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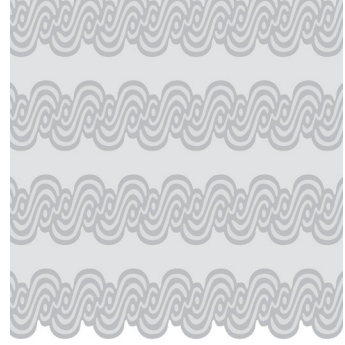
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Résumé

En 1752, Aung Zeya, un chef de village du centre de la Birmanie mena une révolte contre la domination du roi de Pégou. Cinq ans plus tard, il devenait le seigneur d'un royaume unifié et prenait le titre d'Alaungmintaya (futur dhammarāja). Reconnu par ses sujets comme un grand roi puissant, Alaungmintaya prit rapidement place parmi les figures héroïques du pays dans l'historiographie birmane. L'article est consacré aux perceptions et à l'image du roi dans l'historiographie occidentale et birmane. Il présente un sommaire du contexte historique et rappelle la métamorphose politique qui vit la transformation d'un chef de village ordinaire en figure cosmique. Le récit de voyage de Michael Symes (1800) et quelques autres ouvrages anglais établirent tout d'abord dans les descriptions occidentales une image positive du roi. Cette image s'estompa toutefois au cours du xix^e siècle, l'historiographie britannique coloniale et post-coloniale faisant alors remonter au règne du roi Alaungmintaya la peinture généralement péjorative qu'elle dressa de la dernière dynastie birmane. Pour sa part, l'historiographie birmane nationaliste a produit des interprétations positives du règne d'Alaungmintaya qui mettent en exergue son oeuvre politique et militaire. Cette rationalisation d'une biographie colorée de surnaturel par les chroniqueurs a permis des interprétations variées du roi comme homme d'État et comme référence morale. Seule l'historiographie birmane très récente s'est ouverte à une plus grande complexité analytique en incluant, au-delà des chroniques, des sources diverses, notamment administratives.

Abstract

In 1752, a local Burmese chief led a revolt against the rule of the king of Pegu over Central Burma. Adopting the title Alaungmintaya ('future dhammarāja'), Aung Zeya five years later became the lord of a unified kingdom. Recognized by his subjects as a great and mighty king, Alaungmintaya soon took his place among the heroic figures of the country in Burmese historiography. This paper deals with the perceptions and the image of the king in Western and Burmese historiography. A summary of the historical context is followed by a recounting of the king's metamorphosis from ordinary human being to cosmic figure. While Michael Symes' travelogue (1800) and a few other contemporary English accounts laid the groundwork for positive representations of the king in early nineteenth century western descriptions, later British colonial and post-colonial writers took a negative view, interpreting the reign as a precursor to later rulers of the last Burmese dynasty, generally portrayed negatively. Myanmar's predominantly nationalist historians have tended to interpret Alaungmintaya with a focus on his political and military accomplishments while eliding much of the rest of his history. This historiographical process of rationalizing the record of a quasi super-natural ruler paved the way to represent the king as a wise statesman and moral leader. Only the most recent Burmese-language scholarship has been open to greater analytical complexity in presenting Alaungmintaya's reign, such as by examining administrative and other sources outside the traditional chronicle account.



Alaungmintaya King of Myanmar (1752-1760)

Representations in Burmese and Western historiography

Jacques P. Leider

Alaungmintaya (1714-1760), born Aung Zeya in Moksobo (Shwebo), self-made king and founder of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885), the third and last Burmese dynasty, is a heroic figure in contemporary Myanmar.¹ According to the traditional image, he was a local headman in his younger days and a warrior chief displaying leadership capabilities, but he also gained recognition as a statesman of administrative craftmanship. Having repulsed the rule of the king of Pegu in Upper Myanmar, he attacked and subjected the predominantly Mon kingdom (Hansavati, best known by Westerners as Pegu kingdom) and united the territories under his power. His aggressive campaigns led against Manipur and Siam had not conclusive political results, but did pave the way for his sons' wars of expansion after his reign of less than eight years. This is the generally received notion of the king.

A giant statue of Alaungmintaya on the military parade grounds in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw demonstrates that the army acknowledges the king as one the three foremost rulers in the country's precolonial history. He has been a towering figure in Burmese history since his own lifetime. Alaungmintaya's political biography has been told and retold times and again, mainly based on *ayeidawboun* (*are:tōpum*), 'war records' written after his death by a close advisor.

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1. Historians have to differentiate the name of the country and its variety of populations, namely those who have dominated its political history. I use 'Myanmar' to refer to the country in a political and geographical sense, bearing in mind that the territory and the frontiers that define the state today have changed during its history. I use the term 'Burma' when it relates to the country as referred to in Western and other sources during the nineteenth and twentieth century before the official change of the country's name in 1989. The term 'Burmese' is used both as a name and as an adjective to refer to the majority population of Myanmar now officially referred to as Bamar.

I look critically at the image of Alaungmintaya, which has varied over time in both western and Burmese texts reflecting such disparate projects as justifying colonial rule or nation-building.² Myanmar and western scholars have recently taken interest in the biographies of other acclaimed kings such as Anawrahta and Kyanzittha and they have focussed both on the factual account of the reigns and on later representations in historiography. The image of these men's real lives, the perception of their reigns and their later written biographies are thus seen by the scholars as part of a larger biography which transcends the political narrative and includes the chronology of the reigns, the post mortem representations and the fashioning of a peculiar image by posterity. The public use of historical figures in contemporary Myanmar to bolster the myth of nation-building as well as claims of national unity and identity may explain this interest. Against this background, I also draw attention to educational, social and political aspects of the changes in the representation of Alaungmintaya over the last two hundred years. Importantly, the image of the king in modern Burmese historiography has shifted from a cosmologically sanctioned figure to a gifted and able statesman.

There is a considerable gap between western and Burmese writings in how the king and his image has evolved. Take for example the military campaigns against the Mon kingdom of Pegu: while Burmese children learn in school that Alaungmintaya re-established harmonious relations between the Mons and the Burmese thanks to his political astuteness, one western academic has described him as a genocidal butcher who wanted to exterminate the Mons. Each of these depictions are open to criticism. These criticisms are not only a matter of contemporary interpretation, or of being selective in the presentation of the wars Alaungmintaya waged. Western and Burmese representations have themselves changed over time, as a few examples will show. At the end of the eighteenth century, the British envoy Michael Symes did not describe Alaungmintaya as a conqueror (as later colonial authors did), but as the liberator of the Burmese from the yoke of the Mons. Before Myanmar's independence in 1948, Burmese writers were not shy about discussing the wars that led to the subjugation of Pegu, unlike slightly later nationalists who, concerned with 'ethnic harmony',

2. This paper is an enlarged version of a paper read at Panel 646 "Questioning Historical Actors in Burmese Histories" of the Joint Conference of the Association for Asian Studies and International Convention of Asia Scholars in Honolulu, Hawai'i (31 March - 3 April 2011). It is the collateral outcome of several years of research on various aspects of Alaungmintaya's kingship and has benefited from critical comments made by colleagues and friends. I am particularly grateful to Patrick McCormick and Gérard Fouquet for patiently revising successive versions of the text. I first introduced the subject of the historical image of the king during a presentation at Payab University in Chiang Mai ("King Alaungmintaya (1752-60) Questioning the Representations of a Burmese Hero", 19 November 2009) and discussed it later in front of a Burmese audience ("King Alaungmintaya [1752-60] The Representation of a Myanmar Hero and Dynasty founder", lecture given at the French Cultural Centre in Yangon, 21 May 2010). The part on Western interpretations of Alaungmintaya's reign draws on my article "Alaungmintaya, König von Birma, 1752-60, Darstellung und Interpretationen in der westlichen Geschichtsschreibung" (Leider 2011, 609-636).

dictated silence to school book writers. I argue that until very recently, changes in representations of Alaungmintaya have not come about because of developments in scholarship, but because of rhetorical strategies reflecting changing socio-political contexts, academic fashion, political requirements and state ideologies.

