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**Centralizing Historical Tradition in Precolonial Burma: The
Abhiraja/Dhajaraja Myth in Early Kòn-baung Historical Texts**

By

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Abstract

The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja story, the most important origin myth legitimizing Burmese kingship, is widely viewed as a central Burmese (Burman) tradition. Based on evidence from available pre-eighteenth century historical texts, many previously unexamined by scholars, this article finds that the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth developed in western Burma over three centuries before its appearance in central Burma in a 1781 court treatise. This analysis demonstrates that during a significant

¹The author owes gratitude to numerous colleagues who, at different stages, offered help of various kinds. Special gratitude, however, is owed to Vic Lieberman, Ryuji Okudaira, and Atsuko Naono for their extensive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. In addition, Ryuji Okudaira helped me gain a copy of one of the chief western Burmese chronicles under examination in this article. Help has also been provided in gaining access to premodern Burmese texts by Patricia Herbert and the late Daw May Kyi Win. The author is also indebted to U Saw Tun for raising my interest in premodern Burmese literature during my language training in literary Burmese.

period of cultural borrowing, from the 1780s until the 1820s, central Burmese (Burman) literati inserted western Burmese (Arakanese) myths and historical traditions into an evolving central Burmese historical perspective with which most scholars are more familiar.

Introduction

Several origin myths made the royal ancestry of Burmese kings sacred by connecting them genealogically to a solar dynasty. The first, likely pre-Buddhist, origin myth traced the lineage of Burmese kings to Pyu-zàw-hti (Pyu-mìn-hti), the son of the Sun God and a naga princess.² Second, Mahasammata, the first human king of the world in Buddhist thought, served as both a legitimizing model for unifying Burmese kings and, secondarily, as an origin myth for certain Burmese kings who drew up loose genealogies connecting themselves to him.³ A third origin myth provided a fuller elaboration of these genealogies to demonstrate a clearer lineage from Mahasammata to the Burmese kings, through the intermediary of the solar race of the Sakiyan clan (the same clan from whom later sprang Gotama Buddha).

²Maung Kalà [Ù Kalà], *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi*, Saya Pwa (ed.), Rangoon: Burma Research Society, 1926, I, p. 143; Shin Sandá-linka, *Mani-yadana-bon*, Rangoon: Di-bat-sa Press, 1896, pp. 10-11; Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, *Shwei-bon-ni-dàn*, Yangon: Zwei-sa-bei-reib-myoung, 1957, pp. 99-100; See also the discussion in Ryuji Okudaira, “Rekishiteki Haikai,” in Ayabe Tsuneo & Ishii Yoneo (eds.), *Motto Shiritai Myanmar*, 2nd ed., Tokyo: Kobundo, 1994, pp. 9-13. This work was thankfully translated for the author by Atsuko Naono.

³For Burmese thought on the Mahasammata myth as legitimation for earthly rulers, see William J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Kon-baung Period*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1990, pp. 65-67, 69-71, 73-74, 93; Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 66, 72-4, 83; S.

According to this myth, a king of this clan, having lost his kingdom in Northern India, found his way to central Burma. There he established the first Burmese state, Tagaung. When Tagaung was later destroyed, a second ruler of the Sakiyan clan reestablished it.⁴ According to this origin myth, all Burmese kings are descended from this clan and, given the connection made in Burmese histories between Mahasammata and the Sakiya clan, from Mahasammata himself.⁵ Although this origin myth has been treated in the secondary literature on Burmese history as a development stemming out of central Burmese thought, it did not surface in central Burmese texts until 1781 in Shin Sandá-linka's *Mani-yadana-bon*.⁶

The absence of any reference to this myth in Burmese inscriptions and its late appearance in Burmese chronicles led the epigraphist G. H. Luce to argue that:

The old view of some (not all) Burmese historians [concerning Tagaung] is hardly worth discussion. The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja legends were presumably invented to give Burmans a noble derivation from the Sakiyan line of Gotama Buddha himself. But one has only to put a Burman between a North Indian and a Chinese, to see at a glance where his racial connections lie.⁷

J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 93-4.

⁴ *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, Mandalay: Ratana Theiddi Press, 1908, I, pp. 175-182.

⁵ Koenig, *The Burmese Polity*, pp. 86-87.

⁶ Shin Sandá-linka, *Mani-yadana-bon*, Rangoon: Di-bat-sa Press, 1896. Pe Maung Tin explains, however, that this myth did not enter central Burmese chronicles until 1785, with the appearance of the *New Pagan Chronicle*. See Pe Maung Tin, "Introduction," in Pe Maung Tin & G. H. Luce (trans.), *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, London: Oxford University Press, 1923, p. xv.

The Burmese historian Maung Htin Aung took great offense at this remark, partly justified by Luce's sweeping rejection of the myth as merely a central Burmese invention. Maung Htin Aung's similarly sweeping acceptance of the myth, or at least his argument that there is no good reason to doubt parts of it, was, unfortunately, not backed up by an extensive investigation of the very sources (the chronicles) he was defending. In any event, Maung Htin Aung himself, as had Henry Burney, C. J. F. S. Forbes, Arthur P. Phayre, G. E. Harvey, and clearly Luce, accepted that whether fact or fiction, the story had its origins in central Burma, either from the central Burmese (the Burmans) or their forebears, the Pyu.⁸

There is convincing evidence, however, that this myth originated in western Burma (Arakan),⁹ not in central Burma, and that it was a regional historical tradition

⁷ G. H. Luce, "Old Kyaukse and the Coming of the Burmans," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42 (1), June, 1959, p. 75.

⁸ Henry Burney, "Discovery of Buddhist Images with Deva-nagari Inscriptions at Tagaoung, the Ancient Capital of the Burmese Empire," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1836, pp. 157-164; C. J. F. S. Forbes, *Legendary History of Burma and Arakan*, Rangoon: Government Press, 1882, pp. 2-5; Arthur P. Phayre, *History of Burma including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim, and Arakan: From the Earliest Time to the End of the First War with British India*, London: Trubner & Co, 1883, pp. 7-9; G. E. Harvey only hints at this origin myth, explaining that "Their [Burman] chronicles read as if they were descended from Buddha's clansmen and lived in Upper India," *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 the Beginning of the English Conquest*, New York: Octagon Books, 1967, p. 6.

⁹ For a background to early modern western Burma, see Maurice Collis & San Shwe Bu, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay: A Study of Coinage and Foreign Relations," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 15, 1925, 35-52; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Slaves and Tyrants: Dutch Tribulations in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk U," *Journal of Early Modern History* 1 (3), 1997, 201-253; Catherine Raymond, "Étude des Relations Religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e Siècle: Documentation Historique et Évidences Archéologiques," *Journal Asiatique* 282 (2), 1995, 469-501; M. Ana de Barros Serra Marques Guedes, *Interferência e Integração dos Portugueses na Birmânia, ca 1580-1630*, Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 1995; Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan*, photography by Zaw Min Yu, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001; Jacques Leider, "La Route de Am (Arakan): Contribution à l'étude d'une route terrestre entre la Birmanie et le Golfe du Bengale," *Journal Asiatique* 282 (2), 1994, pp. 335-370; Michael W. Charney, "A Reinvestigation of Konbaung-

that was integrated around 1781 into an evolving central Burmese ethno-national historical narrative. This evidence is derived from a detailed examination of contemporaneous western and central Burmese historical texts in the context of both a major shift in the central Burmese court's attention to western Burma in the early 1780s and an internal embellishment of indigenous court culture. I will discuss the transition of this myth from western to central Burmese historical traditions in the context of the reign of King Bò-daw-hpayà (1782-1819), also known as Badon, and his immediate successors. My argument is that the origins of this myth have been wrongly attributed in the prevailing literature: central Burmese literati borrowed this myth in an attempt to make more universal the legitimation of the kings of the Kòn-baung Dynasty (1752-1885).

