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Culture and Circulation

Literature in Motion in Early Modern India

Edited by
Thomas de Bruijn
Allison Busch



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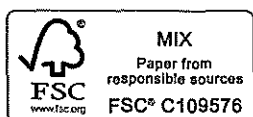
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PIRATES, POETS, AND MERCHANTS: BENGALI LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MRAUK-U

Thibaut d'Hubert

Our perception of cultural identities and their geographical location is often biased by arguments that treat modern nations as a timeless framework, whereas the boundaries of modern nations actually conceal the different structures that predate the modern world. In this essay, I propose to study some aspects of the literary culture and history of Arakan in the seventeenth century, an area which has not been considered as a cultural and political unit of its own because of its interstitial geographical location between modern Bangladesh and Myanmar. My central concern will be the use of languages in this highly multicultural area and the formation of a literary corpus using one of these languages, namely Bengali. We will see that the Bengali language served as an intermediary between the local sphere and the networks of the Bay of Bengal, in which the kingdom occupied a place of growing importance.

The Kingdom of Arakan was located in the northwestern coastal area of modern Myanmar and, at the climax of its expansion at the end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, extended from Bassein to Chittagong (Leider 2002 and 2004: 503). In the last ten years, studies have dealt with the history of trade in the Indian Ocean, as well as the political history of the kingdom of Arakan during the Mrauk-U period (1433–1785).¹ These have allowed us to raise new questions regarding the cultural background and functions of the agents participating in the Bengali literary milieu in Arakan during the seventeenth century.

Before dealing with the status of the Bengali language in Arakan, it is necessary to give a general overview of the literary material available to us. We have a very limited idea of the texts produced in the Arakanese language:² Speeches of ministers and a few poems have been reproduced

¹ Gommans and Leider 2002, Leider 2004, Subrahmanayam 2005.

² The literary language of Arakan used in the inscriptions and chronicles was similar to classical Burmese.

in later chronicles, but no corpus of Arakanese literary texts is extant.³ Pali language and literature were studied in this Therāvādin kingdom, but very few original works in this domain can be labeled as products of the Arakan court.⁴ Similarly, according to the historical records dealing with the fall of the kingdom in 1784, it seems that the Burmese king Bodawphaya (r. 1782–1819) was interested in Sanskrit scholarship in Mrauk-U and ordered the translation into Burmese of Sanskrit texts looted from Arakan (Leider 2006).

The most important testimonies to literary culture in seventeenth-century Arakan are found in the Bengali texts composed in Chittagong, which was part of the Arakanese kingdom from 1578 to 1666, and in the capital city of Mrauk-U (Ben. Rosāṅg). In Chittagong, the bulk of this literature was written by Muslim authors who settled in the rural areas around the harbor.⁵ The texts composed in the Chittagong area were concerned with religious matters such as the lives of the prophets of Islam or Islamic doctrine and practices with a strong Sufi inclination. The authors do not claim affiliation to any Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*) and their Persian and Arabic literary models are not precisely attributed. These texts were apparently aimed at newly converted Bengalis and provided them with the fundamentals of Islam.

The Bengali literature composed in the capital shows different features.⁶ The religious dimension is still present in the texts composed in the capital city but the focus is not on stories of the prophets and proper Islamic behavior. Rather, the authors gave more importance to “Sufi romances” and they made direct references to famous *ṭarīqas* (i.e., the *Chishtiyya* and the *Qādiriyya*) which denotes their integration into supra-regional Sufi networks. The language of these poems is very scholarly and more sophisticated. Their Awadhi, Persian, and Sanskrit literary models are clearly mentioned, thus showing the acute consciousness the authors had of their activity as men of letters. Furthermore, the patrons of this literature were

³ An introduction to the available Arakanese historical literature is given in Leider 2004: 464–77.

⁴ For instance, in the classic monograph written by Mabel Haynes Bode (1909), Arakan is not presented as a cultural center where Pali literature was composed.

⁵ See Sharif 2003 [1969] and 1999 [1983], Saiyad Sultān 1978, Roy 1983, Karim 1997, and Bhattacharya 1999.

⁶ Only one monograph published in Calcutta in 1935 by A. Karim and E. Haq is devoted to the subject of Bengali literature in the Arakanese capital. Their study was based on the manuscripts collected by A. Karim in the Chittagong area. They identified five poets who composed texts in Mrauk-U during the seventeenth century, namely Daulat Kāji, Māgana Thākura, Ālāol, Mardan, and Šamsīr Āli (Haq and Karim 1993).

not only Sufis, but also members of the gentry. The Bengali literature of Mrauk-U is mainly represented by two poets, Daulat Kāji (fl. 1622–38) and Ālāol (fl. 1651–71), who worked under the patronage of Muslim nobles employed in the royal administration, and consists of translations of Awadhi and Persian texts into Bengali.

Among the authors who lived in the Arakanese kingdom during this period, Ālāol provides the most vivid and complete picture of the aspirations of the Bengali literati of his time.⁷ As we will see in the following pages, the nature of his oeuvre and the fact that he was first and foremost a poet-translator, when resettled in the context of seventeenth-century Mrauk-U, afford preliminary answers to explain the functions of the Bengali language in the cosmopolitan kingdom of Arakan.

In this essay I will first investigate the conditions behind the rise of Bengali literature in Mrauk-U. In the second part I will use Ālāol's biography and literary activity as a lens for tracing the evolution of Bengali literary culture in Mrauk-U between the reign of Satui: dhammarājā (r. 1645–52) and Candasudhammarājā (r. 1652–84). Finally, I will situate Mrauk-U in the larger cultural context of the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth century and I will focus on the role of the “court poet” as a cultural mediator between the local power and the cosmopolitan networks of the ports around the Bay of Bengal.

1. *The Formation of a Muslim Elite in the Arakanese Capital*

The short-lived Bengali literary tradition arose in Arakan in a Muslim milieu characterized by two main features: diversity and mobility. I will now give an overview of where Muslims came from and how they settled in the area surrounding Mrauk-U called Dhannavati (the [land] rich with rice) between the mid-fifteenth century and the second half of the seventeenth century.⁸ Then I will proceed by asking two questions: What did they do once settled in Dhannavati? What was their place in Arakanese society?

⁷ For the editions and manuscripts used to write this article, see Ālāol 1975, 1977, 2002 [1985], and 1992. Extracts from his *Rāga-tāla-nāmā* can be found in Sharif 1967: 16–7, 81–2, 92–3. The *padas* of Ālāol are given in Bhattacharya 1984: 38–42. And for *Saptapaykar* I derived the text of the prologue from two manuscripts of the Bangla Academy (Dhaka) referenced B. A. *ālokacitra* 4 and 33 and one that is kept at the Dhaka University (Abdul Karim collection, ms. 499). Two monographs deal exclusively with Ālāol's works: one in English—Ghosal 1959—and one in Bengali—Bala 1991. For a recent analysis of Ālāol's works focusing on his socio-cultural environment and the poetics of translation, see d'Hubert 2010.

⁸ On the Muslim presence in Arakan, see Yegar 1972 and Leider 1998.

