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Eunuchs in Burmese history: An overview

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Despite the fact that Burmese courts had sizeable harems and that eunuchs are typically associated with harems, little attention has been paid to the presence of eunuchs in Burmese courts. This essay provides an overview of the existing English-language literature on eunuchs in Burmese courts, focusing on the three Burmese courts for which mention of eunuchs has survived in the historical record, namely the court at Pegu of the Taungoo dynasty (1486–1599), the court of Mrauk U of the Arakan kingdom (1429–1785), and the so-called ‘Court of Ava’ of the Konbaung dynasty (1765–1885). Noting the descriptions of eunuchs as Muslim, the essay considers the evidence regarding their numbers, their functions, and their possible origins.

Eunuchs played major roles in the courts of the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Persian empires. Because they were castrated and could not impregnate women, their main role has stereotypically been associated with guarding harems. As the Portuguese adventurer Duarte Barbosa noted of eunuchs in Bengal in 1518, ‘They value them much as guardians of their women.’¹ However, closer analyses of the role of eunuchs in these empires reveals that eunuchs played much wider roles, serving kings in a variety of capacities, ranging from personal attendants and trusted confidantes to treasurers, imperial administrators and military commanders. As imported slaves with no family and therefore no interfering kin or need to develop an inheritance, eunuchs were socially more isolated, more dependent on the ruler’s approval and therefore considered more likely to be loyal.² They

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1 Duarte Barbosa, *The book of Duarte Barbosa: An account of the countries bordering on the Indian Ocean and their inhabitants*, trans. Mansel Longworth Dames, 2nd ser., 49, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1921[1518]), vol. II, p. 147. Similarly in 1607, the French traveller François Pyrard explained that even outside the palace, ‘This is in order to put them in charge of the women, and the keys of the house; they trust them in all things, and never their wives.’ *The voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil*, trans. and ed. Albert Gray (New York: Burt Franklin, 1887[1619]), p. 332.

2 In reality, some eunuchs married and adopted children. More research needs to be done on the relatives of Burmese eunuchs.

also could provide a useful check on the power of traditional elite, forming an alternative power base.³

Little attention has been paid to the presence of eunuchs in Burmese courts. Burmese kings had sizeable harems; John Nisbet suggests Burmese eunuchs were primarily associated with harem women, writing ‘The ladies of the royal household and their apartments were in charge of eunuchs (*Meinmaso*), who were only to be found in the capital and nowhere else in the country.’⁴ Typically scholars discussing the presence of eunuchs in Burma repeat virtually verbatim the claim that Sir Henry Yule, then secretary of the 1855 British mission to Ava, saw ‘many Muslims serving as eunuchs in the Konbaung dynasty of Burma’, but without citation or any further analysis.⁵ Remarkably, I found no mention of eunuchs in Yule’s account. In the interstices between unsourced scholarly assertions and Yule’s silence arise unexplored questions about the role of eunuchs in Burmese courts, their origins, their numbers, the relevance of their identification as Muslims, and whether they were present prior to the Konbaung dynasty.

This essay provides an overview of the existing English-language literature on eunuchs in Burmese courts. Eunuchs do not appear to have been present in the smaller kingdoms and tributary states that once existed across the region of modern Burma. Accordingly, this essay will focus on the three Burmese courts for which mention of eunuchs has survived in the historical record, namely the court at Pegu of the Taungoo dynasty (1486–1599), the court of Mrauk U of the Arakan kingdom (1429–1785), and the so-called ‘Court of Ava’ of the Konbaung dynasty located variously at Ava (1765–83, 1821–42), Amarapura (1783–1821, 1842–59) and Mandalay (1859–85). In each case I shall consider the evidence regarding the numbers of eunuchs, their functions and their possible origins, noting variations across historical periods and across these kingdoms. As I am an anthropologist specialising in Thailand, a fuller understanding on their roles will await the insights of historians with deeper expertise in the gender politics of Burmese courts.⁶ Overall, the available evidence

3 See for example, Shaun Tougher, *The eunuch in Byzantine history and society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 47; Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The eunuchs in the Ming dynasty* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996); Jane Hathaway, *The chief eunuch of the Ottoman harem: From African slave to power broker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

4 John Nisbet, *Burma under British rule—and before* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1901), p. 205. Nisbet’s account reverses the stereotype of eunuchs policing palace women, instead placing eunuchs under women’s control. Kings Bayinnaung (r. 1550–81), Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819), and Mindon Min (r. 1853–78) each had over 50 consorts who bore over 100 children. Servants added to the overall size of the harems. In Nisbet and the *Royal Orders of Burma*, the term for eunuch is *meinmaso* (*mainmazo*). Other terms appear to include *panduat* and *thin’kwot-pyee’thau-thoo*. On the latter see W.H. Sloan, *A practical method with the Burmese language* (Rangoon: American Mission Press, 1876), p. 46.

5 Henry Yule, *A narrative of the mission to the court of Ava in 1855* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1968[1858]).

6 This essay emerged as the result of observing a controversial Thai village election held in 1995. As I researched changing electoral laws, I was surprised to learn that women could vote already in 1897: see Katherine Bowie, ‘Women’s suffrage in Thailand: A Southeast Asian historiographical challenge’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, 4 (2010): 708–41. Realising the original law was drafted by a prince who grew up in the palace led me to research the structure of Thai harems and then harems cross-culturally. Given the importance of eunuchs in the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Persian courts, I became interested in learning more about the role of eunuchs across Southeast Asia.

suggests that eunuchs were imported as indicated by their identification as Muslim, were relatively few in number, and served the court already during the Arakan dynasties in a variety of roles—but not as harem guards.

Court of Pegu (Bago)

The earliest evidence of the presence of eunuchs in the region of modern-day Burma comes from the account of the Portuguese Jesuit priest, Nicolas Pimenta.⁷ In recounting the chaos of the fall of Pegu in 1599, Pimenta describes the final desperate actions of King Nanda (r. 1581–99), writing, ‘The King is said to have killed two hundred Eunuches, lest they should betray his huge treasures.’⁸ Beyond hinting at a role guarding his treasury, Pimenta’s account provides no further insight into the origin or functions of these eunuchs.

Pimenta’s reference to eunuchs, let alone their murder, is not corroborated. Other Europeans had travelled to Pegu before Pimenta, however they made no mention of eunuchs (but see [fig. 1](#)).⁹ With the possible exception of Arakan, there is no evidence of eunuchs in any of Pegu’s neighbouring kingdoms at this time. The Taungoo empire had various overland routes to the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, but there is no evidence of eunuchs in the Ayutthayan kingdom prior to the reign of King Narai (1656–88).¹⁰ Pegu also connected to China by sea through Malacca and via two main overland routes through Ava and through Chiang Mai; although China had thousands of eunuchs in its courts, there is no evidence that the Chinese court sent eunuchs to Pegu.¹¹ Writing in 1587, Ralph Fitch notes that ships came to Pegu from Arabia, Bengal, the Coromandel coast, China and the Spice Islands; however, there is no mention made of eunuchs being imported.¹² Nonetheless, eunuchs may have been presented as gifts by Muslim traders; furthermore, the court was clearly wealthy enough to purchase them.

Other European visitors to Pegu may have taken the presence of court eunuchs for granted and hence not worthy of special comment. It is also possible that eunuchs

7 Nicolas Pimenta, ‘Jesuit letters on Pegu in the early seventeenth century by Nicolas Pimenta and others’, ed. Michael W. Charney, *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 2, 2 (2004): 180–87. There may have been eunuchs earlier. Ngazishin Kyawzwa who became king in 1382 had a son named Okzana the Eunuch, however, it is unclear if he was castrated; for details see L.E. Bagshawe, *The Maniyadanabon of Shin Sandalinka*, data paper no. 115 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1981).

8 Pimenta, ‘Jesuit letters’, p. 187. For more on the conquest of Pegu, see ‘Briefe account of the Kingdom of Pegu’ [c.1621], trans. A. MacGregor, *Journal of the Burmese Research Society* 16, 2 (1926): 99–138. See also Victor Lieberman, *Burmese administrative cycles: Anarchy and conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Michael Charney, ‘The 1598–1599 siege of Pegu and the expansion of Arakanese imperial power into lower Burma’, *Journal of Asian History* 28, 1 (1994): 39–57.

9 These accounts include those of Nicola di Conti, Ralph Fitch, Duarte Barbosa, Hieronimode Santo Stephano, Ludovico Di Varthema, Alexander Hamilton, Cesar Fredericke and Gaspero Balbi.

10 For details see U San Nyein, ‘Trans peninsular trade and cross regional warfare between the maritime kingdoms of Ayudhya and Pegu in the mid-16th century–mid 17th century’, in *Port cities and trade in western Southeast Asia* (no editor) (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies Chulalongkorn University, 1998), pp. 55–64. On eunuchs in Siam see Katherine Bowie, ‘Eunuchs in Siam: Before, during and after the reign of King Narai in Ayutthaya’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 110, 1 (2022): 1–20.