I should also explain my use of geographical references in this article. Instead of referring to Arakan and to Burma, I will refer to western Burma and central Burma respectively. This is not simply an anachronistic application of contemporary political boundaries, center-periphery relations, or nationalist Burmese historical perspectives. Instead, after years of examining Arakanese and Burman historical chronicles and other texts, I have gradually come to the conclusion that both the Arakanese and the

era Burman Historiography on the Beginnings of the Relationship Between Arakan and Ava (Upper Burma)," *Journal of Asian History* 34 (1), 2000, 53-68; idem., "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999; idem., "Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia: Forces of Instability and Political Disintegration in Western Burma (Arakan): 1603-1701," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (2), 1998, 185-219; idem., "Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rakhaing Under the Early Mrauk-U Kings, c. 1430-1603," *Journal of Burma Studies* 3, 1998, 1-33; and idem., "The 1598-99 Siege of Pegu and the Expansion of Arakanese Imperial Power into Lower Burma," *Journal of Asian History* 28 (1), 1994, 39-57. It should also be mentioned that the most comprehensive survey of Dutch archival sources, that conducted over the course of many years by Wil Dijk, a graduate student

Burmans, at least those who have left records, saw themselves as part of the same geographical space, extending from eastern Bengal in the west to the Shan states in the east, and from Assam and China in the North, to the Southern coasts of Lower Burma. The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth under examination in this article, for example, concerning two brothers, one who ruled Arakan in western Burma and the other who ruled Tagaung in central Burma (thus tying together both western and central Burma under one legendary family), is one indication of this perspective. In addition to borrowing this myth, Burman historiography has a long tradition, as evidenced in both chronicles and inscriptions, of viewing Arakan as part of a greater Burma.

Furthermore, although I use central Burma to refer to the Burman side of the relationship, I do not imply a hierarchical relationship between the two (as might be assumed from my use of “central”), but rather take into consideration the special place given in both Arakanese and Burman historical traditions to Lower Burma, the home of the Mons and the Aukthas (“people who live below”). References to “western,” “central,” and “southern Burma,”¹⁰ then, make historical and cultural (in addition to geographical) sense. Indeed, references to western Burma as Arakan and central Burma as Burma proper could be argued to reflect, in their own way, no less artificial political, social, and cultural hegemonies vis-à-vis local populations with alternative perspectives.¹¹

at Leiden University, promises to yield publications with much new information on Arakan for the period in the years ahead.

¹⁰ Although not discussed in this article, northern, northeastern, and eastern Burma refer to those areas of highland Burma populated by various ethnic minorities. Southeastern Burma has already entered mainstream usage in reference to Tenasserim.

¹¹ I am grateful to Vic Lieberman for raising my attention to the need to explain my use of geographical references in this paper.

This article is divided into several sections. First, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth, as it eventually emerged in the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (1829), is examined. The analysis then turns to the two strongest pieces of evidence for the myth's western Burmese origins: the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin* (1450s) and a history composed by Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka (1608). The third section of this article looks at three western Burmese texts, copied in the nineteenth century but which can be shown to be copies of a much earlier parent text. A detailed examination of these three texts provides clues as to the “missing link” in the text tree connecting the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin* and Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history, as well as these western Burmese texts to central Burmese texts of the Kòn-baung period. Fourth, the *Mani-yadana-bon* (1781), the first central Burmese historical text to include the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth and its contribution of the Dhajaraja “segment” of the myth is examined. Finally, this article looks at the intellectual context of the Kòn-baung court and explains the adoption and increasing influence of the western Burmese origin myth in the central Burmese court from 1781.

The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja Myth

A fuller elaboration of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth is necessary for the purposes of identifying its movement in Burmese historical texts. This summary is derived from the account provided in the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, the most frequently cited text for this origin myth.¹²

As the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* relates, there was once a war between the King of Pinsala and Kosala and the Sakiyan kings of Koliya, Dewa-daha,

¹²*Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, I, pp. 175-182.

and Kappila-wat. The King of Kappila-wat marched with his army out of India and into central Burma where he founded the kingdom of Tagaung (central Burma's first kingdom). When the King of Kappila-wat died, his two sons, Kan-raza-gri and Kan-raza-ngei, began to fight over the throne. The royal ministers, however, were concerned that this war would lead to the deaths of many people. Thus, the two brothers asked them how it would be possible to make a meritorious war. The royal ministers suggested that whoever succeeded in the task of building a donation hall the most quickly over the course of one night, should be king. The elder brother, Kan-raza-gri, failed because he tried to build an elaborate donation hall out of large pieces of timber and bamboo, while the cunning younger brother, Kan-raza-ngei, built a framework out of small pieces of wood and bamboo, covered it with men's clothing, and then whitewashed it all (making it look as if a fine structure had been built). The elder brother, having lost the competition, took his army and marched southwest down the Irrawaddy Valley. On his way, he established his own son as the King of the Pyu, the Kanrans, and the Thets [Saks] who lived on the western bank of the Irrawaddy River. Kan-raza-gri himself set up his own capital on the eastern side of the Kaladan River in Arakan, at Kyauk-padaung, and then, after a reign of seventy-four years, took control of Danyawaddy, also in Western Burma. All western Burmese (Arakanese) kings were believed to be descended from Kan-raza-gri.

Meanwhile, at Tagaung, we are told, the younger brother, Kan-raza-ngei, was succeeded as King of Tagaung by thirty-one descendants. A "disturbance" by migrating peoples, however, brought this dynasty to an end: the last king abandoned Tagaung with his followers, he died, and then his people scattered in three divisions. The myth then almost repeats itself with a new series of individuals. The Sakiyan kings were devastated once again, and this time it was a certain King Dhajaraja who

migrated with his followers around Northern India and eventually to Tagaung, which was reestablished as a Sakiyan capital. Dhajaraja himself then assumed the regnal title of Thadu Zambudipa Dhajaraja. Later Kòn-baung kings traced their descent from this line.

This myth has not yet been identified in pre-1781 histories or related works from central Burma. The standard historical chronicles prior to this date, Shin Maha Thilawuntha's *Ya-zawin-kyaw* (sixteenth century), the controversially dated *Zata-daw-pon Ya-zawin* (attributed in 1960 to the seventeenth century), and Û Kalà's *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi* (circa 1730) do not include this myth.¹³ Other texts, such as the *Old Pagan Chronicle* and the *Tagaung Chronicle* do not include this myth either, and the latter, despite its seemingly comprehensive title, does not discuss the foundation of Tagaung, suggesting that no relevant traditions were available to the author.¹⁴

Instead, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth made a sudden appearance in central Burmese texts in 1781. In that year, Shin San-dá-lin-ka composed a major court treatise entitled the *Mani-yadana-bon*. This text opens with the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth in basically the same form as that summarized above.¹⁵ The myth entered the chronicle genre of central Burmese literature in 1785. As Tin Ohn explains in his examination of the Burmese chronicles, the 1785 *New Pagan Chronicle* "is the first chronicle which connects the lineage of the Tagaung Kings

¹³Shin Maha Thilawuntha, *Ya-zawin Kyaw*, Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1965; U Hla Tin (ed.), *Zata-daw-pon Ya-zawin*, Rangoon: Ministry of Culture, 1960. On the latter text, see Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth & History in the Historiography of Early Burma: Paradigms, Primary Sources, and Prejudices*, Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1998, pp. 68-9.

¹⁴Pe Maung Tin, "Introduction," xiii-xiv.

