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**PRIESTS, PORTUGUESE, AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE ON THE
PERIPHERY OF WESTERN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA
IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES**

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Until fairly recently, understanding early modern Southeast Asian history depended almost entirely on European travel accounts, documents in European archives, and on the main chronicles of indigenous courts. Changes in the field, especially the stretched boundaries of viable historical projects afforded by interdisciplinary cooperation, have considerably broadened our perspectives on the period and the place. These changes have also opened up a new research space for asking questions about intercultural exchange. Certainly, our richer understanding of the period allows us to revisit older understandings of the centrality of the throne and central religious organizations, whether European or indigenous, to political and religious developments in the region. We are also enabled to better contextualise the documents in the state archives, missionary letters, and royal chronicles and to discern more clearly and, in some geographical areas, for the first time, a greater significance of 'the periphery' in the processes of intercultural exchange formerly isolated to the court, the port, and the battlefield. Nevertheless, we remain under the shadow of the cultural brokers who shapeshifted their identities in manoeuvring the contours of overlapping peripheries. Locating their role in the interplay of culture, religion, and politics is hampered for the same reasons that made them so successful, for a time, in Western mainland Southeast Asia. So long as the major political and religious institutions of early modern Southeast Asia remained independent of each other, the Portuguese and the indigenous courts,

on the one hand, and the Catholic Church and the Buddhist monastic orders (to take one indigenous example), on the other, playing a multiplicity of roles was both a necessity and an advantage.

The periphery as a zone of interaction was previously considered secondary to the stories of both Portuguese and indigenous political expansion. The Portuguese communities rose and fell with the fortunes of the *Estado da India* and in their autonomy grew stronger with the decline of indigenous states. The decline in discipline of Buddhist monastics on the frontiers likewise would reflect the decline of the Buddhist king and his court and hearken the forthcoming collapse of the kingdom and another cycle of political regeneration and purification of the Religion. In this view, this zone was not one of exchange but of alienation, the space at the furthest reach from anything else and attention was focused instead on the points at which the contact was most obvious—in the royal centre, where Southeast Asians and Portuguese came into more visible and often official contact. In actuality, the periphery played a primary role in intercultural exchange. The Portuguese renegade communities were often the only bridge between Europeans and indigenous populations in Western mainland Southeast Asia and their presence made the periphery central to intercultural exchange.

The dissipation of influence and control exercised by political centres with greater distance from the political centre – geographically and socially – has long been an accepted trope of Southeast Asian historiography. The emergence and influence of nationalist historiography in the last half of the twentieth century, however, has obstructed efforts to understand how peripherality impacted local religious and cultural dynamism. History, even of periods many centuries ago, is anachronistically framed according to contemporary political delineations and modern national cultural and religious formations. The necessary reliance on paper archives, dominated by the perspectives of political centres, has only made this obstruction more difficult to negotiate. For many historians working in these conditions, understanding the history of Buddhism in Burma meant focusing on central religious patronage patterns and monastic

appointments in the royal capital. It has also been difficult to work on the history of Buddhism in Burma without accepting, at least overtly, that Burmese were Buddhists as much nine hundred years ago as they are today. This is actually untrue at both ends of this time-frame, for few Burmese would have been Buddhists in 1100 CE in the way that we understand lay practitioners today and many Burmese today are not Buddhists, but Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and so on, but many nationalists claim otherwise. Scholarship of the last few decades on borderlands has helped to challenge this view. Nevertheless, this scholarship has mainly contributed to the image of binary oppositions, associating a different dynamic to the highlands than to lowlands and to ethnic minorities as opposed to Burmans. From the perspective of this literature, state space is seen as internally uniform and the polar opposite of non-state space.ⁱ As a result, this literature is just as unsatisfactory in its own way as the older literature that it sought to rectify for understanding the limits of the influence of political, cultural, and religious centres in mainland Southeast Asia.