11 Tun Aung Chain, ‘The Portuguese trade in the kingdom of Hanthawaddy 1538–1599’, in *Port cities and trade*, p. 49. Earlier Taungoo rulers were likely aware of eunuchs. The famous eunuch-admiral Zheng He appears to have stopped in Tenasserim, if not Pegu.

12 J. Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch: England’s pioneer to India* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), pp. 164–5.



Figure 1. A painting by Ernest Wallcousins (1882–1976) showing a Pegu king in the seventeenth century possibly attended by two eunuchs. Wallcousins' evidentiary sources are unclear. From Harry Hamilton Johnston, *Pioneers in India* (London: Blackie & Son, 1913), opp. p. 166.

were not part of Taungoo courts and Pimenta was simply using the word ‘eunuchs’ as a pejorative reference to palace servants. However, whatever role eunuchs may have played in the Pegu court, it would appear they were killed, captured or fled after the fall of Pegu. The Burmese capital relocated to Ava in 1634.¹³ Furthermore, as the river leading to the city shifted course, Pegu was cut off from the sea and never regained its previous importance.

Court of Arakan

Although the kingdom of Arakan was founded in 1430, the earliest evidence for the presence of eunuchs dates to the reign of King Sirisudhammaraja (Thiri Thudhamma, 1622–38). The discussion of this court is divided into three main sections. The first two sections present the evidence regarding the roles of eunuchs during the reign of King Sirisudhammaraja when the kingdom was at its zenith, followed by a review of the evidence regarding their roles in the succeeding reigns. The third section presents evidence regarding the likely origin of eunuchs in Bengal. Eunuchs remained a presence in the Arakan court until its conquest by Ava in 1785.

Reign of King Sirisudhammaraja (1622–38)

Eunuchs served in capacities ranging from palace attendants to prime minister. The earliest mention of eunuchs is found in the account of Sebástien Manrique; Manrique was a Portuguese missionary who lived in the Arakanese capital of Mrauk U for the better part of five years from 1630 to 1635.¹⁴ Manrique describes several audiences with King Sirisudhammaraja, noting various roles of eunuchs as palace attendants. His first meeting took place in the evening. Escorted by a senior official through the palace, Manrique describes entering a third hall where the senior official knocked on a door. Manrique continues, ‘At the last knock a wicket above the door opened and an ancient hump-backed eunuch looked out, whose villanous countenance would instantly have stopped the cries of the noisest child.’¹⁵ Manrique’s gift to the king was ‘brought in by some eunuchs, who, after presenting it in our name and placing it where the Magh [Arakan] Monarch could see it, carried it away.’¹⁶ During another audience, he notes that ‘only Eunuchs and women are allowed to pass’ beyond the third doorway.¹⁷

13 The Pegu court had a sizeable harem; Fitch noted that ‘the king [Nanda] hath one wife and aboue [*sic*] three hundred concubines, by which they say he hath fourescore or fourescore and ten children’ (Ryley, *Ralph Fitch*, p. 164). The high status of queens in the Taungoo courts is reflected in the gifts Nanda’s father, Bayinnaung, offered to make merit at the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy; they included ‘a broom made from the hair of himself and his chief queen with which the floor of the sanctuary was to be swept’. Michael Edwardes, *Ralph Fitch, Elizabethan in the Indies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 114.

14 An even earlier mention occurs in 1612. King Min Yazagyi (1593–1612) sent his son, Min Mangri, to govern Chittagong in 1610. During his attempted revolt in 1612, Min Mangri was ‘protected by his chief eunuch’ (Michael Charney, ‘Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese: The relationship between the growth of Arakanese imperial power and Portuguese mercenaries on the fringe of mainland Southeast Asia 1517–1617’, *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, 2 [2005]: 1114). Whether this eunuch accompanied him from Arakan or joined his court in Chittagong is unclear.

15 Sebástien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebástien Manrique, 1629–1643*, ed. and trans. Charles Eckford Luard, Hakluyt Society, 2nd ser., vols. 59, 61 (Oxford: Hakluyt Society, 1926[1669]), p. 142.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Similarly, on another occasion, Manrique noted when the king retired, he was accompanied up to the final door by all present; thereafter 'he was invariably received by women, as from this point no one could penetrate farther into the palace, except eunuchs, guards, and young boys'.¹⁸

Some eunuchs evidently served as guards or soldiers. Manrique attended the king's coronation in 1635 and describes 'eunuch swordsmen' as part of the royal procession:

First came the Lascorusil, that is the captain of the cavalry escort and of the eunuch swordsmen. This man, who was of Maumetan [*sic*] race and sect, was dressed in green velvet ornamented with placques of silver, mounted upon a superb white horse from Arabia, and hence known in that country as an Ariquis. Its harness was of the same green colour and covered with silver ornamentation.

This Agarene [Middle Eastern] commander led six hundred horsemen in those squadrons.¹⁹

Manrique's account does not specify if all or only a portion of the 600 swordsmen were eunuchs. Manrique describes three squadrons, 'the first composed of Mogors ... clothed in silks of various textures, but all green in color'; the other two were composed of Peguans and Bramas [Burmese].²⁰ The 'Mogors' were the most likely to be eunuchs and so perhaps numbered about 200. This possibility is reinforced by a parallel use of eunuchs in Aceh which boasted a corps of horsed eunuch guards. An Englishman in Aceh in 1637 witnessed a procession of eunuchs on horseback carrying gilt long swords or gold scabbards and the Dutch described another similar procession in 1642 of some 150 *capados* (eunuchs) carrying halberds and royal gold ornaments.²¹

In addition to these roles within the palace, eunuchs also served in important roles in the court's administration of the kingdom. Dutch sources make it clear that the 'Lascorusil' in Manrique's account was in fact the army commander (that is, *lashkar-wazir*) and was himself a eunuch named Ashraf Khan.²² Ashraf Khan appears to have risen to power under somewhat unusual circumstances. Sirisudhammaraja became king upon the death of his father in 1622, however, his coronation ceremony was delayed some twelve years due to a prediction that Sirisudhammaraja would die within a year of his coronation. As the famous

18 Ibid., p. 201.

19 Ibid., p. 373.

20 Ibid., pp. 373–4. Manrique's editor, Luard, notes that green is the colour 'connected with the pilgrimage to Mecca, and it is worn by those who have completed it', Manrique, *Travels*, p. 373.

21 See Leonard Andaya, *Leaves of the same tree: Trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2008), p. 134. See also William Clarence-Smith, 'Eunuchs and concubines in the history of Islamic Southeast Asia', *Manusya: Journal of Humanities* 14 (2007): 14.

22 For example, Thibault d'Hubert, 'Pirates, poets, and merchants: Bengali language and literature in seventeenth-century Mrauk-U', in *Culture and circulation: Literature in motion in early modern India*, ed. Thomas de Bruijn and Allison Busch (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 52; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants: Dutch tribulations in seventeenth-century Mrauk-U', *Journal of Early Modern History* 1, 3 (1997): 221; Stephan Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal: The rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD' (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2008), p. 145. The Dutch referred to him as '*eenen den opperste capado*' (Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 221). '*Lascorusil*' or '*losclosy*' were European transliterations of the Persian form '*lashkar wazir*'.

Bengali poet Daulat Qazi (c.1600–1638), who lived in Arakan under Ashraf Khan's patronage, records, 'the great king (Sri Sudharma) knowing that his life would come to an end, transferred the rule of the kingdom to the hands of his minister Ashraf Khan'.²³ Ashraf Khan was both 'his chief minister and the commander of his army'.²⁴ Because the king was still then uncrowned, Ashraf Khan was 'virtually in charge of conducting the proceedings of the royal court'.²⁵

Furthermore, Ashraf Khan had networks reaching across the Indian Ocean. He was involved in international trade and apparently was allowed to send his own ambassadors to Batavia.²⁶ According to Daulat, Ashraf Khan's fame 'spread far and wide thanks to "traveling merchants" who sang his praises from Bihar up to Aceh'.²⁷ Believed to have gone on the haj, he was a Muslim apparently in the Sunni Sufi tradition, Daulat describing Ashraf Khan as 'That vessel of righteousness, the virtuous Ashraf Khan, Of the Hanafite sect, and a Chishti lineage'.²⁸ He was evidently very cosmopolitan, Daulat writing:

Men of various nationalities joined him. When Sri Ashraf Khan sat in court, the pick of the Mughals and the Pathans, numerous Hindus, both native and foreign, countless Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras also sat in rows. ... Sriyukta [sic] Ashraf was the chief minister and was like the moon full in its sixteen parts. He daily read books and heard recitals from books on moral teachings, poetry, sastras, all full of diverse *rasas* [poetic sentiments].²⁹

Daulat repeatedly praises Ashraf Khan as 'high-souled', 'virtuous', and 'prosperous', describing him as 'a generous donor and able lover' and equally 'the jewel of the army and a wish-fulfilling tree in charity'.³⁰ Indeed Satyendra Nath Ghosal notes that it is 'a grave omission of history in that of this chief minister whose name is Ashraf Khan and in whose able hands, according to Daulat, the reins of monarchy were entrusted for the major period of the king's reign, history betrays no knowledge'.³¹

23 Satyendra Nath Ghosal, 'Missing links in Arakan history', *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad commemoration volume: Essays on archaeology, art history, literature and philosophy of the Orient, dedicated to the memory of Abdul Karim Sahity-Visarad (1869–1953)*, ed. E.M. Haq (Dakha: Asiatic, 1972), p. 257.