¹⁵Sandá-linka, *Mani-yadana-bon*, 6-7.

with the Sakiyan family.”¹⁶ Other texts that included the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth followed these texts until the myth eventually entered the main dynastic chronicle, the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (“The Glass Palace Chronicle”), in 1829. This influence was sudden but incomplete during the first few decades following 1781. The comprehensive examination of court culture offered by Zei-yá-thin-hkaya in his *Shwei-bon-ní-dàn* (1783), for example, refers only to Pyu-zàw-hti with no mention of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth.¹⁷

Despite the damage to Burma’s palm leaf historical records after the three Anglo-Burmese wars, we have sufficient evidence to make a convincing case for the adoption of the myth from western Burmese historical traditions. The myth, as I will explain more fully below, was clearly present in western Burmese histories long before they appeared in central Burmese historical texts.

Among the many kinds of sources used by central Burmese chroniclers, we know that they typically examined, in addition to other materials, a category of Burmese literature known as *eigyin*. *Eigyin* are poetical works or songs, often tracing the genealogy of the person for whom it was written. Thus, *eigyin* are one kind of historical text, providing carefully packaged historical data for an express purpose, namely, the provision of a real or fictive lineage to legitimate the royal dynasty and its heirs. The agenda implicit in the composition of *eigyin* does not necessarily impinge upon its historical value. The *eigyin* give an extraordinary degree of insight into the

¹⁶Tin Ohn, “Modern Historical Writing in Burmese, 1724-1942,” in D. G. E. Hall (ed.), *Historians of South East Asia* (1961, reprint, London, 1962): p. 87.

¹⁷Zei-yá-thin-hkaya, *Shwei-bon-ní-dàn*, 99-100; So too does the *Zata-daw-pon Ya-zawin*, (pp. 23. 53). Again, the date for this text is controversial. U Hla Tin, considering that it included material for King Nayawaya (r. 1671-1672), attributes this text to the reign of his younger brother, Mìn-yei Kyaw-din (r. 1673-1698), thus making it a late seventeenth century text. Tin (ed.), *Zata-daw-pon Ya-zawin*, 1.

perspectives of its authors and its audiences as well as provide a time capsule for at least one sphere of beliefs at the time of composition. Thus, while we may not accept at face value the historical information in their narratives, as texts they provide information on what kinds of things were being discussed at the time an *eigyin* was authored. In this sense, an *eigyin* is a datable source and is by no means less acceptable than, for example, an inscription. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the existence of a chronicle tradition at certain places and points in time and not to prove or to disprove whether this chronicle tradition is based upon historical fact. Here, the *eigyin* which includes the origin myth under examination in this article is the *Rakhine Mìn-thami Eigyin*.¹⁸

The *Rakhine Mìn-thami Eigyin*, literally “The Rakhine Princess Eigyin,” composed in the 1450s, is not only the earliest known *eigyin* but is also the earliest extant palm-leaf copy of Burmese poetry.¹⁹ The author of this *eigyin*, Adu-mìn-nyo, was a royal minister in the Mrauk-U court in the mid-fifteenth century, roughly three centuries before Û Kalà composed the *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi*. Adu-mìn-nyo is said to have written his *eigyin* for an Arakanese princess, hence the *eigyin*’s title. It became well known as a classical piece of literature and over the course of the following three centuries it circulated throughout both western and central Burma. The *Rakhine Mìn-thami Eigyin* is written in verse using a specialized vocabulary. Translation is not very easy, as words and phrase were shaped to fit the rhythm and metre of the poetry.

Without more extensive corroboration than that offered here, however, this attribution is by itself unconvincing.

¹⁸ Many copies of this text are available, all bearing the same text. For this paper, I have selected Adu-min-nyo, *Rakhine Mìn-thami Eigyin*, Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1969.

¹⁹ U Hla Pe, *Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life, and Buddhism*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985, p. 43.

Although the meaning of the verse is open to a good deal of interpretation, the hard data, references to people, places, and dates are not.

The seventh verse contains the first glimpse in extant western Burmese texts of what would become the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth. The seventh verse first mentions that the country of Danya(waddy) was a gift of Indra and that its first ruler was Marayu. He was followed by fifty-four generations of rulers. The verse then shifts to Lord Kan-raza, who is the Kan-raza-gri of later versions of this myth. Lord Kan-raza is said to have been wedded to the nat princess named Pintsanari. Kan-raza and Pintsanari then established a palace on Kyaukpandaung mountain, where they lived together for twenty-four years.²⁰

Where the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin* provides only an outline sketch of a small, but critical part of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth, there is another (likely pre-1780s) western Burmese text that provides a much more developed narrative of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth. Pe Maung Tin, in the introduction to his translation of the first section of the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, noted in passing that the Abhiraja myth was mentioned in an obscure palm leaf manuscript that he called the *Rahkaing Chronicle*, composed in 1775.²¹ Several copies of this text are available. Pe Maung Tin used a paper copy deposited in the Bernard Free Library (Rangoon) and I have used a palm leaf copy from 1784 that was presumably mislabeled by a clerk at a later date as the *Rakhine Min-raza-gri Arei-daw Sadan*.²² As this chronicle has not yet been substantially analyzed as a text in the secondary literature, a brief overview is necessary for our purposes here.

²⁰Adu-mìn-nyo, *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin*, Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1969, p. 19.

²¹Tin, "Introduction" p. xix.

²²"Rakhine Min-raza-gri Arei-daw Sadan." [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 1632] AMs, 1784 [1775], National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar.

The colophon on the palm leaf copy explains that this text is an historical compilation made by an unnamed royal reader (the *shei-sa-bei*) in the court of Mrauk U in 1775.²³ It is not a typical single-narrative chronicle. Internal evidence indicates that this text is actually a relatively loose collection of different histories, commentaries, and records. In addition to its contents focused on historical details, Pe Maung Tin described some of these other materials as “dialogues between king and minister on questions of religion, politics, ethics, and so forth.”²⁴ All of the materials in this chronicle are connected to this minister, a *go-ran-grì*, one of four major royal ministers in the Mrauk-U court, named Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka (hence this history will be referred to hereafter as the Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka chronicle) and it ends with a listing of his descendants. Judging from these contents, it appears likely that in 1775, the unnamed court reader gained access to the library of a noble family, or a collection of Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka’s materials bundled together in a royal library. For our purposes here, attention will be focused on the first history included in the 1775 compilation.

The first large section of the *Rahkaing Chronicle* is a history of western Burma, up to the death of Mìn-palaun-grì (r. 1571-1593).²⁵ What was likely the colophon for this history, now integrated into the text of the *Rahkaing Chronicle*, explains that it was composed by Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka in 1608, during the reign of Mìn-raza-grì (r. 1593-1612) to answer the king’s questions about the history of

²³Ibid., f. 40b.

²⁴Tin, “Introduction,” p. xix.

²⁵The text provides the year 935 of the Burmese era, but this appears to be a variation of the era dates as occurred occasionally in Burmese and Arakanese history. The uncorrected era dates provide additional evidence of the faithfulness of the copy to the original text, as the dates could otherwise have been corrected quite easily. The correct Burmese era date should be 955, or 1593 CE.

western Burma.²⁶ This history covers the major people and events that are represented in the seventh verse of the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin*, but goes beyond it by a little over a century. Regarding the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth, Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history steps far beyond the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin* by explicitly referring to both brothers instead of simply to Kan-raza-grì, to their father, Abhiraja, and to their establishment of the Kingdom of Tagaung. The story opens with a war between King Daragu of Meisala country and King Abhiraja, which is said to have prompted Abhiraja's migrations. The following is a summary translation of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth as presented in the third section of Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history, covered in only three sides of palm leaf:

[Abhiraja] went upstream to the country of Kanbilawat and stayed in Mawringa [Moriya]. . . King Abhiraja also pulled away from Mawringa and he built the town of Thindwei in the upriver area of the Irrawaddy. Because of the Tayoubs and the Tayeks in the vicinity of this town, he pulled away and built the town of Pagan. This [town] being ruined by water, [Abhiraja] moved and built the town of Tagaung. After King Abhiraja died, his eldest son, Kan-raza[-grì], reigned. When three years had passed, [Kan-raza-grì] gave the palace to his younger brother, Kan-raza-ngei, and [Kan-raza-grì himself] established the town of Kalei-raza-kyou. . . .