Exploring the shifting representations of Alaungmintaya's life and his legacy is a matter of scholarly interest, because the biography of the king is still relevant for people in contemporary Myanmar. Comparing representations may sharpen the awareness among scholars of contemporary Myanmar of the dependence of 'historical' images on the social and political conditions of their production. This study also attempts to critically assess the competing interpretations with regard to the available evidence of written sources.

Historical background: The rise of a warrior chief during the war between Ava and Pegu (1747-1757)

Around 1740, there were three kingdoms in Burma, the Burmese kingdom of Ava, the predominantly Mon kingdom of Pegu and the kingdom of Arakan. Ava in the north and Pegu in the south were opposed in warfare until, in 1752, the Mons overran Ava and put an end to the Burmese kingdom of the Nyaungyan (or Restored Taungngu) dynasty. As the Pegu king was unable to establish a firm rule and to enforce loyalty among all the local lords, Upper Burma lapsed into political anarchy. Aung Zeya was one village headman who resisted the Mon invaders. He was a capable leader and his life is the story of how he made himself the all powerful king of the country in merely five years. From 1752 to 1754, he established his rule firmly over central Myanmar by beating Mon troops sent against him and subjecting other competing local chiefs. From late 1754 onwards, he took his troops down south, first taking advantage of the Burmese revolt in Prome (Pyay) and then gradually gaining control over the whole Irrawaddy valley and the western part of the Delta until June 1755. On the opposite bank of the port of Syriam (Thanlyin), the country's major port of trade, he founded Rangoon (Yangon). After a long siege, he conquered Syriam in early July 1756 and immediately started an offensive against Pegu. Following heavy fighting, the city finally fell in May 1757. His invasions of Manipur and Siam were his first steps to increase the territory of the kingdom, which his sons and successors followed, working towards creating a more centralized state.

Alaungmintaya saw himself as a *dhammarāja*, or 'king of the Law' in Pali. His title in Burmese means 'future *dhammarāja*', a name that summarizes his political ambitions to establish himself as a righteous king following Buddhist moral principles, protect the religious institutions, and ensure the prosperity of the country. As a Buddhist, he interpreted his political rise and military success as the rewards for accumulating merit in his former lives. He believed he enjoyed the sanction of the king of the gods, Thagya Min—Sakka in Pali, or Indra in Hindu religion (Leider 2011a, 2011b and 2012).

Alaungmintaya took credit for restoring peace and order in the country and bringing other lords to submit to him. His royal education—if it may be called that—and his administrative power was built on elite officers and ministers who joined him after the fall of Ava and during the conquest of the south.

Twentieth century historians have interpreted the war between Alaungmintaya, king of the north, and Banya Dala, king of the south, as a war between the dominant ethnic group of the Burmese on the one hand, and the Mons who lived predominantly in the south, on the other hand. This exclusively ethnicised perception of Burma's history reflected contemporary European notions of ethnic nation states. It is misleading and could be termed anachronistic. The ethnic divide was part and parcel of the war between Alaungmintaya and Banya Dala, but it cannot be seen as a defining mark of Alaungmintaya's royal identity nor of his policy.

Alaungmintaya may not have had a defined commercial policy, but he had a clear understanding of the importance of trade. In his interactions with the English East India Company, he was always interested in developing friendly political relations and in trade, insisting for example on the fact that he was the master of the valuable precious stone mines. Until 1755, both the French and the English East India Companies were vying for influence at the court of Pegu in disregard of ongoing changes in the political and military situation elsewhere in the country. While British authors have largely described early Anglo-Myanmar relations in terms of British activities, it is important to note that the initiative in those relations lay overwhelmingly in the hands of Alaungmintaya.

Contemporary and early representations

Alaungmintaya's sons and successors were exceedingly concerned with perpetuating his prestige as a political unifier who resuscitated a strong kingdom. They derived their own legitimacy from the political merits and the military triumphs of their father. The inscription of King Hsinbyushin (1763-76) at the Neibbanzeit U pagoda in Shwebo shows how Alaungmintaya became a larger-than-life figure. Hsinbyushin compared his father to the legendary first king of humanity, Mahasamata and to King Ashoka, the Indian Maurya emperor who entered Buddhist historiography as a great protector of the Buddha's teaching. Remarkable, Alaungmintaya's edicts and orders, written on perishable palm-leaf manuscripts, have survived until today. Such orders from the reigns of his successors between 1760 and 1782 are much scarcer.

The process of making Alaungmintaya into a hero (or 'towering figure') and founding figure of a new dynasty, probably started during his own lifetime and continued beyond. Alaungmintaya has the reputation among Burmese even today of considering himself a future Buddha, a *bodhisatta*, although this cannot be proven. There is no such reference in the chronicles, but the idea can be loosely linked to the titles in his orders. This idea may be a legend transmitted

orally from early on, grounded in the image of Alaungmintaya in circulation during his own lifetime.³

The key Burmese source for the life of the king and almost all later biographical writing is Letwè Nawratha's *Alaung Mintaya Ayeidawboun*, a record of his reign which Letwè Nawratha, a contemporary poet and close advisor to the king, wrote around 1766 (Thaw Kaung 2008). He introduced his work with a summary of the history of early eighteenth century Upper Burma (Letwè Nawratha 1900, 1967 and 2009). The work can be called a political biography, although it is mainly a sober account of the military events that led Alaungmintaya from resisting the Mon invaders to becoming an all-powerful king. The work also establishes Alaungmintaya's supernatural credentials with references to omens and predictions of key events in his life, thus establishing his legitimacy. Letwè Nawratha presents Alaungmintaya as shining since childhood, having an exceptional personality, with an innate sense of leadership, and being keen on learning and respectful of traditional values and morality. While supernatural signs frame key events in the narrative, the *ayeidawboun* is not a eulogy to Alaungmintaya, nor does Letwè Nawratha fashion the king as superhuman. Both the inborn natural dispositions and the confirmation of the king's destiny by supernatural means make his path as a political winner and his final triumph explainable in the eyes of the chronicler. The general narrative had to fit popular expectations of a *minlaung*, the concept of the forthcoming king, traditionally understood in Myanmar as a lord who rises to power from amidst the people thanks to his meritorious deeds in former lives. Nevertheless, Letwè Nawratha was not uncritical towards Alaungmintaya and particularly towards his sons and ministers, who fostered a growing haughtiness of Alaungmintaya after the fall of Pegu. His early struggles against local rivals are also prominent in the record, and his initial defeats are not ignored. However, this early part of his political rise barely plays a role in later representations of his personality and reign. There was an undeniable intention to produce an image of a natural-born leader predestined to lead his armies to victory. Letwè Nawratha's narrative emphasizes Alaungmintaya's superiority and greater Buddhist legitimacy in comparison to his main foe, Banya Dala, the king of Pegu. Alaungmintaya stands out as a masterful organizer of troops and resolute decision-maker.

Letwè Nawratha's work circulated in various, notably shorter, versions which did not include the pre-1752 historical introduction. The authors of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (who started their work in 1829) used the *Alaungmintaya Ayeidawboun*, and inserted other archival material. The part of the chronicle that deals with Alaungmintaya's reign was later integrated into a work covering the whole Konbaung

3. The written evidence would rather suggest that Alaungmintaya wished, just as Banya Dala of Pegu did in his letters, to obtain the 'Buddha-prize', i.e. enlightenment and/or omniscience. There is little doubt that the proximity of the king's title with terms such as *bhurā: loṇi:/ phayalaung* and *aloṇi:tō/alaungdaw* referring to a bodhisatta furthered speculation about the king's intrinsic nature as much as a symbolic enlargement of his identity.

dynasty compiled by Maung Maung Tin and known as the *Kunbhoñ chak Mahārājjavañ tō krī: [Konbaungzet Mahayazawintawgyi]* (Maung Maung Tin 2005). In this work, the tone of the narrative has already become more triumphant. The reputation of the king grew over time. The next generation of Burmese, who faced the British during the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26, drew moral strength from the memory of Alaungmintaya's more glorious days.