24 Ibid., p. 258.

25 Ibid.

26 His international trade networks become clearer during the end of his career. Upset at his rice monopoly, the Dutch contemplated seizing one of the ships he was planning to send to Masulipatnam or Pulicat. He also was 'reported to have owned ships that were active in combat and blockaded the Tenasserim coast' (Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', pp. 148–9). After Ashraf Khan fell from power, a ship he had sent to Kalingapatnam in Orissa was lost and the new king seized another which was returning from Aceh with pepper and gold. Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 224.

27 D'Hubert, 'Pirates, poets, and merchants', p. 57.

28 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 222. Believed to refer to Ashraf Khan, Manrique (in *Travels*, p. 352) describes him as 'his false preceptor, a Mohammedan, who, having twice visited the hateful Mausoleum where the obscene sandals of the descendant of Hagar are said to be preserved [Mecca], was held to be a saint by these Barbarians'. See also Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 223; Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 149.

29 Ghosal, 'Missing links', p. 258.

30 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', pp. 222–3.

31 Ghosal, 'Missing links', p. 256. Assuming Manrique is referring to Ashraf Khan, Manrique denounces him as 'reprobate devotee of iniquity' and denounces his influence on the king (Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrant', p. 223; Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 149). He describes

However, Ashraf Khan's power was not to last. By the time of the king's coronation, Ashraf Khan and the *Laungkrak ca*, the king's treasurer and chief merchant who was soon to take the throne, were considered the 'two most important men in Arakan after the king'.³² In the face of rice prices quintupling due to famine from droughts that began in 1631, the king established a royal monopoly in rice and awarded it to Ashraf Khan in January 1636.³³ This decision put Ashraf Khan into direct conflict with the *Laungkrak ca* and the Dutch, the Dutch complaining of untrustworthy and dishonest characters such as the chief eunuch.³⁴ In May of 1638 King Sirisudhammaraja died, followed by the death of his successor, his son Min Sani, in June. Under these suspicious circumstances, the *Laungkrak ca* became King Narapati-kri. Immediately following his coronation, Narapati-kri had Ashraf Khan thrown in prison, his possessions confiscated, and after a prolonged period in jail, put to death. The Dutch representative Adam van der Mandere considered this a just punishment as, according to him, the *lashkar-wazir* had raised himself above the rest of the Arakanese nobility and had started to behave like he was king in Arakan.³⁵

Later Arakanese reigns (1638–1785)

Eunuchs continued to serve in high positions in subsequent reigns through the end of the dynasty in 1785. During King Narapati-kri's reign (1638–45) a high-ranking eunuch named as *Louwedansougrij* served as a member of the Privy Council.³⁶ This eunuch appears twice by name in accounts of events in the king's final year in 1645. In May 1645, as the king and his nobles were debating their next military campaign, the king 'ordered all the *meijnedaers*, mestizos, and Japanese to present themselves at the court. The eunuch *Louwedansougrij* collected all their weapons and registered them. The king issued these orders so that he would know how many foreign soldiers each noblemen controlled and how many, and what kind of, weapons these soldiers had at their disposal'.³⁷ In October 1645, the *Louwedansougrij* became embroiled in a conflict with another member of the

this person 'in promising to render him [the king] invisible and invincible, undertook that he should obtain the vast Empires of Delhi, Pegu, and Siam, besides many other similar inanities' (Manrique, *Travels*, p. 351). Intriguingly Manrique suggests that this royal adviser had acquired his influence with the king and his broader reputation as a saint through his curing powers (*ibid.*, pp. 352–3). Manrique implicates this 'reprobate' in black magic, incendiarism, and human sacrifices to secure his hold on the throne. See also Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 223; Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 149.

32 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 114. Conflict between these two men dated back to 1628 when the *Laungkrak ca* had tried to overthrow the king. This rebellion was suppressed at the time and a large number of the *Laungkrak ca*'s men were executed. See *ibid.*, p. 145.

33 For details see *ibid.*, p. 148.

34 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 222; for details of the conflict see Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', pp. 145–50.

35 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 152.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 169. Van Galen suggests *Louwedansougrij* was a title which probably referred to the *Louwe taung su kri*, or chief of the village of Louwe. Taung or 'river' Louwe is a village not far downstream of Mrauk U in the Kaladan valley; *ibid.*, p. 53.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Privy Council 'over the protection of a garden'; this conflict resulted in the imprisonment of the *Louwedansougrij*.³⁸

An unnamed eunuch, but clearly a senior figure trusted to deliver the king's messages, also appears during the earlier crisis involving the king's health in 1643. Narapati-kri became seriously ill in November 1642 and held no public audiences until June 1643. During this period, all contacts with the palace and the royal family were firmly in the hands of the queens of Narapati-kri; not even the king's eunuchs or the highest ranking courtiers were allowed inside the palace.³⁹ As Sanjay Subrahmanyam explains, both the courtiers and commoners 'came to believe that the king was dead, and that this fact was being concealed by the queen, who issued all orders during this period'.⁴⁰ According to the Dutch report, 'when unrest reached a point that the "land was wholly in revolt," the king called one eunuch in, and spoke to him; the eunuch then came out and reported that the ruler appeared to be in good health'.⁴¹

While this crisis reveals the degree of credibility this eunuch held as the king's representative, it also reveals the considerable power being exercised by Narapati-kri's queens, most notably Nat Shin May. Nat Shin May was Sirisudhammaraja's older half-sister and his primary queen.⁴² As Maurice Collis explains, 'she was not a woman to confine herself closely to her own apartments. She enjoyed the King's full confidence and it must be supposed that she sat in the council chamber and made her will felt among the courtiers and high officials'.⁴³ She allegedly had a longstanding affair with Narapati-kri before he became king. Implicated in the suspicious deaths of King Sirisudhammaraja and her son, she is alleged to have engineered Narapati-kri's rise to the throne.⁴⁴ As Collis explains, after her son's the death, Nat Shin May

sent out a summons to the members of the Council. They assembled in the audience-chamber at the palace. When all had sat down, it was noticed that the doors and windows of the hall were shut and bolted. This ominous sign had one meaning; they were to vote the way the Queen instructed them or they would never leave the chamber.⁴⁵

Thus, in contradistinction to the widespread presumption that eunuchs policed court women, this queen policed eunuchs even if they served as council ministers.

Eunuchs continued to be important in the Arakan court in the late seventeenth century. Dirk Vonck, the Dutch factory chief in Arakan from 1680 to 1683, provided

38 Ibid., p. 169.

39 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 228; Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 157.

40 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants', p. 228.

41 Ibid., p. 228.

42 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 122, 162; Jacques Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie: son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004), p. 252.

43 Maurice S. Collis, 'The strange murder of King Thiri-thudhamma', *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 13 (1923): 238.

44 Narapati-kri and some of his ministers took former queens of Sirisudhammaraja as their wives Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 152.

45 Collis, 'The strange murder', p. 242; see also Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 150. For more on this queen, see Leider, *Le royaume*, pp. 270–78.

an overview of the court during the last years of King Candasudhammaraja's reign (r. 1652–84). In addition to describing ten principal ministerial positions which comprised the king's privy council, Vonck notes:

The court is furthermore served by a number of eunuchs, of whom two are important. One eunuch is the king's chamberlain and treasurer and the other is charged with the supervision of the farmers in the neighbouring villages, he is also the master builder [architect] of the king and supervisor of all the [construction] works in the country.⁴⁶

He adds, 'Only the members of the king's Privy Council were allowed to enter the private audience chamber of the king and then only when called in by the eunuchs'.⁴⁷ Although no further specific information currently exists about the role of eunuchs in the eighteenth century, eunuchs remained a presence in the Arakan court at the time of its conquest in 1785.