²⁶“Rakhine Min-raza-grì Arei-daw Sadan,” f. 15b. Again, the era date is off by twenty years. The date of composition provided in the text is BE 950 (CE 1588), but correcting it by twenty years gives us a composition date of BE 970 BE (CE 1608). This correction is supported by the events supplied as Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka would not have been the *go-ran-grì* in 1588, but certainly was in 1608. Min-raza-grì as well did not become king until 1593 and remained king until 1612.

When sixteen years had passed, [Kan-raza-grì] crossed the Bo-kaung-taung and established the town of Kyaukpandaung in the upriver area of the Katsabannadi River [the Kaladan River]. At this time, [Kan-raza-grì] sent a request to Queen Shin-saw-sit, of the royal line of Marayu, in the town of Nilabantaun [for her daughters] and made her eldest daughter, Thu-nanda, his chief queen and her youngest daughter, Pwa-daw-si, his middle queen. [Kan-raza-grì] also made Saw-pintsa-nari, the daughter of the Mawrin, King Kandalarat, his north queen. [Kan-raza-grì] reigned in the town of Kyaukpandaung for twenty-four years. After this, [Kan-raza-grì] moved to the ancient town of Danyawaddy.

The King of Tagaung, Kan-raza-ngei, placed fifty-seven villages to the east and the west of the Salwin [Salween] river as obstacles to the Tayoub and the Tayek. Among these were the Shan towns and districts . . . [Kan-raza-grì's] great queen, Thu-nanda, gave birth to one royal son, Sila-raza. From the middle queen, Pwa-daw-si, were born two daughters, Keinnara and Pintsa. From the north queen, Saw-pintsa-nari, was born one royal son, Zambudeip. Sila-raza was married to Keinnara and they were placed into the palace. Zambudeip was married with Pintsa and, after Kan-raza-ngei had died in Tagaung, Zambudeip was placed in possession of Tagaung.²⁷

Clearly, the narrative of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth had undergone considerable evolution between the 1450s and 1608. Abhiraja and his wars and

²⁷Ibid., ff. 4a, 4b, 5a.

movements in Northern India, Kan-raza-gri's younger brother, Kan-raza-ngei, the foundation of Tagaung, and considerable detail on queens and royal children, had all entered the story. It should also be noted that Pintsá-nari had changed from a nat princess to a human queen. More importantly, the claim that Kan-raza-gri actually ruled for several years at Tagaung and gave the throne to his younger brother (not losing it) contrasts sharply with later central Burmese versions of the story, in which the elder brother loses a competition for the throne with his younger brother and the former never holds the throne at all. Further, Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka, in his version of the story, claims that Kan-raza-ngei was succeeded not by his own line or by another Sakiyan migrant (Dhajaraja) but rather by the children of Kan-raza-gri and an indigenous western Burmese queen. Western Burma, then, is stressed as the source of central Burmese kingship, through both an elder brother of the royal race who made western Burma his home and his children by a queen of an indigenous western Burmese royal line.

Despite these differing perspectives, elements of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth's narrative can thus be identified to be of at least fifteenth century vintage, and most of the story had developed by 1608. The Dhajaraja twist and other changes in the narrative likely developed after Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history was written. More importantly, for the purpose of this paper, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth reveals itself to be a western Burmese historical tradition that was only adopted, in substantially altered form, in central Burmese histories from 1781 onward.

Searching for Other Links

Although we are able to pinpoint the existence of an early form of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth in several pre-1780s western Burmese historical texts, this does not fully explain the sudden and widespread access by central Burmese literati to this historical tradition from 1781 onward. One would suspect that the existence of this tradition in one or two texts by themselves, even allowing for its usefulness in the intellectual climate of the 1780s central Burmese court, would not have had such an immediate influence without having been accompanied by a range of other histories that included the same myth. Western Burma has had a long tradition of chronicle writing. Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka, writing in the first decade of the seventeenth century, says that he had examined the historical literature and the great chronicle, which remains unidentified. Thus, there were western Burmese chronicles between the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin* and Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history and the eventual conquest of western Burma by the Kingdom of Burma in 1785.

The damage and dislocation of three Anglo-Burmese wars and the effects of insects, fires, and mishandling of palm leaf manuscripts over time makes it difficult to peer into the full range of western Burmese texts taken to the central Burmese royal center.²⁸ From a survey of existing palm leaf manuscripts, however, I have been able to identify a widespread chronicle tradition that was recopied verbatim in several places in western and central Burma in the nineteenth century. These copies strongly indicate the presence of a parent text that predated the central Burmese conquest of western Burma, although we cannot see the parent text itself (this is something like identifying a black hole that can only be located by the activity of solar energy around it). When we consider that the antiquity and origin of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth has already been identified, the widespread circulation of this text in nineteenth-century

Burma helps to indicate the extent of its presence in western Burma's chronicles and historical traditions.

In this section, I will examine three palm leaf western Burmese chronicles, all of which include essentially verbatim copies of the same narrative of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja story. These three texts share the same title, *Rakhine Ra-zawin*, so I have differentiated them for the purposes of discussion as follows: Sithu-gammani's chronicle, Nga Mi's chronicle, and the Calcutta chronicle. As all three provide the same verbatim version of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth, I will summarize this version here, before moving on to a discussion of each of the three individual texts examined in this section. Each of these three chronicles, word for word, relates the same narrative as follows:

At one time, in the country of Thindwei [Tagaung], which was called Bintsalarat, Abhiraja, the great king, became king of Thindwei [Tagaung]. After this king had reigned and died, the king's two sons, Kan-raza-gri and Kan-raza-ngei, vied for their father's golden palace and the people of the country were divided into groups belonging to each of these two brothers. The learned men [the ministers] observed that as these two brothers planned to make war, the populace of the country would die by fire and sword. Because of this, they asked the two brothers to instead compete at making a work of merit and whoever was victorious would become king. As if making a great donation [to the religion], the two brothers each would build a large donation house in one night. The elder brother built donation house using wood that was

²⁸James Alfred Colbeck, *Letters from Mandalay: A Series of Letters*, edited by George H. Colbeck,

great. The younger brother built his out of bamboo and covered it with male clothing and then whitewashed it. Having lost the competition, the elder brother told the younger brother to rule with power and wisdom and then departed, marched down [alongside] the Irrawaddy river with his army.

When [Kan-raza-gri] finished going upstream on the Chindwin River, in the time that he diverted to the Bokaungtaung mountains [the Arakan Yoma mountain range] he took Saw-pintsa-nari, the daughter of the Gandalarat nat-king. They stayed on top of the Kyaukpandaung mountain in the uppermost part of the Mi river. There he built a great city and a jewelled palace. Saw-pintsa-nari, the nat princess, was delighted. . .

Kan-raza-gri left from Kyaukpandaung and built a great city in Thirigout, the uppermost part of Thindout. . . He later built a great city in the ancient place where had been the great city of Danyawaddy. . . Altogether, Kan-raza-gri had lived in Kyaukpandaung for twenty-four years and in the town of Danyawaddy for thirteen years, and then he died.²⁹

London: W. Alfred Lower, 1892, pp. 66-7.

²⁹Sithu-gammani-thinkyan, “Rakhine Ra-zawin,” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 2297] AMs, 1886 [circa 1870s], National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar, ff. 5b-6b; Nga Mi, “Rakhine Ra-zawin,” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 3465a] AMs, n.d. [circa 1840], Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London, ff. 50-52; “Rakhine Ra-zawin,” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 95] AMs, 1791, Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, India, ff 75a-76b [based on current order of leaves].