Muslims settled in Arakan in waves. The first probable substantial arrival of Muslims in the area surrounding the capital Mrauk-U dates from the return of Nara mit lha (r. 1404–34) to the throne of the Arakanese kingdom after the invasion of the king of Ava around 1408 (Leider 2004: 39–58). After a period of subordination to the Sultan of Bengal who provided Nara mit lha with soldiers to take back the throne, the Arakanese kings regained their sovereignty and about a century later in the 1540s even included the port of Chittagong in the kingdom. Thereafter, the conquest of Bengal by the Mughals that lasted between 1574 and 1610 forced some of the soldiers working for the Afghan rulers to seek refuge in Arakan where they entered the service of the court (Leider 2004: 402). Besides those “willing” Muslim immigrants, we find slaves taken during the raids of Luso-Arakanese pirates in market-villages of the delta area. According to their skills the slaves could either be sold to Western traders or kept in order to work in the kingdom, as was the case with the Bengali poet Ālāol. The fact that Chittagong was controlled by Arakanese kings between 1578 and 1666 also occasioned the settlement of Bengalis (both Muslims and non-Muslims) in the Dhannavati area. The most impressive example dates from 1644 when king Narapati (r. 1638–45) ordered the displacement of 80,000 craftsmen from Chittagong to Dhannavati (van Galen 2002). We have so far only mentioned urban Muslims of Turko-Afghan stock acclimatized to the Bengali cultural environment, and rural Bengalis recently converted to Islam. Although the two groups cannot be fully homogenized, both share the characteristics of being Muslim and speaking Bengali. I will therefore refer to them as “Bengali Muslims”.

Besides the Bengali Muslims, other groups were also present in Mrauk-U: those who were neither Bengali Turko-Afghans, nor converted Bengalis. One category included the merchants involved in long-distance trade. Most of these traders originated from the three great Persianate empires of the time—the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires—as well as from the ports of the sultanates of Southeast Asia. Culturally speaking they were more distant from the Arakanese context and their language for communication was Persian. The other category is historically more traceable and consists of Mughal followers of Prince Shāh Shujāʿ, Aurangzeb's brother, who took asylum in Mrauk-U in 1660. We will return to this important event when dealing with Ālāol's life and works. For the moment, what concerns us is that they were Persian-speaking Mughals, distant from the regional culture and thus, just like the traders, they are to be distinguished from Bengali Muslims.⁹

⁹ Regarding the place of Bengal in Mughal culture see Eaton 1993: 167–79.

One cannot fail to notice the potential for diversity within Arakan's Muslim society itself. This diversity is confirmed by Ālāol who gave an extensive list of names referring to various kinds of Muslim individuals present in Mrauk-U under the reign of Satui: dhammarāja (r. 1645–52):

nānā-deśī nānā-loka/ śuniyā rosāṅga-bhoga/ āisanta nṛpa-chāyā-tala/
 ārabī misrī śāmī/ turakī hābsī rūmī/ khorāsānī ūjbegī sakala//
 lāhurī mūltānī hindī/ kāśmirī dakṣiṇī sindhī/ kāmarūpī āra baṅgadeśī/ (...)
 bahu śekha-saiyad-jādā/ mogala-pāṭhāna-yoddhā/ (...) ¹⁰

Various individuals [coming from] various countries, informed about the delights of Rosāṅg (i.e., Mrauk-U), came under the king's shadow: Arabs, Egyptians, Syrians, Turks, Abyssinians, Ottomans (*Rūmī*), Khorasanis, Uzbeks, Lahoris, Multanis, Hindis, Kashmiris, Deccanis, Sindhis, Assamese (*Kāmarūpī*), and Bengalis (*Baṅgadeśī*), (...) Many sons of Shaykhs and Sayyids, Mughal and Pathan warriors (...)

One point is striking about this enumeration: Here Ālāol does not encompass the whole Muslim community by saying that “Musalmans” are present in Mrauk-U, but gives precise names related to particular places. He does not just name these places in a random order; he starts from the ones farthest afield (Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Central Asia, and Ethiopia), then he gives the nearer “Hindustani” area (Lahore, Multan, Kashmir, Deccan, and Sindh) before finally introducing the regional area with Assam and Bengal.¹¹ Ālāol is completely conscious of the subtleties of the diversity surrounding him. It seems that no simple religious identity is adequate for describing the kinds of people present in the place he lives. The Bengali Muslim poet here expresses a fact key to the understanding of the modalities of circulation and communication in Arakan during this period: One's status depends on whether one is from the far Ottoman Empire, from nearer Hindustan, or from the regional (*deśī*) area of Bengal. By observing the status of Bengali Muslims in Arakan, it will become clear that they could take advantage of their position as regional intermediary between the local Arakanese Buddhist power and the cosmopolitan, Persian-influenced, Muslim outer world.

¹⁰ Ālāol 2002 [1985]: 13.

¹¹ He specifies similarly the names of what is usually collectively designated by the term “firing” (Portuguese, French, Dutch, etc.) Concerning the perception of the world by Ālāol as compared to Rānīr, a contemporary Hadhrami author from Aceh, see Wormser and d'Hubert 2008.

How did these Bengali Muslims play this role? European sources testify to the active place of Muslims in the administration of the kingdom. Among the titles often encountered when Europeans mention Muslim officials are *loscloy* or *lascorusil* (for Pers. *lashkar wazir*), *kotwal* (Pers. *kutwāl*), and *majlis*. The *lashkar wazir* was a general of the army, the *kotwal* was in charge of security in the capital city, and the *majlis* was a representative of foreign merchants in Mrauk-U and delivered authorizations for trading and collected taxes on behalf of the king in the harbor (Subrahmanyam 2002 and van Galen 2008: 217). These three functions were assumed by the various patrons of Daulat Kāji and Ālāol. For instance, Daulat Kāji's protector, Āsrapha Khāna, was the *lashkar wazir* of Sīrisudhammarāja (r. 1622–38). Saiyad Musā, Ālāol's patron around 1670, seems to have been the *kotwal* of Mrauk-U.¹² The last protector of Ālāol is called *majlis* Nabarāja all throughout the *Sikāndar-nāmā* (1671), which identifies him as the *majlis*, or the tax collector of the Mrauk-U harbor. Other such examples could be added, but the point here is to notice the following fact: These highly ranked Bengali Muslims who patronized literary works were somehow connected to the outside world through warfare in the case of the *lashkar wazir*, or economic activities in the case of the *majlis*. Actually, even people such as the *kotwal* and the *lashkar wazir*, who were responsible for the internal affairs of the kingdom, were also involved in long-distance trade.¹³ Besides referring to these high-ranking Muslims, Bengali texts also contain data concerning those of a lower status, such as "royal horsemen" (*rājāsōyāra*)—a rank Ālāol occupied after his arrival in Mrauk-U—as well as "translator for maritime affairs," *ḍiṅḡāra dobhāṣī* (Sharif 1958: 243).

What seems most relevant from this short overview of the functions of the Bengali Muslims in the Arakanese capital is their intermediary location between the local power and the supra-regional world. Ālāol provides a clear picture of the acute perception of the Other prevalent in his milieu. It is not a totalizing categorization, but a precise division of people accord-

¹² Even if the poet does not designate him by the term *kotwal*, he speaks of him as being "in charge of the royal domain (*nṛpati-viṣaya*)" and he adds that his patron had under his command thousands of "soldiers equipped with firearms (*agni-astra-dhārī*)" (Karim 1997: 259).

¹³ This fact is attested by Bengali sources as well; for instance, Daulat Kāji stresses that, thanks to "wandering traders from abroad"—*deśāntarī pravāṣī panthika vanijāra* (Daulat Kāji 2003 [1995]: 6), his patron was famous in places as distant as Aceh (*Āci*), China (*Mācīna*), and Patna in Bihar. The situation is linked with the topic of "mercantilism" in the Bay of Bengal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which has been investigated by Subrahmanyam (2005). See also Prakash 2002, Leider 2004: 431, and van Galen 2008: 204–41.

ing to the distance from Mrauk-U of their place of origin. This ability to distinguish what kinds of strangers ran their businesses in Mrauk-U is not merely rhetorical; it is the reason why Bengali Muslims were instrumental to the Arakanese power and is the main driving force behind their status in the Arakanese kingdom.

2. The Functions of the Bengali Language in Arakan

As mentioned above, some Bengali Muslims functioned as translators to smoothe maritime affairs. The value placed on their linguistic skills brings us to the next topic: the specific functions of the Bengali language in the Arakanese political and cultural context. In this multicultural milieu, it is necessary to understand the different functions of languages in order to locate Bengali more specifically.