Arakan's role in eunuch production and trade

Michael Peletz, who is one of the few scholars to have considered the subject of eunuchs in Southeast Asia, has suggested that eunuchs in the Burmese courts came from Arakan.⁴⁸ However, there is no evidence of castration specialists in Mrauk U or elsewhere in Burma, be it for war captives, criminals, or any other reason. As a specialised procedure with a significant rate of mortality, castration took place primarily at specialised centres.⁴⁹ In addition to sites in Europe, Central Asia, and northeastern Africa, there were centres in China, Vietnam, Java and Bengal. Thus eunuchs in Burmese courts would have been imported, embedding its courts in some form of the international slave trade. The likelihood of their importation is reinforced by the frequent designation of eunuchs as Muslim.

So where did the eunuchs in Arakan come from? Neither China nor Vietnam appear to have exported eunuchs to slave markets. However, Arakan courts would have had access to the eunuchs exported from castration centres in Africa, the Middle East, Java and Bengal.⁵⁰ Mrauk U was a cosmopolitan town. As Thibaut d'Hubert notes, there were many long-distance traders, most of whom 'originated from the three great Persianate empires of the time—the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires—as well as from the ports of the sultanates of Southeast Asia'.⁵¹ Muslims had dominated the routes for centuries across the Indian Ocean, particularly

46 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 54. Van Galen provides details of council roles.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

48 Michael Peletz, *Gender pluralism: Southeast Asia since early modern times* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 73.

49 Drawing on evidence that the price of eunuchs was as high as 20 times more than that of other slaves, Jan Hogendorn concludes that mortality rates went as high as 90%; Jan Hogendorn, 'The hideous trade: Economic aspects of the "manufacture" and sale of eunuchs', *Paideuma* 45 (1999): 146. The 17th century French jeweller, Jean Chardin, wrote of Persia that 'only one in four survives' and the 19th century French army doctor working in Egypt, Antoine Clot Bey, states that two-thirds die. G. Carter Stent, 'Chinese eunuchs', *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 11 (1877): 145. Recovery took about three months.

50 The supply of eunuchs from Java appears to have ended by the end of the 17th century. Clarence-Smith, 'Eunuchs and concubines', p. 8.

51 D'Hubert, 'Pirates, poets, and merchants', p. 50.

the Gujaratis whose trade routes linked to the Red Sea and Europe. Following the treaty of Amasya between the Ottomans and Safavids in 1555, Middle Eastern presence in the Indian Ocean expanded significantly. Gavin Hambly notes the presence of 'habshi' slaves shipped from Abyssinia or from the ports of East Africa.⁵² Thus it is possible that there were habshi eunuchs in the Mrauk U court and it is possible that Ashraf Khan was himself a habshi eunuch. However, it seems far more likely that he and other eunuchs were of Bengali origin.

To determine the origin of eunuchs in the Arakanese court of Mrauk U, it is important to differentiate the court from the kingdom. A close reading of existing sources suggests that the eunuchs in the court of Mrauk U came from Bengal, specifically from the mountainous regions of Sylhet and Ghoraghat. The primary port from which eunuchs were exported was Chittagong. Because Chittagong came under Arakanese control in 1538–1666, it is easy to understand how Arakan could be mistaken as a centre for the production of eunuchs, particularly given Arakan's role in the broader slave trade.

Bengal had a longstanding reputation as such a centre for eunuch production. Already in the thirteenth century Marco Polo wrote of Bengal:

There are many eunuchs, and from this province all the nobles and gentlemen from the neighbouring provinces are provided with them Indian merchants come to this province, and buy the eunuchs I have mentioned, and also many slaves, and then they take them to divers other countries to sell them again. Eunuchs and slaves are very numerous, because all who are taken prisoners by those people, are straight-way castrated, and then sold.⁵³

Similarly the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires wrote of eunuchs in Bengal in the *Suma Oriental* in 1515:

The Bengalees are great merchants ... The king is Moor, a warrior ... The people who govern the kingdom are Abyssinians. These are looked upon as knights; they are greatly esteemed; they wait on the kings in their apartments. The chief among them are eunuchs and these come to be kings and great lords in the kingdom ... They are more in the habit of having eunuchs in Bengal than in any other part of the world. A great many of them are eunuchs. Most of the Bengalees are sleek, handsome black men, more sharpwitted than the men of any other known race.⁵⁴

Abu'l Fazl-I-Allami included a chapter on the 12 districts of Bengal in his account of Akbar's reign in India. He specified that the sarkar of Ghoraghat has 'numbers of eunuchs' and Sylhet 'furnishes many eunuchs'.⁵⁵ In 1608, concerned that the practice

52 Gavin Hambly, 'A note on the trade in eunuchs in Mughal Bengal', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, 1 (1974): 128.

53 Marco Polo, *The travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Aldo Ricci (London: Routledge, 1931[c.1302]), p. 203.

54 Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515*, trans. Armando Cortesão, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944[1515]), vol. 2, p. 88.

55 Abu'l Fazl-I-Allami, 'Account of the twelve subhas', in *Ain-I-Akbari*, vol. II: *A gazetteer and administrative manual of Akbar's empire and past history of India* [c.1598], trans. H.S. Jarrett and annotated Jadu-Nath Sarkar (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1949), p. 136. Also known as Abu'l-Fazl

was spreading, the Mughal emperor Jahangir sent orders to the subahdar of Bengal to end the practice of child castration in Sylhet.⁵⁶ Highlighting the impact of incessant warfare, Stephan Van Galen notes that Bengal provided an “inner frontier,” a mountainous forested region of tribal peoples comprised of hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators, and pastoral nomads.⁵⁷ Although Muslims were major traders of eunuchs, they were forbidden from castrating fellow Muslims. Therefore eunuchs were typically captured from such non-Muslim populations.

In addition to slave-raiding, the practice was also the result of poverty and the need to pay tribute. In 1607, François Pyrard, a French traveller who was in Bengal, noted in graphic detail the great prevalence of eunuchs for trade and tribute:

One of the greatest trades in Bengal is in slaves; for there is a certain land subject to this king where fathers sell their children, and give them to the king as tribute; so most of the slaves in India are got from hence. Many of the merchants castrate them, cutting them when they are young, and not only the testicles, but also the entire organ. I have seen many of this kind, who appeared to have but a little hole for the passage of water.⁵⁸

Hambly summarises the motivations for castration as follows:

[D]ire poverty, long-established custom and the need to meet the revenue demands of the government (the Mughuls, for example, regularly sold revenue defaulters and their families into slavery) would have been among the likely incentives. Moreover, since eunuchs often acquired great wealth and influence it may have been reckoned an advantage in a society accustomed to the idea of human castration to have at least one member of a poor family in a position to win the ear of the affluent and the powerful.⁵⁹

Shadab Bano notes that eunuchs were not sold in the general market, but ‘were probably brought directly to the courts by the merchants trading in them’.⁶⁰ Hambly comments that ‘the merchants were mainly Muslims and that they purchased the children either direct from their parents or from kidnappers who had already castrated them’, adding ‘Where this was not the case, the merchants must have arranged for the operation to be undertaken by specialist surgeons, perhaps Hindus of the baidya caste.’⁶¹

ibn Mubarak and Abu'l Fadl, he describes three types of eunuchs, Sandali, Badami, and Kafuri, associated with sandalwood, almond and camphor colours and three types of castration. In Sandali (also known as *atlasī*), the entire genitals were removed; for Badami part of the penis was left, and for Kafuri the testicles were either crushed or cut off (p. 135). For further discussion see also Hambly, ‘A note on the trade in eunuchs’, pp. 125, 129; K.S. Lal, *The Mughal harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), p. 188.

56 However the order had little effect. See Hambly, ‘A note on the trade in eunuchs’, p. 129; see also Shadab Bano, ‘Slave markets in medieval India’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61 (2000): 369.

57 Van Galen, ‘Arakan and Bengal’, p. 224; see also David Ludden, ‘Investing in nature around Sylhet: An excursion into geographical history’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, 48 (2003): 5080–88.

58 Pyrard, *The voyage*, vol. I, p. 332.

59 Hambly, ‘A note on the trade in eunuchs’, p. 130.

60 Bano, ‘Slave markets’, p. 366.

61 Hambly, ‘A note on the trade in eunuchs’, p. 130. Baidya (also Vaidya) is a Hindu caste in Bengal associated with Ayurvedic physicians.

