first a short account of the life of Lord Buddha that fully complies with the standard Theravadin narrative. A key statement is made at the moment that the Buddha reaches the age of eighty:

... thinking that the *sasana* would be established for five thousand years for the benefit of the liberation of living beings and that not all the living beings [able to be set free] had been set free, [the Enlightened One] wondered where to establish [the *sasana*]. Seeing that his *sasana* would be strong at its origins in Majjhimadesa [i.e. in India], but would [later] perish, he said that he would establish it for five thousand years in the great noble country of Dhaññavati-Rakhaing [i.e. Arakan] bearing the name of Mahavihika<sup>5</sup> (f° ku-kû)

At this juncture, the Buddha's own words consecrate a crucial link between the *sangha* and the temporal power that made the survival of the *sasana* dependent on benevolent kings:

“When the lords over land and sea who are *sasanadayakas* will not honor it, it will decline a little bit; when they will honor it, it will shine like the sun and the moon. Like a woodpecker flying up and down, [the *sasana*] cannot be completely ruined. [...] Whom can I now trust to establish [my *sasana*]?”

---

<sup>5</sup> “Mahavihika” or “Mahavihimka” is a term to refer to Arakan that appears only after the conquest of Arakan by the Burmese in 1784 (for example in the Konbaungzet, vol. 2: 26). It cannot be traced in older Arakanese accounts and its provenance has not been traced yet. We may possibly ascribe it to King Bodawphaya's taste for “classic” sounding names applied to the various domains of his realm.

He saw King Candasuriya [of Dhaññawati] who was a donator [king] and had been his friend [in former lives] and decided to go [and see him]. (f°kû)

Here our author refers in merely two sentences to Buddha's travel to Arakan in the company of five hundred followers moving in flying pavilions offered by Sakka [god Indra] and the establishment of the *sasana*. Following a request by King Candasuriya, the Buddha accepts to have a life-size statue made of himself. This is the origin of the Mahamuni, also called "Buddha's younger brother", a life-like statue of the Enlightened One that became the paragon of the Arakanese kings (Maung Maung Tin 2004). As the *Explanation on the Venerable Sasana of Arakan* was most probably meant for a predominantly Arakanese audience, there was no need to elaborate on this well known story. Our author's text concludes with the Buddha's return to India and the *parinibbana*. Then he turns immediately to King Ashoka's missions sent to various countries. As we know, Arakan is not mentioned among these and there was also never an attempt among the Arakanese to do what Thai and Burmese Buddhist chroniclers have done, that is to identify Yonaka or Suvannabhumi with the land of the Thai or the Mon and Aparanta with Upper Burma.

In Arakanese eyes there was indeed no need to receive new missions as "the *sasana* had already been spread by the Buddha himself", as our author puts it. Between the lines we have to understand that according to his understanding, this direct transmission guaranteed that the *dhamma* would not be tarnished or altered in Arakan and that the *sasana* would not be destroyed.

The last point becomes clear when our author abruptly turns to the four instances where, as he states, Arakanese kings helped their Sinhalese homologues to reinstate the *sasana* in Sri Lanka.

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Arakanese monk leader</i>	<i>Sinhalese king</i>	<i>Arakanese king</i>
1	AD 82	Jina-Man-Aung with 12 monks	n.a.	Suriyasiri
2	AD 1207	Atula-Vijaya with 16 monks	n.a.	Dasaraja
3.	AD 1273	Uttaradhamma with 36 monks	n.a.	Nga Ran-Man-Raja
4	AD 1481	Siddhat-thana with 50 monks	n.a.	Bhasaw-phru

Four times in Sri Lankan history, "Indians holding wrong beliefs" (*miccha-yu-mha kye-kula*) destroyed the *sasana* and each time, noble Sinhalese kings rose up and appealed to Arakan to send monks to spread the *sasana* as it had been preserved there.

Beyond these stereotypical explanations on the renaissance and the survival of the *sasana* in Sri Lanka, our text does not provide any details on the missions. As we will explain below, exchanges of monastic missions between Arakan and Sri Lanka are a historical reality. But the *Explanation on the Venerable Sasana in Arakan* is a poor and superficial source to explore that subject. It looks as if the author had not the least interest to provide his audience with historical details and names. He finishes his presentation by stating authoritatively that “ancient Arakanese chronicles and histories tell us these facts”. The first mission can barely claim a historical character as this period of Arakanese history is still shrouded in mystery. The second and third missions meet faint confirmations in other sources, as we will see below. Though we do not have any detail on the fourth mission, it is confirmed by the Arakanese chronicle tradition and it fits into the better known context of Arakan’s early modern history.

The interest of this text does not lie in the question how true are its claims, but why it was written and why such claims were made in 1872. We have already anticipated an explanation by hinting at the Buddhist reformist efforts during the nineteenth century. After the convening of the Fifth Buddhist Synod by King Mindon, the pride of having reviewed and fixed by inscription on marble stones the Canon stimulated nationalist strains in Burmese Buddhism<sup>6</sup>. The greater facility of exchanges with monks from Sri Lanka and Siam was positively thought-provoking and stimulating as far as matters of discipline and text tradition were concerned, but it also produced a spirit of competition regarding the leadership in the Buddhist Theravada world.

How does our Arakanese text of 1872 try to outdo Burmese and other discourses to establish the integrity of the Buddhist tradition in Arakan and to establish Arakan’s status as a mainstay of the *sasana*?

The text contests the supremacy generally given to Sri Lanka and conveys two core messages.

---

<sup>6</sup> The convening of a Buddhist synod at Mandalay by King Mindon which earned him the title “Pañcama-sanghaya-pyu-min” and the erection of 729 marble tablets containing the full Canon (finished in 1868) are linked to the noble aim of well preserving the scriptures. Generally there was an insistence on textual knowledge, a good monk being a monk who could recite the scriptures, able to follow the full set of rules because he can perfectly recite them. By hierarchically organizing the monkhood and by a system of examinations (the pathama-pyan), a better control of the monks was a further objective. However positive the effects of the reform movement may be viewed, it also led to a bureaucratization of the monkhood and with its focus on the memorization of Pali texts, it strongly influenced the common understanding of what Buddhist knowledge meant. The creation of reform gains such as the Shwegyin, the Dwaya (with its division into Maha- and Muladwaya) and the Hngat-twin has to be seen as a separate development inside the reform movement.