Considering that all of the records written on palm leaves and paper are now lost, we rely mainly on inscriptions and travel accounts to identify which languages were used at the Arakanese court. From the available material, we know that Arakanese, Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, and Bengali were all participants in a complex literary system. A more precise classification of these languages according to the different fields of activity in the kingdom would require an accurate study of the content of the inscriptions, which has yet to be undertaken. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish to what extent each language was considered administrative or literary.

First and foremost, the local language, Arakanese, in its literary form, which is equivalent to classical Burmese, was used on coins, for epigraphic records, and other official documents. In its oral form it was also spoken by the king and his dignitaries, whether Arakanese or not.¹⁴ No extensive literary texts produced at the royal court have been preserved in manuscript form.¹⁵ Arakanese was the language of the local elite and was central in the administration of the kingdom. But it seems that no active support

¹⁴ Ālāol specifies that Māgana, his first patron, knew *magī*, that is to say, Arakanese (2002 [1985]: 17).

¹⁵ This does not mean that no literature was composed in Arakanese at the royal court during this period. For instance, poems attributed to some king or queen are quoted in the chronicles. In the episode relating the events leading to the succession of Narapati, a bard recited a *ṇa cañ*, that is, a versified narrative about the great deeds of the past (Leider 2004: 272). Manrique also refers to songs in Arakanese (Magh): "To this accompaniment many ditties were sung most skillfully, alternately in the Magh, Brama, and Peguan dialects, but they were in such high-flown language that I could scarcely understand a word" (1927: 36).

was provided by the local elites towards fostering a literary tradition in this language.

The two classical languages originating from India (Sanskrit and Pali) were learned in Arakan from a remote past. We have proof of Sanskrit scholarship for the ancient period (fourth–eighth centuries) in the form of various inscriptions.¹⁶ The most important ancient Sanskrit inscription was kept in the Shit-thaung pagoda built in the sixteenth century (Johnston 1944: 373–82). This suggests that it was still relevant to preserve a record in Sanskrit even during later periods. But the main evidence for the study of Sanskrit in Arakan during the seventeenth century stems from the presence of court Brahmans called *puṇṇa* (Leider 2006). Their activities at the court show that Sanskrit was a technical language useful for various matters connected to statecraft, such as coronation rituals, astrology and the interpretation of omens, and more generally what falls under the category of *nīti* (political wisdom).¹⁷ Ālāol's constant references to Sanskrit literary culture show its relevance in the Arakanese context outside Brahman circles. If Sanskrit was no longer an administrative language during the seventeenth century, it was still learned by some members of the court for purposes besides religious ones and was present in the cultural background of Bengali Muslims, Brahmans, and Buddhist scholars. The Pali language was mainly used in the religious field. Unfortunately no study of the history of Pali literature in Arakan has yet been undertaken. The dynamism of Buddhist institutions is attested by various embassies sent to Sri Lanka to bring back copies of the *Tipiṭaka*—the Pali Canon—and the construction of libraries to store these texts (Raymond 1995). Through its interaction with Arakanese, Pali also played an important role in the composition of chronicles, and in a broader sense as a lexical stock for Arakanese courtly and administrative language. But, contrary to the case in Burma, no poetical work seems to have been composed at the court or in one of the important monasteries of Arakan. Similarly, in the case of the Arakanese language, the local power left no hint of literary patronage though all the material—texts, scholars, wealth—was available to build up such a tradition.

As regards to Persian, we have evidence of its functioning both as an administrative and a literary language. To be more specific, Persian was used in order to garner some visibility from neighboring Muslim Bengal

¹⁶ Concerning Sanskrit inscriptions from the Candra dynasty (fourth–eighth centuries), see Johnston 1944.

¹⁷ In his study of the sources of the Burmese *Nīti kyan*, Ludwik Sternbach points to the role of Arakan in the transmission of Sanskrit anthologies dealing with *nīti* (1963: 330).

and in diplomatic affairs. During the sixteenth century Arakanese kings struck coins with Persian names alongside their Pali titles, which were also given in Arabic and Sanskrit. This was not a sign of the Islamic influence of the Arakanese kings, but rather a way to be culturally understood by their nearest neighbors and by the sultanates that were then emerging around the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, Persian letters sent to European merchants and Mughal courts simply testify to the presence at the Arakanese court of secretaries and translators who could read and write Persian.¹⁸ Persian was then one of the important diplomatic languages of the time, and clearly instrumental for full inclusion in the economic and political exchanges with other powers around the Bay of Bengal. Except for these letters and one inscription, no original Persian literature has been produced in Arakan, and if we wish to find clues regarding Persian scholarship in Arakan, we have to turn to the Bengali literary tradition of the kingdom.

Now let us consider the case of Bengali. Firstly, it is important to note that Bengali was the culture language used for administrative and literary purposes in many courts in northeastern South Asia.¹⁹ Thus it is no surprise to find Bengali literature in Arakan, which was culturally and politically contiguous. Authors living in Arakan during the seventeenth century left behind a fairly high number of literary texts, which was not the case for the other languages mentioned above. Before mapping the production of Bengali literature in Arakan, it is necessary to say a few words about its use in the administration. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Sanskrit titles written in the Bengali script are found on some Arakanese coins (Leider 1998). The addition of Bengali script on coins can be understood as an attempt to be more visible at the regional level, whereas Persian and Arabic, mentioned above, addressed an even wider audience.²⁰ Dutch and Portuguese sources also provide evidence of the use

¹⁸ See the letter to the Armenian merchant George Christiano in van Galen 2008: 211. Regarding epistolary relation between the Arakanese kings and the Mughals, see Askari 1959.

¹⁹ Bengali literature was patronized in the peripheral kingdoms of Nepal, Kamata and Kamrup, Tripura, and Orissa (Sen 1999–2000 [1975–78]: vol 1, 214–24; Brinkhaus 2003).

²⁰ The multilingual coin bearing Arakanese, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit inscriptions dates from 1622. After that the Arakanese kings minted only unilingual coins in Arakanese. The multilingual coins are contemporary with the military expansion of Arakan and reflect a will to be understood as an emerging power at various levels: the local one—the one of Arakanese language, the regional—the area of the Bengali language and regional Sanskrit literacy, and the supraregional one—the realm of the Persian and Arabic speaking world (Mitchiner 2000: 139).

of Bengali language for diplomatic and commercial activities.²¹ Thus we observe that Bengali was used in the domains where the Bengali Muslims were active; that is to say, in businesses requiring any kind of interaction between the local and the regional or supra-regional levels.

Bengali literature was mainly written in two places in the kingdom: Chittagong and Mrauk-U. The properly Bengali-speaking area of Arakan that was Chittagong was an important center of literary activity. The Bengali texts composed there have to be examined in the context of Islamic influence in the rural areas during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They reflect the necessity of building an Islamic corpus in Bengali in order to educate the recently converted rural populations. The themes center on religious matters (lives of the prophets, Sufism, and so on) and, though the authors note their reliance on Arabic and Persian sources, they very rarely mention them specifically. Otherwise, the capital city of Mrauk-U, where the Bengali Muslim community was very prosperous, provided a suitable environment for learned men seeking patronage. Until the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Bengali language was restricted to the realm of administration and no literary text produced before this period is available today. Note that it is when Bengali disappeared from the coins minted in Arakan that the language acquired the status of a literary language. To put it differently, when the local power claimed its Arakanese Buddhist identity, Bengali Muslims felt the necessity to support the composition of literary texts. The Bengali literature composed during this period can be seen as testimony to the cultural awareness of a community which had reached the highest point of its economic prosperity, and whose role in the administration of the kingdom as an intermediary between the local power and the outside world had been clearly established.