On its fringes, the mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist political centre was more distant, desperate, and more tolerant (it hardly had the means to be otherwise) of nonconformity and change, although this reality is rarely reflected in the hype of royal orders and state chronicles that sought to portray powerful world rulers, not weak central administrators.ⁱⁱ The reach of central monastic institutions was also weaker and their influence less entrenched, giving a great deal of room for local interests and alternatives until relatively late in the early modern period when states even in this part of the world were becoming larger, their administrations more efficient, and their ability to garrison and control better. Certainly this was not yet the case prior to the late eighteenth century in Burma, especially in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Just as our focus has shifted from the centre to the periphery in the case of Buddhist kingdoms such as Burma, the status of their geographical points of contact with the Portuguese is also being reconsidered. More recent understandings of the *Estado da Índia*, for example, have

moved beyond an older view that focused on central institutions to speak for the history of the Portuguese presence in Asia, the failures of adventurers on the mainland being seen as examples of the poorly considered projects that sought to expand the *Estado da Índia*. More recent work by such scholars as Sanjay Subrahmanyam have decentred the motivations and energies involved in these ‘frontier’ projects, stressing

the crucial, and often determining character of local initiatives and private persons, inhabitants of geographical, political and social frontier zones, in influencing the changing shape of the *Estado da Índia*. For, if the received wisdom stresses the great ‘empire builders’ and insists on viewing the Portuguese enterprise in Asia from top down, as well as from the centre outwards, there may be some worth noting how ‘the tail wagged the dog’—that is to say how peripheral initiatives came to dominate a system in place of a central motor.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this view, the Portuguese presence outside of the formal boundaries of the *Estado da Índia* represented nothing else than the weak fringes of empire or the ‘shadow empire’ to use one historians terminology.^{iv}

While attempts to see how the periphery influenced the broader *Estado da Índia* can be fruitful in some ways, in other contexts, such as that considered in the present paper, this view can be misleading. This is in keeping with the unique position of the Iberians in sixteenth-century Southeast Asia that is substantially different from the experiences of any other European force to enter Asian waters. Unlike the Dutch, French, and British companies and later empires that followed the Portuguese into Asia in later centuries, the Portuguese crown did not have the resources nor sufficiently developed institutions in Asia (in contrast perhaps to the Americas, but not perhaps to Africa) to force a co-terminous existence between the *Estado da Índia* and the frontiers of the Portuguese diaspora.^v As one scholar of the Portuguese in Asia has observed,

one of the Portuguese leaders we will examine below, Filipe de Brito e Nicote, was unable to bring together the Portuguese and mestizos populating coastal Burma under his control and this was unfortunate for the wellbeing of the *Estado da Índia*.^{vi}

Certainly, De Brito would tease Goa with the possibility of gaining control of 2,500 Portuguese and mestizos living in Burma outside of its control, a potentially substantial boost to its manpower resources.^{vii} Such dreams, however, ignored the fact that most of the Portuguese and mestizos living in Burma, at the limits of the Portuguese diaspora, were there not because they were not allowed to live within the *Estado da Índia*, but because they chose not to. Had the *Estado da Índia* followed them into Burma, they would have pushed further on, to another port, island, or continent, somewhere –anywhere – else. As was the case of both the Burmese and the Portuguese in Burma, some people chose to live as far from the reach of the political centre as possible, for the freedom and opportunities the absence of central political control provided. Thus, rather than an informal or ‘shadow empire’ in George D. Winius’ view or ‘frontier’ of empire in Subrahmanyam’s, the areas of the mainland Southeast Asia populated by large communities of Portuguese and affiliates in the space between where the *Estado da Índia* stopped and the Portuguese diaspora reached is probably best considered independently of the *Estado*, on its own terms.^{viii} This means not only looking at this special space from an internal perspective rather than from the perspectives of Goa or of Lisbon, but also removing how the Portuguese in this special space impacted or influenced the *Estado da Índia* as the primary focus of our attention. If we wished, this influence could be shown.^{ix} Indeed, some scholars of the Portuguese empire consider the Portuguese communities in Burma only so far as the latter depended on Goa for help or when Goa depended upon them for access to certain markets and supplies for their formal possessions, but this sphere of activity tells us very little about these ‘renegade’ Portuguese and their interactions with indigenous societies.^x This is also not to deny that this space was defined in part by the limits of formal empire, by central political and religious institutions in mainland Southeast Asia and in Goa and Lisbon. and by later historians. All of

