Prophecies, Omens and Dialogue: Tools of the Trade in Burmese Historiography

by

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The study of Southeast Asian history presents a special intellectual problem, since our working conceptions in the discipline of history have been shaped almost entirely by western historians writing about the West. Standards of historical writing are not universal, however. Conceptions of history shaped in the tradition of Herodotus Thucydides, von Ranke et al, do not fully or automatically apply to the study of Thai, Javanese, or Burmese history. These societies had their own "indigenous conceptual systems"; that is, they had a unique and often implicit criteria of right and wrong, a special method of establishing legality, legitimacy and authority. Until we recognize and understand the unique cultural foundation on which these societies rest, we will be unable to understand their history or write it. How the cultural assumptions of one of these societies, that of Burma, can be discovered by an analysis of its chronicle tradition, is the subject of this essay.

The problem is challenging, since the sources of Burmese history rarely deal explicitly with cultural values and assumptions — they take for granted that the reader is familiar with them. Consequently, the scholar must not only turn to a wide range of sources — poems, ballads, myths — but must do so with a special set of interpretive tools. In Burmese history these tools, the technique of document exegesis, can be derived from the rich tradition of historical chronicles. These chronicles, properly interpreted, might yield the crucial cultural "statements" — the same as those which might be discovered in other circumstances by structural analysis — vital to historical understanding. From the chronicles, to be more specific, can be extracted the ingredients commonly viewed as essential for intellectual history: conceptions of man, of order and disorder, of the state, leadership, legitimacy, authority, in short, the assumptions on which society was based and in which the

authors of historical documents were themselves immersed. By identifying and understanding these assumptions, we can take a small step toward mastering the guiding conceptions of Burmese historiography.

Conceptions of Change and Continuity

The concept of change is basic to the writing of Western history. One of the areas in which fundamental differences arise between East and West is precisely the conceptions of change as revealed by their historiography. In "western" historical writing, societies are seen to change inevitably and significantly. Change, moreover, is equated with progress and progress is highly valued. Therefore, originality or newness are cherished goals for which to strive. In contrast, in Asia (and particularly Burma), although change is indeed viewed — in Buddhist thought — as inevitable, it is not associated with progress, and therefore, innovation and newness are not goals for which to strive — custom and tradition of the "purer past" are. However, in both traditions, discrepancies exist between ideals and society as it is. What the West often prizes as new and original may in fact be quite old, and the East is often forced to be innovative, severing itself from traditional practices, and is then left to justify those actions in a culture that euphemized the past. Both cultures, consequently, use disguises; the West frequently attempts to present traditional things as new and original, while in the East, things that are in fact new and original are cloaked in tradition. One of the ways in which Burmese historians have accomplished this end in the chronicles, is by the use of three literary devices: prophecies, omens, and dialogue. These were the "tools" that disguised change and accentuated continuity, both of which were closely tied to one's perception of time.

Time, to people steeped in the precise, mathematical Sanskrit tradition, was calculable to the second. The whole cosmos existed not only in a physically represented space (with a chain of endless mountain ranges called cakkavala) but in a

precisely formulated network of time. A person's birth, a king's ascension, the donation of a temple, were calculated to the precise moment in the universe, deduced from the position of the constellations. It is extremely rare when the precise year, month, day, hour, and position of the stars of important events are not meticulously recorded. For events that the culture considered important, there was an extreme regard for time and its corollary — accuracy. Dates had to be precise, for one's horoscope, so significant to one's whole earthly existence, was entirely dependent upon the precise moment of birth and its accurate recording. Burmese society's attitude toward time was, in other words, one of order; calculable, rather inflexible, and not to be transformed or conquered, but the reverse — to establish the context and limitations by which humans lived.

In the Buddhist view of time, humans lived in cycles, from the smallest (of birth, death, and rebirth) to the largest (eons or kalpa, the time between the origin and destruction of a world system, continuing ad infinitum). Given such a system, it would have been pointless to "capture" or "conquer" time, even in concept. Rather, one must escape it by becoming immune to it, in nibbana or extinction. Because of the belief in samsara (cycles of birth, death, and rebirth), the "end" for humans was not death, and the "end of the world" was not its permanent physical destruction but the completion of a cycle after which the process repeats. When Burmese Buddhists speak of impermanence, they do so in the context of samsara, through which all beings go prior to attaining nibbana, and more specifically, their own aspirations to salvation while still human. Because the kalpas or eons through which world systems go are simply too long to be of much significance to affect daily behavior, when people spoke of impermanence then, they meant death, a stark example of the Law of Impermanence's reality. Power, position, wealth are fleeting and if these are not used for the glorification of the Religion — which even though subject to the same Law of Impermanence had at least 5,000 years to live — then everyone's chances for salvation are lessened; for Maitreya, the future savior will appear at a time when the world is moral, kings great, vegetation luxurious, and most important, Religion "pure." Most devotees

prayed for rebirth as a human when Maitreya descends from Tusita, one of the Buddhist heavens, to preach the dhammacakka, the ultimate in sermons. Upon hearing this sermon, ignorant man will, by the force of the presentation, attain enlightenment and nibbana. To insure that the Religion survives those prophesied 5,000 years, people gave much of what they had to build temples and monasteries and to support the monks, the custodians of the Religion and insurance against religious decay. Surely, the presence of tangible temples and monastic establishments filled with learned monks testified that the Religion was surviving even though people died. Religious donations, in other words, were thought to counteract the Law of Impermanence for these gifts were made "in perpetuity" and assured the Religion's indefinite survival. There was little question of fundamental change occurring within this (5,000 year) span of time — which in human calculations was infinity. Even though Theravada Buddhist doctrine taught that everything is cyclical and impermanent, the belief in a future savior nevertheless promised salvation and escape from impermanency. There was a final conflagration, but it too was not permanent, for the whole cycle of world systems would begin again after that event. The only non-cyclical feature was nibbana and for most people, their rebirth as humans at Maitreya's future descent would assure that. Material donations on the one hand and the belief in Maitreya's coming on the other were thus thought to counteract the inevitability of religious destruction taught by the Law of Impermanence. And this desire to preserve the religion at all costs meant, necessarily, the preservation of all the institutions intimately connected with it. Ironically, the ultimate Buddhist doctrine of change created attitudes that drove people to preserve the old order instead.