Contemporary eighteenth century English representations of the king provide descriptions of his physical appearance at court audiences, but offer relatively little information on key political and military events other than Anglo-Burmese trade negotiations. These early descriptions come mainly from two envoys sent by the English East India Company to the court, Captain Baker and Ensign Lester, who met the king in person, Baker in 1755 and Lester in 1757. They offer no analysis of the king's policies among their matter-of-fact observations. They view Alaungmintaya following English expectations regarding trade, trading facilities and English hostility towards the French. The king appears cheerful, generous, optimistic, and open-minded towards contacts with foreigners. Alaungmintaya demonstrates natural curiosity and a high opinion of his strength, power and luck. Company records and his surviving orders confirm the impressions of the two Englishmen.

In his interactions with the East India Company and Banya Dala, Alaungmintaya demonstrated patience, but when it ran out, he could be harsh and vengeful. His order to destroy the Company's trading post in Negrais sprang from such a moment. He was also capable of bold initiatives, but did not take his decisions in haste. While he may have consulted his advisors before making decisions, he still showed an independent will. His Armenian advisors did not support his pro-English stance. Unsurprisingly Armenian advisors supported Armenian traders against British trade interests. Yet the king remained pro-English for a long time, even after English captains in Yangon had repeatedly disappointed his expectations.

From the court of Amarapura to the western press: the legacy of Michael Symes' description of the king

In his *Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava...in the year 1795*, Michael Symes provides a historical introduction in which he praises King Alaungmintaya. Before Symes's mission, the British had little knowledge of Burmese history. The mission to the court of King Bodawphaya in 1795 marked the renewal of Anglo-Burmese relations after a total breakdown in 1761. Symes' description of Alaungmintaya and of his political legacy represents a perception of the king that prevailed at the Burmese court among the elite whom Symes met (Symes 1800a, 51-52):

Considering the limited progress that the Birmans had yet made, in arts that refine, and science that tends to expand the human mind, Alompra [Alaungmintaya], whether viewed in the light of a politician, or soldier, is undoubtedly entitled to respect. The wisdom of his

councils secured what his valour had acquired; he was not more eager for conquest, than attentive to the improvement of his territories, and the prosperity of his people.

He issued a severe edict against gambling, and prohibited the use of spirituous liquors throughout his dominions; he reformed the *rhooms*, or courts of justice, he abridged the power of magistrates, and forbade them to decide at their private houses on criminal causes, or property, where the amount exceeded a specified sum; every process of importance was decided in public, and every decree registered. His reign was short, but vigorous; and had his life been prolonged, it is probable, that his country would at this day have been farther advanced in natural refinement, and the liberal arts.

Symes' account was translated into several European languages, and this favorable description soon spread among educated readers in Europe, finding its way into geographical and historical magazines, encyclopedias and erudite discussions of the laws and politics of non-European states (Symes 1800b, 1800c, 1802-4, 1805). In fact, Symes' description set the European view of Alaungmintaya until the middle of the nineteenth century. Curious minds and the enlightened public in the West, keen to discover the world and the knowledge that sprang from exotic new studies, took Symes's description at face value.⁴ In repetition, Symes' original portrayal underwent reformulations with varying shifts of emphasis. For some authors, the image of Alaungmintaya matched the ideals and expectations of good political leadership common among educated European bourgeoisie in the first part of the nineteenth century. Often caught in a romantic fascination with the Orient, these writers longed to find civilized monarchs outside of Europe. They saw Alaungmintaya as a liberator, a man of the Enlightenment, or even a French revolutionary propagating rationality and equality.

In one early nineteenth century British review, Alaungmintaya is characterized as a man 'of low extraction but possessed of a spirit of enterprise and boldness equal to the most arduous undertakings' (Guthrie 1801, 764) and John Pinkerton compared him to Cromwell (Pinkerton 1804, vol. 2 138). Another author called him one of 'those bold and adventurous spirits that occasionally are to be found in the Eastern as well as Western hemisphere of the globe' and thanks to his 'military talents... rescued his countrymen from the foreign yoke' (Dodley's Register 1801, 465).⁵

4. Symes' positive presentation of Myanmar was taken at face value by his early readers, but met heavy criticism by writers in the imperialist age. Take for example Albert Fytche's skeptical comment of 1878: '[Symes] failed to estimate the real character of the Burmese people whilst he overrated the government and resources of the country' (Fytche 1878, 196).

5. See also the discussion in Bertuch und Gaspari 1800, 560-577.

Alaungmintaya may never have become a household name in Europe, but was accessible to educated readers in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands and the German-speaking world. He is probably the only Southeast Asian ruler who has an entry in the *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* published by Michaud.⁶ In 1818, Charles Doris wrote an allegorical biography of Napoleon under the pseudonym of 'Alompra'.⁷

The editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, one of the most influential British journals in the nineteenth century, re-edited Symes' *Account* in 1827 because it was still, three decades after the mission, the most detailed presentation of the country (Symes 1827).⁸ One of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, Baron Henry Brougham, was the first western author to deal seriously with the political system of Burma. In his *Political Philosophy*, he presents the constitution of the Burmese kingdom as the model of kingship in the countries east of India. He notes that the Burmese Empire was an absolutist monarchy based on religious principles in which everybody had to abide by the will of the king. Though Brougham evaluates critically the evils of tyranny, he concludes that the Burmese Empire was less ignorant and more liberal than the Ottoman Empire (Brougham 2004, 131).

Brougham underscores the reform of justice in the Burmese Empire, noting that the magistrates were (Brougham 2004, 134):

appointed from among the laymen and the business of courts of Justice [...] conducted by professional advocates, and not, as in the Mohammedan courts, by the parties themselves. Alompra however introduced from the latter the great improvement of transacting all judicial business in open court. Before his time, the judges decided causes in secret.

6. One may note the following appreciation in volume 56 (Michaud 1834, 236-238):

Alompra fut un de ces personnages prédestinés que la providence choisit à de longs intervalles pour exécuter ses décrets en les élevant au-dessus des autres hommes. Il affermit son empire et sa dynastie sur des bases solides.

7. Baron de B*** 1818. The book was presented as the free translation of a Latin work of Father Lebre, a Portuguese Jesuit. A travel account about Burma including a biographical account of the king that appeared several years later is attributed to the same author (Baron de B*** 1835).

8. An advertisement for *Constable's Miscellany of Original and Selected Publications, in the various Departments of Literature, Science, and the Arts* in volume 47 of the *Edinburgh Review* (*Edinburgh Review* 1828, non-paged advertisement section at the end of the volume) pointed to the common interest for such travel records:

The unlimited desire of knowledge which now pervades every class of Society, suggested the design, of not only reprinting, without abridgement or curtailment, in a cheap form, several interesting and valuable Publications, hitherto placed beyond the reach of a great proportion of readers, but also of issuing in that form many Original Treatises, which are now in preparation by some of the most distinguished authors of the age.

From liberator to despot

From the late nineteenth century onward, the imperialist gaze transformed Alaungmintaya into a despot. His image in the West underwent a radical change. Authors of the imperialist age down to the postcolonial era saw him as a gifted and energetic, but also power-hungry ruler who had taken his position by virtue of his ruthlessness. He was no longer portrayed as the liberator of the Burmese, but as a tyrant and persecutor of the Mons. While the entry on him in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* does not discard Symes' favorable evaluation, it does express some disdain for him as an oriental monarch (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911):

Alompra is one of the most remarkable figures in modern Oriental history. To undoubted military genius he added considerable political sagacity, and he deserves particular credit for his efforts to improve the administration of justice. His cruelty and deceitfulness were faults common to all Eastern despots.