I refer to the first text under examination as the Sithu-gammani chronicle.³⁰ In 1886, a minor Burmese official recopied a western Burmese history originally copied in the 1870s by a royal official known as Sithu-gammani-thinkyan (hereafter Sithu-gammani). Sithu-gammani is known to have copied a range of historical texts, including the *Chiengmai Chronicle*, from old palm leaf manuscripts stored in the royal library at Mandalay. At some point, Sithu-gammani turned to an unidentified western Burmese historical text, copied it, and left his name on it (hence the “Sithu-gammani chronicle”).

An examination of internal evidence allows us to trace the tradition of the text that Sithu-gammani copied back to the *Rakhine Min-thami Eigyin*. The Sithu-gammani chronicle provides a history of western Burma, from the beginning of the world up to the mid-fifteenth century. It includes the Abhiraja myth, as well as other important developments, such as the conquest of western Burma by Pagan (eleventh century), the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Laungret (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), and the early years of the Kingdom of Mrauk-U (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries). It should be noted that in the present chronicle, Sithu-gammani adopted a semi-abstract writing style, in which he dropped many non-critical words out of a sentence with the understanding that the reader would be able to fill in the gaps.

The second chronicle is a large palm leaf manuscript entitled the “Rakhine Ra-zawin” (hereafter, referred to as the Calcutta chronicle), compiled in 1791.³¹ Many Burmese texts, such as this one, had been carried away at first as trophies by British

³⁰Sithu-gammani-thinkyan. “Rakhine Ra-zawin.”

³¹“Rakhine Ra-zawin,” (1791). This text is partly disorganized, but the colophon can be found on f. 55b (following the current order of the palm leaves). I visited the Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the summer of 1998 as part of my doctoral research at the University of Michigan. I later obtained a complete copy of what remained of the text of the *Rakhine Ra-zawin* from this collection with the generous help of Professor Ryuji Okudaira of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

soldiers and officers, but were later donated to colonial libraries. This particular text was deposited in the Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, a colonial collection in Calcutta, where it remains today.³² The Calcutta chronicle is complete up to the 1590s, the earlier years of the reign of Min-raza-gri. Although the Calcutta chronicle's coverage extends beyond that of the Sithu-gammani chronicle by almost a century and a half, much of the narrative up to the 1450s (the full extent of the Sithu-gammani text) is verbatim the same in both chronicles (and in the Nga Mi chronicle discussed below).

Nga Mi compiled the third of the chronicles under examination here in the early 1840s. Arthur Phayre, then the Deputy Commissioner for Arakan (1834-1848),³³ sought glimpses on these early western Burmese chronicles. He had observed that copies of western Burma's great history were to be found everywhere in western Burma.³⁴ He thus commissioned a western Burmese literati named Nga Mi to survey the ancient local chronicles and provide him with a compilation of them.³⁵ The history that Nga Mi provided became known as the "Nga Mi chronicle." Arthur Phayre's copy, complete with his personal notes in the margins, made its way into the Oriental

³²As many of the officers in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and in the early administration of colonial Burma were also active in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, many of the texts that came into their possession found their way here, although some texts gained in the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars were also donated to the collection. In addition to damage from a failure to apply preservation techniques prior to 1948, many donors had clearly remove selected samples from the manuscripts, rendering many of these texts incomplete. Desai, W. S. "Burmese Mss. In the Royal Asiatic Society Library." In *Sir William Jones: Bicentenary of His Birth Commemoration Volume 1746-1946*, Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1948, pp. 146-147.

³³Jatswan Singh, "The Origins of British Burma: Arakan and Tenasserim, 1826-1852," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Malaya, 1992, p. 245.

³⁴Arthur P. Phayre, "On the History of Arakan." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 13, 1844, p. 23.

³⁵Phayre, "On the History of Arakan," p. 23.

and India Office Collection of the British Library, where it remains today.³⁶ However, since a western Burmese monk cited Nga Mi's chronicle as the basis for his own chronicle in the 1930s, it can be safely assumed that copies of Nga Mi's chronicle were also circulated locally as well.³⁷

For the years they share coverage, the Nga Mi chronicle provides the same historical narrative as found in the Sithu-gammani (1870s, 1886 copy) and Calcutta chronicles (1791). Thus, Nga Mi's chronicle is certainly not, as Phayre believed, merely a new compilation drawn from various western Burmese chronicles. Instead, it is a recopying of a text from the same tradition that was copied in both the Sithu-gammani and Calcutta chronicles. It is difficult to look into the mind of someone who has been dead for well over a century, especially given the absence of other materials on Nga Mi. One could only conjecture why, when commissioned to put together the ancient western Burmese chronicles, he provided a copy of one specific text. In my own experience in examining other chronicles in western Burma and the Irrawaddy Valley, I have found that, unless given a clear reason not to, respected texts were faithfully copied verbatim, whether with slight modifications or with additional information for intervening years. These modified copies sometimes bore only the copyist's name. It seems likely that Nga Mi would have done the same and that the chronicle he presented to Arthur Phayre in the early 1840s was an extant and well-respected western Burmese chronicle. Given the appearance of this same historical narrative in so many places and periods, as described thus far, it is clear that texts of the chronicle tradition copied by Nga Mi were well circulated throughout both

³⁶Nga Mi, "Rakhine Ra-zawin."

³⁷Shin Sanda-mala-linkaya, *Rakhine Ra-zawin Thet-kyan*, 2 vols., Mandalay: Hanthawaddy Press, 1932.

western and central Burma. As the Nga Mi chronicle provides the same verbatim account of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth as we find in the Sithu-gammani chronicle, both texts can be accepted as reflecting different branches of the same chronicle tradition.

Sithu-gammani's chronicle (that is, the original text he copied), the Calcutta chronicle, and the Nga Mi chronicle are thus different copies stemming from the same chronicle tradition. Each of these chronicles, in ascending order, provides increasing coverage of western Burma's history over time, while maintaining much of the same text of the chronicle just before. This appears to present a linear evolution of an historical tradition, similar to that generally evident in the connection between Û Kalà's *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi* and *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* and between the latter and Û Tin's *Kòn-baung-zet maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, although in this case adjustments took place in the copying.

The identification of this connection between the three chronicles under discussion here is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that Sithu-gammani's text was not an original text, but rather a copy of a much older work, and since the 1791 *Rakhine Ra-zawin* is a copy of this text, we must assume that the original predates the 1790s at the latest. Furthermore, accepting that the Sithu-gammani chronicle is a copy of an original dated prior to 1791, and that the original text that Sithu-gamanni worked with in the royal library at Mandalay almost certainly entered the royal library in the early eighteenth century or had been taken from Mrauk-U during the conquest of 1785, I suggest that we can attribute this shared text (common to all three of the chronicles discussed in this section) to the period between Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history in 1608 and the conquest of 1785 (probably earlier). This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that the shared text was so widely

distributed even though Burmese texts tended to move in rather limited circles in precolonial times.

In any event, it can be asserted with a fair degree of certainty that with the exception of the Dhajaraja segment of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth, the general narrative of this myth is a western Burmese, not a central Burmese historical tradition and certainly predates its appearance in central Burma in 1781.

The Dhajaraja Segment

There remains one critical step in the development of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth, namely the addition of the Dhajaraja segment. The Dhajaraja segment is clearly a “sanitized” repetition of the original Abhiraja segment of the myth: Dhajaraja, like Abhiraja, is portrayed as a Sakiyan ruler who left India and who also established his capital at Tagoung. However, the Dhajaraja segment does not appear in precolonial western Burmese historical texts. Thus, this alteration of the original myth and its integration with that same original myth into a single narrative in *Hman-nàn mahayazawin-daw-gyi* in 1829, appears to be a variation of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth that is peculiar to post-1781 central Burmese historical literature.