At this point the status of Bengali in Arakan, both as an administrative and a literary language, appears to be connected to communication and

²¹ For instance, the term *losclosy*, sometimes found with the spelling *lascorusil* (Manrique 1927: 373), clearly shows that Dutch and Portuguese heard this word from a Bengali speaker, because the phonetic rendering is the one of eastern Bengali (Persian [a] becomes [o], initial syllable [va] becomes [u], [z] becomes [j] in Western Bengali and remains [z] in the East). The Bengali pronunciation is also found in the case of shrines typical to eastern Bengal and Arakan, called in Persian *Badr maqām* but spelt *boder mogom* in Dutch sources (similarly the short [a] of Persian became [o] and the consonant cluster [dr] became [d] when followed by the Bengali genitive mark *-er(a)*). Other such examples could be given, but at present it seems enough to ascertain the fact that Bengali was occasionally used as a medium between Europeans and the local authority.

mediation. We will now see how essential it is to understand this role, in order to grasp the dynamics that led to the constitution of the corpus of Bengali literature in Arakan during the seventeenth century. The biography and literary career of the Bengali poet Ālāol provides a specific example of the ideological developments of the Bengali milieu, revealed through the literary tastes of the poet and of his patrons.

3. *Ālāol: His Life and the Shifting Cultural Environment of Arakan*

Compared to previous Bengali literature, a remarkable feature of Ālāol's texts is the autobiographical accounts that the poet provides in the prologues to his poems. These short autobiographies are not strictly historical, and they should be understood within the rhetorical framework required by the poet-patron relationship: Such introductions to the life of the author were a kind of self-promotion aimed at clarifying the poet's background for the potential patrons present in the assembly. Nevertheless, these passages inserted into the prologues are the only sources we have for a broad reconstruction of the poet's life, and it is possible to glean from them some basic information about his historical, political, and cultural circumstances.

Ālāol's father was a counselor (*amātya*) of Majlis Qutb, the Afghan ruler of the Fatihabad kingdom in the country of Gauda, which is to say the western part of Bengal.²² One day, as his father and he were traveling by boat on some business, they were attacked by Luso-Arakanese pirates (*hārmād*) who were looking for slaves in neighboring villages. His father died in the battle and Ālāol was taken to Mrauk-U, where he was hired as a royal horseman (*rājāsoyāra*).²³

Before introducing his literary activity in the Arakanese capital, I should mention the tremendous shift in cultural environment that Ālāol experienced when he was violently removed from Fatihabad and led to Mrauk-U. Ālāol briefly depicts the place he came from in the extract from *Satī Maynā Lora Candrānī* given below (1992: 6), which requires some comments on the structure and significance of Ālāol's lexical choices:

In [the country of] Gauda is the famous kingdom (*muluka*) of Phatehābād (Fatihabad),

²² On the boundaries of the *sarkār* of Fatihabad (Fathābād) during the time of Akbar, see Abū'l-Faḥl 2001 [1927]: 127; for contemporary accounts on Fatihabad and Majlis Qutb see Mīrzā Nāthan (1936: vol. 1, 59, 88–9).

²³ For a depiction of the Muslim cavalry in Mrauk-U, see Manrique 1927: 373.

Where [live] honorable men refined in their speech (*ukṭi*) and devotion (*bhakti*).

There are many scholars (*dānīśmand*) [and] Sufi masters (*khaliphā*),
As well as [holy] tombs (*gor-sthāna*) of many saints (*āuliyā*).

[Among] Hindu families, [there dwell] wise Brahmins learned in the
Vedas (*śrotriya*);

There constantly flow the streams of the Bhāgīrathī.

In this place, Majlis Qutb is the ruler (*adhipati*),

And I, who am endowed with a weak mind (*hīnamatī*), am the son of his
counselor (*amātya*).

First the author locates Fatihabad in the traditional geography of Bengal by mentioning Gauda. He then introduces his audience to the intellectual elite of this place, evoking both the holy men and the holy places of this Brahman and Muslim society. Finally, Ālāol gives the name of the ruler and adds that he is himself the son of a counselor or minister, whose name he does not specify. The words used to describe the intellectual elite of Fatihabad reveal his familiarity with both Brahman/Sanskrit and Muslim/Persian cultures. Notably, Ālāol does not mix these two domains in a syncretistic way, and he seems totally conscious of their separate religious identities. He mentions Hindu and Muslim intellectual elites with appropriate terms current in Sanskrit (*brāhmaṇa*, *śrotriya*)²⁴ and in Persian (*dānīśmand*, *khaliphā*), respectively. This categorization comes after a general remark that outlines the characteristics of the educated man, regardless of his religious belonging: refinement in speech and devotion. It is noteworthy that the Bengali Muslim poet uses Sanskrit words (*ukṭi-bhakti-śiṣṭa*), and not Persian, to express the idea of refinement: As a matter of fact, his poetry, though based upon Persian themes, answers to aesthetic requirements originating from Sanskrit literary canons.

In contrast to Chittagongian authors of the same period who are not explicit regarding their literary models and sources, Ālāol gives the names of various Sanskrit and Persian works and authors, and once more proves to be very self-conscious about his literary activity as a cultural mediator.²⁵ All of the works Ālāol mentions, whether Persian or Sanskrit, are “classics”—there are only two references to Sanskrit texts composed after the

²⁴ In *Sikāndar-nāmā* Ālāol uses *bhaṭṭācārya* instead of *śrotriya* (1977: 27).

²⁵ For instance, Ālāol mentions the names of Sanskrit authors such as Bhavabhūti, Kālidāsa, and Vararuci (2002 [1985]: 160). He also refers several times to Piṅgala (ibid., 19, 72, 160); and in the field of Persian literature, besides the authors whose texts he translated, he gives the name of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (ibid., 121–2) and mentions Firdawsī’s *Shāh-nāmā* (1977: 20).

twelfth century²⁶ and no mention of contemporary Persian literature. Sanskrit literary culture was pivotal in a society composed of Buddhists, Hindus, and partly of *deśī* Muslims or “acclimatized” Turko-Afghans now familiar with South Asian literary culture, and it is no surprise that Ālāol stresses its presence in his native place as a proof of his respectable education. Persian, as we will demonstrate in the following pages, was then an element of growing importance in the socio-cultural climate of Mrauk-U, and it was vital for the poet to make a claim about his necessary accomplishments in this respect as well. But in order to have an accurate opinion of Ālāol’s cultural location, I must add that the court milieu in which the poet grew up was headed by Afghans who about a century earlier were the patrons of the Hindavi Sufi romances such as Jāyasī’s *Padmāvat* (1540) and Manjhan’s *Madhumālātī* (1545). In sum, Ālāol was a Bengali-speaking Muslim from the interior of Bengal, who hailed from an Afghan background acclimatized to North Indian regional cultures, and showed respect to figures of eloquence and wisdom associated with both Persian and Sanskrit cultures.

From a cultural environment of Afghan nobles settled in the interior of Bengal in a fragmented political context, Ālāol landed in a cosmopolitan harbor, wide open to the commercial network of the Indian Ocean. Such a shift must be taken into account in order to understand the choices and expectations that shaped his literary works. Ālāol’s literary activity can be divided into three phases, which reflect his progressive adaptation to the cultural environment of the assemblies that he joined in Mrauk-U. The period of residence in Mrauk-U led to Ālāol’s shift away from North-Indian (Awadhi) regional cultural references, followed by a phase of literary experimentation deeply linked with his contemporary environment. Finally, that is, during the last years of his career, Ālāol made a radical move to more wide-spread Persian literary models.