F. Tennyson Jesse's popular work on Burma, *The Story of Burma*, published in 1946, includes a *Historical Synopsis* that reflects an entirely negative British evaluation of Burmese kings in general and of Alaungmintaya in particular:

Th[e kings] never administered a country and it was not for that that they went to war. War to them meant raids and looting, never administration. [...] Alompra could be said to have united Burma, but it was a unity cemented with the blood of his victims. His cruelties were such that it would do little good to write of them here. [...] Under Alompra, the art of internal administration decayed, for he was a brutal man with none but brutal ideas. [...] But civilisation to the King of Burma was still to be in possession of the power to rob and torture; to amass wealth and luxury [...] Burmese history consisted of little else, and their wars of aggression were without the administrative qualities which the white man showed. This is a difference between the English and the Burmese, which in fairness to the English must be remembered.⁹

This change reflected the opinions prevailing among the British colonizers about Burmese kings in the middle of the nineteenth century. Contemporary portrayals of King Thibaw (1878-1885) as cruel, savage and barbarian were applied retroactively to earlier rulers of the Konbaung dynasty. The decrepit nature of the Burmese monarchy became central to the British rationale for subjecting the Burmese kingdom to British rule. Take for instance Harvey's comment: 'It is a people which must sometimes have wondered whether its government did not emanate from a vampire rather than a king' (Harvey 1925, xx). This dismissal of Burmese rulership shaped the British imperial project and became anchored in British minds starting

9. Tennyson 1946, 16-18 *passim*. Tennyson was a well known female journalist and author of dramas.

in the middle of the nineteenth century. Kenneth McKenzie's defence of the second Anglo-Burmese war in his *Burmah and the Burmese*, published in 1853, is revealing (McKenzie 1853, v):

Unfortunate as any war always is, and must be, yet in contending with an unprincipled and tyrannical government like that of Burmah, there is a grain of satisfaction in knowing that we thereby shake the despotic thrones of the East, and thus add something to the cause of liberty and peace. If we cannot humanize by fair means...we must, *vi et armis*, carry civilisation into the country, and openly defy the custom-house of tyranny.

Colonial historiography

British scholar-administrators' interpretations of Burmese kings followed contemporary European ideas of states and nations as being forged by great men. At the time, European nations tried to assert unique identities as a result of competing national ambitions. In Burma, these authors fashioned the rivalry between Lower and Upper Burma not only as political competition, but as a struggle based on ethnicity, between a Mon south and a Burman north. For Arthur Phayre (1812-1885), an early British governor of Arakan in British Burma as well as author of the first English-language *History of Burma* (Phayre 1883), Alaungmintaya is a national leader who defends purely Burmese interests in his war against the Mons. Phayre writes, 'From the beginning of the troubles [Alaungmintaya] was intensely national, and determined not to yield to the conqueror' (Phayre 1883, 150), and again, 'He again defeated a Talaing [= Mon] force, and fully recognizing the national importance of his enterprise, gave orders to his men to spare the Burmese and Shâns who fought under the flag of the usurper' (Phayre 1883, 151).¹⁰

The English rendering of Myanmar history as an age-old rivalry between the Mons and the Burmans complemented an increasingly sympathetic representation of the history of the 'downtrodden' Mons, who had dominated the south of the country and reputedly transmitted Buddhism to the Burmans.¹¹ This portrayal of the Mons as victims of Burman aggression can be traced back to one of the earliest general descriptions of the Myanmar kingdoms. Vincenzo Sangermano, an Italian missionary (1758-1819), described the campaign against the kingdom of Pegu as a war of vengeance. '[Alompra's] next care was to take vengeance on the Peguans by carrying the war into their own kingdom, where he overcame them' (Sangermano 1833, 61).

10. See also Samuel Cocks who wrote: 'To mark the national character of his rebellion he gave orders that Burman and Shan troops in the army of Pegu were to be spared in the hour of victory, but Talaings were to be slain' (Cocks 1910, 107).

11. For a criticism of the colonial representation of the Mons, see Aung Thwin 2005.

For the British administrator-cum-scholar Arthur Phayre, Alaungmintaya's career could only be reconstructed on the basis of European sources, but his own narrative was entirely built on the accounts of the Burmese he closely followed, mostly without any critical comment. In G.E. Harvey's *History of Burma*, written in the 1920s, the author gives a very different description of Alaungmintaya. The king is no longer a man of low birth as he was for Symes, but a member of the upper classes whose warfare takes on epic dimensions in emotion-laden writing. Harvey's style mixes fascination and grudging respect with an irrepressible disdain, evident throughout his work. The following (Harvey 1925, 220) is but one of many examples:¹²

There was no need to offer bounties or to press men. They were fighting for the existence of their race. Also there would be loot, and they looked forward to the clothes and horses and girls they would take from those dogs of Talaings [= Mon].

Emphasizing the deficiencies of the national character, Harvey notes that a Burmese war leader such as Alaungmintaya was unable to think strategically and that he was superstitious and unnecessarily cruel. He adds (Harvey 1925, 221):

.. the deficiency of the races of Indo-China in power of combination on a large scale is natural to people whose inherited instincts were formed in a country of great distances and bad communications. But when roused to enthusiasm they have shown considerable capacity for combined action.

A modern reader may look at Harvey's writing as condescending, but in his preface to Harvey's volume, Richard Carnac Temple considers Harvey's writing as fair, objective, and above racial prejudice.¹³

The most eurocentric historian of Burma was D.G.E. Hall.¹⁴ More than half of the chapter concerning the reign of Alaungmintaya in his influential *History of Southeast Asia* (Hall 1955) deals exclusively with the king's relations with the East India Company.¹⁵ An academic historian, Hall taught in Myanmar before WWII, but he did not learn the Burmese language. He made himself a specialist of western, mainly English, sources on the western presence in Myanmar (such as Dalrymple 1791) and

12. See also Fytche's appreciation of the Burmese records on Alaungmintaya: 'They serve to bring out the individuality of Alompra as a type of Burmese warriors, profoundly ignorant of the outer world and yet gifted with a barbarous intelligence which excites our wonder' (Fytche 1878, 192).

13. The reimpression of Harvey's book in the year 1967 shows what great authority it kept over the years (see Carnac's preface in Harvey 1925 [1967 edition], v-vi).

14. Manuel Sarkisyanz has described Hall's writings as apology of British imperialism. See Sarkisyanz 1972.

15. Published in 1955, re-edited and/or reprinted 14 times until 1981, Hall's *History of Southeast Asia* dominated for a long time the representation of Burma's precolonial history.

counted as one of the most prominent authors on Myanmar history from the 1930s to the 1960s. In all his publications on Burma and Southeast Asia, and particularly when talking about early Anglo-Burmese relations, Hall emphasizes English interests and viewpoints (see for instance Hall 1928). In his interpretations, he never pays attention to the legitimate political interests of the Myanmar kings.

Hall's writings do not contradict the presentation of Alaungmintaya's personality, policies, and diplomacy as found in the East India Company's archives, but he generally represents the king in a most unfavorable light.

Whereas Harvey looks at Alaungmintaya from a perspective of British racial and imperial superiority, he shows a certain respect for the king as a leader. Hall not only skips essential parts of early Konbaung history, but his deriding portrait of Alaungmintaya precludes an appreciation of the historical importance of the king.

In *The Tragedy of Negrais* (Hall 1931, see also Hall 1968), an article in which he provides his version of Anglo-Burmese relations in the middle of the eighteenth century, Hall repeatedly states that Alaungmintaya considered the negotiation of a treaty with the governor of the East India Company in Madras as being below his dignity. Hall insinuates that the king deemed the conclusion of the treaty in 1757 with the Lester mission an 'unparalleled ... act of condescension' and that 'the haphazard manner of its ratification was undoubtedly designed by Alaungpaya to show his utter contempt of treaties' (Hall 1931, 330-1).¹⁶ In contrast, G.E. Harvey in his *Outline of Burmese History* (Harvey 1929) and Dorothy Woodman in *The Making of Burma* (Woodman 1962) states the king's goodwill in the course of negotiations.