After undergoing castration, eunuchs also underwent special training. Writing in 1518, Duarte Barbosa's account suggests that eunuchs are not only castrated in Bengal, but also trained there:

The Moorish merchants of this city [Bengala [Gaur]] oftentimes travel up country to buy Heathen boys from their parents or from other persons who steal them and castrate them, so that they are left quite flat. Many die from this; those who live they train well and sell them ... These eunuchs they hold in high esteem as men of upright character, and some of them become their lords' factors, and some Governours and Captains of the Moorish Kings, so that they become very rich and have great estates.⁶²

Unfortunately little is known of their training in Sylhet. Because many of the young boys came from ethnic minorities, they likely were taught Bengali, the language widely used for administrative and literary purposes in many courts in northeastern South Asia, or Persian, widely used across the Indian Ocean.⁶³ Because eunuchs were more expensive than ordinary slaves, they were destined to serve in courts or other elite homes; therefore their training likely also included etiquette. That many became court treasurers suggests they received some training in accounting. That many served as royal guards suggests they also likely received military training. Based on the experiences of Ottoman eunuchs who apprenticed in noble homes in Cairo before being sent on to Constantinople, Bengali eunuchs may also have served as apprentices in Gaur or Chittagong before being exported to courts elsewhere.⁶⁴

The reputation of Bengal as a source of eunuchs was widespread across the Indian Ocean. By the early seventeenth century, it was common for households in Portuguese western India to have slaves designated 'bengala'.⁶⁵ Similarly Francisco Pelsaert describes typical Mughal harems as having for each wife 'Two or three eunuchs, or more, who are merely purchased Bengali slaves'.⁶⁶ In the court of Safavid Persia, historically only the sultan could have 'black' eunuchs. According to Sir John Chardin's account in 1686, although some were African, 'black' referred to eunuchs who came from India, mostly from Malabar and the Gulf of Bengal.⁶⁷ Those from Malabar may well have originated in Bengal and been transhipped to Persia via ports in Malabar.

That Arakan was not itself important as a eunuch or slave-producing state is further implied in a letter written by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) representative Adam van der Mandere dated November 1638. Concerned about Arakan's possible loss of Chittagong, Mandere writes:

The idea that Arakan might consequently loose its territories in Bengal caused grave concern in VOC circles: Were they to loose these lands, the whole kingdom will be ruined.

62 Barbosa, *The book of Duarte Barbosa*, vol. II, p. 147; also in Hambly, 'A note on the trade in eunuchs', p. 126.

63 See D'Hubert, 'Pirates, poets, and merchants'.

64 On Ottoman training see Hathaway, *The chief eunuch*.

65 Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrant', p. 215.

66 Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India, the remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1972[1626]), p. 65.

67 See Kathryn Babayan, 'Eunuchs', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. IX, fasc. 1, 2012: 64–9. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/eunuchs#iv>. See also Bano, 'Slave markets'.

Arakan, without Bengal, will be worth nothing to the Company ... In Arakan itself slaves are not to be had, other than those coming from Bengal. If the Arakanese loose Bengal it will be more profitable to establish a factory in Chittagong.⁶⁸

Giving additional credence to the likely origin of eunuchs in Bengal, and particularly in the region near Sylhet, is William Foley's account of his trip to Rambree Island in Arakan in 1835. He says the town, which was once an important port in the Arakan kingdom, had a population of 9,001, of which Mughs (Arakanese) comprised the majority, numbering 5,803. The Mughs in turn were comprised of three major castes, one of which were employed as eunuchs:

Under the head of Mughs (*Magas*) are included many inferior castes, such as the *Hyah*, *Phra-gyoung*, and *Dhung*. Much uncertainty prevails with respect to the origin of these castes; it is either involved in obscurity, or totally lost to those with whom I have conversed upon the subject. By some, it is affirmed, that the *Hyahs* were originally natives of a country beyond *Manipur*, but nothing further could be obtained, so as to facilitate a discovery of their descent, or account for their settlement in the province. In former days, the *Hyahs* tilled the crown lands, were exempted from taxation, and gave one-half of their produce to the sovereign. It is insinuated by the *Rakkheins*, that not a few of the *Hyah* caste were employed as eunuchs in the service of the Arracan Rajas. They now occupy themselves in the cultivation of *pawn* and *chilly* gardens, but are looked upon as an inferior caste, and consequently never intermarry with the *Rakkheins*.⁶⁹

Manipur is a region adjacent to Sylhet. Foley's description also dovetails with the description of the eunuchs in court who oversaw gardens and ricelands during the Mrauk U dynasty.⁷⁰

Arakan summary

Eunuchs in the court of Mrauk U most likely came from Bengal. Despite their likely origins as ethnic minorities, they were identified as Muslim. Just how eunuchs came to participate in the Arakanese court is unclear. On the one hand, the court during the reign of King Sirisudhammaraja was wealthy enough to afford to buy eunuchs. On the other hand, they may have been gifts from merchants seeking trade advantages or even offered as tribute from governors of Chittagong. There is no evidence that the Portuguese, Dutch, British or French were interested in the eunuch trade as opposed to the general slave trade. Instead evidence indicates that the major merchants involved in this specialised trade were Muslim, with eunuchs primarily exported out of Chittagong.

Eunuchs had a significant presence in the Arakan court, fulfilling a range of functions. As Van Galen summarises, eunuchs 'managed the affairs of the palace,

68 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 153.

69 William Foley, 'Journal of a tour through the island of Rambree, with a geological sketch of the country, and brief account of the customs, &c. of its inhabitants', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 4, 37–40 (1835): 201. My thanks to Jacques Leider for this reference.

70 The *Phra-gyoung* are described as former temple slaves and the *Dhung* as Hindus formerly from Bengal. See *ibid.*, pp. 201–2.

controlled access to the king and were in charge of royal domains'.⁷¹ More specifically, surviving accounts reveal that eunuchs served in roles as army commander, prime minister, member of the Privy Council, holder of royal monopolies, treasurer, architect, construction supervisor and overseer of lands, in addition to chamberlain, palace attendants and possibly palace guards. What is not mentioned in these accounts is any possible role overseeing harems; indeed Queen Nat Shin May exercised control over even the king's eunuchs, rather than vice versa.

The number of eunuchs may have been as high as two hundred during the reign of King Sirisudhammaraja, the majority apparently serving as royal guards. Although evidence regarding the presence of eunuchs in the Arakan court in the eighteenth century is lacking, it is likely the number of eunuchs decreased. Following the loss of Chittagong in 1666, court revenues declined such that the court would unlikely have been able to sustain any large retinues. Trade had almost come to a standstill in Arakan in 1677. The most important merchants had either died or left and the population had become poorer. There was growing factional strife at the court. These conflicts were manifest in a series of fires. On 27 February 1678 a large fire in Mrauk U destroyed the palace and about 3,000 to 4,000 houses; it killed 4,000 to 5,000 people including the young daughter of the king, who himself narrowly escaped death. A subsequent series of fires destroyed the palace of the king's mother, of one of the king's daughters, and the cloth market.⁷² As Jacques Leider summarises the decades that preceded the Burmese conquest,

the Arakanese chronicle recorded a constant deterioration of the political order. The increase of violence was accompanied by a loss of social norms: bands of pretenders to the throne roamed the countryside, villages were burnt to the ground, pagodas were destroyed, and reliquaries desecralized.⁷³

The Arakanese kingdom was conquered on 9 January 1785 by the Burmese Konbaung dynasty. Mrauk U was devastated during the invasion. The Burmese executed thousands of men and deported a considerable portion of the Arakanese population—including members of the royal family and eunuchs—to central Burma. However, Arakanese eunuchs continued to play roles in the early Konbaung court, some evidently returning to Arakan. Some eunuchs may have continued to serve in administrative positions even after 1826 when Arakan was ceded to the British.

Court of Ava

Although the Konbaung dynasty was founded in 1752, eunuchs do not appear to have been present before its conquest of Arakan. However, eunuchs became an element of the court after 1785 through to the dynasty's end in 1885. This section reviews the evidence of the number, role and origin of eunuchs during the reign of King Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819) and during subsequent reigns.

71 Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal', p. 55.

72 Ibid., p. 200.

73 Jacques Leider, 'Forging Buddhist credentials as a tool of legitimacy and ethnic identity: A study of Arakan's subjection in nineteenth-century Burma', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, 3 (2008): 426.