After some time in the Arakanese capital, Muslim inhabitants with whom he had shared his knowledge recognized him as a scholar and brought him to one of the king’s courtiers named Māgana Ṭhākura, son of Baḍa Ṭhākura, who commissioned a translation of Jāyasī’s *Padmāvat* into Bengali.²⁷ Here begins what we know about Ālāol’s literary activity. The

²⁶ The *Saṅgītadāmodara* of Śubhaṅkara (Bengal, sixteenth-c.) and the *Saṅgītadarpaṇa* of Catura Dāmodara (seventeenth-c.), two treatises dealing with music and related arts, such as theater, dance, and poetics (Ālāol, Saptapaykar, B.A., *ālokacitra* 4, f. 104b).

²⁷ Māgana apparently did not formulate his request by asking for a translation into “Bengali” but rather asked Ālāol to “compose [the poem] in *payāra* [verses] in order to fulfill everyone’s wish” (Ālāol 2002 [1985]: 21).

reasons that motivated Ālāol's patron to choose this particular text—after all the text originated far away in the plains of India in a dialect of Hindavi—are not clearly expressed. The author only relates that the story of *Padmāvatī* had been narrated to Māgana, who then expressed the wish that people who did not know “Hindustānī” in Rosāṅg could be given the opportunity to appreciate Jāyasī's poem, and commissioned a translation using the Bengali verse called *payāra*. I would suggest that in this particular case, the patron relied upon the poet's taste for the choice of the text to be translated. Considering Ālāol's Afghan background and the deep respect he expressed for Jāyasī, whom he calls *kavi-kula-guru*, the “master of all the poets” (Ālāol 2002 [1985]: 9), a title often given to Kālidāsa in the Sanskrit tradition—it is very likely that he was himself an authority in the literary field and that he provided his milieu with the literary models to be translated. The prologue of the second part of *Sayphulmuluk* (1670) where it is stated that Māgana, Ālāol's patron, was also his “disciple”—*śiṣya* (Karim 1997: 260)—further substantiates this view.²⁸ The composition of the Bengali *Padmāvatī* (1645–52) constitutes the first phase of his literary activity, and it is characterized by the poet's inclination towards regional literary cultures, associated with the Afghan ruling class once spread throughout the Gangetic Valley.²⁹

The second phase of Ālāol's career is marked by two texts: the first part of *Sayphumuluk Badiujjāmāl* (1652–60, *SB*) and *Satī Maynā Lora Candrānī* (1659, *SMLC*). These two texts show a progressive shift from North Indian literary culture to Persian supra-regional models while illustrating at the same time his belonging to the local literary tradition. Ālāol composed *SB*, later included in the Arabic *Thousand and One Nights* (Shackle 2007), at the request of the same patron Māgana Ṭhākura. In the prologue of *SB*,

²⁸ The poet's role as a teacher is also clear from the several digressions in *Padmāvatī* where Ālāol comments on topics unfamiliar to his audience. In some places, Māgana himself intervenes and asks the poet for an explanation or expresses his eagerness to hear the rest of the story. See, for instance, Ālāol (2002 [1985]: 120).

²⁹ One should add that Ālāol did not turn towards Braj, which had become the literary vernacular *par excellence* in North India during the Mughal Period (see Busch, this volume). Though Braj literature shared some similarities with Ālāol's poems, such as the explicit recourse to Sanskrit poetics, the highly Sanskritized vocabulary of some authors' texts, and the centrality of the figure of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa to embody the ideal lovers (*nāyaka* and *nāyikā*), Ālāol does not manifest any awareness of this contemporary literary trend. Besides the Indo-Afghan cultural heritage, the first reason for the choice of Awadhi is its association with Sufism, and the second, less evident, could be the presence of these texts in a merchant milieu during the seventeenth century. See Banarsidas 1957: 335. I thank Jérôme Petit for this reference to Sufi romances in Banarsidas's text.

Ālāol says that the son of a *pīr*, a Sufi master, invited by one of Ālāol's patrons named Sulaymān, once told a story in Persian about the prince of Egypt Sayphulmuluk and a fairy princess called Badiujjāmāl, and it delighted Māgana who was also attending the assembly. Māgana asked the poet to compose a *payāra* version—i.e., a version in Bengali verse—of the text, comprehensible by those who were not masters of Persian. Ālāol's familiarity with Persian had already been clear from his translation of *Padmāvat*, where he makes explicit references to Persian literature,³⁰ but this was the first time the author had adapted an entire text from a Persian model.

In the case of *Satī Maynā Lora Candrānī* (1659), the poet fulfills the request of his patron by completing the poem of his predecessor Daulat Kājī. By carrying out this task, Ālāol validated his association with the local literary tradition. Ālāol not only completed the story; he also composed a new tale and inserted it into *SMLC*. The tale relates the exemplary behavior of princess Ratanakalikā, banished by her husband because she disagreed with the following statement: A wife's happiness relies on her husband's fortune (*bhāgya*) as a recompense for his previous good deeds and not on the value of her own actions (Ālāol 1992: 27–9). This story is most interesting because of its implicit intertextual references. The author frequently makes explicit allusions to the Sanskrit epics (*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*) and borrows motifs found in Sanskrit narrative literature such as the *Kathāsaritsāgara*. This is his only extensive text that is not a translation or an adaptation. It reveals the various literary skills that the author had been honing since his education in Fatihabad, as well as his growing interest in Nizāmī's (d. 1209) poetry. Though he does not explicitly mention the Persian poet, Ālāol employs some of the most important techniques of Nizāmī's *maṣnavī Haft paykar* (Seven Portraits): Through the movement of the protagonist from the world of men to the world of fairies and demons, he conveys mystical meanings and suggests the shift from the physical world (*‘ālam al-mulk*) to the world of images (*‘ālam al-miṣāl*).³¹ The likely influence of Nizāmī on Ālāol is confirmed by the fact that he actually translated Nizāmī's *Haft paykar* the following year. This original composition of Ālāol reflects many aspects of life in Arakan during the mid-seventeenth century. For instance, a striking reference to Ālāol's contemporary environment is found in this quotation from *Satī Maynā Lora Candrānī*, which

³⁰ For instance, Ālāol explicitly refers to the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār in *Padmāvatī* (2002 [1985]: 121–2).

³¹ See C. Jambet's afterword in Nezāmī 2000: 341–60.

mentions some of the main places and characters of the story of Ratanakalikā. A thorough analysis of this tale would reveal many features linking the story and its characters to contemporary Mrauk-U, but for the moment let us consider only the examples present in the following two verses (Ālāol 1992: 45):

hena kāle prabhātana nāme sadāgara /
sādhu upendradevera dharmavatī ghara //
saodā hetu ratnapure nityi āise yāya /
devera durlabha vastu rājāre jogāya //

At that time a trader called Prabhātana, whose mansion was in the
righteous [king] Upendradeva's [city of] Dharmavatī,
Frequently went to Ratnapura for trade in order to provide the king with
the gods' rare wealth...

One of the main characters is a trader described by the word *sadāgar* (Pers. *sawdāgar*), and the two cities where he conducts his trade are Ratnapura, the "city of jewels", and Dharmavatī, the "[city] endowed with *dharma*". The "city of jewels" is the perfect epithet for Golconda, famous for its diamonds and pearls,³² and the "city endowed with *dharma*" could plausibly refer to the Buddhist capital, especially considering the phonetic similarity between "Dharmavatī" and "Dhaññavatī", the name of the area around Mrauk-U. Moreover, the merchant engages in trade in order to provide the king with luxury merchandise, a situation that echoes the prominent place of the king in commercial affairs during Ālāol's time. Through analogies between his contemporary environment and the one depicted in the story, Ālāol incorporates in a meaningful way the everyday life of his audience in his literary composition. During this period, the poet on the one hand inaugurated the inclusion of Persian models in the local literary corpus and, on the other hand, consolidated by various means his claim of belonging to the local tradition.