In *Burma*, published in 1950, Hall writes erroneously that Alaungmintaya only wanted to recognize an English trading settlement in the form of an order given to King George II (Hall 1950, 83-4). The original Burmese text of the letter to George II shows that the term *ameindaw* 'royal order' is actually not used. In *Europe and Burma: A Study of European Relations with Burma to the Annexation of Thibaw's Kingdom 1886*, published in 1945, Hall entirely dismisses the importance of Lester's mission of 1757. He states that the treaty the East India Company had been proposed since 1755 'proved to be a useless document', but he passes over the fact that this failure was entirely due to the East India Company itself and not to the Burmese (Hall 1945, 69).¹⁷

Another debatable interpretation of Alaungmintaya's policy is the connection that Hall establishes between the destruction of the East India Company settlement

16. At other places one finds the formulation 'refusing to set his seal to such a thing as a treaty' (for example Hall 1950, 82).

17. Hall *presented* the treaty as 'of course valueless' with the argument that Burmese kings could not sign treaties that were binding their successors (see Hall 1955, 349). Concerning the king's own interests in his negotiations with the English, see the introduction of Than Tun 1983-1990, vol.3. Hall hinted repeatedly at Alaungmintaya's insatiable desire to buy arms, a formulation taken over by Cady (see Hall 1955, 348; Hall 1945, 67; Cady 1964, 290).

in Negrais and the king's ill feelings about the poor English respect for Burmese court etiquette. In May 1756, Alaungmintaya sent a letter on a gold leaf to King George II and patiently waited two or three years for an answer. As he did not receive either an acknowledgement or a reply from London, he complained bitterly to English visitors. Hall interpreted the destruction of Negrais ('the Tragedy of Negrais' as he called it) as 'a fearful revenge for this unpardonable slight of not having replied to the golden letter'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, this was not the reason why the king put an end to the East India Company settlement in Negrais. Alaungmintaya gave the order to destroy the settlement in late 1759 after the English chief in charge at Negrais, a Lieutenant Newton, had provided Mon rebels with arms.¹⁹

Hall's representation of the early Konbaung period was revised only by a new generation of historians starting in the late 1980s.²⁰ The most influential among this generation has been Victor Lieberman. His academic work on early modern Burma is grounded in novel research and analyses of Burmese sources which had hitherto been poorly used. Lieberman presents Myanmar's past as a succession of kingdoms which see a recurring strengthening of the political center. The decline of political power

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18. One of the survivors of the Burmese attack led by a French officer, was James Robertson. He was imprisoned and reported from Rangoon that the king was angry about the fact that even after such a long time, his letters had not received a reply. Robertson quoted the king asking if the English consider him a fool. But in the official report of the East India Company trying to establish the reasons of what took place at Negrais, Robertson's declaration was not taken into account.
19. The arms trade is traceable, but poorly documented in the archives of the East India Company. Colonial historians questioned the validity of reports on military support given to the Mons. Hall attributed the information to rumors spread by the king's Armenian advisors (Hall 1945, 70 and 1955, 349). Cocks presented the misbehavior of the English captains in 1755 in a more balanced way than Hall, but considered the reports about English arms' deliveries to the Mon rebels as wrong, too (Cocks 1910, 112-113 and 116).
20. A radically different point of view of the early Konbaung kingdom was only presented in 1987 in the second edition of *In Search of Southeast Asia*, a handbook first published in 1971, to which Robert Taylor, a political scientist, contributed a chapter. His approach is Burma-centric to the point that the Mon kingdom of Pegu or Hamsavati is not even namely referred to. Not even later Burmese nationalist writing has ever passed into silence the name of Alaungmintaya's main foe. Alaungmintaya's warfare is presented as a campaign to crush separatist ethnic forces in the south, partly through the manipulation of ethnic identity (Steinberg 1987, 101-2). John Cady's works (*A History of Modern Burma* [Cady 1958], and *Southeast Asia Its Historical Development*, quoted above [Cady 1964]) as well as Frank Trager's *Burma From Kingdom to Republic A Historical and Political Analysis* (Trager 1966), need only be mentioned on the margins. Cady and Trager were both Americans who were highly knowledgeable about the country and their works were less tainted by colonial prejudice. But they give disappointing and partly wrong summaries of pre-colonial Burmese history (see for example Cady 1964, 289-90). Dorothy Woodman's *The Making of Burma* treats Burma's colonial history exclusively on the basis of British archival sources. But thanks to the help of the Burmese historian U Tet Htoot, she gave a better appreciation of Alaungmintaya's letter to George II than Hall (Woodman 1962).

at the end of a dynastic cycle thus does not mark a fatal setback, but a restarting of a process of political consolidation which Lieberman sees in a *longue durée* perspective. The analysis of Alaungmintaya's reign forms an important part of Lieberman's theory. The integration of military, institutional and cultural aspects into his theory of political cycles does justice to the historical importance of Alaungmintaya's reign (Lieberman 1982, 229-270). But Lieberman's combination of synchronic and diachronic representations takes apart the *loci* of action and the life of the *dramatis personae*. While Western and Burmese authors of the positivist and romanticizing British colonial historical tradition attempt to give their readers a sense of drama of Alaungmintaya's rise and the king's personality, Lieberman selects biographical elements to support his argument on structural developments.

Given his outstanding work and his scholarly authority, Lieberman has been widely quoted in the field of Southeast Asian studies.²¹ Some recent scholars have simplified his careful treatment of what he calls 'ethnic politics' in eighteenth century Burma (Lieberman 1978, 455-482) into a misrecognition of Alaungmintaya's policies in what constitutes a revival of the colonial-era myth of the Mons as eternal victims of Burman overlordship (see for instance Aung Thwin 2005). Michael Charney argues that Alaungmintaya was 'possessed of great animosity toward the Mons generally' (Charney 2006, 134-7), while Ben Kiernan writes of Alaungmintaya's 'systematic ethnic discrimination [that] was unprecedented in Burmese history' and the intensification of a 'campaign of ethnic chauvinism' during Alaungmintaya's attack on Pegu (Kiernan 2007, 152). This language does not find support in a thorough analysis of the sources, and criticizes the king in an anachronistic way for policies and an ideology which does not fit the context of mid-eighteenth century Burma.

To explain Alaungmintaya's political and military success, Lieberman rightly draws attention to what he calls a 'policy of systematic ethnic appeals'. Indeed, for quite natural reasons, Alaungmintaya used the shared ethnic and linguistic identity at the beginning of his political career to rally the Burmese. However, to obtain the support of the majority population was not a sign of ethnic divisiveness, but a strategic political move, as in 1752 not all the Burmese had readily joined Alaungmintaya's campaign. On the other hand, Alaungmintaya did not exclude the Mons because they were linguistically and ethnically different. He expressly included them in his first public appeal to the population in the Delta to support his military campaign in January 1755 (Than Tun 1983-1990, vol.3 91). Two years later, after the fall of Pegu, Alaungmintaya resettled the Mon population at Patheingyi. Making peace was the order of the day, not ethnic extinction.

21. See for example "Political Consolidation in Burma under the Early Konbaung Dynasty 1752-c. 1820" (Lieberman 1996) and *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in the Global Context, c. 800-1830. Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland* (Lieberman 2003).

Burmese representations of Alaungmintaya

While western writing (with the exception of Lieberman) has evolved towards an increasingly negative view of Alaungmintaya's reign, modern Myanmar writers have developed a more positive and sometimes broader approach towards his reign. This has led them to replace the myth of the supernaturally predestined king by the myth of a virtuous and outstanding military chief and statesman. Burmese writers have emphasized the flourishing of literary production during the early Konbaung period, the economic benefits of canal building in the Mu valley, the building of religious works, the ban on animal sacrifices, and the prohibition of intoxicants. Since the colonial period, Burmese historical writing had adopted the western methodology of historical research as taught by British professors at Rangoon University, but it remained descriptive rather than analytical. Burmese historiography reacted early on against the euro-centric and colonialist format of writing the country's history, switching the perspectives and rebalancing the order of heroes and villains in national history. But Burmese historians became modern only in the sense that they discarded mythical elements from the traditional narrative of the king's reign. Many have not, however, freed themselves from the authority of British historiography either by exploring Burmese sources which had not yet been investigated, or by recontextualizing national history within Asia. Such a move would dispense with dominant western references and allow for more autonomous interpretations.²² Burmese historians have not thoroughly revised or questioned the facts and their interpretations that were fixed in colonial historiography. Burmese representations of King Alaungmintaya differ by selective strategies to mine the biographical stuff. They do not aim at widening our historical understanding by exploring new sources or a fresh reading of old sources. They do rather offer a succession of moral interpretations of the king's historical role.