(1) The Buddha has come to Arakan because he wanted to establish the *sasana* on a safe ground that India (or *Majjhimadesa* including here Sri Lanka) could not offer. An nineteenth century Buddhist audience would have known that the *sasana* had disappeared from India and that it had met with troubled periods in Sri Lanka. The fact that Buddha had come to Arakan could not raise anybody's eyebrows as the Enlightened One did not merely leave relics behind that could have remained hidden or a footstep (*buddhapada*) to commemorate his visit, but consecrated a life-size image, the Mahamuni, calling him his "younger brother" and promising that it would stay on until the period of 5000 years of the *sasana* had elapsed. The many miracles ascribed to the Mahamuni strengthened the claims of its sanctity. For a contemporary Burmese or Arakanese audience, this was undoubtedly standard fare. Bypassing the fact that the Mahamuni had been requested to leave (read: taken away) by an invitation (read: conquest) of the Burmese king in 1785, the author meaningfully connects to two disjoint facts: the continuity of Buddhism in Arakan and its decline in India. It was the Buddha himself who had foreseen the circumstances and wisely provided for the survival of the *sasana*. We are thus offered a message of comfort and reassurance about Arakanese Buddhism.

(2) The proof that the *sasana* had been faithfully transmitted in Arakan is provided by the fact that good *dayaka* kings from Sri Lanka appealed to Arakan to re-establish the *sasana* there. This second message builds on some historic evidence as well. Though the references in the text are flimsy, the historicity of relations between Sri Lanka and Arakan as such could be dealt with as a matter of fact. But they are presented here as radically one-sided: Arakan was the giver and Sri Lanka merely the receiver. This is to all standards surprising and does not match with the Arakanese chronicle tradition itself which refers to missions where Arakanese monks went to collect copies of the *Tipitaka* in Sri Lanka. It shows that our author did not feel any need to balance or adjust the message of his pamphlet and he apparently wanted to strike at Sinhalese claims of seniority in religious matters.

The first message discards any criticism that the *sasana* in Arakan could not claim a direct connection with the Buddha. We may thus read between the lines that Arakanese monks did not need to receive any lessons dispensed by Burmese Theravada monks. The second message deals with the critical relationship towards Sri Lanka and establishes Arakan's superiority with regard to the country that had produced the written Canon. In our



modern eyes, the radically simple claims of the *Explanation* sound hollow and we remain unconvinced. But how did the author try to further the credibility of his claims with his audience? Like other apocryphal texts, this text proceeds by non-contradiction with the respected and fully authorized canonical tradition. The biography of the Buddha is impeccable. The core message is embedded in an orthodox discourse. Moreover, similarly again to other apocryphals, the text is not seeking controversy; it does neither criticize nor reject other positions. It does not contest other claims, it merely states its own. This self-absorbedness makes it likely that the author was talking to a home audience. The messages conveyed were inbound. They could be understood and appreciated by an audience of Arakanese monks that would have welcomed them because they fitted pre-existing expectations and already well-established conceptions<sup>7</sup>, but they may not have been meant to be apprised by a larger audience. With regard to our erstwhile question, we may briefly summarize that at the time when Burmese monks eagerly posited Burma as a mainstay of the *sasana* disregarding Arakan's place in the propagation of the *dhamma*, an Arakanese author juxtaposed a similar claim for Arakan and championed his cause by invoking Buddha's stay in Arakan and Arakanese monastic missions to Sri Lanka. We can now focus our attention on the situation of the *sasana* in Arakan. Given that Arakan's imagined place in the Theravada world appears a far cry from what we would call historical facts, we have to acquaint ourselves with some of the facts traced in other sources both regarding Buddhist practice in Arakan and Arakan-Sri Lanka relations.

### ***Described: Tracing the sasana in Early Nineteenth Century Arakan***

To the best of our knowledge no Arakanese chronicles of the *sasana* similar to the ones we find in Burma are available. No collections of *metta-sa* (submissions to the king) offer, like in Burma, a treasure-trove of source materials to reflect on religious questions and points of debate. In an interpretation of Arakanese historiography that we can ascribe to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, I have repeatedly used the term "crisis literature" to contextualize its underlying quest for defining an Arakanese identity and represent Arakan's past. I have stated that texts produced during this period of time have to be read against the background of a double crisis of Arakan's long history of political and social disorder in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Limited space prevents us from replacing this text in the broader context of Arakanese literature where it finds a place as a marker of Arakan's identity crisis that erupted with its conquest by the Burmese in 1785.

eighteenth century and the loss of its independence in 1785. Buddhist institutions and practice were not shattered by these crises, but they undoubtedly suffered.

The *sangha*, the core Buddhist institution of learning and religious tradition, may not always need kings to flourish – Buddhism did quite well in British Burma (1852-1886) and in many other places without much political interference or royal protection – but it needs on the ground a stable village society where an economic surplus can ensure the continuity of monastic life and learning (*kyaung* in Burmese means both “monastery” and “school”). The political background of Buddhism in Arakan from the late seventeenth to the middle of the nineteenth century displays a film of contested powers, social elite crisis and intermittent revivals of a strong central power with moments of respite. Bearing in mind that the annual cycle of court ceremonies, of celebrations and donations had a model character for village elites, political instability did neither bode well for the royal support of Buddhist institutions and ritual practice nor for the existence of village monasteries. When the chronicler mentions laconically that a military commander - a guard of the palace today, a rebel tomorrow - ripped open a pagoda founded but a few years before to empty it of its reliquary, the description spells, we dare to say, a profound crisis and a loss of moral standards and social norms. But beyond daily religious practice tinted with the spirit cult, the beliefs surrounding the Mahamuni continued to materialize the adherence of Arakanese Buddhists to a number of core values<sup>8</sup>. Political upheavals could not fully distract from the sense of identity that bound the Arakanese to their perception of Arakan as a “Buddha-land”. Wondrous manifestations at its sanctuary are duly mentioned in the chronicle and reflect acute moments of crisis.