The third phase is what can be called the Persian turn of Ālāol's carrier. It includes the three poems entitled *Saptapaykar* (Seven Portraits, 1660), *Tohphā* (The Gift, 1662–64), *Sikāndar-nāmā* (The Book of Alexander, 1671), plus the second part of *Sayphulmuluk Badiujjāmāl* (1670?). *Saptapaykar* and *Sikāndar-nāmā* are two translations from the *Khamṣa* (Five Poems) of Nizāmī.³³ *Tuḥfa-yi naṣā'ih* (The Gift of Counsels) is a versified ethical treatise popular in South-Asia originally composed in 1393 in Delhi by Yūsuf

³² Regarding diamond trade between Golconda and Mrauk-U, see Leider 2004: 435.

³³ In actual fact, Ālāol only translated the first part of Nizāmī's *Iskandar-nāmā*, entitled *Sharaf-nāmā*. See Ālāol 1977 and Gaefke 1994.

Gadā (Digby 1984), a member of the Chishtī Sufi order. All of these are translations from Persian models. This raises the question of what could have motivated the abandoning of Awadhi textual models in favor of an exclusive interest in Persian literature. This issue must be interpreted with reference to two topics: the place of Mrauk-U in the Persianized commercial network of the Bay of Bengal and the arrival of Shāh Shujā', Aurangzeb's brother, in 1660, followed by the uprising of the Mughal guards in 1663. This political crisis generated a reinforcing of religious identities in the kingdom. The Arakanese power had already been at work for a few decades establishing a Buddhist identity and the repression of the Muslim "strangers" who were the Mughals also spread to the local Bengali Muslims (van Galen 2008: 188–9). European sources, as well as Ālāol's own statements, mention the momentary distrust of the Arakanese power towards Muslims in the kingdom, regardless of their origin. In such conditions the exclusive choice of Persian was motivated by the necessity to reinforce the identity of the Bengali Muslim subjects of the kingdom. In addition to the shift from Awadhi to Persian, the nearly complete absence of references to Sanskrit texts and authors in Ālāol's later poems is striking.³⁴ One might even remark, as Peter Gaefke has done, Ālāol's more orthodox approach in the *Sikāndar-nāmā* (1671) in comparison with Nizāmī's.³⁵ Ālāol's poems shared fewer cultural affinities with a Hindu or Buddhist audience, and were more narrowly Muslim in character. The poet's affiliation to the *Qādiriyya* Sufi order, a very important *ṭarīqa* serving the cause of Islamic reformism in seventeenth-century South and Southeast Asia, through the *qāzī* or Islamic Judge of Mrauk-U, can be interpreted as another sign of the defining of his sense of religious identity later in life.

This phenomenon can also be seen as a reflection of a new set of cosmopolitan trends rather than local claims on the author. A text such as the *Sikāndar-nāmā* operated within a vast geo-cultural space extending from Macedonia to China, hence locating the audience of the poem in a wider pan-Islamic and unspecified space. At the same time, the radical shift away from vernacular and Sanskritic models to a more exclusively Persian ethos

³⁴ While explicit references to Sanskrit literature tend to disappear in his last poems, the influence of the principles of Sanskrit poetics is still important and Ālāol's Bengali remains highly Sanskritized and the Persian words scarce.

³⁵ Peter Gaefke explains the rather orthodox statements of Ālāol regarding non-Muslims in the *Sikāndar-nāmā* by the frontier location of Arakan in the Islamic world. Though the tendency towards conservatism on a frontier may have somehow been a factor, the study of socio-political crises that preceded the composition of the text is more relevant in order to understand the new ideological orientations of Ālāol (Gaefke 1994).

was a way to show the preeminence of supra-regional literary models from the Indian Ocean over the local ones shared by the bulk of Arakanese literati.³⁶ Being Muslim in such a context meant adopting larger cultural references and putting some distance between one's self and the local mores.

We saw how the status of the Bengali language was related to the roles of its speakers in Arakanese society and how it played the role of an intermediary at the regional level. Ālāol's itinerary and his progressive shift from regional cultural references to cosmopolitan ones creates a dynamic picture of the changes in Bengali Muslim society in seventeenth-century Mrauk-U. It is interesting to note how Ālāol was instrumental in such a context; he was, in the domain of *belles lettres*, what his patrons were in the more practical domains of trade and politics. Before dealing with the poet's specific function in his milieu, I want to highlight the fact that Ālāol would certainly not have had similar opportunities to display his skills in his home town in Fatihabad. It was less connected to the rest of the world than Mrauk-U and, one might add, it is ironically thanks to piracy and the slave trade that his literary genius found a proper environment to be fully expressed.

4. *The Poet's Duty Towards his Milieu: Conveying Global Culture in the Local Idiom*

Over the last two decades, historians studying the commercial networks of the Indian Ocean and more specifically of the Bay of Bengal have analyzed the internal trade system linking the Coromandel Coast to Burma and Sumatra during the first half of the seventeenth century, which witnessed the climax of commercial exchange in the area.³⁷ We saw that the world of long-distance trade and regions like the Coromandel Coast or North Sumatra are found in the Bengali texts composed in Mrauk-U during this period (cf. *supra*). Above, I have made an attempt to show the links between Ālāol's life circumstances, contemporary local history, and the changing inflections of the poet's literary activity. In the following section

³⁶ *Tuḥfat al-naṣā'ih*, the only Islamic treatise composed by Ālāol, was translated between 1662 and 1664 and the mutiny of Shujā's guard, the *kamānchī*, occurred in 1663. This fact corroborates the view that this period witnessed the necessity for Muslims in Arakan to define their religious identity more precisely.

³⁷ See mainly the following volumes of essays: Prakash and Lombard 1999, and Gommans and Leider 2002.

I will adopt another approach, namely the resituating of Ālāol's texts in the wider literary culture of the Persianized commercial network of the Bay of Bengal, with a special focus on two places where vernacular literatures based on Persian themes were formed almost simultaneously: Aceh and Golconda.

Subrahmanyam has shown that the commercial network of the Bay of Bengal was characterized by a Persian culture that underlay the relationships between the various powers engaged in trade. The "mercantilist" policy of some Buddhist states also led to the adopting of Persian protocol at the courts of Buddhist kings in Southeast Asia, the case of Ayutthaya during the second half of the seventeenth century being the best documented (Subrahmanyam 2005). Denys Lombard has also stressed the Western-oriented aspirations of religious and literary life in Aceh during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He referred to Ālāol and his translation of the "Alexander Story" that succeeded the composition of a Malay version of this story and the adoption of the name Iskandar—Iskandar Muda (1607–36), Iskandar Thani (1636–41)—by sultans of Aceh (Lombard 1967: 151ff.; 1999: 193–4).³⁸ The recent work of Vladimir Braginsky on Malay Sufi literature also suggest the relationship between these texts and contemporary Sufi treatises composed in Chittagong (2004). The mention of Aceh in the texts of Daulat Kāji and Ālāol as well as common themes and religious preoccupations encourage further research. We face here a complex nexus of cultural exchange, or at least the obvious interest in similar topics in this area. Putting these data together, we get the impression that poetic "fashions" (no less than textiles and other commodities) were spread among the local literati settled in the ports around the Bay of Bengal.

The synchronicity of this adaptation into the local languages of common Persian models is particularly striking in the case of Mrauk-U and Golconda. If we compare the literary production in Golconda with Mrauk-U (see table 1), it appears that whenever a Persian theme was adapted into Dakani, a southern dialect of Hindavi, in the sultanate, the same theme was also finding a new expression in the Bengali texts composed in the Arakanese capital.³⁹ The diffusion of literary models corresponds with the growth of commercial activities between the two places. Sources from both Mrauk-U

³⁸ Previously two Arakanese kings, Ca lañ ka sū (1494–1501) and Mañ Pha loñ (1571–93), had issued coins bearing the name Sikandar (Leider 2004: 330–1).