The narratives found in books or individual chapters written in Burmese and English since the colonial period are based on the sources mentioned earlier, the *Alaungmintaya Ayeidawboun* and the *Konbaungzet*, occasionally including oral traditions and a few published English sources such as Baker's and Lester's accounts. Following colonial-era 'modern' historiographical practices, Burmese writers discard the supernatural elements so prominent in the chronicles, which takes the king out of the context of cultural practices which formed royal statecraft.

An early exception to this style of chronicle-based, mainstream writing was the work of Pagan U Tin. He was the author of the *Mranmā mañ: up khyup puṃ cā taṃ:*

22. See Leider 2002. An example already quoted may once again be referred to here. Though it was clearly Alaungmintaya who had taken the initiative to contact the English East India Company in 1755, Burmese authors have kept on following D.G.E. Hall's writing that presents the English East India Company as being the initial and dominant player in Anglo-Burmese exchanges (See for example Aung Thein Han 1969, 99).

[*Records of Administration of the Myanmar Kings*], a work written between 1921 and 1930 that includes some paragraphs specifically concerned with King Alaungmintaya's methods of government and his economic and religious policies (U Tin 1921, see also U Tin 2001, 286-291). Pagan U Tin's work projects an image of a leader who implemented his political decisions with great determination while occasionally ignoring the advice of monks or ministers. As U Tin also underscores that the king did not change his orders even when he knew better, his description warrants the characterization of Alaungmintaya as being willfully stubborn. A positive note is sounded on the other hand by Alaungmintaya's adherence to established tradition and his attention to administrative procedures.

The publication of Alaungmintaya's orders and letters in 1964 provided a rich, but hitherto poorly accessible body of source material that could be used to critically revise the image of King Alaungmintaya. However, this body of primary sources and U Tin's earlier critical observations had little or no impact on later biographical sketches and the general portrayal of the king.

Burmese historians consider Alaungmintaya a great statesman because of his capacity to reunite the country and organize the state. Their writing commonly presents the king as an able statesman with a virtuous character. Burmese writers share a general tendency to select episodes from the king's biography to derive lessons from history. This pedagogical function of historical writing has not been limited to school books, but it is widely spread in history books that were printed since the parliamentary period (1948-1962) and throughout the authoritarian period, i.e. Ne Win's dictatorship (1962-1988) and the SLORC and SPDC regimes (1988-2012). What the reign of the king could 'teach' was invariably linked to socially dominant or government-led notions that mirrored customary authoritarianism and contemporary political conditions. Under General Ne Win, the home-grown socialist ideology, Burmese nationalism and a top-down quest for ethnic consensualism were not only promoted and officially encouraged, but they durably impressed mind-sets. Historians have been keen to select those episodes and aspects of Alaungmintaya's reign which match their own or officially-sanctioned ideologies.

To understand how the representation of Alaungmintaya's reign and personality reflects a changing socio-political context in Myanmar, I first highlight Alaungmintaya's characterization as having model moral character and being a model statesman, by the way that his war against the kingdom of Pegu has been represented and interpreted and, secondly, by the topic of Anglo-Burmese relations.

In his *Mranmā rājāvaṅ* [*Myanmar History*], first published in 1929, U Ba Than presents an overview of the salient military events of Alaungmintaya's career, and then praises Alaungmintaya's courage, his gift for administration, concern for the 'race' (*amyò*), the enforcement of discipline among his troops, and his decisiveness. While duly mentioning how the king built canals and pagodas, Ba Than is also keen to list the factors that led to the king's military triumphs (Ba Than 1929, 301-302).

U Ohn Maung's chapter on Alaungmintaya in his *Kyon:sum: mranmā rājavan tatiya cācoñ* [*Myanma history used in schools, third part*] has a similar structure. He presents a factual account which emphasizes the episodes involving the English East India Company followed by a positive appraisal of the good qualities of the king, such as his respect for ancient traditions and his recognition of talented people (Ohn Maung 1955, 6).

Bo Ba Shin, a military man whose thinking was marked by the Second World War experience, took a new approach towards national history in his *Mranmā nuīñnaṃ tō samuiñ* [*History of Myanmar*] of 1948, where he dropped the Eurocentric perspective of earlier writers. His account of Alaungmintaya's reign starts with a description of the geopolitical context and takes the perspective of a national interest versus the political threat of foreigners, be they English, French or Siamese. His presentation of the king's war record lacks any triumphalism and does not eulogize the king. He underlines how Alaungmintaya raised the moral character of the people by forbidding intoxicants and fought burglary and violence by forcing village elders to compensate victims (Ba Shin 1948). The king's military profile was also highlighted by Aung Thein Han in his *Mranmā nuīñnaṃ samuiñ sac* [*New History of Myanmar*], published in 1969. Aung Thein Han saw Alaungmintaya as a magnanimous political leader, but he underscores more than other authors Alaungmintaya's military gifts and his experience in guerrilla warfare, a description which he extends to key officers who surrounded the king (Aung Thein Han 1969, 100-5).

Sagaing U Bo Thin, on the other hand, celebrated Alaungmintaya as a self-made man of modest origins, a point underscored by the use of the king's former name, Aung Zeya. In a biography he wrote in the early 1970s, Sagaing U Bo Thin introduces Alaungmintaya as an exemplary hero, and as a pacifier, keen on cultivating harmonious relations with foreigners (Sagaing U Bo Thin 1988, 256), a characterization already found much earlier in Hla Thamein's *Notes on Burmese History* (Hla Thamein 1956, 130) as well as in Saya Kyaw's *Mranmā samuiñ puṃprañ* [*Stories from the History of Burma*] (Saya Kyaw and U Htun Shein 1952, 114), both publications from the 1950s. Significantly, Sagaing U Bo Thin's book was reprinted in 1988, a year of acute political crisis.

In conclusion, the review of Burmese authors who dealt with King Alaungmintaya's reign shows that their portrayal of Alaungmintaya's leadership bolstered the concept of customary authoritarianism as a mark of pre-colonial Burmese history.

There are more striking differences between the various authors with regard to their interpretation of the conquest of the independent Mon kingdom. The representation changed from an altogether positive one, towards one which projected ethnic consensualism into the past. Burmese historians, starting in the 1970s, marginalized the extensive warfare that led to the Mon defeat or discreetly left it aside.

Ba Than, writing in the late 1920s, follows the historical record of the chronicles when he recounts that the execution of Mahā Dhammayāzā Dhipati, the last king of Ava, by the king of Pegu sparked the Burmese uprisings in Pyay and in Pathein in 1754 and 1755, when Burmese and Mons burnt down each others' houses and

attacked and killed each other (Ba Than 1929, 292 and 300-302). But this fact is silently passed over in books written after 1948. The ninth edition of Ohn Maung's *Kyon:sum: mranmā rājavan̄* [*Myanmar history used in schools*] (1955) still contained an exercise in which students were asked to answer how many times Alaungmintaya had marched against the Mons and why he had been successful (Ohn Maung 1955, 48-9). Current schoolbooks do not even mention the confrontations.