An important key to identifying this twist in the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth’s evolution is to be found in Shin Sandá-linka’s *Mani-yadana-bon* (1781). Before this can be demonstrated, however, something must first be said about Wun-zin Min-yaza, the man to whom most of the historical anecdotes in the *Mani-yadana-bon* are attributed. By tradition, a central Burmese king once found a village boy of exceptional learning and knowledge about the court. The king made this boy, who became known as Wun-zin Mìn-yaza, a royal minister. He also became the royal

adviser to King Mìn Kaun I (r. 1401-1422) of the Ava Dynasty (1364-1555). Stories, reputed to be the anecdotes and advice that he had related to these kings in order to better inform their rule, have been passed down from generation to generation. Some slipped into the narrative of Û Kalà's *Maha-ya-zawin-gyi*, but aside from being able to identify, logically, these as being at least as old as Û Kalà's history, we really do not know when other stories attributed to Wun-zin Mìn-yaza developed or who really authored them. In any case, numerous texts have purported to offer the full corpus of Wun-zin Mìn-yaza's "sayings," but each with a different assortment of stories. For example, one text said to have been composed in 1833, begins with the fall of Pagan and the emergence of the controversial "three brothers." Its narrative then moves up to Wun-zin Mìn-yaza's time and recounts his advice to the Avan kings.³⁸ As there appears to have been no original text to work from, each of these "comprehensive" texts must be considered as original compositions in their general form, with the inclusion of different traditions attributed to Wun-zin Mìn-yaza. Another text, the focus of our attention in this section, Shin Sandá-linka's *Maní-yadana-bon*, was composed in 1781 but included other materials of apparently recent appearance in central Burmese literary traditions. Shin Sandá-linka, for example, included historical anecdotes that long antedated the fall of Pagan and Wun-zin Mìn-yaza's time. Also included is later historical data, such as commentaries on Tabin-shwei-hti's (r. 1531-1550) habit of drinking alcohol, of which Wun-zin Mìn-yaza could not possibly have been aware because he himself would have died at least a century earlier. In short, although Shin Sandá-linka's *Maní-yadana-bon* is implied to be a copy of an earlier historical text, it is actually a heterogeneous collection including both old and new (in 1781) material.

³⁸Wun-zin Mìn-yaza, "Ya-zawin-ngei," [Palm leaf manuscript number 3407] AMS, 1833, Oriental and

As I have mentioned, the *Maní-yadana-bon* is the first central Burmese historical text, and the first among the Wun-zin Min-yaza texts, to include the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth. In its general form, Sandá-linka's version of this myth is the same as that in the Sithu-gammani chronicle, the Calcutta Chronicle, and the Nga Mi chronicle. However, there is one important exception. Shin Sandá-linka explains that Abhiraja took on the new regnal title of Thadu Zambudipa Dhajaraja (hence Dhajaraja in its short form) at Tagaung.³⁹ This development may have been partly inspired by the claim made in Maha-zeiya-theinka's history that Kan-raza-gri installed his own son Zambudeip (Zambudipa) on the Tagaung throne when his younger brother Kan-raza-ngei died, although this must remain conjecture until further evidence is available. In any event, the insertion of the coronation title is important for two reasons. First, Sandá-linka appears to be the author responsible for the appearance of the name Dhajaraja. Second, the compilers of the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyì* apparently drew upon the same tradition, the refugee king being called Abhiraja in western Burmese texts and his (shortened) coronation title of Dhajaraja in the *Maní-yadana-bon*, as two different but related myths.⁴⁰ The "two" myths were thus integrated, with some adjustment, into one linear narrative. The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth had thus finally evolved into its present form.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the full form of Abhiraja's coronation name (as supplied by Sandá-linka), Thadu Zambudipa Dhajaraja, was also worked into the narrative of the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyì*. The latter text also explains that Dhajaraja assumed the title of Thadu Zambudipa

India Office Collection, British Library, London, United Kingdom.

³⁹Sandá-linka, Shin. *Maní-yadana-bon*, p. 7.

⁴⁰*Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyì*, I, pp. 175-182.

Dhajaraja (as Sandá-linka had Abhiraja), when he became king of Tagaung.⁴¹ The *Mani-yadana-bon* thus allows us to identify the central Burmese contribution to the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth as well as the branch of the origin myth's text tree that led to the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 to be inserted here]

The compilers of *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* must have realized that they were working with two versions of the same myth. Indeed, they cite several texts, including specific western Burmese texts, which should have made this clear. But there were obvious incentives to amend the myth as a whole, utilizing the altered central Burmese version. The addition of the Dhajaraja segment, for example, made the whole Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth more palatable to the central Burmese court because the story of a second Sakiyan king circumvents any superior claim of legitimacy on the part of the royal line of western Burma (whose descendants were still around to potentially raise old royal claims) or any suggestion of western Burmese cultural superiority. In other words, the Dhajaraja myth segment appears to be a way of using a convenient myth found in western Burma and applying it to central Burma, without injuring the pride or threatening the claims of superiority of the intended audience of the repackaged myth--the Kòn-baung court.

⁴¹Ibid., I, p. 179.

The Embellishment of the Kòn-baung Kingship and Court Culture

The Kòn-baung court adopted the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth from western Burma into its emerging state historical narrative, as I have explained above. Western historiography of Burma accepted from the beginning that the underlying motive for utilizing the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth in central Burmese histories was to grant legitimacy to Kòn-baung kings. As Henry Burney suggested in 1836:

The great point with the Burmese historians is to show that their sovereigns are lineally descended from the Thakyi race of kings, and are ‘Children of the Sun;’ and for this purpose, the genealogy of even Alompra, the founder of the present dynasty, is ingeniously traced up to the kings of Pagan, Prome, and Tagoung.⁴²

Luce, as mentioned earlier, shared the same sentiments. Despite the objections of Maung Htin Aung, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja story is clearly a myth used to connect the central Burmese kings to the Sakiyan race of kings, and thus to Mahasammata. But the Pyu-zàw-hti origin myth had already lent Burma’s kings legitimacy as members of a solar dynasty. Why change one origin myth for another, unless the latter was important for other reasons? Examining the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth in the context of recent research on the texts that appeared in the Kòn-baung court in the early 1780s can provide some answers.⁴³

⁴²Burney, “Discovery of Buddhist Images,” p. 164.

⁴³Ryuji Okudaira, “Features of the Theravada Buddhist State Structure with Special Reference to the Muddha Beiktheik (‘Supreme Coronation Ceremony’) as Observed by King Badon in Eighteenth Century Myanmar,” in *Proceedings of the Myanmar Two Millennia Conference 15-17 December 1999*,

Although I will suggest that Bò-daw-hpayà was largely responsible for the changes under examination here, I should first explain that Bò-daw-hpayà did not act alone in an intellectual vacuum; other court literati had begun to change their perspectives on the Kòn-baung court as well. Bò-daw-hpayà inherited from his predecessors, Hsin-hpyu-shin (r. 1763-1776) and Singu (r. 1776-1782), for example, a courtly intellectual climate that increasingly sought to emphasize the court's natural political and cultural hegemony in the region. Kòn-baung literati supported this emphasis in two important ways. First, elaborated lineages (as opposed to vague references) used to explicitly establish Mahasammata as a royal ancestor began to appear in court verse in the early 1770s, during the latter years of Hsin-hpyu-shin's reign.⁴⁴ The *Paleik-sa Eigyin*, for instance, composed in 1774 or 1775 by Û Hpyaw, the royal tutor of prince Singu (prior to his kingship), provides an extensive account of the lineage of kings from Mahasammata to the Kòn-baung Dynasty. It should be noted that Û Hpyaw included Pyu-zàw-hti in his *eigyin*. Although Û Hpyaw additionally elaborated on the Sakiyan royal heritage, he did not include the

Yangon: Universities Historical Research Centre, 2000, III, pp. 120-132; Idem & Andrew Huxley, "A Burmese Tract on Kingship: Political Theory in the 1782 manuscript of Manugye," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64 (2), 2001, pp. 248-259; Michael W. Charney, "A Reinvestigation of Konbaung-Era Burman Historiography on the Beginnings of the Relationship Between Arakan and Ava (Upper Burma)," *Journal of Asian History* 34 (1), 2000, pp. 53-68.