³⁹ For the dates of the Dakani poems I rely upon the conclusions of Md. Jamal Sharif (2004). Regarding linguistic diversity and the usage of languages, Golconda shares a number of common features with Arakan. Though historians such as R. M. Eaton (1978 and 2005) have integrated the linguistic diversity of the sources in their studies, research combining

Table 1

Golconda				Mrauk-U			
Patron	Poet	Text	Date	Date	Text	Poet	Patron
Muhammad Quṭb Shāh (1612–26)	Ghawwāṣī	<i>Maynā Satvantī</i>	1612–26	1622–38 1659	<i>Satī Maynā</i> (part 1) Id. (part 2)	Daulat Kājī Ālāol	Āsraf Khān Sulaymān
'Abdallāh Quṭb Shāh (1626–72)	Id.	<i>Sayf al-Mulūk Badī' al-Jamāl</i>	1625	1652–60	<i>Sayphulmuluk Badi'ujjamāl</i>	Ālāol	Māgana Thākura
Abū al-Ḥasan Qādīrī	Quṭbī	<i>Tuḥfa al-naṣā'ih</i>	1635	1662–64	<i>Toḥphā</i>	Id.	Sulaymān
Abū al-Ḥasan Tānā Shāh (1672–1686)	Tabī	<i>Bahrām u Gulandām</i>	1672	1660	<i>Saptapaykar</i>	Id.	Saiyad Md. Khān

and Golconda testify to the development of commercial relations during the first half of the seventeenth century. As mentioned earlier, aside from their functions in the kingdom's administration, Ālāol's patrons were also involved in trade. Indeed, there are several clues regarding the trade with Golconda led by the *kutwal* and the *lashkar wazīr* of Mrauk-U during the period of Ālāol's literary activity (Prakash 2002: 98–9; Leider 2004: 424–5, 431). On the other hand, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has observed, Masulipatnam, the main port of the kingdom of Golconda, was “a window for the process of promoting Persian culture across the Bay of Bengal. Many of the Persian traders that we have mentioned (i.e., Kamal al-Din Mazandarani, etc.) were prominent in Tenasserim, Martaban, and Mrauk-U” (2005: 64). We then witness the formation of a network of Muslim notables involved in trade who shared a similar interest in Persian literature.

This new diffusion of Persian culture in a regional idiom has to be understood in the larger perspective of the gradual spread of poetry outside the court circles since the Timurid-Turkmen period of Persian literature; thus,

the various literary trends in Golconda in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is still wanting.

as Losensky notes (1998: 138), “wealthy merchants might act as either patrons or performers at poetic gatherings.” He further adds (1998: 142):

Within a general political and cultural history, poetry becomes only one important element in a network of semiotic and economic practices, both shaping and being shaped by its social nature and context.

The socio-cultural aspect of poetry performance to which Losensky draws our attention is crucial in the case of the poems of Mrauk-U and its trading partners. Poetry was a means to teach and learn a range of values and knowledge that constituted a common ground for travelers, who constantly had to reassure their hosts regarding their own status as men of culture through their acquaintance with cultural standards. For example, Ālāol almost never fails to describe the place he came from in the prologues to his poems and provides his audience with the information necessary to situate him within the composite cultural environment of his time.

The purpose of this literature was to allow the appropriation of cosmopolitan Persian literature through the regional literary idiom. In other words, the regionalization of the literary expression aimed to make cosmopolitan literature and the values it conveyed more accessible. In the case of Ālāol's texts, the didactic dimension is additionally salient in his prologues and various technical digressions in the body of the poems. Ālāol was not only a writer but also a teacher. He taught the arts connected with *belles lettres* to his patrons and their children (Ālāol 1977: 28). He was also just as much a commentator as a translator.

It is appropriate to understand the parallel development of regional literature from common Persian models in Golconda and Arakan (among other places) to be the result of Persian-influenced noblemen, involved in both domestic administration and long-distance trade, who were eager to share a common literary culture.

The central place where literature appeared as one of the main elements of social relations was the *sabhā*, or assembly. Ālāol depicted one of these *sabhās* in his prologue to *Sayphulmuluk* (Karim 1997: 254–5).

One day Sulaymān who was his [= *pīr* Ma'sūm Shāh's] disciple, invited the *pīr* and welcomed him at his place.

The *pīr* was with his son [Sayyid Muṣṭafā]. He also invited the very wise Māgana.

The noble Sulaymān invited many scholars (*ālim olamā*), all virtuous men. The glorious assembly (*mahāsabhā*) [was immersed in a stream] of inextinguishable *rasa*; they were joyous and intoxicated by the *rasa* of [speeches about] essential matters (*tattva-kathā*) and songs.

They shared a meal composed of the six flavors, and ate at their leisure. The assembly (*sabhā*) was enjoying the perfume of musk, of sandalwood, and flowers.

As he was listening joyously to spiritual speeches and sweet songs, Māgana, the jewel of virtue, declared:

"Half of the night was spent [in a stream of] delightful words; son of the *pīr* (*pīrjādā*), tell us an ancient story (*purāṇa prasaṅga*)!"

After listening to these words, Sayyid Muṣṭafā, who is endowed with many qualities, related the story (*kicchā*) of Sayf al-mulūk.

"[Prince Sayf al-Mulūk] strived to reach the nymph (*apsarī*) called Badiujjāmāl after performing various deeds (...)"

In the mouth of the scholar (*paṇḍita*), grace [expanded] in a playful motion. The assembly was engulfed by a wave of joy.

He whose heart contains love when he listens to a love story, starts burning like gold, whose purity increases in the flames.

All the topics [of the poem], all the pains and afflictions raised an immense joy in the heart of the lord Māgana!

The master (*guru*) addressed me [in this way]: "Listen! This ancient story (*prasaṅga purāṇa*) is in Persian language (*phārsī-bhāṣeta*),

Not everybody understands this Persian book (*phārsī-kitāb*); I propose that you compose this [tale] in a narrative poem in *payāra* (*payāra-prabandhe*)."

Lack of obedience towards the order of him who shall not be upset is a major fault (*pāpa*).

He provides me with food and helps me to face my fears, thus he is like a father [to me]!

This is reminiscent of similar gatherings held a few decades earlier in Ahmadabad, another important junction-point of the commercial networks of the Indian Ocean. These were hosted by the poet Naẓīrī Nishābūrī (d. 1612/13) and described by Taqī Awḥadī (d. 1629/30)⁴⁰

In Gujarat [Naẓīrī] built a mansion worthy of a king (*pādshāhāna*) and lived in delight, and all the dear ones, rich and poor, were constantly present at his assemblies (*majma*). The poetry gatherings and discussions in his house were very animated.

The example of Naẓīrī—an *amīr*, a merchant, a poet, and a patron all in one—can be compared to the kind of multi-faceted individual we find in Mrauk-U in the person of Māgana Ṭhākura. The host, who was also the poet's patron, is presented as a scholar, and, in accordance with what is prescribed as the ideal behavior of the patron in Sanskrit and Persian literatures, he is able to understand and comment on the texts to which he

⁴⁰ Quoted in Hujjati 1996a.

is listening.⁴¹ The two main characteristics of the patron are his erudition and generosity. The guests are other important Muslim men, scholars, and saintly persons and everyone present enjoys the sensual pleasures and spiritual delights of the poem. If the patron is the host and the master in this "court", the *pīr* also occupies a central place and provides the literary material that will be the medium for the enjoyment of the soul of the listeners. All of the works translated by Ālāol were narrative texts used by Sufis for spiritual observances, and it leaves absolutely no doubt that Sufism, as it was practiced in seventeenth-century South and Southeast Asia, played a major role in his literary activity.