these interests portrayed these Portuguese in ways that masked their irrelevance to central designs and influences. What is most interesting is that these renegades, while seemingly erratic and contradictory in behaviour when all sources are brought together, on closer scrutiny are clearly revealed as calculating and manipulative in their representations to powerful centres. It is thus worthwhile to attempt to understand not only what motivated, but also what enabled, this Janus-like behaviour.

Sometimes the motives for engagement between local leaders and the *Estado da Índia* or the Burmese court, to take one example, were political in nature and often, in accordance with Subrahmanyam's understanding, the energy for engagement emerged not in the centre but in what he views as the frontier of the *Estado da Índia* or what others might view as the frontiers of the Burmese state. These episodes of connectivity between political centre and periphery are documented elsewhere and represent attempts by local leaders to reach out to the *Estado da Índia* for resources to fix temporary competitions with other local leaders rather than any effort to establish fixed co-terminosity. Indeed, throughout the entire period of Portuguese adventurism in Western and Lower Burma, local Portuguese sought generally to keep the *Estado da Índia* at arm's length except on those few occasions when there was some commercial benefit to be had, and often such efforts did not reach fruition. Local Southeast Asians were even less interested in connections with indigenous political centres, at least not with those that eventually arrived to force them, temporarily at least, into subjection.

RELIGION ON THE FRONTIERS

Even without the Portuguese presence, it was on the frontiers of Southeast Asian societies and states that court-defined religious orthodoxies and cults had their weakest grasp making possible the potential for change. The indigenous state during this period had weak means of monitoring local areas: while it could muster forces to dominate and watch an area closely, it could only do so for limited periods of time, and certainly the geographic space within which it could assert this

temporary presence was limited. Generally, aside from dispatching monks from the centre who may or may not have been able to exert influence locally, or donating local pagodas or monasteries, the court yielded to local patronage.

Framing priestly or monastic activity within the context of formal church structures tied to Lisbon and Goa, on the one hand, or Buddhist royal capitals, on the other, has also helped to make the political centre look more powerful on the periphery and more relevant on the frontier than it actually was. The autonomous role played by Buddhist monks on the frontiers of the early modern Burmese state is paralleled by the surprising degree of autonomy and influence exercised by individual Catholic priests among the Portuguese settlements in Arakan and Burma. Rather than unusual, this was often the nature of the Catholic mission in Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Catholic priests were not limited to the formal domains of one or the other of the Iberian courts. Priests went wherever Portuguese communities took hold, regardless of their affiliations with the *Estado da Índia*. Further, some Catholic priests were not limited to either of these domains. In a Portuguese overseas world rapidly being overfilled with priests their monasteries tolling heavily on the resources of local communities, there was good reason for new priestly arrivals to organise flocks in new lands; hence, the great mobility of Catholic priests in Asia during the early modern period.^{xi} Certainly, those priests who moved beyond the *Estado da Índia* and the Portuguese diasporic frontier did so at great peril and usually without much success. On this frontier, fortunate Catholic priests found flocks but little material support, with important exceptions. Portuguese renegades or freebooters, or, from the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan, refugee Japanese Christians found Catholic priests a useful means to confess their sins, to meet other personal spiritual needs, and to conduct important Catholic rituals that would gain them success in battle and in peace. Even so, most were not wealthy enough to provide substantial patronage.