⁴⁴Pe Maung Tin, *History of Burmese Literature: Myanma Sabei Thamine*, Rangoon: Thudhammawadi Press, 1955, pp. 197-198. Michael Aung-Thwin suggests that Kyanzitha (r. 1084-1111) and Narapatisithu (r. 1173-1210) had done so during the Pagan dynasty. Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 57, 221, n. 22. The evidence Aung-Thwin cites, however, does not necessarily support his comment. Instead, the inscriptions cited only claim that the kings are of the solar line, no extensive royal lineage is provided, and Mahasammata is not mentioned. See Charles Duroiselle (ed.), *Archaeological Survey of Burma: Epigraphia Birmanica being Lithic and Other Inscriptions of Burma*, Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Union of Burma, 1960, I (2), pp. 151, 167.

Abhiraja/Dhajaraha origin myth.⁴⁵ Second, as I have argued elsewhere, in the early 1780s, prior to the invasion and conquest of western Burma, Kòn-baung court literature had also begun to reevaluate the historical relationship between central Burma and outlying regions, particularly with western Burma. This reevaluation led to the inclusion in their narrative of stories that emphasized the cultural superiority of the central Burmese and the central Burmese court's superior claims of authority over rulers in western Burma.⁴⁶

William Koenig has observed that the early Kòn-baung kings moved toward more universally-valid legitimation of kingship associated with Mahasammata.⁴⁷ The interest in an indigenous origin myth in enhancing the luster of central Burmese kingship had dissipated substantially. The rejection of the old origin myth, connecting Burma's kings with Pyu-zàw-htì, in the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* sponsored by Ba-gyi-daw in 1829, is one indication of this transition. Efforts to connect the Kòn-baung king with Mahasammata, however, intensified. The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth, included in central Burmese texts from 1781, connected Burmese rulers to the Sakiya clan and thus allowed for the demonstration of a clear lineage stemming from Mahasammata to Burmese kings (as well as kinship ties with Gotama Buddha). Unlike the Pyu-zàw-htì myth, which was only valid in the Burmese context, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth granted the Kòn-baung court legitimation and royal status that had wider currency, far beyond central Burma.

⁴⁵ Û Hpyaw, *Paleik-sa Eigyin*, Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1907, pp. 5-47, passim, with special note of pp. 9, 15, 19, 29; See discussion in U Hla Pe, "Letteratura Birmana." Original unpublished English manuscript [published in Italian in O. Botto (ed.), *Storia delle Letterature D'Oriente*, Milano: Vaillardi, 1969, IV, pp. 245-301], f. 22; *Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life, and Buddhism*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Charney, "A Reinvestigation of Konbaung-era Burman Historiography," pp. 53-68.

⁴⁷ Koenig, *The Burmese Polity*, pp. 86-89.

There is increasing evidence that the major shift toward an exclusive emphasis upon Mahasammata can be pinpointed to the reign of Bò-daw-hpayà. Recent research has found that the reputed legal basis of Mahasammata's rule provided in the *Manugye Dhammathat*, originally composed in the 1750s, was considerably enlarged and more fully elaborated in a copy of this text completed on 25 June 1782, about nine months following the appearance of the *Mani-yadana-bon* (October 1781) and its account of Abhiraja/Dhajaraja. The added material included not only a new chapter three and chapter sixteen, but also the insertion into chapter one of "twenty-two lists on kingship and judicial behaviour."⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the compiler of this version of the *Manugye Dhammathat* is unknown and the possibility that Bò-daw-hpayà himself composed this text cannot be rejected with certainty.⁴⁹

At the same time, Bò-daw-hpayà strengthened the universal aura of the Kòn-baung court through Brahmanical consecration rituals and the acquisition of requisite court Brahmins and Sanskrit texts to do so. Okudaira has observed, for example, that Bò-daw-hpayà, among the early Kòn-baung rulers, initiated the observance of "the most elaborate and complex" of the various Brahmanical consecration rituals, the Muddha Beiktheik. Bò-daw-hpayà had this ritual performed twice, once in 1783 and once in 1784, both prior to his conquest of western Burma in 1785.⁵⁰ The complexity of the Muddha Beiktheik consecration ceremony required specialized court Brahmins and Sanskrit ritual texts. In 1782, Maung Htaung *hsaya-daw*, a Buddhist monk with

⁴⁸Ryujji Okudaira, "A Serious Problem Caused by Printing of a Burmese Manuscript--Richardson's Text of the *Manugye Dhammathat* or a Law Book." Paper presented at the Symposium in honour of U Pe Maung Tin, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 11-13 September 1998, ff. 11-15; Okudaira & Huxley, "A Burmese Tract on Kingship," pp. 248-251.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 252-3.

whom Bò-daw-hpayà maintained a close relationship, translated one of these Sanskrit ritual texts into Burmese.⁵¹ Bò-daw-hpayà urged the acquisition of more Sanskrit texts and both he and his successor, King Ba-gyì-daw (r. 1819-1837), dispatched numerous missions to obtain these texts and as well as Brahmins from Bengal.⁵² Bò-daw-hpayà eventually gathered from Sri Lanka and India all sorts of texts (both Pali and Sanskrit) that drew upon South Asian intellectual traditions.⁵³ The volume of Bò-daw-hpayà's acquisitions was unprecedented; by comparison with Hsin-pyu-shin's (r. 1763-1776) importation of sixty Sanskrit texts, for example, Bò-daw-hpayà imported several hundred.⁵⁴ Additionally, the conquest of western Burma led to the resettlement of significant numbers of court Brahmins at Amarapura, the central Burmese royal capital.⁵⁵ Brahmins thereafter performed not only significant ceremonial roles, but served as mediators of Sanskrit texts and even as contributors to the composition of

⁵⁰Okudaira, "Features of the Theravada Buddhist State Structure with Special Reference to the Muddha Beiktheik," pp. 120-121; see also, J. S. Furnivall, "The Coronation of Burmese Kings," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 15 (1), 1925, 142.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 121-122.

⁵²Although this latter effort has been portrayed as merely a ruse for political maneuvering (Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma*, 77), this is an old colonial view that warrants serious reevaluation; the evidence, in light of this discussion, suggests instead a more fundamental interest in the texts and the Brahmins themselves.

⁵³Koenig, *The Burmese Polity*, p. 92; Mabel Haynes Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma*, London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1909, p. 77.

⁵⁴According to the *Thakahta Abhiseka Sadan* (1782, p. *hka*), Bò-daw-hpayà dispatched to Calcutta a delegation of ten Brahmins who gathered about 236 Sanskrit texts. Thirty of these texts were then translated into the Burmese language. The author was unable to obtain a copy of the *Thakahta Abhiseka Sadan* and is drawing upon a personal communication from Professor Okudaira (2 March 2002) who has in his possession a 1976 photographic copy (provided by the University Books Publishing Committee) of an undated palm-leaf manuscript copy of this text. See also Koenig, *The Burmese Polity*, p. 92, who estimates the number of imported Sanskrit texts at over 250.

⁵⁵ Royal Order of 4 February 1789, in Than Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of Burma, A. D. 1598-1885*, Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1986, V, p. 456.

royal histories.⁵⁶ Thus, the strengthening of universally-valid royal legitimation through the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth, the connection with Mahasammata, and the Muddha Beiktheik consecration ritual was an on-going development by the time that Bò-daw-hpayà conquered western Burma in 1785.