One mode of preservation was accomplished by the writing of chronicles, which were concerned more with the present and the past than with the future. The belief in the Law of Impermanence made hindsight (as a concept of historiography) unappealing: one should record now, for the Law made the future unclear. The belief in Maitreya, admittedly, was a futuristic concept, even to the extent that it was messianic; but it had to do with personal salvation, not with hindsight as an

alternative approach to the writing of good history.

The Chronicles

The Burmese chronicle tradition is a long and varied one. Chronicles were written mainly by secular members of court for the benefit of their contemporary rulers. The "r w data" on which the accounts had been based was extensive; daily records kept by scribes and stored in the royal palace. Sometimes an individual wrote the history of the dynasty during which he lived, in other cases, a team of scholars attempted to write a "national" history treating the various dynasties that had ruled Burma — often of different ethnic background — as part of one (Burmese) culture. But in virtually every case, one chronicle was built upon another (often verbatim), so that we might describe Burma's chronicle tradition as a cumulative one (this was part of the tradition of preserving the past, not changing it). What "revisionism" there was, did not deal with "factual" events per se, but with the explication of the significance, in religious or moral terms, of those events. Most chronicles are late, dating to the seventeenth century and after, although the earliest surviving palm-leaf manuscript can be traced to the fifteenth century. Thenceforth, every dynasty compiled one or more accounts of its reign until the last one, which was conquered by the British in 1885. Survivors of that dynasty continued its history until Burma's last king died in British-forced exile in 1916. At this point, we could say that the Burmese chronicle tradition came to an end.

More specifically, there are perhaps six out of approximately a dozen or more chronicles of Burma's past that should be noted for their role in this tradition. They were the fifteenth century Yazawinkyaw (Royal Celebrated Chronicle), the early sixteenth century Zatadawbon (Compilation of Royal Horoscopes), the early eighteenth century Mahayazawindawgyi (Great Royal Chronicle), the late eighteenth century Yazawinthit (New Royal Chronicle), the early nineteenth century Hmanan Mahayazawindawgyi (Great Royal Chronicle of the

Glass Palace, the first part of which is better known in Southeast Asian Studies as The Glass Palace Chronicle), and the mid-nineteenth century Konbaungset Mahayazawindawgyi (Great Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty). Although each differed in quality, emphasis, coetaneity, and less so in content, each was written during the dynasty under which the author served and therefore can be considered a contemporary or near-contemporary source for that particular reign. They were written without using "hindsight" as a conscious, historical tool, a concept not appreciated in the cultural context of karma (to be discussed below), but rather were syntheses of court records that had been kept daily by scribes and secretaries and not readily available to everyone. The authors therefore were privy to the inner workings of the palace and had access to sources reserved only for those who were part of the "elite." The chronicles' contents reveal that the authors rote largely for one purpose; to record the achievements (and often failures) of the dynasty in whose reign they lived, so that a standard of behavior could be preserved for future kings to study. As such, the chroniclers were concerned not with the past but with the present, but in the process, used past exemplary models which they hoped their contemporary rulers would emulate.

A few of the chronicles were written prior to the period with which this volume is concerned but as most of them were compiled during it, there is small possibility that they might reflect the intellecutal currents of different epochs. Indeed, one could argue that perduring sentiments such as conceptions of man and the state should not and cannot be confined by arbitrary periods of time created largely for heuristic purposes and on the whole by Western scholars far detached in time and place. Surely, thoughts and ideas that were essential to the foundations of Burmese society must be allowed to cross these artificial boundaries that had been created by twentieth century historians largely for their twentieth century audiences. Even more compelling is the fact that Burmese society between the 1700's and 1800's experienced no profound or substantive transformation; the entire period from the re-establishment of Ava around 1635 to the end of the Burmese monarchy in 1885 should be viewed as one continuous segment, even

if interrupted by disruptive events in the 1750's — for the institutions of Burmese society persisted.[2]

With the exception of the Konbaungset, all of the histories paint the Pagan period in a heroic vein, for this was considered the foundation of Burma's classical culture. But as the accounts draw closer to the period in which their authors lived, factual events increasingly dominate, and very little myth, legend, or supernatural events remain, except where they served to make "statements" about Burmese culture. Miracles and supernatural events become pro forma, part of the "language" of the art of writing good history, imparting "meaning" to the narration of events. It is therefore the historian's task to be selective, ignoring (if he wished) the fact that their heroic treatment of the Pagan period consists only of a few chapters, largely for legitimatizing purposes. (The problem has been exacerbated by Pe Maung Tin's translation of The Glass Palace Chronicle which was the only Pagan segment of the entire Hmanan. Even though it represents less than one-quarter of the whole historical work, it left the impression on western scholars attracted by the English translation that all indigenous history was written in that mythical and heroic vein.)