True, Arakan was not only a country of Buddhists and Buddhist standards. Not only were there villages on the Upper Kaladan and in Ramree that were predominantly inhabited by Muslims of Bengali origins; the chronicle also refers to “Indian” and “Mon” chiefs who by 1750 had most probably been arakanized, but whose ascendancy still revealed the foreign

---

<sup>8</sup> It is not exaggerated to talk of a ‘cult of the Mahamuni’ as further research could illustrate. When Francis Buchanan visited Arakanese villages in the southern district of Chittagong in 1798, he noted in his discussions with local monks that “there existed many differences in the religious doctrines of the people”. We find here a Theravada Buddhism that may have been at that time far away from standard Buddhist conceptions found at the Burmese capital. Paraphrasing the words of an Arakanese monk, Buchanan writes: “All that I could learn from this priest was that he worshipped Maha-Moony, a brother of Godoma, but whether or not this term was meant literally I could not understand. The priest said that there had been five Moonies, of whom Godama was the 4<sup>th</sup>, but that he having obtained Nirban, was no longer to be worshipped. The God at present in power, he said was Maha-Moony.” (Schendel 1992: 68)

origins of Arakan's palace guards. Social cohesiveness depended on a hierarchically constructed political order; it was not only a function of diverse systems of beliefs. A major political disruption ensued with the 1784 invasion, when Burmese troops marched towards a fast victory. A seriously divided Arakanese resistance by local chiefs subsided, but was soon tackled and during the first ten years, relative calm prevailed. But excessive demand on Arakanese manpower both for Burma's war efforts against Siam and for King Bodawphaya's grandiose building projects coupled with fiscal pressure exacerbated the situation. By thousands, the Arakanese fled in 1798/1799 and later on to Bengal; many settled peacefully in the southern part of the district of Chittagong, especially in a settlement soon called Cox' Bazar where the Aggamedha temple, founded in 1799, still commemorates a comprehensive relocation of Arakanese culture. But after 1800, official British benevolence and negligence also ensured a safe haven for adventurous rebels in exile who led incessantly violent incursions into their home land. It ruined the life of those Arakanese who remained in Arakan while occasionally facing the Burmese administrators with their well entrenched garrisons, it did nothing to advance the cause of Arakanese independence.

At the same time Arakan was integrated into the Konbaung political and cultural sphere. Burmese governors left their mark by founding new ordination halls in the province, royally sponsored campaigns led to a re-ordination of the Arakanese *sangha* and, in the long run, to an integration of the Arakanese monks in the grid of Burmese monastic education<sup>9</sup>. The monastic institutions in Arakan became indistinctive from those in Burma proper. But one should mind the complexity and the ambiguity of this integration as it was not wholeheartedly and consciously embraced by the Arakanese themselves. We have seen, on the one hand, that the prevalent discourse in Arakan to explain the origins of Buddhism *there* was never integrated in any form into Burmese religious chronicles. But on the other hand, the Arakanese monastic reform movement that was headed by Ashin Samedha (1801-1882) in his monastery in Akyab inscribes itself into the larger context of the reform movement and

---

<sup>9</sup> Though Arakan's monastic integration was probably one of the most successful policies of the Burmese during that period, oral traditions tell us that Arakanese laypeople refused to feed the Burmese monks so that they had to cook themselves and cut their own hair. Earlier on, the Arakanese *sangha* had known an apparently quite visible division between *ekacara* and *bahucara* gaings. *Bahucara* gaing monks are defined by Ashin Candamalankara, the author of the *New Chronicle of Arakan* (Mandalay 1930-1931), as monks "who use things that they have borrowed from laymen, who give money loans to lay people and take interest from them, who practice trade, who attend the royal court, who stock fishing lines, fish traps and nets, who attend public festivals." If oral traditions are correct, they were also astrologers and medical doctors and practised martial arts, so that they were no much different from the Burmese *pwe-kyau* lineages that also became victims of the reform movement in the nineteenth century (see Leider 2006, forthcoming).

it had, with the constitution of the *Sangharaja nikaya*, a tremendous impact on the development of Theravada Buddhism in south-east Bengal (Bechert 1977). While in terms of Buddhist chronology and the spread of the *sasana*, Arakan was not attributed a place by Burmese religious chroniclers, in terms of political chronology, Arakan's succession of Buddhist kings gained official recognition and was in a way ennobled as it was integrated into the latter part of the royal Burmese chronicle (*Konbaungzet* 2: 26-29).

The end of the First Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826 made Arakan into a British territory on the margins of Bengal<sup>10</sup>; for three decades, it was run by no more than a dozen Englishmen commanding Indian troops that badly stood the climate. The anarchy of yonder had vanished and soon the new port of Akyab saw Arakan as a prime exporter of rice. But a total lack of understanding of the differences between Arakan and Bengal in terms of local administration and wrong-headed fiscal policies spelt economic disarray for the majority of the population until the 1840s. Undoubtedly stability prevailed in Arakan in the second half of the nineteenth century and Arakan could relish a tranquillity that had not graced the preceding century. But British commercial strategies bypassed the Arakanese Buddhist population as the colonizers favoured a massive influx of Chittagonian Muslim labour to extend the production of rice. This is the background for the changes that the *sangha* underwent and for any description of Buddhist education and practice among the Arakanese. It should help us to approach the few Western sources that provide us with a look at Arakan's Buddhism in the middle of the period from the conquest (1785) to the dynamic religious policies of King Mindon (1852-1878).

Lieutenant William Foley's *Journal of a Tour through the Island of Rambree with a geological sketch of the Country and Brief Account of the Customs etc. of its Inhabitants*, presented to the Asiatic Society in 1834 (Foley 1835), gives short descriptions of Arakanese Buddhist practices and offers an altogether sympathetic account. He briefly portrays the daily life of the monks, their quest for food, their dress and outer appearance, their "extremely rigid" discipline, their courteousness and hospitality. While evoking the voluntary nature of monasticism, he explains that young men take the monastic garb "either from a religious feeling or for the purpose of performing some expiatory service" being enabled to do so "through the assistance of some persons who deem it an act of piety to defray the expenses consequent to

---

<sup>10</sup> On Arakan's early colonial period, see Woodman 1962; Leider 2003; Report on the progress... 1869.

their ordination.” (1835: 30) While he was effusive about the monks and introduced a few notions of Buddhist cosmology, Foley also noted the superstitions of the Arakanese that were “part and parcel of this benighted land”. He writes: “Was I to credit all that is said of ghosts and goblins, it would appear wonderful how this poor people contrived to pass through life unscathed.” (1835: 86). Foley’s kind description offers an interesting contrast with the accounts of three Baptist missionaries of the American Board for Foreign Missions: G.S. Comstock’s *Notes on Arakan*, Howard Malcolm’s *Travels in Southeastern Asia* and Robert Robinson’s biographical sketch of John Christopher Fink published as *Among the Mughs*<sup>11</sup>. Their descriptions are often richer than the more scholarly accounts found in other publications that focus mostly on Buddhist doctrines. As the missionaries were competitors in the same trade, they had a more professional look on Buddhist practice and education.