Reign of King Bodawpaya

The earliest mention of eunuchs in the court of Ava appears in the *Royal Orders of Burma* (hereafter ROB), dated 4 Feb 1789.⁷⁴ The order, issued by King Bodawpaya following the Burmese conquest of Arakan, reads:

Myo Wun–Town Officer, Mrok U, shall send, without exception, all the members of the Arakan Royal Family and Arakan ministers; he shall execute anyone of them who refuses to come here or who tries to go back during the trip here; and he shall also send here all Brahmins, barbers and eunuchs of the Arakanese court.⁷⁵

Their presence in the court of Ava is confirmed by British envoys Michael Symes and Captain Hiram Cox who visited Amarapura in 1795 and 1796, respectively; both note the presence of eunuchs and describe them as Muslim or Mahomedans.⁷⁶ Symes describes the eunuchs as ‘Muslims who had been taken as prisoners in military campaigns against neighboring Arakan’ and ‘kept at the royal court primarily as tokens of military prowess’.⁷⁷ Captain Hiram Cox offers a description of their attire and position of symbolic importance in royal audiences, writing:

To the right and left of the throne ... were ranged twenty of the King’s bodyguard ... Nearer the throne, to the right or west side were seated in a line with the bodyguards, six eunuchs of the palace, native Mahomedans, in white jammās and coloured silk lungees, with white handkerchiefs round their heads.⁷⁸

Both the ROB and these British accounts suggest that the earliest eunuchs in the court of Ava did indeed come from Arakan, thereby making it likely that eunuchs were not an intrinsic part of the Burmese court of Ava’s administrative structures prior to 1785. The ROB mentions eunuchs a total of eleven times across its span from 1598–1885. Of these mentions, nine occur between 1789 and 1810; two occur in 1819. This concentration of mentions suggests that the presence of eunuchs in the court of Ava was generating new issues that needed to be addressed, in turn suggesting that their presence was new. Although Cox only mentions six eunuchs in attendance during his

74 *The Royal Orders of Burma (1598–1885)* (ROB), ed. Than Tun, 10 vols. (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 1985). The ROB editor writes that eunuchs ‘probably were in the Mranma palace from very [early] times. The earliest reference to eunuch was in 1661. His name was Min: Ma Sui: Ussaman. In 1673 another eunuch called Min: Ma Cui: Rajaduta was mentioned.’ The editor also notes that the eunuchs brought from Arakan ‘were given some administrative charges and some even in the fighting forces’ (ROB, vol. 10, p. 76). Lieberman notes that during the succession crisis in 1673, ‘the senior interior minister put a eunuch in charge of the palace with orders to prevent all communication with the outside’ (p. 147). During the crisis of 1661, some 6,000 people from Martaban fled to Siam, raising the question if eunuchs were among them (Lieberman, *Burmese administrative cycles*, p. 202). Unfortunately the English translation is an incomplete compilation of orders and so contextualising these eunuchs must await someone more knowledgeable than I.

75 ROB, vol. 5, p. 43.

76 Bodawpaya moved the court from Ava to Amarapura in 1782. For more on Cox’s mission, see G.P. Ramachandra, ‘Captain Hiram Cox’s mission to Burma, 1796–1798: A case of irrational behaviour in diplomacy’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, 2 (1981): 433–51.

77 Michael Symes, *An account of an embassy to the kingdom of Ava in the year 1795* (Edinburgh: Constable & Co., 1827), vol. 2, p. 69.

78 Hiram Cox, *Journal of a residence in the Burmhan empire, and more particularly at the court of Amarapoorah* (London: John Warren and G & W.B. Whittaker, 1971[1821]), p. 88. My emphasis.

audience, there were likely more; the ROB lists the names of fourteen individual eunuchs between 6 July 1801 to 29 Aug 1819.⁷⁹

The eunuchs mentioned in the royal orders appear to have some status since several indicate the eunuchs are being given villages or other taxable entities 'in fief' (for example, 6 July 1801; 23 May 1803; 29 August 1819). Another two orders specify that certain families are to provide 'food and shelter' or 'to feed and to look after' a specified eunuch (28 September 1806; 6 November 1808). The 26 October 1808 order states that the 'relatives' of three eunuchs would be exempted from military service. The 24 October 1808 order appears to suggest that the subordinates given to two named eunuchs were also not expected to contribute to military preparations. The orders of 22 January 1810 and 15 September 1819 both suggest the named eunuchs were responsible for gathering tax or tribute. The 22 January 1810 order is noteworthy for the large number of households involved; it reports that of the 121,143 houses in Dhanawat of Mrauk U, 3,265 houses of 'relatives of eunuchs' paid tax direct to the king and orders that '[e]unuchs shall collect the tax from the houses of their relatives and send it to the King direct'.⁸⁰

The royal orders are also interesting for their frequent references to places in Arakan (for example, Dhanawat is mentioned in orders of 20 July 1806, 22 January 1810, and 15 September 1819; others places mentioned may also be in Arakan). These references suggest some eunuchs remained in administrative positions in Arakan. While most of the orders refer to support or special privileges these various individual eunuchs were entitled to receive, the 20 July 1806 order grants the request of three eunuchs to be allowed 'to return to Dhanawat (Mroka U/Myo Haung) to construct tanks, bridges and rest houses for public use'.⁸¹

The British accounts suggest eunuchs, given their small numbers, had a purely symbolic role in court. However, evidence from the ROB suggest elite eunuchs continued to perform administrative roles paralleling their former positions in the Arakanese court, namely as holders of royal monopolies, construction supervisors, tax collectors, and overseers of lands. By continuing these roles, Arakanese eunuchs may have helped consolidate Burmese control over Arakan. It is also possible that the Konbaung court acquired new eunuchs directly from Bengal to facilitate its access to Bengal and the Indian market. As Leider explains, 'The possession of Arakan opened up a new road towards Bengal and North India that combined a maritime track between Chaka and Arakan's coast with the road of the Am pass that linked Arakan with the

79 ROB, vol. 10, p. 7. The ROB index mentions two eunuchs 15 May 1867 orders, but I did not find them in the English translation of ROB for that date.

80 ROB, vol. 6, pp. 167–8. It is unclear if eunuchs had relatives or if this refers to their subordinates.

81 ROB, vol. 5, pp. 262–3. These development efforts would have dovetailed with Bodawpaya's broader efforts to support the political and administrative integration of Arakan. These efforts included building new ordination halls and other efforts to encourage the assimilation of the local population (for more, see Leider 'Forging Buddhist credentials'). The Thinzin Pagoda in Mrauk U (Myohaung), Akyab district, was evidently built by the eunuchs of the royal palace on the hill where they lived and were buried. See *List of ancient monuments in Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1916), p. 6; https://ia801607.us.archive.org/9/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.37793/2015.37793.List-Of-Ancient-Monuments-In-Burma_text.pdf (last accessed 13 Mar. 2023). Regarding the repair of old religious buildings in Sandoway ordered by King Bodawphaya, see ROB, vol. 18, Aug. 1787.

Irrawaddy valley.⁸² A number of royal orders regarding road repairs and trade activities underscore the importance of the trade through Arakan and the king's early interest in commercial contacts with the British.⁸³ The importance of the trans-Arakan roads is also underscored by at least eight missions sent by the king to northern India.⁸⁴

Eunuchs may also have held symbolic value for King Bodawpaya. As Leider has argued, Bodawpaya's decision to relocate the Arakan elite was not merely a demonstration of the subjugation of this region, but also reflected a desire to draw upon Arakanese status and expertise. As Leider explains, 'Because Bodawphaya wanted to reform kingship in Burma by turning to its Indian Sanskrit roots, he was keen to study the cultural heritage of Arakan as well.'⁸⁵ Bodawpaya also relocated the abbots of the major monasteries and other learned scholars of Mrauk-U. Arakanese court Brahmins or *punna* who were of Bengali origin 'played a dominant role at the court of King Bodawphaya and they remained at the top of the strictly hierarchised *punna* group until the end of the Burmese monarchy in 1885'.⁸⁶ Having eunuchs in his court may have added to his court's grandeur and been a reflection of efforts in gaining international prestige at a time when courts around the Indian Ocean had eunuchs.

Under King Mindon

Following King Bodawpaya's reign, eunuchs appear to have served primarily as royal messengers through the end of the Konbaung dynasty in 1885. Albert Fytche, British Chief Commissioner, writes of his visit to Mandalay in 1876, during the reign of King Mindon (r.1853–78), 'The number of eunuchs kept up by the King is small'; nonetheless he adds, 'Their influence is much dreaded by the King's ministers and others in authority, as they are reputed to be very spiteful towards those who offend them.'⁸⁷ The origin of this generation of eunuchs is unclear. Fytche provides the following description of one of the eunuchs, who appears to have acculturated as Burmese:

One, whom I frequently saw when I was at Mandalay—and who appeared to be a special favourite of the King's—was tall for a Burmese, and appeared strong, but loosely put together. He was said to be young in years, but his face was much wrinkled, which was attempted to be concealed, apparently, by a thick wash of *tha-nat-kha*,—a fragrant yellowish pigment, much used by Burmese ladies for rubbing on their face and body, and made from the bark and root of the *Murraya paniculata*, an ornamental flowering shrub of the citron species.⁸⁸

The accounts of James G. Scott and Fryniwyd Tennyson Jesse provide three instances in court involving eunuchs. At least one—and possibly all three—of these events

82 Jacques P. Leider, 'Politics of integration and cultures of resistance: A study of Burma's conquest and administration of Arakan (1785–1825)', in *Asian expansions: The historical experiences of polity expansion in Asia*, ed. Geoff Wade (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 188.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 194.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Leider, 'Forging Buddhist credentials', p. 416.