The earliest surviving text composed as a history is brief — half of which is a list of kings of Mauryan India and Ceylon — followed by a list of Burmese kings, many of them legendary. The India/Ceylon section may have been taken from the Mahavamsa known to the Burmese at least as early as 1442 A.D. when a copy of it, and several hundred other Buddhist texts, were donated to a library.[3] Four of the later six chronicles were written between the early 1700's and 1800's, and of them, the Mahavazawindawgyi established the standard form even to the extent of types of analyses, insights, and judgments followed by subsequent authors, not to mention format, organization, and thematic outline. The Hmanan was an attempt by a team of scholars, appointed by the king in the early years of the nineteenth century, to reconstruct a comprehensive history from the "mythical" origins of Burmese society to date, utilizing all available chronicles, ballads, poems, inscriptions, and other primary sources. The Konbaungset was begun in the mid-nineteenth century to resume where

the Hmanan had ended, carrying the narrative to 1916 when King Thibaw (1876-1886) died in exile. It is thus begun with Alaungpaya (1752-1760) and ended with the last king of that dynasty, hence its title Konbaungset (The Konbaung Dynasty). The decision to continue the history of the Kingdom and the Dynasty to 1916 (Thibaw's death), even though both had ended in 1886 with the British conquest and annexation, suggests that history and its focus belonged with royalty (yazawin — king's history), even though, as we shall observe, accommodations were made for the "folk memory" and its folk heroes. Emphasis and selection also suggest that what was perceived to have been Burmese (the "national" group) was not simply Burman (the ethnic group), for Mon and Arakanese histories and their kings were included under the titles of "Burma's history" as epitomized by Twinthin Myanma Yazawinthit (Twinthin's New Royal History of Burma). Ethnic categories were not the primary or dominant concern of historians nor were they significant in the perception of what constituted loyalty and political authority.[4]

To early Burmese historians and particularly to the Burmese chroniclers from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, history was primarily written to establish a standard set by an ideal past. Written history was expected to identify a model cast of characters, whom living men and omen (especially royalty) should attempt to emulate or avoid (if evil). History was written not for its o n sake, but to substantiate, by historical examples, beliefs and truths found in religion and politics. History was written, not for intrinsic reasons, but to serve as a means to other ends. Each major event was used by the chroniclers to express a moral principle, explicit or more likely implicit, from which present rulers should learn. History, the chroniclers wrote, was to be used as a standard for all affairs of state and Religion.[5]

By the use of prophecies, omens, and dialogues, the early chroniclers imparted to narrative history the moral, didactic, often miraculous content it was expected to have. Burmese chronicles, if they are to be understood, must be read with an understanding and an interest in both the context in which they were written as well as the intent of the writers. Admittedly, we should be wary of

viewing origin myths and other such events used for symbolic purposes as factual. But at the same time, to simply dismiss them as legend and myth, unworthy of history, avoids the problem; for only in these chronicles can we find the information needed for narrative history. Other sources for institutional history are plentiful — such as revenue records, administrative files, donative inscriptions — but only in the chronicles is history as we know it recorded. An example should illustrate our problem. The Burmese histories claimed that the kingdom of Tagaung in northern Burma was the first Burmese dynasty and that its origins can be traced to Buddhist India in the early centuries B.C. As Buddhists, the Burmans quite obviously were attempting to link their origins with the tribe to which the Buddha belonged, the Sakyans of Kapilavastu in India. Archaeology has shown that indeed Tagaung was a historical site,[6] but ascribe it to a much later peiod. It has also shown that the direction of cultural development in Burma is unclear rather than necessarily north to south as the Tagaung myth implied. On the one hand, therefore, Tagaung is a confirmed historical site but dated too early; yet on the other, it was incorporated into the old histories well before archaeology was even considered an academic discipline. With proper analysis, the intention of this myth can be made to yield historical "truth." The barrier to understanding — and this may be the key — was the western assumption that factual statements of an empirical nature and statements of belief concerning a conceptual system do not appear in the same text, particularly in the same sentence. The examination of the context in which the chronicle was written and the intent of its authors is therefore critical if we are to succeed in writing sober Burmese history. And to do so, we must view prophecies, omens, and dialogue as "tools" which might reveal perceptions of moral order (continuity) and disorder (change), not as superstitions of the quaint Burmese who ignored the distinction between empirical and symbolic truth (the distinction was known but not readily admitted, for symbols were as meaningful as, and certainly more powerful than, explicit statements were). Heretofore, such a textual analysis has notbeen attempted in Burmese studies; to apply it to theBurmese chronicles is a small, first step in theunderstanding of Burmese historical sources andhistoriography

Prophecies (Byadeik)

One of the main purposes of prophecies concerns legitimacy. A family, dynasty, or individual ruler; their capital city, town, or village; the geographical area from which they came; all had to be legitimized in order to be part of the Burmese royal tradition. The ultimate criterion for legitimation was the Buddha, or Buddhist doctrine. By tracing the first dynasty of the Burmans to immigrants from the Sakyans to which Buddha was said to belong, Burma's subsequent ruling families established a direct link to the descendants of the Buddha. This linkage was usually achieved by incorporating into the chronicle a typical motif found in Buddhist and Burmese literature, what I have called the "Buddha-Ananda motif." Buddha would smile, Ananda, his chief disciple would ask why, and Buddha would reply that at this site, under these circumstances, a city would be founded that would last the predicted 5,000 years of His Religion.[8] When the last king of Pagan, Kyawswa, had been deposed by the less than legitimate "Three Shan Brothers" in the late thirteenth century, Buddha said to Ananda: "O beloved Ananda, in the future, in this place, there will be a capital, and three brothers will uphold the sasana (religion)."[9] The origin myths of other important towns in Burmese history also begin with such a prophecy. Following it, the chronicle normally recounts a part-historical, part-folk legend for which the locality was known, and then begins a narrative of events based on more reliable records, contemporary to the author. Well-known folk tales, interspersed between stories of the Buddha in a well-organized narrative inspired a good deal of confidence in the veracity of any account. One of the functions of prophecies, then, was to provide "divine" sanction to historically important sites. The capitals of all the dynasties of Burma received prophecies in which the Buddha-Ananda motif was used and were exclusively entitled "cities with prophecies."[10]