Fink thought that “the influence of Boodhism is sensibly on the decline while no other system takes its place”. Commenting on Fink’s experience, Malcolm writes: “Though the Arracanese are Boodhists and as tenacious of their system as others, yet they seem less devoted to its prescribed observances. Little money or time is spent in religion. I saw no pagoda in the province, except a small one, left half built, near Akyab; nor any person carrying offerings, or attending to his religion in any other way. The kyongs which I saw are but wretched huts.”

Comstock further noted that “the days of worship of which there are four in every month, one at each quarter of the moon, are observed by very few in Arakan and the same may be said in reference of all the Boodhist rites.” He could state three reasons “to account for the decay of Boodhism”: “Idolatry flourishes only when supported by the Government”, and this, he remarks, was no more the case under the British government; “as every man is secure in the possession of all he has” [which had not been the case under the Burmese administration], “the people prefer to invest their money in trade”; finally, “the lack of confidence and interest in the religion of Gautama, clearly [is] discernible more and more among the people”.

---

<sup>11</sup> G.S. Comstock lived as a missionary in Arakan from 1834 to 1844. See Comstock 1849: 238-240 for the following quotations. H. Malcolm visited Arakan in 1836 during a deputation to Baptist missions all over Asia. See Malcolm 1848: 146-147 for the following quotations. John Christopher Fink was a Dutch missionary who started to live among the Arakanese in the southern district of Chittagong after 1821. He lived in Arakan from 1825 to 1838. See Robinson 1871.

“On the whole Buddhism is evidently far from flourishing in Arakan, [t]here are, *however*, about six hundred Poongees [monks] ... in the province for whom the inhabitants erect comfortable dwellings... sufficient for their comfortable support”. Comstock’s conclusion is somewhat ambiguous and raises the question if the missionaries were merely speaking out their vain hopes and wishes to see Christianity triumph in Arakan or if there was some grain of truth in their description. These missionaries knew either indirectly through fellow missionaries like Adoniram Judson or through direct experience about the flourishing situation of Buddhism in Burma itself and Arakan did not compare favourably in that regard. Comstock opines that “the Mugs [Arakanese] are more ignorant and superstitious than the Burmese” and [that they] “are far more parcimonious in expending money in honor of Gautama than their neighbours on the eastern side of the mountains [*i.e.* the Arakan Yoma dividing Arakan and Burma]”. We may comment on this recalling that decades of political disorder and economic oppression could explain that there was still little material surplus in the 1830s or 1840s to invest in religious works of merit. “In the mute majesty of decay stood the lone jedi” writes Captain S.R. Tickell on his trip to the Upper Kaladan, when he passed the famous pagoda of Urittaung that had already caught the eye of the first Portuguese travellers three hundred years before (Tickell 1854: 89). Mrauk U’s old pagodas were left in abandonment as well and they were overgrown by the jungle until some restoration work was done only in the early twentieth century. Johan Fink, explains Malcolm, saw only three pagodas built in the whole district of Akyab between 1825 and 1836.

Several accounts mention the traditional schooling offered to the young boys during their stay in the monastery. But while Robinson (1871: 29-30; 84-86) described it merely as a challenge for the missionaries who could not provide free education on a similar level and Foley (1835: 31) praised a system that did not make a distinction between rich and poor, Comstock presented altogether negative conclusions on Arakan’s education while comparing it with Burma.

“... they are far less inquisitive and intelligent than the Burmese. The proportion of men here who cannot read is far greater than in Burma. Intelligent Burmese have told me that in their country nine out of every ten can read; in

Arakan, I should think, that less than one half of the men can read, and am not sure that one fourth can." (1849: 241-242)

This lack of literacy can be explained by the low number of village monasteries and monks in Arakan. The percentage of monks in the general population was decidedly lower than in Burma and it was apparently even lower than in Tenasserim, a region that had similarly suffered during the Bodawphaya reign<sup>12</sup>. Based on estimations and calculations found in Malcolm's and Comstock's accounts (dating to 1836 and 1841 respectively), we find that in the whole of Arakan the ratio of monks in the general population was no more than 0,24% and in the district of Akyab, where more than half of the Arakanese population lived, it was even as low as 0,16%. By comparison, the ratio in Tavoy was 1,59% (Malcolm 1848: 45). According to A.P. Phayre's *Account of Arakan* that reflects the administrative situation in 1840-41, the whole province counted 960 villages (Phayre 1841). Independently from the fact that there may have been villages that were entirely populated by the descendants of Bengali Muslim slaves on the Upper Kaladan – actually it was more common that the village population was mixed -, one could reasonably assume that, just like in Burma, each village would have had at least one monastery with a permanently residing monk so as to give the lay people the opportunity to make merit. This was definitely not the case. We have quoted Reverend Comstock, a credible source, as he lived ten years in Arakan (1834-44); he indicates the number of six hundred *pongyis* (monks) for the whole of Arakan. But that number may be even too high. While Malcolm reports that in Ramree "which is the Episcopal residence and religious metropolis of all Arracan, there are no more than two hundred", Comstock gives the number of teaching monks as 214 in the whole district of Akyab<sup>13</sup>. They had no more than 1066 "scholars", a meagre figure indeed. Visiting the ancient Mahamuni shrine near Kyauktaw in 1851, Captain Tickell found only two

---

<sup>12</sup> Tenasserim had once more become a Burmese province in 1793. Its mixed population was severely oppressed during the years when Bodawphaya invaded Siam (1785; 1809-1810) and tried to extend Burma's control over the southern trade (see Chutintaranond 2005). But Tenasserim never was an independent kingdom and, in comparison with Arakan, lacks the profile of a geographically coherent history. That may be the reason why the suffering of its population has never been represented in the categorical terms that historians of Arakan have used. But here as there, a large, if not the largest part of the population fled (in this case to Siam) when Burmese generals oppressed the local population. According to Malcolm (1848: 45), Mergui counted, as a district, ten thousand people, while forty to fifty thousand had fled to Siam due to Burmese oppression!

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm 1848 : 146. Akyab was created by the English as a commercial port and became Arakan's administrative capital. Its name was changed into Sittway after Burma's independence. The importance taken by men from the island of Ramree in Arakan's political and religious history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is remarkable and would call for a more extensive discussion. The religious centre Malcolm refers to here was the Sam-khyaung monastery whose head monk belonged to the Kam gaing and was the superior of the monks in southern Arakan since the reign of King Bodawphaya.