86 *Ibid.*

87 Albert Fytche, *Burma: Past and present* (London: C.K. Paul & Co., 1878), p. 248.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

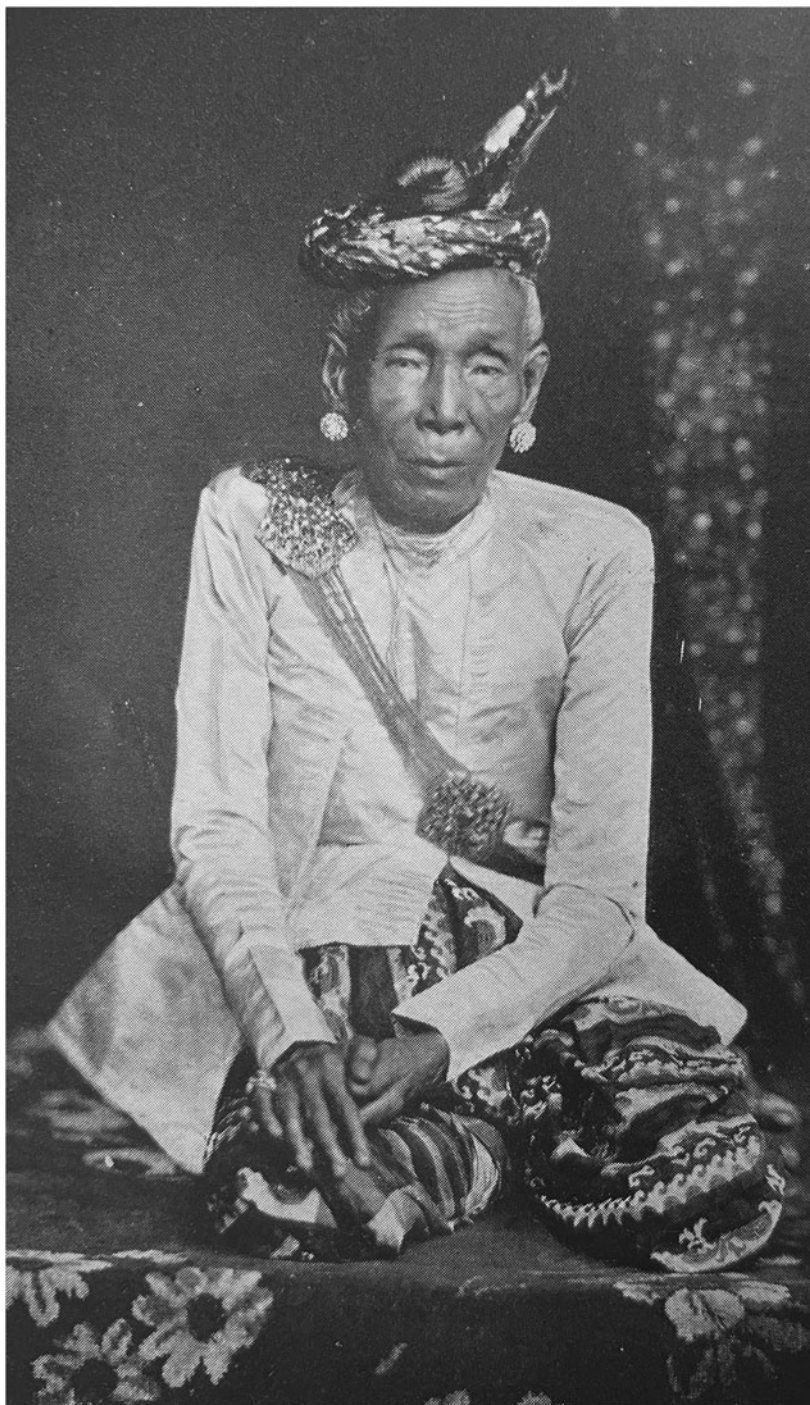


Figure 2. U Hka Gyl, the Chief Eunuch during the reign of King Mindon. From Vincent Clarence Scott O'Connor, *Mandalay and other cities of the past in Burma* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1907), p. 21.

involve ‘the chief eunuch’, named U Hka Gyl. He may also have been the eunuch Fytche mentions having seen frequently. U Hka Gyl was apparently important enough that a photograph of him survives (see [fig. 2](#)). In each example it is clear the eunuch is highly trusted because he is involved in extremely delicate situations.

The first instance places the chief eunuch, U Hka Gyl, in the room as King Mindon lay dying. With some 62 consorts and over 100 children, the machinations for succession that would lead to the arrests and subsequent murders of some 70 to 80 members of the royal family were well under way. The Alèmandaw Queen⁸⁹ took advantage of the political turmoil to engineer the marriage and succession to the throne of her daughter Supayalat and her half-brother, Thibaw. Where U Kha Gyl’s political sympathies lay is unclear, but the queen’s plotting began by ensuring the king’s isolation. Scott’s account is as follows:

The Alèmandaw Queen ... carried out her plot with equal energy and daring. While the King was ill, the only persons, besides the physicians, allowed to come near him were the Alèmandaw Queen herself, the Taungsaingdaw, the Thanatsin and Letpansin Queens, and *U Hka Gyl, the chief eunuch*. She still further isolated him by ordering that no ponies or carriages were to pass near the palace and that no one was to speak above a whisper throughout the whole building, or to come near the sick chamber. It was by her orders that the Princes were first summoned to the palace and arrested.⁹⁰

Although embedded within a historical novel, Jesse’s account draws upon interviews with members of the European and Burmese community, including Queen Supayalat’s ladies-in-waiting.⁹¹ Jesse provides a dramatic reconstruction of the bedside scene when the queens realised their sons had just been arrested:

Women’s voices, shrill, wailing, lamentable, clamoured without, and the next moment several of the Queens, a crowd they seemed in the dimness and small space, came rushing into the room. The *chief eunuch, U Kha Gyi*, a wrinkled and withered personage, besought them despairingly to go back, and disassociated himself with great speed from any further proceedings ... From the broken words of the mother of the Thonzé Prince and the cries and interjections of the other ladies, the King learned what had happened

The King issued a stern order that the Princes were to be released at once and brought before him. The lion had spoken with something of the old roar in his voice and obedience was swift. The Queens allowed themselves to be herded out of the

89 Queen of the Middle Palace; also called Hsinbyumashin.

90 James George Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, 5 vols. (Rangoon: Government Printing, Burma, 1900–01), vol. 1, p. 83. My emphasis.

91 Fryniwyd Tennyson Jesse, *The lacquer lady* (London: William Heinemann, 1929). Her sources included interviews with Rodway Swinhoe of the Bombay-Burma Corporation, Sir Herbert Thirkell White, former Lt-Governor of Burma; and Sir George Scott who ‘vetted every line of the book’ (*ibid.*, p. viii). She conducted interviews with the characters she has named as Julie, Selah and Fanny, each of whom had access to the inner court. She also interviewed Mrs Hosannah Manook, the daughter of the Minister for Foreigners to the Court of Mandalay and herself a maid of honour to Supayalat, who ‘told me of the women’s side of the Palace’ and ‘many episodes which have never found their way into the history books’ (*ibid.*, p. viii). Mr Manook is also mentioned by Gwendolyn Trench Gascoigne, *Among pagodas and fair ladies: An account of a tour through Burma* (London: AD Innes & Co., 1896), pp. 153–6.

room by *U Kha Gyi*, who reappeared now that he found the matter was going well and that he was not to be blamed for having allowed the inrush of agitated mothers.⁹²

The second instance involves a eunuch—possibly *U Kha Gyl*—who had been entrusted as the courier in the sensitive mission of gathering the votes which would determine the succession. The eunuch in question was someone the *Alèmandaw Queen* trusted completely. Scott provides the following account:

The King was now more isolated than ever and the *Alèmandaw Queen* further developed her plot. While the Ministers were sitting in Council near the southern palace there was brought to them by an *eunuch* from the *Alèmandaw* a *parabaik*, a black official notebook. It contained a list of the Princes' names, and the Ministers were requested to put a mark against the name of the one they thought best fitted and worthiest to be appointed *Eingshemín*, the successor to the throne. The *parabaik* was first handed to the *Hkampat Wungyi*, who at that time was looked upon as President of the Council. He looked over the list and passed it on, without a word and without making any remark to the *Kin Wun Mingyi*. This officer had now been completely won over by the *Alèmandaw*, and without a moment's hesitation he placed his mark against the name of the *Thibaw Prince* ... The *parabaik* was then taken back by the *eunuch* to the *Alèmandaw* and after a day or two she laid it before the King and pointed out to him the unanimous vote of his Ministers. The King simply looked at it and laid the book down by his bed without a sign or a word. All this time he knew nothing of the arrest of the Princes and during a slight revival of his strength the Ministers were in great alarm and were with difficulty kept from releasing the prisoners by the *Alèmandaw*.⁹³

Following the coronation of King *Thibaw* and his marriage with *Supayalat* and her older sister in 1878, the *Alèmandaw Queen* and her daughter *Supayalat* arranged for the mass murder of the arrested princes, rival queens and princesses, and various other members of the royal family in February 1879.⁹⁴

The third occasion involves a eunuch, perhaps the self-same *U Hka Gyl*, in another murder plot instigated by Queen *Supayalat*. King *Thibaw* had taken another wife named *Mi Hkingyi*. *Supayalat* became extremely jealous. After several dramatic fights, *Thibaw* requested the chief of police (see [fig. 3](#)) to hide *Mi Hkingyi*. As *Gwendolen Gascoigne* explains, 'This the head of the police did in his own house for the space of a year, when, as ill luck would have it, he was despatched upon some mission, and during his absence the queen, discovering that the wretched girl still lived, had her taken and killed.'⁹⁵ *Supayalat* sent a eunuch to verify the death.