Prophecies were also used with the emergence of "great kings," who, in the judgment of the chroniclers and folk memory, had upheld and promoted the welfare of Buddhism, for the king, above all else, was considered the Defender of the Faith. But kings with prophecies, or whose reigns commanded

prophecies were often usurpers; they either had not been formally appointed heir or had not at all been a part of the recognized royal family. The glowing prophecy of King Kyanzittha (1084-1112), which he himself had inscribed on stone told the story of how several deities — each symbolic of a major cultural group in Burma — had agreed in the remote past to insure the king's acquisition of the throne as a reincarnation of Visnu. Kyanzittha had wrestled the throne away from Sawlu, the appointed heir, and had subsequently become extremely successful, promoting the Religion and perpetuating tradition; therefore, he had to have a prophecy to legitimize his non-royal origins.[11] Similarly, King Bayinaung (1551-1581) of the Taungngu Dynasty (mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century), Alaungpaya (1752-1760) of the Konbaung Dynasty, his grandson Bodawpaya (1782-1819), and Mindon (1853-1878), had all received byadeik for their rule. None had been formally appointed heir but all had been successful in their reigns in promoting traditions cherished by the society.[12] The byadeik was used in these cases to affirm that these reigns had been sanctioned by the "highest authorities" even though (or precisely because) they had not followed traditional succession rules. This process of legitimation by byadeik was used particularly if the reigns had been highly successful and subsequently upheld tradition in a manner considered to be authentic and proper. In order to preserve the royal blood, a usurper once established would then marry the last Chief Queen of the preceding ruler, thereby passing legitimacy to his own, otherwise illegitimate, descendants.

The Law of Karma states that whatever one sows, one shall reap. All present situations such as rank in society have been determined by actions in one's previous lives and present actions will determine future events and the status into which a person is reborn. If a usurper were successful, it implied that his past behavior had been so exemplary as to enable him to dispose a person the magnitude of a king, whose status had also been determined by his own past action. "Retroactive karma," therefore, was a major ingredient in Burmese political ideology and was used implicitly to justify usurpation even though it violated tradition and custom. But good karma alone did not

imply royal blood; therefore, a usurper married the Chief Queen who was the carrier of royal blood. Change was thereby legitimated by rituals and justified ex post facto as part of the karmic principle.

At the samt time, prophecies were used for kings who had been true to tradition, followed all the rules, but who had been deposed. If karma determined status, how could misfortune or evil befall a person with the rank of king? For example, Thado Minbya's reign (fourteenth to fifteenth century) and his city had received a prophecy. But the king, his dynasty, and his city had come to an inglorious end. Yet Ava had truly been a Buddhist city, its kings were "good," they had built magnificent temples, patronized the Religion and had provided for the welfare of the people — the ultimate and essential criteria for receiving a favorable record of rule. In order to "explain" this contradiction, the chroniclers stated that although this king was strong in dana (generosity, gift giving, especially characterized by such action as temple construction), he was, however, weak in sila (religious duty, such as meditation, learning the scriptures, and general patronage of the Buddhist Church).[13] Knowing that Ava was subsequently destroyed by the "barbarians," the historians had set the stage, so to speak, for the sad event when Ava, its temples and monasteries, its clergy and citizens, were destroyed. When the uncomfortable event appeared in the text, the reader was reminded of the king's sila and the event was implicitly relegated to the moral law of cause and effect — karma.

Thus karma created and karma destroyed. To western historiography, it is a circular argument but to cultures in which Buddhist thought is a major ingredient of political ideology, the argument is infallible; for everything else in the natural and supernatural world operated in cycles, including time, space, and, of course, history. Because of karma, evil persons did become kings; usurpers did ascend the throne; the Religion did become "impure"; noble cities were destroyed. Events contrary to the ideal manner in which society was supposed to evolve were not suppressed or omitted from the daily narrative kept by court scribes; rather, they were "explained" by the use of prophecies when the chronicle was subsequently

written. Prophecies functioned, then, as justification of events that often contradicted parts of the belief system, and were used further to give importance to occasions such as the founding of a new dynasty and capital or the destruction of old ones.

Omens (Nimeit)

The omen or ominous event appeared in either natural or supernatural form. Occurrences which deviated from the way things were supposed to happen were usually accompanied by omens. Their setting included coincidences, dreams of royalty, battles, births and deaths of heroes, and other such "powerful" and auspicious occasions. As in prophecies, omens would occur at succession disputes. When Prince Sawlu (mentioned above) was a child, he ate the egg placed underneath the food rather than the one placed at the top. The wise men saw it and stated that during his reign, the royal line would break. This ominous feature was necessary, for King Kyanzittha, a highly popular folk-hero whose royalty was questionable, replaced Sawlu, the legitimate heir. On the one hand, the chroniclers did not wish to be explicit about a popular king's non-royal background, while on the other, they knew that something, however implicitly, had to be said about events that broke with custom. Sawlu's ominous behavior and the judgment of the wise inserted by the chroniclers "explained" those uncomfortable occurrences.