The primary desire to acquire South Asian texts and Brahmins, then, cannot be attributed to an interest in western Burma per se. Rather, the reverse was true: the interest in western Burma almost certainly stemmed from a broader interest in expanding the cultural horizons of the central Burmese court and making more universal the legitimacy of its rulers. Western Burma, secluded from the Irrawaddy Valley by a formidable mountain range, had sat as an independent kingdom within the greater Indian cultural matrix for over a millennium. As a result, the Mrauk-U court had the same kinds of court specialists (Brahmins), texts, and traditions that Bò-daw-hpayà wanted. After a vigorous military campaign in 1785, the Kòn-baung kings became the first central Burmese dynasty to permanently annex western Burma.⁵⁷ Along with the Mrauk-U court's royal family and court Brahmins,⁵⁸ the royal library of Mrauk-U was carried back and its contents carefully surveyed by learned men in Bò-daw-hpayà's court.⁵⁹ As I have explained, there is explicit evidence that Kòn-baung court writers utilized western Burmese histories that came into their possession.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ultimately, when Ba-gyi-daw commissioned the compilation of the *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, he included knowledgeable court Brahmins (*ponna binnya-shi*), alongside Buddhist monks and other learned men. *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, I, p. 174

⁵⁷ Û Tin Kòn-baung-zet *maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, Rangoon: Leidi Makhine, 1968, II, pp. 1-10.

⁵⁸ Ibid., II, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Û Tet Htoot, "The Nature of Burmese Chronicles," In D. G. E. Hall (ed.), *Historians of South East Asia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 57.

⁶⁰ The *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, for example, lists the *Rakhine Ra-zawin* and the *Rakhine Maha-muni Thamine*, as important sources for the section of the text that includes the

All of this may appear to suggest a one-way flow of historical texts and traditions from South Asia, including western Burma, to central Burma. Since western Burmese historical myths had begun to influence central Burmese historical literature by 1781, then western Burmese literati or texts must have earlier found their way to the central Burmese court. Indeed, in this paper, I have focused upon the influence of a western Burmese myth upon central Burmese historical traditions. But western Burmese historical traditions also changed, over time, in ways that hint at a growing awareness of historical traditions developing in the Irrawaddy Valley. The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth, for example, gradually included increasing amounts of information on the Irrawaddy Valley. For example, Tagaung began to play an important role in this myth, something that clearly belonged to central Burmese historical traditions. Although we can identify the effects of this bilateral cultural interaction, however, more research is needed into the relationship between local and regional literature and ideas in the earlier decades of the Kòn-baung court before this process can be fully understood.

I should also stress that the influence of the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth was by no means sweeping and immediate. Indeed, for several decades many central Burmese literati were either unaware of the borrowed origin myth (even more evidence of it not being a local historical tradition) or purposely ignored it, clinging wholeheartedly to the Pyu-zàw-hti origin myth. *Twìn-thìn-taik-wun*, Maha-si-thu, for

Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth and other details. *Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*, I, p. 182. An analysis of a copy of the *Rakhine Maha-muni Thamine* (*Rakhine Maha-myat-muni Thamine*) from 1745, however, yields no information on the Abhiraha/Dhajaraja myth and thus appears to have been used only as general reference (in fact, this text begins with Gotama Buddha, whom Abhiraja and Dhajaraja are to said to predate). Û No. “Maha-myat-muni Thamine,” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 40206] AMs, 1745, Universities Central Library, Yangon, Union of Myanmar. As for the “Rakhine Ra-zawin,”

example, does not mention the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja origin myth in his *Myanma Ya-zawin-thet* (1800), a massive and comprehensive work on Burmese history, does not refer to the myth.⁶¹ Neither does he include it in his *Alaung-hpayà Ayei-daw-bon*, choosing instead to draw *Alaung-hpayà*'s lineage from Pyu-zàw-hti.⁶² But gradually, over time, the myth became the dominant origin myth in central Burmese histories. To point to one example, although Maha-si-thu's account of *Alaung-hpayà*'s life, as I have mentioned, focused exclusively on the Pyu-zàw-hti myth, in the 1920s James G. Scott found a different palm-leaf account of *Alaung-hpayà*'s life now tied *Alaung-hpayà*'s lineage to the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth.⁶³

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the movement of a historical tradition from one region of Burma to the Kòn-baung royal center. As I have explained, the myth of Burma's Sakiyan kings was only an innovation for central Burma when the *Mani-yadana-bon* (1781) and the *New Pagan History* (1785) were composed. In fact, it was a borrowed tradition from a competing regional Burmese cultural center that had developed in the South Asian context, the home of what the central Burmese court would have identified as the universalist cultures and political theories of Buddhism and Brahmanism. As this regional center was both geographically and intellectually closer to India than was central Burma, its historical

it is not immediately clear to which text this refers, as most western Burmese chronicles are known by this title.

⁶¹ Twìn-thìn-taik-wun Maha-si-thu, *Myanma Ya-zawin-thet*, vol. I. Rangoon: Mingala Bon-hneib, 1968.

⁶² Twìn-thìn-taik-wun Maha-si-thu, "Alaung-mìn-tayà-gyì ayei-daw-bon," in Û Hlá Tin, ed., *Alaung-hpayà ayei-daw-bon hnasaung-dwè*. Rangoon, 1961, pp. 153-233.

⁶³ J. G. Scott, *Burma: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924, pp. 3-4. Unfortunately, Scott does not provide any other bibliographic details.

traditions were more closely attenuated to the demonstration of the universalist approach to kingship. When Bò-daw-hpayà conquered western Burma, he and his court drew upon the cultural products of this close relationship between India and western Burma and translated them into the central Burmese cultural context. The Kòn-baung royal center and its cultural heritage were, in a sense, re-founded around this borrowed link.

I have considered several possible criticisms of my approach in this article. We cannot demonstrate with absolute certainty that the Nga Mi chronicle (1840s), the Calcutta chronicle (1791), and the Sithu-gammani chronicle (1870s) are copies of pre-1781 texts. The evidence, however, strongly suggests that they are. Further, the argument could reasonably be made that it is within the realm of possibility that the compilation which includes Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history is a fabrication or that its date is mis-attributed (thus rendering it a new text produced in 1775). This latter argument, however, shoulders the burden of proof. Even should all these points be conceded, three pieces of evidence cannot easily be contested. First, no evidence for the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth has yet surfaced in pre-1781 central Burmese histories. Second, the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth is clearly laid out in full in a western Burmese chronicle which, even were the composition date of 1608 attributed to Maha-zei-yá-thein-hka's history that it contains to be doubted, was compiled by 1775 at the latest. Third, some of the peculiar and essential data of the myth is referred to in a western Burmese text dated in the 1450s. Thus, regardless of how we treat the other texts I have discussed in this paper, it has been demonstrated that western Burmese historical texts are the earliest extant sources for the Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth.

What does this mean for the overall picture of Burmese history? The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja myth was consciously extracted and inserted into an emerging

central Burmese “national” historical narrative that continues to inform contemporary Burmese about their country’s past and their own cultural and ethnic identity. Understanding the tensions and interactions among local, regional, and national historical narratives, as Prasenjit Duara has shown for China, is vitally important to understanding the history of a nation-state,⁶⁴ as Burma has become. By carefully identifying the origin and movement of shared data among precolonial Burmese texts, as I have done here for one specific myth, the importance of regional historical traditions in the formation of the national historical narrative is revealed. Further, by extrapolation, this strongly suggests that further research in local and regional Burmese historical texts is needed if we are to understand Burmese history from any but the perspectives of one privileged ethnic group (the central Burmese or Burmans) among many within the contemporary Burmese national collective.

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⁶⁴Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

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