“officiating” monks and he speculated that the place was “not much coveted as a ‘cure’ by the yellow robed sacerdotals who find more gain at Akyab itself” (1854: 98). But while Mrauk-U, the old administrative centre was declining, Akyab, the new capital, did not count more than twenty monks in 1836. We should refrain from making comparisons with Ava’s royal monasteries, some of which housed up to five hundred monks and students. But compare the “wretched huts” seen in Arakan with the American Baptist preacher’s description of monasteries in Moulmein. Here there were Buddhist institutions flourishing under the same indifferent English rule as in Arakan:

“Still Boodhism is as yet by no means a neglected system. New pagodas are making their appearances in different parts of the city; there are twenty-nine *kyoungs* [monasteries], containing somewhat more than five hundred priests, including novitiates, who are plentifully supported. The *kyoungs* are vastly superior to the dwellings of the common people, and some of them are situated in delightful groves with ample grounds. Here and there is a sacred banyan-tree, carefully nurtured, and occasionally lighted with lamps at night. In the city and suburbs are seventy-eight pagodas.” (1848: 48)

We may conclude that while it had not lost all its vigour (remember the renewed appeal to monastic discipline exemplified by Ashin Samedha), Arakanese Buddhism had certainly been impoverished and diminished as a consequence of several decades of disorder, oppression and neglect.

We may now turn to the background of a critical claim made in the *Explanation of the Venerable Sasana* that states Arakan’s alleged merits in reviving the *sasana* in Sri Lanka.

### ***Represented: Ordinations, Scriptures and Politics of Legitimacy***

In our last paragraph, we will pay attention to the monastic exchanges between Arakan and Sri Lanka as they have been represented in Sinhalese and Arakanese sources. Our examination will also throw light on home-grown strategies of legitimacy that were intimately linked to the justification of the continuity of the *sasana* and the maintenance of its purity.

Catherine Raymond’s examination of a Sittway collection of Sinhalese Buddha statues originating from various places in Arakan has brought a material confirmation of the historicity of religious contacts between Sri Lanka and Arakan and her dating of these



statues as ranging between the thirteenth and the eighteenth century establishes a rather large chronological framework for such relations (Raymond 1999).

There is in fact only one exchange of monastic delegations that we are well informed about, both by Sinhalese and Arakanese sources. It took place at an unlikely moment of Arakanese history, during the last decade of the seventeenth century, when utter political instability prevailed in the country. It involved two Sinhalese and one Arakanese mission sent in the years 1693 to 1697. In his article on the Sinhalese embassies to Arakan in the seventeenth century, D.B. Jayatilaka introduces the 1693 mission by saying that as “religion [had] gradually lost its hold upon the people and religious observances and practices fell into disuse” in the second half of the seventeenth century, King Vimaladharmasuriya II (1684-1707) found that “the *Sangha* had become thoroughly corrupt and unworthy to be the custodians of that Faith”, and decided to send a mission to Arakan (Jayatilaka 1940: 2). Jayatilaka, following his unspecified Sinhalese manuscript source, states that the object of the 1693 mission was to “obtain information as to the state of Buddhism in that country”, while Fernando formulates differently, saying that the purpose of that mission was to find out “the state of the latter country” and examine “the possibilities of obtaining the services of some competent Buddhist monks to re-establish the *upasampada*” (Fernando 1959: 41)<sup>14</sup>. Noteworthy is the fact that the *Dutch East India Company* (VOC) was heavily involved in the preparation and organisation of the mission. The monastic delegation composed of Bāminivatte Disayanaka Mudiyanse, Dodamvela Herat Mudiyanse, Sivagama Pandita Mudiyanse and a retinue of twenty people, left Kandy in July 1693, then embarked for Tuticorin from where a Dutch ship took them in eighteen days to Arakan. As the arrival of both the ship and its delegation were unexpected, says the author of the manuscript, the Sinhalese had to overcome lots of ceremonial and practical obstacles in Arakan before being allowed an audience by the king to deliver at last a message written in Pali and explain the purpose of their visit. With an answer of the Arakanese king, they returned back to Kandy where they arrived in June 1694. The *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* gives an account of the elaborate ceremonial procedures to present the royal letter to King Vimaladharmasuriya II.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jayatilaka based his paper on a Sinhalese manuscript about which he does not provide any material information. Fernando’s source document, the *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* deals only with the first, 1693 mission. On the main events, both documents “agree substantially”, concludes Fernando, while noting a number of differences in dating. Jayatilaka and Fernando’s articles contain unfortunately a number of factual errors regarding Arakanese history and geography as the authors seem unable to clearly differentiate between Arakan and Burma.

According to Jayatilaka's source, the Arakanese king promised his help in the official reply prepared for the Sinhalese delegates.

Two years later, the same king of Kandy sent once more a delegation of five monks to Arakan<sup>15</sup> with valuable presents and 550 sets of the eight requisites; they were received in audience by King Marumpiya and instructions were given to send a sizable group of fully ordained *bhikkhus* to Sri Lanka. Together with the Arakanese monk delegation, the Sinhalese envoys returned to Kandy, most probably in two Dutch ships<sup>16</sup>. The Sinhalese source states that the Arakanese monks numbering thirty-three *bhikkhus* were escorted in a magnificent procession to the capital, lodged at Malvatte Vihare and received in audience by the King in front of the Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Tooth.

Historians of Sri Lanka have focused their attention on the embassies from a purely Sinhalese point of view. Neither Jayatilaka nor Fernando cared about providing their readers with a bit of information about the kingdom of Arakan. None of the two authors seems to have been the least surprised by the fact that the king of Kandy had to send *two* missions to Arakan while one mission should in normal conditions have been able to do the job. Their lack of interest has veiled more general questions regarding the religious exchanges. But what is more damaging is, as we will show, the fact that it has obscured the historical truth.

As a historian of Arakan, I have always been surprised that the king of Kandy opted for Arakan to request a chapter of monks for reviving the *upasampada* ordination. From a formal point of view, the official Sinhalese delegation transmitted a request from a king to another king<sup>17</sup>. While it seems perfectly understandable that the Sinhalese king wanted to obtain first of all information on the state of the *sasana* in Arakan, it would seem as obvious to obtain beforehand some information about the king and the kingdom he was dealing with. Eventually he did not seem to care or is it that King Vimaladharmasuriya was lulled by false reports?