There were other types of physical omens which presented problems of interpretation. When Ava was destroyed in 1527, spirits were said to enter temples, planets moved in strange ways, eclipses and earthquakes occurred, temples cried, and lunar constellations moved out of sequence. It is known that eclipses, earthquakes, and lunar misalignments did not occur on happy occasions; yet their precise meaning is ambiguous. To be explicit, however, was not a desired literary trait either; innuendo was a preferred technique. On these occasions, one can only speculate as to their precise intent or simply relegate such passages to literature's many devices for creating mood. Sometimes, behavior

was simply recorded. But the reader knew what was proper and improper behavior for different classes of persons and would therefore conclude that "improper" behavior was an "omen" with possible unfavorable consequences. When Thohanbwa, then chief of the Shans, destroyed Ava in the fourteenth century (mentioned above), ominous behavior helped to verify the explanation given by the chronicles for the destruction of a once-noble and righteous kingdom. He had invited the Sangha to a feast, for which many chickens, pigs, and buffalo were killed. When the monks arrived and were gathered in one place, his troops surprised and killed them. The message was clear: Thohanbwa was a "barbarian" for killing monks; but the monks had almost enthusiastically participated in a feast where meat was served, a taboo for orthodox monks. The description of the event was sufficient and needed no explicit or additional comment.

Similarly, when passing moral judgment on a king, a chronicler seldom stated directly that he was "bad"; instead, manipulation of words and classifiers and other indirect methods were used to make a point. For example, the proper language classifier that should have been used for a king would be deliberately exchanged with that used for a dog, or words reserved for monks and holy objects would be replaced by those used for ordinary laymen.[14] In Burmese, each noun is followed by a classifier, which usually corresponds to the rank and status of that noun. One might say, in English, a piece of paper, a bunch of grapes, a pair of pants, a bevy of girls. In Burmese, these classifiers (pair, bunch, bevy) follow rather than precede the noun. More importantly, they are hierarchic: one cannot use a bevy for nuns who are considered spiritually superior to lay women. Such usage by scholars who knew better, therefore, must be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to mar the characters involved. Thus when the classifier for a dog or other animal (kaung) — never properly used with humans, least of all kings — was used, the reader immediately knew something was amiss and concluded that the king was behaving like a dog.[15]

Like prophecies, omens were used to reaffirm the necessity of following tradition. When kings of non-royal birth emerged victorious, were successful,

and subsequently upheld tradition, supernatural events were created,[16] either to link them with past royalty through genealogical manipulation; if not that, their non-royal birth was accepted but they were made reincarnations of deities or past royalty. King Tabinshwehti of the sixteenth century was one of the most successful, dynamic, and exemplary kings in Burmese history. But his mother had been a "commoner" to whom his father, the then king, had taken a fancy. Apparently, her lineage was too well-known to manipulate successfully, so the girl was stated to possess all the marks of a superior person and made into a queen, though not Chief Queen. One day, while waiting on the King who was asleep, she let out a scream, waking him up. The King asked what had happened. She replied that the "Sun King had entered my womb." (The Solar Dynasty was the mythical ancestral family of many royal dynasties throughout the Mid-East, South, and Southeast Asia, including those of Iran, India, and Burma.) The King then stated that if she bore him a son he would make her Chief Queen despite the rules. The child was a boy and the King named him Tabinshwehti, "Golden Umbrella." When the King's advisors asked if he had named the boy, the king told them what his name was and the advisors replied that with him, the royal line should break.

Of course, the historian knew that Tabinshwehti's successor was his brother-in-law who was even more successful than he, and not, as the rules of succession demanded, the eldest son by the Chief Queen. He also knew that Tabinshwehti would eventually defeat the Mons, the ethnic group likeliest to present a major challenge to Burman rule, and reunite Burma under one dynasty once more. The chronicler then used this knowledge to create a coincidence. In it, a prince under a past Mon dynasty had been treated unjustly and killed, and was to be re-born in the person of Tabinshwehti. According to the story, Tabinshwehti, with a few daring men, had gone to the famous Shwe Mudaw Pagoda, the symbol of Mon independence in the heart of Mon territory, to have his ears pierced. The Mons were unable to apprehend him and his flaunting defiance of their military impotence in their own territory was colorfully recounted by the court historian. Then the author revived the story of the Mon prince who prior to being executed, had worshipped at this very same pagoda, saying, "My life is about to be

ended by no fault of my own...if it is true that I am without fault, let me enter the womb of the Burmese kings and when of age, let me come and put the...Mons under my suzerainty."[17] Thus at the same pagoda that the Mon prince prayed for karmic justice, Tabinshwehti's first and dramatic defiance of Mon power and authority began. It was a coincidence filled with meaning to those who appreciated the political symbolism of the Shwe Mudaw Pagoda in Mon-Burman political relations, who sincerely believed in reincarnation and karmic justice, and who felt that coincidences like these were in themselves extremely "powerful" symbols of historical truth.

Similarly, the ominous background of King Alaungpaya, the creator of the last Burmese Dynasty (1752-1886), justified "innovation" in establishing something "new." When he was born (after ten months) the earth quaked, the ground cracked. As a child, he was precocious, and when he reached age twenty-two, all the signs of a min-laung (imminent king) were attributed to him. Everyone heard of those omens and waited his arrival so that he might bring order out of the chaos that Burma was at that time experiencing. The reigning king heard of these stories and ordered a "massacre of the infants" (in the manner of King Herod). But like King Kyanzittha of Pagan (and Jesus of Nazareth), Alaungpaya escaped the search to become the unifier of the last Burmese Dynasty. These omens and coincidences gave karmic and "divine" dimensions to Alaungpaya's commoner background and gave credence to the genealogical ties which the authors had attempted to make between his family and that of Pyusawhti, founder of the Pagan Dynasty, and thence to Mahasammata, the first king of the world.