As Scott explains:

Thibaw had quite got over his fancy. He wanted peace in his household above all things. He sent for the *Taingda* [then promoted to *Wungyi*] and asked if *Mi Hkingyi* was still alive and added that he wanted to hear no more about her. The *Wungyi* took the hint and had the girl killed. *Supayalat* sent a *eunuch* to make certain of the fact. The whole

92 Jesse, *The lacquer lady*, pp. 104–5. My emphasis.

93 Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, vol. 1, p. 84. My emphasis.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

95 Gascoigne, *Among pagodas*, pp. 153–4.



Figure 3. Chief of Police during the reign of King Thibaw. From Gwendolen Trench Gascoigne, *Among pagodas and fair ladies: An account of a tour through Burma* (London: A.D. Innes & Co., 1896), p. 158.

matter was much discussed in Mandalay and throughout Burma and ruined the confidence of the people in the King.⁹⁶

The Konbaung monarchy came to an end in 1885. On the day the British were deposing and deporting Thibaw and Supayalat, a newspaper reports that of 300 maids of honour, only 17 remained the following morning.⁹⁷ No mention is made of eunuchs, so it is not clear if the chief eunuch or any others were among the retinue of 25 attendants who accompanied Thibaw and his relatives to Madras and later to Ratanagiri.

⁹⁶ Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, vol. 1, p. 91. My emphasis.

⁹⁷ Anon., 'Occupation of Mandalay', *The Mercury*, 18 Jan. 1886, p. 4. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/9116407#>.

Conclusion

Unlike the Chinese court where the Portuguese priest Alvaro Semedo estimated there were some 12,000 eunuchs in 1626 or the Safavid court where the French jeweller Sir John Chardin estimated there were some 3,000 eunuchs in the 1660s, the total number of eunuchs in the Burmese courts was low.⁹⁸ The highest number appears to have been about 200 in the courts of Pegu and Arakan; in the Mandalay court the numbers were perhaps 10 to 20. Other Theravada Buddhist courts had similarly low numbers, with most having no eunuchs. Nonetheless, low numbers does not necessarily mean their presence was unimportant.

Stereotypically eunuchs have been associated with roles policing women. However, the evidence in Burma suggests that to the extent eunuchs in Burmese courts served queens and other royal women, it was to promote their interests rather than to police their bodies. As their involvement in looming successions in both the Arakan and Konbaung courts revealed, queens exercised considerable control over the court eunuchs. Embedded in matrilineal societies, the position of women in Burmese courts differed from the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Persian courts. Unlike the Chinese courts which preferred commoners as royal consorts, the Ottoman and Persian courts which preferred slave-concubines, or the Mughal courts which preferred first-cousins, the Theravada Buddhist courts of mainland Southeast Asia preferred half-sisters as primary queens.⁹⁹ Accordingly Burmese queens were of high status, with considerable economic and political power. *Purdah* was not observed within Burmese courts and the chief queens often sat in audiences next to the king on the throne.¹⁰⁰ Instead of eunuchs, the Theravada Buddhist courts of mainland Southeast Asia typically had female ‘amazons’ guarding the inner palaces.

Rather than harems alone, the available evidence suggests that eunuchs in Burmese courts served the king and the kingdom more broadly. Burmese kings, like rulers elsewhere in Asia, may have placed more trust in eunuchs than their own relatives. In Arakan, eunuchs served in roles as army commander, prime minister, member of the Privy Council, holder of royal monopolies, treasurer, architect, construction supervisor and overseer of lands, in addition to chamberlain, palace attendants and possibly palace guards. The early Konbaung court appears to have made use of eunuchs as a means to integrate the Arakan territory, drawing on their administrative roles as holders of royal monopolies, construction supervisors, tax collectors, and overseers of lands. The later Konbaung court continued to integrate its remaining eunuchs as royal messengers.

Orlando Patterson notes, ‘The absolute ruler ... requires the ultimate slave; and the ultimate slave is best represented in the anomalous person of the eunuch.’¹⁰¹ As liminal figures who were neither male nor female, eunuchs were symbolically

98 Hsieh Bao Hua, *Concubinage and servitude in late imperial China* (London: Lexington, 2014), p. 179; Babayan, ‘Eunuchs’.

99 Katherine Bowie, ‘Harems of Asia: The politics of kinship and kingdoms’, manuscript.

100 See for example, Manrique, *Travels*, pp. 391–2; see also illustrations of King Mindon, for example, https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=or_16761_f001r. See also Vincent Clarence Scott O’Connor, *Mandalay and other cities of the past in Burma* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1907), pp. 7, 85.

101 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and social death: A comparative study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 315.

resonant in an ideology of sacred and profane power.¹⁰² Having eunuchs as participants in royal processions or attendees at royal audiences can be understood not simply as providing the king with physical protection, but as adding to his symbolic power. In the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Safavid courts, the eunuchs conformed to the ruler's religion.¹⁰³ However the eunuchs in the Burmese courts (with the possible exception of Mandalay's chief eunuch) continued to be identified as Muslim, despite the Theravada Buddhist orientation of the courts themselves. That Burmese eunuchs are described as Muslim appears to be less a statement about their religion than a reinforcement of their status as 'foreign', thereby adding to the symbolic power of the king as ruling a globalised empire.

Having eunuchs may have not only been a means for Burmese rulers to sacralise themselves within their kingdoms, but a strategy to position their kingdoms internationally. The repeated descriptions of Burmese eunuchs as Muslims suggest royal efforts to orient their courts among the other powerful courts across the Indian Ocean which were Muslim and had eunuchs. That eunuchs likely came from Bengal, with special training and diverse language skills, may have facilitated their abilities to form brokerage networks across the Indian Ocean region. Burmese courts may have also sought to utilise such Islamic associations as a counter to growing European colonial pressures.

At a time when scholarly interest in gendered politics—notably of third genders—is gaining currency, it is remarkable that the presence of eunuchs in Southeast Asia has received so little attention.¹⁰⁴ The available information about the numbers, roles and origins of eunuchs in the Burmese courts presented in this essay raises further questions about their relative importance in the underlying political logics regarding gender ideology, factional politics, and international relations. That eunuchs appear to have had their greatest roles in Burma in the seventeenth century may be an artefact of available sources. However, it may also reflect the orientation of Burmese courts towards the greater Muslim world. The decreasing presence of eunuchs in the eighteenth and nineteenth century may reflect the declining production of eunuchs, mounting pressures from European colonialism, and growing disapproval from global anti-slavery movements.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, this essay should be understood as an invitation to scholars with deeper understandings of Burmese historical texts and contexts to enrich our understanding of the roles that this painfully constructed category of fellow humans played in Burmese court politics, both within the respective courts and as part of an interconnected global history.¹⁰⁶

102 Tougher, *The eunuch in Byzantine history*, p. 49.

103 For example, Ottoman eunuchs, despite their origins as Christians, became Muslim, even serving as guards of the shrines in Medina and Mecca. Hathaway, *The chief eunuch*.

104 On eunuchs in Islamic Southeast Asia, see Clarence-Smith, 'Eunuchs and concubines'; in Siam, see Bowie, 'Eunuchs in Siam'; in Vietnam, see Bowie, 'Eunuchs in Vietnam: What's missing?', *South East Asia Research* 30, 4 (2022): 409–25; and Bradley Camp Davis, 'Finding eunuchs in imperial Vietnam: Questions and sources', *South East Asia Research* 30, 4 (2022): 426–33.

105 On the importance of slavery in Burma, see Bryce Beemer, 'The Creole city in mainland Southeast Asia: Slave gathering warfare and cultural exchange in Burma, Thailand and Manipur, 18th–19th century' (PhD diss., University of Hawai'i-Manoa, 2013).

106 On connected histories, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, for example, 'Introduction: Revisiting empires