A few glimpses from the Arakanese chronicle may suffice to provide a less than favorable picture of Arakan's political situation during the years 1693 to 1697

---

<sup>15</sup> The delegation was composed of the three monks sent in 1693 and Gampha Vijetunga Mudiyanse and Galagama Mohottala.

<sup>16</sup> The Arakanese monks returned later on a Dutch ship to Arakan. See Fernando 1959: 46 and fn. 36. Nga Me's Arakanese chronicle [hereafter referred to as "the Arakanese chronicle"] mentions the arrival of the Sinhalese delegation on two ships.

<sup>17</sup> The Arakanese chronicle account does not refer to the monks as such, but says "the ambassadors of the King of Lankadipa-sihala".

(Candamalalankara 1931, vol.2: 228-233). At the death of the great Candasudhamma (1652-1684), the coffers of the royal treasury were empty<sup>18</sup>. After the loss of the port of Chittagong to the Mughals in 1666, royal trade revenues had declined and it was impossible for the kings to maintain the elaborate military establishment that had been built up during the decades of prosperity in the early seventeenth century. After 1684, the royal palace guards took the power at the court and until 1710, their officers installed and dethroned the kings at will and at an appalling speed. Unsurprisingly the puppet kings faced constant revolts of dissident lords and local military commanders. In 1692, Manidatta, an elder son of Candasudhamma that had earlier been bypassed, was made king with the title Manisudhamma<sup>19</sup>. In less than two years, he was three times installed in the palace and three times dethroned, alternating with his predecessor, Waradhamma, a much younger brother! Jayatilaka's Sinhalese source text emphasizes, as we have seen, the delay of a royal audience. There is no surprise to that.

When the Sinhalese embassy arrived, the men in power were not only suspicious of the embassy's motives, but they apparently had no idea how to react. The so called "wise men" (royal counselors) at the court were discussing with Manisudhamma how to handle the situation. The decision was finally taken to improvise an audience with a fake king, Mahajeyya, a general, being the protagonist. He kindly received the embassy and let the ambassadors make their request, a request, says the Arakanese chronicler, that Manisudhamma straightly refused to grant! The Sinhalese embassy would have to return home unsuccessful. But could a high-caliber Sinhalese embassy return to Kandy with empty hands? The elaborate description in the *Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava* shows that a letter was indeed remitted to King Vimaladharmasuriya II. It can only have been a fake. But for what reasons were the Sinhalese ambassadors sent away without a positive reply? Were there no competent monks at hand? The Arakanese chronicle description raises more questions than we are able to answer. Why did Manisudhamma not meet the ambassadors himself? Was he too incompetent to do so? In 1693, he had already been dethroned and re-installed a first time. If Mahajeyya actually one of the strong men in the background preferring to handle this sensitive matter himself, why does the chronicle refer the responsibility of the refusal to the nominal king?

---

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of Arakan's political and economic history, see Leider 2002; 2004a.

<sup>19</sup> On his reign, see Candamalalankara 1931, vol. II, p. 228-229.

One may quite easily conclude from all this that Arakan was, in the first place, not the country to go to. Who had suggested Arakan to find monks to revive the *upasampada*? It has generally been understood that the *Dutch East India Company (VOC)* strongly supported the revival of Buddhist monasticism as part of a strategy to contain Portuguese Catholicism and the *VOC* may have seen its support as part of a goodwill policy to compensate by diplomacy of religious means the rigors of their monopolistic policies that hurt Kandyan trade interests<sup>20</sup>. Had Arakan been suggested to the King of Kandy as a mainstay of the *sasana* by Dutch traders, though they knew that Arakan's political situation was then entirely unpredictable?

Starting from all this, it is stimulating to reflect on the second mission of 1696-1697, led by exactly the same venerable monks who had to endure the disaster of the first mission and who apparently had tried to save their faces with a faked letter from the Arakanese king. How could they explain to Vimaladharmasuriya II that Manisudhamma had not sent any Arakanese monks along with them?

While the Sinhalese sources make a lot of noise around the first mission with its faked reply, - Jayatilaka's manuscript suggesting even that after initial delays, the Sinhalese envoys were given a splendid and generous reception -, the second, successful mission seems to have kept a lower profile<sup>21</sup>. About the 1696 mission, the Arakanese chronicle contains information that contributes some correctives to Jayatilaka's manuscript description. Politically speaking, Arakan was not really in any better shape by then. At the time the Sinhalese envoys left Kandy, Noratha, a prince, fourteen years of age, was forced to enter monkhood after spending two weeks as king in the palace. An elderly monk, Gu-phru, who was not of royal ascendancy, was then disrobed and installed as king with the title Marumpiya<sup>22</sup>. He started his reign by disrobing and killing the young Noratha a few days after taking power! When the Sinhalese embassy arrived on two Dutch ships, Marumpiya agreed to their request to send a group of Arakanese *sasanapyu* (missionary) monks to Kandy to purify the *sasana*. They left in December 1696 under the leadership of the Sattathana Sayadaw Indamañju and the Laung-karak Sayadaw (respectively the "Santana" and the

<sup>20</sup> On Dutch-Kandyan relations, see Silva 1981: 151-157.

<sup>21</sup> The Rakkhanga-sannas-curnikava contains no information at all and Jayatilaka's manuscript is, as he writes, "exceedingly brief" on this second mission.

<sup>22</sup> Various spellings exist, Mayuppiya (Phayre), Moraopi (Paton), Moeroepia (Dutch sources). On the reign of this king, see Candamalankara 1931, vol. 2: 230-234.

“Lokaraga-pudgala” of Jayatilaka’s manuscript). After purifying the *sasana*, they ordained a great number of monks, says the chronicler. When they wanted to visit the famous Tooth relic in the city of Anuradha (?), the guardians refused to open the locks to let them see it. But when the Sattathana Sayadaw paid reverence to the Enlightened One by reciting the “*gatha* starting with the verses *rajanatala-âkâsam-nakkhattâraparikkhittam*”, the locks opened automatically and the monks could pay homage to the tooth relic<sup>23</sup>. Before returning to Arakan, the missionary monks also paid a visit to the Buddha’s footprint on Mount Sumanakuta and composed two stanzas (quoted in the chronicle) that were recited by the monks in homage to the *Buddhapada*.