Mahasammata, in Indian political theory, belonged to the Solar Dynasty to which all Buddhist kings traced their ancestry. Because the world was in chaos, the people agreed to elect him king to provide order, and in return compensated him with one-tenth of their produce. The Mahasammata legend has often been likened to the "social contract" aspect of European political thought, and kings in India as well as Burma have consistently imposed a ten percent tax on produce. How central this ideology was to Burma's conception of legitimacy is difficult to estimate, but it is clear

that the chaotic conditions under which Alaungpaya came to power could not have been more appropriate for drawing legitimacy from this legend. As Alaungpaya's edict described those conditions, "mothers could not find their sons (nor) sons their mothers."[18] Although not stated explicitly — few ideas in Burmese political thought are — the understanding is that if there were no order, there would be more than ample "legitimate usurpers" (those who had rights to the throne by blood ties and/or karma) to replace the king. Revolts were not necessarily justified by ideologies of "social contract" but were always placed in the context of karma: successful revolts were ipso facto legitimate by virtue of their success. In Alaungpaya's case, reestablishment of order using the Mahasammata legend accomplished two things: one, he tied himself to the mythical Solar Dynasty to which all great Buddhist kings belonged, and secondly, connected political thought with the conditions of the time. Alaungpaya did not overthrow a legitimate dynasty (at least not in the eyes of the Burmans) but overthrew those who had overthrown the legitimized Taung-ngu Dynasty and he himself was therefore reestablishing order. In doing so, he was the "people's choice" (as Mahasammata had been); but this thought did not declare a democratic political principle, rather it was an affirmation of good karma.

These and other examples illustrate how kings, whose rise to power was accompanied by omens and prophecies in Burmese chronicles, were usually (even if royal) either not in direct line for the throne or were creators of new dynasties. Because ominous events and coincidences were instigated by supernatural forces beyond human control, nontraditional and non-customary behavior could be accepted as legitimate. As long as change occurred in content (such as the passage of power) and not in form (such as transformations in the type of leadership), innovation was justified by omens. When King Thibaw, the last of the dynasty that Alaungpaya had created, died in British-forced exile in 1916, no vultures rested on pagodas, no earthquakes occurred, no constellations flew out of formation, and there were no eclipses. Yet, earlier in 1885, when Thibaw and his Chief Queen were removed to India, effectively eliminating the monarchy, there was an entire paragraph of the

usual omens.[19] Along with these supernatural ones were "natural" omens such as lawlessness in the countryside and rule by outlaws, signs of extreme disorder. The type of omens used, and the fact that they were applied to the king's deportation to India rather than to his death suggests that disorder was perceived to exist not so much at the death of a king, but in the absence of kingship as an institution. Omens and prophecies therefore allowed innovation, creativity, and change significant niches in an otherwise tradition-bound and continuity-oriented society.

Dialogue

To have used the word "speeches" instead of "dialogue" would remind historians of the historiographic issues involved in this device, made conspicuous by Herodotus and Thucydides. But the device used in Burmese chronicles was more than speech making — it included admonitions, advice, and ordinary conversations. For want of a better term, dialogue has been chosen to include a variety of literary forms of direct communication. Unlike the often subtle use of ominous events or the often ambiguous intent of prophecies, the direct and explicit statements of dialogue made by characters in the history were even more unequivocal. These were judgments made by mortals, near-peers of kings, and wise ministers of court; not by the symbols inherent in supernatural events. They established standards by which contemporary rulers should live. If narrative history and its supernatural forms of justification for royal action left some doubt as to exactly what the morality in an event was, "dialogue" made certain that the point was not missed. And as one would expect, dialogue appeared on prophetic and ominous occasions.

The classic example is the chastising of thirteenth century King Narathihapade of Pagan by his Chief Queen on the eve of the political demise of the Pagan Dynasty, for which the King was made a scapegoat by nineteenth century historians. He was described in epithets not very complimentary of anyone, least of all a king, and was accused

of tearing down religious edifices to build fortifications, an act certain to bring disaster. The chroniclers implied that for having done such an evil deed, the King would be spending an eon in an existence less than human. The problem for the chroniclers was to explain how such a magnificent Buddhist kingdom, the foundations of the classical Burmese state, had come to such a sad end at the hands of the Mongols. They did it by allowing Queen Saw to reproach the King, and this reproach established a standard of all kings thenceforth. It also revealed how Burmese historians viewed historical causation.

The Queen first scolded the King by telling him that he had failed to listen to her advice sooner, which was "Bore not thy country's belly, degrade thy country's forehead, lay down thy country's banner, poke thy country's eye, break thy country's eye-tooth, sully thy country's face, cut off thy country's feet and hands."[20] But, she said, "thou wouldst not hearken to my words; and now it is hard indeed for the realm and villages to prosper!"[21] When the King asked for clarification — an added insult, for the meaning should have been clear to anyone — Queen Saw explained.