We saw that Awadhi and Persian verses were recited and commented upon in the assemblies Ālāol attended. About three decades before the composition of *Padmāvatī*, Daulat Kājī, in the prologue to *Satī Maynā*, explicitly referred to discussions about philosophical matters in Arabic and Persian (2003 [1995]: 10). Also, both of the Bengali poets mention that their patrons (i.e., Āsrāph Khān and Māgana) knew "Magī" or Arakanese. If the patron is always presented as a scholar able to understand all of the languages spoken in the multicultural environment of Mrauk-U, the members of the assembly did not seem to be as well-versed in these languages.⁴² That is why the patron turned to the local poet to translate or explain the Awadhi or Persian poems that were recited in order to avoid any obstacle to the perfect harmony of the heterogeneous gathering. Thus, the poet helped to expand the horizons of his patrons' entourage in the field of Persian literary culture, helping to bridge the disparate cultural backgrounds of important traders and their peers in other harbors of the commercial network of the Bay of Bengal.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show the historical relevance of the literary career of the Bengali poet Ālāol and what one can gain from an accurate

⁴¹ Regarding the necessity for kings to be educated in Sanskrit literature, see Pollock 2006: 184–7, and for the poet's functions in the patron's court in an Arabo-Persian context, see Meisami 1987: 3–39.

⁴² That a proper understanding of texts was considered indispensable to the "cultivated companions" (*yārān-i bāfarhang*) is, significantly, mentioned in the introduction to the *Farhang-i Shīr Khānī*, a dictionary composed during Afghan rule in North India. The author of the work explains that he had started to collect and to write down the meanings of difficult words found in Persian poems, starting with Nizāmī's *Sharaf-nāma*, to facilitate access to these texts for the companions of the Afghan ruler (Hujjati 1996b).

contextualization of it. I have traced the life of a man of letters who had been removed from the hinterland of Bengal and who progressively adapted to the literary assemblies of Mrauk-U. At every stage of his career, he affords the modern reader tremendous insights regarding his heterogeneous literary models and the subtle way in which he combined them. Ālāol was always very self-conscious about the development of his literary activity and his role as a mediator in the milieu to which he had adapted himself. His texts provide access to a range of information that makes possible a thorough analysis of languages and their functions in seventeenth-century Mrauk-U. Contextual analyses in tandem with comparative studies of other traditions are necessary in their own right but also as an alternative to the often encountered subjective arguments about the "sweetness" of the sounds of a language or the affective attachment of speakers to their mother tongue.⁴³

My aim has also been to clarify some contextual issues, which I think will pave the way for studying Ālāol's voluminous oeuvre with more precision. Regarding Bengali literature in Mrauk-U, three features seem particularly important for a better understanding of these texts: the mapping of the centers of literary activity and their links to one another, the role of religious networks and their agents in the spread and interpretation of literary models in the various centers, and the epistemological relevance of the different spheres of local and cosmopolitan literary activity.

In the case studied here, we can see that it is impossible to understand the literary tastes of Ālāol's milieu without a comparative study that considers the other centers of the Bay of Bengal. From the available material we must describe the context in which this literature was performed by defining the places, their social significance, and the functions of the agents inhabiting such circles. Literary assemblies organized by the Muslim noblemen of Mrauk-U adopted some of the codes employed in royal courts, the models *par excellence* of etiquette and cultural refinement, but the functions of the members seem more fluid and the hierarchy defined differently than at court.⁴⁴ The comparison of various models of courtly comportment will contribute to a better understanding of the production and circulation of texts. Mapping the centers of literary production will also open up the

⁴³ Horst Brinkhaus justly points to the problematic nature of these subjective arguments while dealing with Bengali and Maithili in Nepal (2003: 68, 71–2).

⁴⁴ The assemblies attended by Ālāol were somewhere in between the royal courts and these less formal salons. In the present volume, see also the contributions by Allison Busch and Corinne Lefèvre in connection with the courts and entourages of prestigious patrons and also the essay by Stefano Pellò for more information about poetic courts.

field of intertextual studies. For instance, Ālāol provides various explicit references to other texts. It is necessary to study the role played by such texts in other centers of the commercial and cultural network of the time. Were these texts commented upon, adapted, or translated? Do they figure in the literary canons of other contemporary cities?

The religious networks and the agents who were active in these networks were also central to the formation of literary canons during this period. We have indicated that alongside the patrons who provided material support and "sensual pleasures", both the *pīrs* and the 'ulamā' were the providers of "spiritual delights". In the assembly where literature was performed, religious figures were the authorities who brought with them the texts that were to become the standards or literary models (Wormser and d'Hubert 2008). They were surely not the only ones to assume this role, but, in the case of Mrauk-U, their place was central in the organization of the assemblies, and all of the texts Ālāol composed were used in other Sufi milieus in South and Southeast Asia.

Examining the interplay between local and cosmopolitan registers provides a meaningful tool for investigating seventeenth-century Arakan. Regionalism and cosmopolitanism have been expressed in complex ways by the various members of society. This opposition is an alternative to essentialist approaches based upon the complete identification of cultural identities with religious faiths, because it provides the opportunity to locate "sociotextual communities" in a more subtle frame of reference than that made possible by religious categorizations alone. For instance, the way Ālāol utilizes Sanskrit literary references does not seem to be linked to a mere religious stance; instead, it is a way to state the degree of his identification with, or distance from, locally shared references.

The case of Bengali literature in Arakan is a fascinating example of complex cultural exchanges on the margins of South Asia. Above all, it shows the necessity of thinking in terms of regional cultural history in connection with supra-regional processes. I hope that some of the ideas presented here will travel to other shores and stimulate collective work that can lead us to a better comprehension of the circulation of people and ideas in the Bay of Bengal during the premodern period.

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THE COURT OF 'ABD-UR-RAHĪM KHĀN-I KHĀNĀN AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN IRANIAN AND INDIAN CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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'Abd-ur-Rahīm Khān-i Khānān (1556–1627) was a major figure from the Mughal nobility during the reigns of Akbar (1556–1605) and Jahāngīr (1605–27). Born in India, he was the son of Bairam Khān—one among the few Iranian *amīrs* who had gathered around Bābur (r. 1526–30) in the hope of a new and rewarding career under the rising Mughal power. Bairam Khān had indeed achieved considerable success under Bābur and his successors (he became the tutor and vice-regent of the young Akbar) before falling into disgrace in 1561 and being murdered soon afterwards. Following Bairam Khān's death, Akbar took his only son under his personal care and entrusted his education to several distinguished scholars. The 1580s saw the real start of 'Abd-ur-Rahīm's political career, the sequence of which closely parallels that of the Mughal expansion: After having successfully headed the imperial campaigns in Gujarat (1583) and Sindh (1591), he was assigned to the Deccan (1593) where he spent his remaining life and enjoyed the highest degree of power and autonomy.¹

Following the imperial example—and more particularly that of his father—'Abd-ur-Rahīm was a man of the sword as well as of the pen. He first distinguished himself by his language skills: His own writings show that he was proficient in Turkish, Persian, and Hindavi, and he is said to have known Arabic, Sanskrit, and Portuguese—learning the last at Akbar's request. His personally translating Bābur's memoirs from Turkish into Persian testifies to his linguistic capabilities. The Khān was also an author in his own right, as is evident from the poetry he composed under the pen name of "Rahīm" ("the compassionate"). Aside from his own literary skills, the *amīr* was an enthusiastic patron of architecture as well as an ardent collector of books. From the 1580s onwards, he maintained a library-cum-workshop, which is one of the best documented examples of a sub-imperial library in Mughal times. Reflecting the wide-ranging interests of its patron

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¹ For a detailed account of 'Abd-ur-Rahīm's career under Akbar, see Husain 1999: 27–36.