These descriptions may elicit a smile but they do not tell us much about the situation of the *sasana* in Arakan in those troubled times. The final success of the 1696-1697 missions reflects nonetheless positively on the Arakanese *sangha* as it seems to indicate that the standards of monastic education, discipline and ordination had not been harmed by the political insecurity at the centre of the kingdom. With reference to what is stated in the *Culavamsa* (hereafter CV) about these missions and the ordinations performed, Sinhalese historians have commented upon the fact that the higher ordination was specifically performed on the sons of noble families, showing a general trend of the *Sangha* to make class and caste distinctions (Ilangasinha 1992 : 84). Malalgoda notes that Gammulle Ratanapala, a Sinhalese author of the late eighteenth century also questioned the moral motives of the re-ordination linking it with economic interests of “a few influential monks”. He observes that the re-introduction of the *upasampada* ordination in 1697 had only a very limited temporary effect as it became soon again impossible for a *samanera* to obtain the higher ordination (Malalgoda 1976: 57). His *caveat* that “there is no evidence that the Arakanese monks remained in the island in order to instruct their Sinhalese pupils in the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*” is nevertheless contradicted by the evidence of the Arakanese chronicle.

In a similar context of the decline of higher Buddhist monasticism, the CV (94:15-22) mentions an official request by Vimaladharmasuriya I (1591-1604) to King Minrajagri (1593-1612) to send Arakanese monks to Kandy to revive the *upasampada* ordination. This request is also mentioned by the Arakanese chronicle which tells us that twenty *bhikkhus* under the

---

<sup>23</sup> This earned the miraculous monk the sobriquet “Sattathana-Open-the-lock” continues our chronicler.

leadership of the Myauk-tanzaung Sayadaw Candavilasa<sup>24</sup> and the Venerable Nandicakka (singularly mentioned in the CV) went to Sri Lanka. Confusingly, the dates of the two sources are not the same, the CV has 1596 and the Arakanese chronicle, 1606. The last date is most probably wrong as it does not match with the Kandyan king's regnal dates. Setting the Sinhalese request in an Arakanese context, it is easier to accommodate than the request made about a hundred years later. Under the reign of King Minrajagri, Arakan reached the apogee of its territorial expansion. In southeastern Bengal, the port of Chittagong was fully under its control and trade revenues filled the royal treasury. Minrajagri had his share in the ruin of the Burmese First Taungu dynasty (fall of the capital Pegu after a siege in 1599) and for over a decade, Syriam, Burma's most important port, was run by Felipe de Brito, a Portuguese captain who had made a career in Arakan's navy. Arakan became a regional power broker and controlled the slave trade in the northern Bay of Bengal. It is not difficult to figure out that the news about this powerful Buddhist kingdom spread to Sri Lanka and made it appear to Vimaladharmasuriya I as an attractive place from where Buddhist missionary monks could be requested. The *Minrajagri-satam*, a contemporary Arakanese source, emphasizes the religious reform policy of King Minrajagri that favored the forest-dwelling monks who followed more strictly the rules of the *vinaya*. Curiously, it does not mention the request of the Sinhalese king and Minrajagri's reply. Can it be that the lingering fame of this great period of Arakanese history influenced a hundred years later Vimaladharmasuriya II's decision to make a request for *bhikkhus* to an Arakanese king?

The requests for Arakanese missionary monks by King Vimaladharmasuriya I and II are marginally mentioned in the SV (Law 1959: 30), but amazingly not in our Arakanese pamphlet, the *Explanation on the Venerable Sasana of Arakan*. It is precisely these historically well attested missions that give some credibility to the claim that in earlier times, Arakan had contributed to the continuity of the *sasana* in Sri Lanka.

Moving back in time, we need to discuss the evidence on fifteenth-century missions about which we only know from Arakanese sources. In his 1891 report on the Mahamuni pagoda, E. Forchhammer quotes an Arakanese text that has since become unavailable (the *Sappadanapakarana*) (Forchhammer 1891: 2-5). It says that King Min Khari (1433-1459) obtained a *tipitaka* from Sri Lanka. The Arakanese chronicle states that King Bhasawphru

---

<sup>24</sup> C. Raymond notes variants of this name : "Candivisala" and "Candadilasa" (Raymond 1999).

(1459-1481) also obtained a *tipitaka* from Sri Lanka in 1475<sup>25</sup>. These missions put Arakan in the position of a receiver. The kingdom with its new capital founded in 1433 was, during the fifteenth century, a burgeoning but still rather weak principality that stood in the shadow of powerful neighbors, in the west, the prestigious sultanate of Bengal and in the east, the kingdom of Ava. Obtaining a *tipitaka* or claiming to have obtained a *tipitaka* from Sri Lanka must have served the purpose of legitimating the claims of Buddhist orthodoxy and fulfilling the need for the king to establish himself as a protector and supporter of the *sasana*. It is not at all unlikely that Arakanese monks went to Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century, but we have no means to check the historicity of these missions. Intuitively we may interpret their claimed historicity with regard to the important 1475 mission sent to Sri Lanka by King Dhammazedī (*aka* Ramadhipati, 1472-1492) which led to the adoption of the Sinhalese style ordination of the *sangha* in the Mon country. For the purpose, a new ordination ground was established in Pegu in 1476 and significantly named 'Kalyani' (*The Kalyani Inscriptions...* 1892). It is important to note that there are no earlier religious missions mentioned in the Arakanese chronicles.

Another Arakanese source, the above mentioned *Minrajagri-Satam* (hereafter MRCT) refers to several missions sent to Sri Lanka to check the sacred Pali texts as they were kept in Arakan against the texts as they existed in Sri Lanka. The MRCT is a manual written for King Minrajagri that recalls the royal genealogy, extols virtuous kings, refers to ancient law and practice and defends in particular the rigorous measures taken by earlier Arakanese kings against heteropractic and heterodox monks (Leider 2004b). Keeping its religious bias in mind, it is not surprising that the author reaches the conclusion that the scriptures had been faithfully transmitted in Arakan since the time of Lord Buddha (for a detailed list of these missions, see appendix 1). As stated above, this text whose origins go back to the early seventeenth century, does not mention the request of King Vimaladharmasuriya I for missionary monks.