> Bore not thy country's belly — that is, cast not reproach upon the rich when they are guiltless, for they are as the belly of thy kingdom. Seize not nor spoil them of their goods, and gold and silver. When rich men died, though they had sons and daughters to inherit, they gat not their inheritance. To seize their goods and squander them till all is gone, this it is to bore thy country's belly. Abase not thy country's forehead — that is, deal not harshly in thy reckless choler with thy chief and faithful councillors and captains, who are as thy country's forehead. Fell not thy country's banner — that is, wax not wroth nor rage blindly against the wise men, monks and hermits, who are as thy country's banner. Pluck not out thy country's eye — that is, be not wroth and durious as a devil, without let or thwarting of thine anger, against thy wise chaplains learned in the Pitakas and Vedas, who are as thy country's eye. Break not thy

> country's tusks — that is, do not chafe and fume, heedless of the future, against the members of thy family, who are as thy country's tusks. Sully not thy country's face — that is, take not by force another's children who are as the mirror of their parents, their husbands, or sons, for such are as thy country's face. Cut not thy country's feet and hands — that is, kill not in anger, regardless of the future and the present, thy soldiers who are as thy country's feet and hands.[22]

Dialogue was, however, not always this straightforward. Occasionally, sarcasm was used to make a point. Again the chroniclers chose to admonish this same king. Narathihapade had fled to the Delta, some 300 miles south of the capital when the Mongols attacked, but subsequently returned and stopped at Prome, halfway between the Delta and Pagan. His retinue was in disarray. His servants said to the King, who had demanded 300 dishes of curry at every meal, that "We cannot find thee three hundred dishes of salt and spice, and they set around him only a hundred and fifty dishes. And the King wept, and covering his face...cried, 'Alas! I am a poor man!'"[23]

Advice given by ministers to kings in the past was often meant for contemporaries of the author. This was a method for criticism without fear of punishment. In present day spoken usage, this particular approach is called saung pyaw, a sarcastic innuendo referring to disguised criticism or public slander, which though directed at (say) your child, is in reality meant for a nearby person who can also hear one's statement, and for whom the criticism is in fact meant. It avoids direct (and in Burmese society, demeaning) confrontation and in the following example, perhaps execution. The story revolved around the decision in 1374 of whether or not to annex a neighboring kingdom. A wise uncle of the then reigning king stepped forward and argued against annexation, giving many convincing reasons. The author of this particular history was writing, however, in the eighteenth century, and the king he was serving then was also contemplating annexation of that same kingdom. The dialogue in this case was actually

meant for this eighteenth century monarch.

Dialogue also revealed essential principles that governed aspects of the Burmese conceptual system which otherwise might have been lost to later historians. When Saw Rahan, a cucumber farmer of the tenth century killed the reigning king who had plucked a cucumber from his garden, the king's aide said "Ho! farmer, why strikest thou our master?" He answered, "Thy king hath plucked and eaten my cucumber, Did I not (do) well to strike him?" and the aide "spake winding words and said, 'O farmer, he who slayeth a king, becometh a king.'"[24] "Retroactive karma," an essential ingredient in Burmese conceptions of kingship, was reaffirmed. Then the nineteenth century authors, not without sarcasm, had the aide convince the farmer that being a king was not so bad, that it was certainly better than tending to cucumbers. The farmer with great incredulity replied, "Is it so?" But after Saw Rahan had become king, the Mahāgiri Nat, guardian spirit and ancestor of all royal dynasties, refused to speak to the King or accept any food offerings made by him. The King then questioned his advisors who replied, "because you are not of royal blood, the Nat King refuses to speak...; give your son in marriage to Shwe On Thi, the royal daughter (of his predecessor), and make him Heir Apparent."[25] So the King gave his son in marriage to Shwe On Thi so that the royal line would continue. Though implicit in this case, dialogue nevertheless revealed that successful usurpation could be justified, although not encouraged, if certain essential rituals were followed that preserved the sanctity of royalty, and that the latter was determined by the female side of the lineage. The Mahāgiri Nat, by demanding that proper and traditional rituals be followed "explained" the contradiction between Buddhist beliefs in karmic law ("he who slayeth a king becometh a king") and the Law of Impermanence[26] on the one hand, and the practice of hereditary succession and desire for such continuity on the other.

Conclusions

Prophecies, omens, and moralizing dialogue were

found most frequently in the earliest portions of the chronicles, dealing with the history of the pre-Pagan and Pagan periods. For subsequent periods, this trend decreases. With few exceptions — such as those attributed to Alaungpaya, who was after all the founder of the dynasty under which the authors held tenure and was, even in less romanticized history, rather exemplary — when the narrative approaches the end of the second Ava Dynasty (about 1750), omens and prophecies had become pro forma, part of the "art" of writing good history. Indeed, U Kala's judgment of what constituted good history included listing characteristics of kings, such as their lineage, their works of merit, and their omens. Omens were being treated, in other words, as formal appendages of kings, like their horoscope and lineage, and were no longer used exclusively as historiographic tools.

On the whole, a major concern of Burmese chroniclers was to show continuity. But Burmese narrative history was filled with changes; in dynasties, capitals, and kings. Further, there were other contradictions: dynasties claimed descent from legitimating (religious) sources, yet they had clearly emerged from secular backgrounds; capitals claimed divine prophecies for their origins, yet battled each other; kings claimed royal birth, yet many had been commoners; the Sangha (Buddhist Church) claimed purity of doctrine and behavior, yet kings periodically had to "purify" it. The circular argument of the Law of Karma "explained" some of these discrepancies, and rituals also helped to bridge the gaps of discontinuity: coronations, marriage rites, temple building — all fulfilled the requirement that tradition be preserved.

But ritual and karmic justification were not sufficient. One needed supernatural and natural phenomena, woven convincingly around narrative history to help uphold the belief in continuity. And to this end, new and innovative events were often disguised as old and customary. Disguises used by the chroniclers covered only those parts of the picture that were "uncomfortable" — such as the acceptance of the non-royal, usurping, but folk-hero — and not the essential principles that shaped Burmese society nor the essential facts

(events) of narrative history. They were, to be sure, embellished, elaborated beyond a degree acceptable to von Ranke, and on the whole, placed carefully in a meaningful context. The fundamental problem for Burmese historians was the contradiction — and this was a major dialectic in its conceptual system — between the desire for continuity on the one hand, and the belief in the (Buddhist) Law of Impermanence on the other. If, as the belief states, everything is impermanent, change must be continuous. Where then is continuity? Therefore change, which is in essence innovation, must be made to wear the cloak of tradition.