Colonial historians described the rivalry between Mon and Myanmar kingdoms over the centuries as a dominant theme of national history. But in nationalist and later state-sanctioned historiography, Alaungmintaya's long, drawn-out wars against the Mons were a politically uncomfortable truth to be written around. His conquest of the Mon kingdom came to be interpreted in an oversimplified way as a political success. Burmese history books emphasized Alaungmintaya's astuteness in integrating the Mon kingdom within the Burmese nation, not the bloody wars and exhausting sieges (Aung Thein Han 1969, 107). While the army and then Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) rule under Ne Win (1962-88) claimed to defend the unity of the country against separatist ethnic guerillas, the authoritarian regime also promoted a strict nationalist agenda. Representations of the past projected anachronistically an idealized representation of a unified state created by wise rulers. A subliminal longing for ethnic harmony projected the mute awareness of the ethno-political conundrums in the present towards the hope for a better future.

Aung Kyi's chapter on Alaungmintaya in his *Mranmā rājavan̄ hmat cu hmat yā padesa* [*Various notes on Burmese history*], published in 1956, praises the king for putting an end to the disorder in the country in a situation of political anarchy (Aung Kyi 1956, 166-181). According to the ideology of the time, an enemy of the state must be crushed and Alaungmintaya was the model of a state leader who rid the country of enemies threatening the unity of the nation.

Addressing a wider academic audience as he published in English, nationalist writer Maung Htin Aung staunchly defended Alaungmintaya's policies. In his *History of Burma*, he explains that 'in spite of the harshness shown to the Burmese by the Mons during the period of their supremacy, Alaungpaya's policy was conciliatory and many local Mon officials were given back their appointments' (Maung Htin Aung 1967, 164-165).²³ In Maung Htin Aung's view, the war against Ayutthaya took place because 'Siam started hostilities' and 'because the Mons would always be plotting and planning to rebel and win back Lower Burma' (Maung Htin Aung

23. At times Maung Htin Aung's attempts to defend the king ends up in slightly anachronistic interpretations. Take for example the following quotation: 'Alaungpaya was trying to conform to international law as explained by the English captain and he had just begun his quest to learn the principles of law and diplomacy as practiced by the Europeans' (Maung Htin Aung 1965, 15).

1967, 168-169).²⁴ Sagaing U Bo Thin's biography (*Aloñ:mañ:tarā: krī: ū: oñ jeyya [Alaungmintayayyi U Aung Zeya]*) heavily emphasizes how the king put an end to the opposition between Mons and Burmans. He even lists the benefits of the conquest of Pegu for the Mons themselves: an end to slavery; work and food for the poor; freedom from forced labour for agricultural pioneers, and no export taxes (Sagaing U Bo Thin 1988, 210-211 and 254).

Tin Htwe's more recent biography (*Aloñ:mañ:tarā: Ū: Oñjaya [Alaungmintaya U Aung Zeya]*, published by the Ministry of Information in 1991) portrays the king's leadership and again fashions him as a model leader (Tin Htwe 1991). As the author gives a dramatic account of how the king took decisions and fought battles, he tries to show Alaungmintaya as a hero who led the various groups of native people to peace and harmony in a unified country. While previous historians replaced the much resented term 'Talaing' commonly used in the precolonial chronicles by the politically correct term 'Mon', Tin Htwe bypassed the issue of Mon ethnic identity altogether by using the somewhat more neutral term 'enemies' (*yanthu*). One may either welcome or question this form of de-ethnicization of the conflict.

My own analysis of Alaungmintaya's policy towards the East India Company shows that the king, while eager to buy arms from the English, was nonetheless a fine diplomat, trustful and sincerely interested in building long-term political and commercial relations with the English (Leider 2009, 49-60). But few of these positive aspects of the king's reign are found in the writing of Burmese historians.

Burmese historians' interpretations of the king's relations with the English and the French changed over the decades, reflecting Burma's increasingly isolationist and xenophobic foreign policies after 1962. On Hla Thamein's list of Alaungmintaya's seven most noteworthy policies, the fourth was that the king was on good terms with other countries (Hla Thamein 1956, 129-130).²⁵ But under the authoritarian Ne Win regime (1962-88), official propaganda blamed colonial subjugation for a lack of national unity. Echoing this line of thinking, Sagaing U Bo Thin writes that as the Mons and Burmans had not been united, the Europeans were able to gain a foothold in Burma (Sagaing U Bo Thin 1988, 221). While some authors suggested that Westerners could not be trusted, some went further and alleged that Alaungmintaya himself had not trusted foreigners (Tin Htwe 1991, 120; Aung Kyi 1956, 181). In Aung Kyi's *Notes on Burmese history* and Tin Htwe's biography of the king, foreign traders are represented as 'expansionists' and Alaungmintaya as the king who faced them down (Aung Kyi 1956, 166-181, Tin Htwe 1991, 120).

Maung Htin Aung has been the only author to criticize Harvey and Hall's distorted picture of Alaungmintaya's negotiations with the East India Company. He

24. Nonetheless Maung Htin Aung did not have a blind spot regarding the war against Manipur which he duly calls 'a war of conquest' (Maung Htin Aung 1967, 167).

25. Remarkably, Hla Thamein does not mention Alaungmintaya's military leadership at all.

gave due recognition to the king's diplomacy with the English in *The Stricken Peacock-Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752-1948* (1965), although his evaluation tends to be apologetic (Maung Htin Aung 1965, 13-20). Writing about the king's golden letter to George II, he says (Maung Htin Aung 1965, 16-17):

this letter, because of its quaint language has caused amusement to modern scholars, including Burmese scholars. But it was in many ways a pathetic letter in which Alaungphaya was trying to find a place for Burma in the sun of European diplomacy.

But considering the letter merely an expression of 'felicitations on the occasion of the first official contact between the king of Burma and the king of England', Maung Htin Aung misses the letter's economic and political importance (Maung Htin Aung 1967, 164-165).²⁶

Thirty years later, in his biographical account *Aloñ:mañ:tarā: Ū: Oñjaya [Alaungmintaya U Aung Zeya]* Tin Htwe's chapter on Anglo-Burmese relations, entitled 'The destruction of the establishment of the expansionists' was much more aggressively nationalistic.²⁷ Both the destruction of the English factory in Negrais in 1759 and the elimination of the French East India Company after the fall of Syriam in 1756 are presented as military responses to an intrusion. According to Tin Htwe, Alaungmintaya had planned to remove the English from Negrais since 1755. He even imagines (Tin Htwe 1991, 77) Alaungmintaya saying:

These enemies of the *sāsana* do not have any gratitude. It is not right that these foreign heretics have settled in Hainggyi which belongs to my realm. The various kinds of mischievous foreigners have to be captured now and handed over to me.

But this fabricated quote contradicts the fact that in early 1755, Alaungmintaya was keen to make contact with the English to buy powder and cannon from them. Tin Htwe's presentation of Alaungmintaya as eager to be rid of evil foreign expansionists is not supported by the key documents that were appended to his work, notably Alaungmintaya's letter of mid-June 1755 to Thomas Saunders, governor of Madras (Tin Htwe 1991, 150-151). Bearing in mind the date of its publication, 1991, it would be difficult not to see a reflection of the political tensions the country faced with the West after 1988.

26. It is curious that a Myanmar writer limited his analysis to an eighteenth century English translation of an original Burmese letter whose original text is easily accessible in the most widely spread chronicle of Myanmar, the *Konbaungzet Yazawin*. It is even more surprising that the overall majority of Myanmar historians have never taken any interest into this extraordinary letter, which documents the rare attempt of an Asian monarch to enter into direct contact with a European king.

27. Tin Htwe 1991, 109-123. The chapter also provides readers with an overview of French-English rivalries in India.

A break with the retelling of traditional accounts took place only with the publication of Toe Hla's *Aloñ:mañ:tarā: krī: i Kunbhoñ rhve prañ* [*Alaungmintaya's Golden Konbaung Land*] in 1992 (Toe Hla 1992). He argues that Alaungmintaya was a man of political vision who dedicated his energy to the rebuilding of the state. He refers to local descriptions of the country's anarchy at the fall of Ava to highlight the merit of the king refounding the state. His high regard for Alaungmintaya may thus fit well with official views of heroes of the past which the authoritarian military government that ruled from 1988 until 2011 approved. Toe Hla, unlike others, frequently cites original sources and is the first Burmese historian who raises a critical awareness for interpreting the available evidence. Quoting both the chronicles and the king's own orders, he reconstructs some of the socio-economic and political context to make sense of Alaungmintaya's policies and presents the king's personality in a less sketchy and simplified way than found in earlier Burmese historiography.