In the case of the missions listed by the MRCT, our investigative attention is less absorbed by the question of their historicity which rests on weak ground, than by the coded significance of the claims that are made. For a king like Minrajagri, a warrior king who had pushed the limits of his kingdom to an extent that went beyond the hopes of all his

---

<sup>25</sup> Note that the Explanation on the Venerable Sasana of Arakan ascribes to this king a mission sent to Sri Lanka to re-establish the *sasana*!

predecessors, it was important to ascertain the purity of the religious tradition so as to strengthen his cosmological legitimacy as a *dhammaraja*. As the continuity of authoritative Pali texts was located in Sri Lanka, the “Sri Lanka missions” in the *Minrajagri* encode a reference to a norm of textual accuracy that could warrant the continuity of the *sasana* in Arakan. There is an unmistakable didactic stance in the *Minrajagri-satam* as its author, a minister, explains that earlier virtuous kings had sent missions to Sri Lanka to check the accuracy of the scriptures. Little can be said on the historicity of such missions. The regnal dates, even of a king like Dasaraja who appears as one of the greater kings of the Lemro period (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> c.), cannot be ascertained on the basis of epigraphic evidence.

At this point we may conclude that in some older Arakanese texts, it was clearly understood that Sri Lanka was a stronghold of the *sasana* as its kings had faithfully preserved the textual tradition. The reference to Sri Lanka stamped a mark of authority on a claim of textual purity.

This remark concludes our examination of the little known Arakan-Sri Lanka relations. What does it mean for the understanding of the *Explanation of the Venerable Sasana of Arakan*, written in 1872? The claim made in the *Explanation* regarding Arakan’s essential role in preserving the *sasana* in Sri Lanka is unwarranted as it can not be substantiated by other sources. Our analysis clearly shows that the anonymous author did not care much about historicity and established facts, as he does not even mention, paradoxically, the well proven exchange of missions in 1693 and 1696-1697. We can thus briefly reformulate and bring to a point our earlier interpretation of the *Explanation*.

In the nineteenth century, a quasi-ideological war of rival claims raged among Theravada monks about which kingdom could boast the truest transmission of the *sasana*. These claims pushed into a defensive mood Arakan’s Buddhists who were just recovering, as we have seen, in the middle of the nineteenth century from a long period of trouble. Judging less from a historical than from a psychological point of view, the *Explanation of the Sasana of Arakan* does not offer a balanced argument based on historical evidence, but impresses as an exhibition of pride in the face of the boisterous demonstrations of the Burmese Theravada seen and heard in Mandalay’s monasteries and temples.



## *Conclusion*

When we weave the three threads of this paper into a garland, we find that it is above all an exercise in contextualization that gives us new insights in Arakanese Buddhism and its historical or allegedly historical connections with Sri Lanka. The 1872 text that I have occasionally called a pamphlet claims a legitimate transmission of the *sasana* in Arakan but sketches the Arakan-Sri Lanka connection in terms that lie beyond history and historical context. It looks superficial and is neither well-written nor reliable for an educated reader. But that's precisely why it is challenging us to understand the context in which it was written and why it was written that way. In the second part, we have turned to a mosaic of bits of information on Arakanese Buddhism in the first half of the nineteenth century. The inescapable orientation of Arakanese monks towards reform-minded Burma, on the one hand, and the undeniable weakness of monastic education in Arakan, on the other, clearly marks two poles of tension which co-existed in an environment where, since 1826, there was no more official protection for institutional Buddhism but an entirely new context of political and economic stress.

Our analysis of the representations of religious embassies appeared first as an exploration of fact-bound records. But as we have examined the historical context of the best known of the Sri Lanka-Arakan monastic exchanges, we have seen how it rebounds on the interpretation of the contents of these relations themselves. Well founded doubts on what actually happened attended our exploration and textual contexts have raised questions on the nature of historiography. Some embassies were real or may have been real, others appear as fabricated purely for the purpose of religious legitimacy.

All in all, our exercise in contextualization leads to a decidedly richer picture of Arakanese Buddhism that helps us to identify institutional change in its proper environment. We have outlined a complex political framework that explains the conditions with which lay practice and monastic institutions in Arakan had to cope. A key word that connects different strains of our analysis is the quest for legitimacy. The coded reference to Sri Lanka as a mainstay of *sasana* transmission, the superficial evocation of relations with Sri Lanka, the listing of successive embassies with Arakan as either the giver or the receiver of religious dispensation, the postulate of Arakan's ability to revive Sri Lanka's *sasana* are basically all

variations of the same theme: the need to legitimize the religious tradition in the eyes of a particular audience of listeners or readers.

Our study raises also new questions that can be briefly evoked here and might lead to more introspective research. One question pertains to religious missions as such. According to the chronicles, they have played such an important role in the spread and the survival of Theravada Buddhism. But how far can we trust claims that are made in our sources? Can we critically examine if initial expectations and final implementation matched? Just how religious and how political was such interaction?

Another important question concerns the unexplored relationship between the Arakanese and Burmese *sangha* since the Pagan period. It is extremely unlikely that the *sasana* in Arakan flourished in isolation and independently from the way that Buddhist practice evolved among the Mon and the Burmese. But neither Arakanese nor Burmese sources seen by this writer provide us with clear references to relations whose existence we can reasonably assume. This lack of evidence underscores the importance of the claims made with regard to Sri Lanka, as these relations are not only recorded, but also invented for the need of legitimacy.

Is it safe to assume lineages connecting Arakanese and Burmese monks when there is no clear-cut proof? While we would like to believe that there were connections, we could eventually end up, not with inter-ethnic lineages, but rather with evidence of a mutual distrust among monks coming from different ethnic backgrounds and superficially credited with the opprobrium of heterodoxy. In the *MRCT* for example, Pyu and Mon monks who allegedly followed King Alaungsithu's troops to Arakan (12<sup>th</sup> c.), are said to have corrupted the local monks.

These contiguous questions call for more fact-assembling, they challenge our capacity to outwit the messages contained in the sources and our creativity to give meaning to it all. Future research can also show if the conceptualization of relations inside the Theravada world fits rather with an inbound, self-centred paradigm where outer relations are merely codes for claiming legitimacy or an open-network paradigm where institutional change, doctrinal re-alignment and intellectual exchange can be demonstrably contextualized in receptive socio-political frameworks.

### ***Bibliographic references***

*Explanation on the Venerable Sasana of Arakan, dated Buddhist era 2316.* Palmleaf manuscript (private collection, Sittway).

*Report on the progress made in the Arakan division from 1826 to 1869.* 1870. Rangoon: Government Stationery. 53 p.