Not unlike the "speeches" of Herodotus and Thucydides, used to provide drama to events, sway the reader to a preferred point of view, or introduce certain philosophical concepts, Burmese historians used prophecies, omens, and dialogue to do much the same thing, albeit to a greater degree. With these historiographic devices, Buddhism was introduced into and preserved in Burma in its "pure" (orthodox) form, the royal blood passed legitimately from one dynasty to the next, exemplary standards for royal behavior were articulated, the establishment of capitals and centers of power received "divine" sanction, and the destruction of cherished institutions were "explained." All of this depicted Burmese society in its ideal form despite events that suggested otherwise. Prophecies, omens, and dialogue bridged the ideological gap between the ever-changing events of narrative history (and belief in the Law of Impermanence) and the persistent traditions and institutions of custom-valued society (and the desire for continuity). To put it another way, the discontinuity of text was embellished to serve the continuity of context.

Notes

1. For a brief summary in English of some of these chronicles, one should read Pe Maung Tin's

introduction to The Glass Palace Chronicle, ix; Dr. Yi Yi's "Burmese Sources for the History of the Konbaung Period 1752-1885," JSEAH, VI, 1 (1965), pp. 48-66. Dr. Than Tun's "Historiography of Burma," Shiroku, no. 9 (Oct. 1976), pp. 1-22; 107-130 had independently arrived at similar conclusions reached here on the function of Burmese historical writing.

2. What I have assessed as the six major and essential institutions of pre-colonial Burmese society which should be considered the basis for determining change or continuity remained intact. These were: Theravada Buddhism in its karmatic form, stressing salvation through merit; an economy of redistribution based largely on agriculture; cellular organization of society based on patron-client ties on the one hand and a hierarchy on the other; an administration based on "fiefs" rather than on salaries; a legal system grounded upon codified, customary, civil law and royally-derived criminal law; and a political system formed around the kammaraja model of kingship.

See my "Jambudipa: Classical Burma's Camelot," Contributions to Asian Studies, XVI (1981), pp. 38-61.

3. Inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya, and Ava tr. by Tun Nyein (Rangoon: Govt. Supt. Print., 1899), pp. 37-47.

4. F. K. Lehman, "Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems," in Peter Kunstadter, ed., Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 93-124. For a detailed analysis of a particular historical episode using Lehman's principle, see Victor Lieberman's "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma," Modern Asian Studies, 12, 3(1978), pp. 455-482.

5. The Glass Palace Chronicle, tr. by Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce (Rangoon: Rangoon University Press, 1960), p. ix.

6. Historical Sites in Burma, ed. by U Aung Thaw (Rangoon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1972), pp. 99-103.

7. Although not concerned with the context in

the manner that we are in this paper, Victor Lieberman's article on a religious chronicle is the only other attempt in the English language at substantive textual analysis, although Tet Htoot had earlier arrived at the same conclusion in D. G. E. Hall's Historians of Southeast Asia (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 58. See Lieberman's "A New Look at the Sāsanavaṃsa," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 39 (1976), pp. 137-149.

8. Hmanan Mahayazawindawgyi (Rangoon: Pyigyi Mandain Pitakat Press, 1963), vol. 1, p. 188 is but one of many examples. Prophecies were not limited to events that occurred only in the remote past; often kings "prophecied" retroactively; that is, a prophecy was made of the present situation. For such an example, see King Kyazittha's inscription as translated in Epigraphia Birmanica (Rangoon: Supt. Govt. Print., 1960), vol. 1, pt. 2 (Rangoon, 1960), pp. 113-114.

9. Twinthintaik Wun Mahasithu, Twinthin Myanma Yazawinthit (Rangoon: Mingala Ponhneit Press, 1968), vol. 1, p. 164.

10. Shin Thilawuntha, Yazawinkyaw (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1965), p. 121; Konbaungset Mahayazawindawgyi (Rangoon: Layti Mandain Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 545; vol. 2, pp. 311-313; vol. 3, pp. 285-286.

11. Epigraphia Birmanica, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 113-115, 151.

12. Than Tun, "Historiography," p. 5.

13. Twinthin Myanma, pp. 197-200.

14. Twinthin Myanma, p. 393.

15. My thanks are due Prof. Alton Becker for this insight into the deliberate use of Burmese classifiers.

16. Twinthin Myanma, p. 444.

17. Twinthin Myanma, p. 444. That the Burmans acquired royalty by the reincarnation of a Mon, and not a Burman prince suggests that the concept

of royalty and legitimacy was not confined or restricted by ethnic differences and that the criteria may be commonly shared among both groups, though political rivals. The alleged animosity between Burmans and Mons — for long argued to have been a significant theme in Burmese history — is a superficial analysis of events, ignoring institutional realities.

18. Alaungmin Taya Ameindaw Mya (The Royal Edicts of Alaungmin Taya) (Rangoon: Burma Historical Commission, 1964), pp. 219-220.

19. Konbaungset, III, p. 728.

20. U Kala, Mahayazawindawgyi (Rangoon: Hanthawadday Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 292.

21. The Glass Palace Chronicle, p. 177.

22. The Glass Palace Chronicle, p. 178.

23. The Glass Palace Chronicle, p. 177.

24. The Glass Palace Chronicle, p. 58.

25. Twinthin Myanma, p. 65.

26. Buddhist doctrine asserts that everything in this world is inherently impermanent and will eventually decay and be destroyed. It is a concept that affirms change rather than continuity.