While Daw Ohn Kyi's more recent biography of Alaungmintaya (Ohn Kyi 2010) looks like a bare retelling of the record found in the *Alaungmintayayagi Ayedawpon*, the author provides her readers with a systematic, introductory overview of the administration under the king's rule. One might wish that the author's excellent knowledge of the sources would take her to writing a more appealing and comprehensive work on the king.²⁸

Toe Hla and Ohn Kyi's academically sound writings are a step away from nationalistic history writing, but their appraisals are limited to an internal, domestic perspective (Toe Hla 1992, 29-35; Ohn Kyi 2010, 165-78). Their conclusion seems to be that the king should be judged upon the merit of his best intentions and his political and administrative consolidation.

While educated readers may have access to books such as these, most other people likely learn about King Alaungmintaya from school books. A brief look at the representation of the king in the curriculum of history text books will conclude our investigation of Burmese representations of the king.

In Third Standard (8-9 years old), the children learn that Alaungmintaya was a remarkable young man with an outstanding personality who foresaw the decline of Ava and overcame interior divisions in the country by his astuteness. He looked after the welfare of the country and its religion. He attacked aggressive neighbors such as Manipur and Ayutthaya and eliminated the French and English expansionists. Nothing is said, as mentioned above, about the military events that dominated the longest part of his reign: the war against Pegu and the Mon kingdom of Hamsavati. In post-independence Myanmar, the Mon cultural legacy was increasingly celebrated as a foundational element of the rise of the Myanmar Buddhist civilization during the Pagan period. The fact that the rise of the Konbaung dynasty was first of all built on the destruction of the

28. Daw Ohn Kyi is the editor of the most recently published manuscript of Lakwè Nōrathā's *Aloñ:mañ:tarā are:tōpun* (see Lakwè Nōrathā 2009).

predominantly Mon kingdom in the middle of the eighteenth century has either been excluded from the curriculum, or its presence has been reduced, as it did not match the concept of ethnic consensualism promoted by successive governments in Myanmar.

In Fourth Standard, school children are introduced to the topic of Thai-Myanmar relations. They learn that Alaungmintaya took possession of Dawei (Tavoy) and the north of Tenasserim from Siam, but that the Thais were responsible for the war, as they had unrightfully taken possession of border villages. The invasion of Siam, explains the history textbook, led to the conquest of Dawei and Myeit (Mergui) which re-established the territorial unity that had been broken since the time of King Nanda Bayin in the late seventeenth century.²⁹ Only in Eighth Standard is an overview of the conquests and battles during the reign of Alaungmintaya given. While the king is presented as the unifier of the country, the fact that the English had provided arms to Mon rebels, generally omitted in Western historiography, is underscored.

What young people may thus remember is Alaungmintaya being a defender of the national territory against aggressive neighbors and expansionist Europeans. In their analysis of Myanmar history textbooks, Rosalie Metro and Nicolas Salem-Gervais show the shift towards a national identity 'ever more based on ancient and glorious "Myanmar" essence' under the post-1988 military regime (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012, 29-30).³⁰ One notable aspect of this has been the substitution of great kings, such as Alaungmintaya, for Aung San as national hero.

From a critical academic viewpoint, the simplistic perceptions found in schoolbooks are not reflective of the historical status of the king and the wide-ranging interest of his reign. Nationalist historical discourses have led to a representation which is no less a caricature than those found in western writing. While schoolbooks affirm a general image of Alaungmintaya as an exceptional figure, a military hero and a model ruler, their depictions are based on a partial interpretation of the evidence. For example, the invasions of Manipur and Siam: while Manipur had been an aggressive neighbor twenty years before Alaungmintaya's rise, it was no longer a rival in 1758 when Alaungmintaya meddled in Manipuri court politics. The description of the eighteenth century French and English as 'expansionists' in modern Burmese historical writing is not completely wrong-headed. But qualifying them as such before anything else, overshadows the fact that they were above all traders, and passes over the fact that Alaungmintaya was keen to see foreign traders flock back to the kingdom after the civil war so as to revive the lucrative trade with South India. As mentioned above, East India Company sources leave

29. The special volume on Thai-Myanmar relations of the history curriculum for the middle level of basic education presents the invasion of Siam and the conquest of Daway and Beit as the sole consequence of Siamese provocations against border villages (School books committee 2006, 14-15).

30. For a reference to the use of Alaungmintaya as a model for current leaders, see Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012, 40. An interesting discussion of Burmese school books is also found in Smith 2010, 1-78.

no doubt that Alaungmintaya was very open-minded on relations with the English. These relations soured because of the inconsistent policies of the East India Company towards the kingdom when its directors decided to focus on their long-term interests in India after events in Bengal in 1757. To praise Alaungmintaya only for doing away with the ugly English is not really doing him the honor he deserves. Nationalist history does not always serve its heroes well.



Studying the image of King Alaungmintaya leads to interesting insights about the way that successive generations of Burmese and Western writers have seen and interpreted the political decisions, military deeds and diplomatic craftsmanship of this Myanmar king and dynastic founder. The lack of an interpretational consensus in Western and Burmese/Myanmar discourses on Alaungmintaya is not just a matter of curiosity. Taking stock and comparing these divergent representations raises questions about the use of historical sources and the social and ideological conditioning of historical writing. Our review of the variant representations of the king reflects the historical projections of individual writers within the context of generally held beliefs and prevailing ideologies. Authors seem largely unconscious about the teleological and subliminal prejudices that orient their writing. We have also noted that with the exception of Lieberman's influential work in the Western academic sphere and Toe Hla's innovative approach in Myanmar, most interpretations of the king's reign do not step on new research or the exploration of previously unstudied or newly discovered sources. It is surprising that even post-colonial representations have generally lacked any ambition to broaden our understanding of the king's reign. But each image or cliché stands also as a historical marker *per se*, on its own and in its own way. No image is useless, 'passé' or outdated, once we can reposition it within its own context, as we have tried to do in this research.

Ideological, paedagogical and academic approaches towards the use of historical materials vie with each other for the production of a biographical account. Historians try, or should do so, to understand a man's life as it was embedded in the cultural matrix and socio-political networks of his own times. The intricate task of providing a fair biographical account is not simply a matter to strike a balance between the heroization and the demonization of the king, but to reach out for a deeper understanding of the king's historical role. We are still at a distance from such writing in Burmese history for any king. Given the limited state of thorough studies on eighteenth century Myanmar, there is still plenty of room to recreate in the mind of modern readers a life of Alaungmintaya with greater complexity than hitherto produced and enrich it with more details and analytical acumen. The prisms and blind spots of earlier representations can helpfully assist in keeping alive one's awareness for critical directions to be taken.

Note on Burmese titles of books and other documents

Titles of Burmese books have been transliterated to be searchable by specialists. The transliteration of Burmese names and titles in the text of the article and in the native references follows a model suggested by Christian Lammerts and Arlo Griffiths with the exception of ‘:’ used instead of ‘h’ to indicate the third tone. The system allows the reproduction of tones as well. For readers who are not familiar with Burmese, transcriptions of proper names have been included for easy reading and put between square brackets in the text or in the translation of the titles in the list of references. The English spelling of proper names of people and places that have entered the common historical vocabulary (such as Alaungmintaya or Banyas Dala) has not been altered. The new spelling of geographical names created by the 1989 reform has not been applied. Therefore, Pegu is used instead of Bago and Ava instead of Inwa, Arakan instead of Rakhine. This is in line with habits by Western scholars and historians to keep on using spellings established in the existing historical literature. Therefore the use of Burma instead of Myanmar (now widely spread in international usage) is not a political statement, but a convenient choice to refer to the geographical and historical entity as it existed in the late royal and throughout the colonial period.

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