Some of the Portuguese who bridged the two worlds of the *Estado da Índia* and the Portuguese diasporic rimlands were enabled to seek priests out through formal channels. Indeed,

at the beginning of the seventeenth century, some prominent members of the Portuguese community at Dianga, the Portuguese enclave near Chittagong, had written to the Dominican Vicar General in Lisbon for priests.^{xii} In his first three years at Syriam, as well, the soon-to-be ruler Felipe de Brito himself summoned no Catholic priests until after he had secured formal aid from Goa, in 1603, and stopped at Cochin on his way back to Syriam. There the Father Provincial agreed to write to the four priests in Bengal, directing them to send two of their number to go to Syriam, where the latter arrived in February 1604.^{xiii} They were given a residence and a small church and then set about their duties.^{xiv} However, much of the movement of religious clergy was around the diasporic frontier, out of the direct sight of both the *Estado da Índia* and the Buddhist royal courts, but not always. It is true that such priests (or Buddhist monks) could represent one link of empire, providing ‘eyes and ears to the crown’,^{xv} but not necessarily so and to no certain degree. From the perspective of the Portuguese in Burma at least, this was not the purpose or relevance of the priests.

Following the stationing of these priests can be dizzying. In 1598, the Jesuit fathers Francisco Fernandes and João André Boves were dispatched to Dianga. In 1599, these priests decided amongst themselves that Father Fernandes should remain at Dianga, while Father André would go to Pegu. And the priests were free to make on the spot decisions about the viability of new missions. Once reaching Burma, for example, Father André remained in the port at Syriam for what seems to have been only a few months.^{xvi} Other priestly movements were more anonymous and priests came and went without dispatch or invitation as in the case of the Dominican friar Belchior da Luz, who, according to De Brito, was a near relative of his who sought him out in Syriam once he had established himself there, a timely replacement for Father André.^{xvii} Among the Jesuits, a series of often paired priests were present at Syriam in the years that followed, including the Jesuit Balthasar Sequeira (1606), while Burmese sources mention two other priests after this time who cannot be clearly identified and known only crudely as ‘Kumuzayu Antony’ and ‘Aragatu’.^{xviii} By 1607, priests were circulating in tours between Syriam

and Sundiva Island (today, Sandwip Island), which, under Sebastião Gonsalves y Tibão, had become the new base for the Portuguese outside of Chittagong after the loss of Dianga. Among the Jesuits, in 1610, João Maria Griego and Blasius Nuñez served on Sundiva Island, while Manoel Pires and Manoel da Fonseca served at Syriam. In 1611, Pires and Diogo Nunes served at Sundiva, while Griego and Fonseca served at Syriam. In 1613, when Syriam was lost to the Burmese, Fonseca and Nunes were serving there, as were Franciscans, Dominicans, and secular priests. The Dominican priest Father Manoel Ferreyra was speared to death when the town was taken and Fonseca, Nunes, and the Dominican Father Gonçalo (known as *O Granço*) were all deported to upper Burma along with the other prisoners when the town fell. Nunes himself never made it to the Lower Chindwin, for he died on the march north.^{xix}

The circulation of these priests was neither dependent on the *Estado da Índia* nor random. Catholic priests circulated among clear and definite nodes (Dianga, Syriam, and Sundiva Island) in a special space that was, again, outside of the *Estado da Índia* but encompassed the Portuguese diasporic frontier in this area of Asia. More specifically, the different orders were competing with each other to establish themselves in the different nodes.^{xx} As the Jesuit Father Nicholau Pimenta had written with some anxiety while at Syriam in 1602: ‘I understand that Philip de Brito will call Religious of other orders, if we decline this Mission’.^{xxi} Nevertheless, even while Pimenta was there and as he himself notes, in addition to the Jesuits, the Capuchin friars had already established a presence outside of the town walls.^{xxii} Hence, lists of priests in these towns are incomplete by themselves, for they only focus on the activities of monks from particular orders.

The Catholic priests at Dianga, Syriam, and Sundiva saw their main responsibilities not in conversion but in preaching to existing Christians, mainly Portuguese. This does not negate their importance to community formation, for they performed important functions that helped local communities integrate on the basis of religious fraternity to a degree that could probably not have been achieved through any other means. At Syriam in 1599, Father André administered the

sacraments and took confessions from Portuguese there and some of his activities drew the curiosity and not, importantly, the consternation of the Buddhist rulers present there. During Holy Week, for example, he made a sepulchre which the Arakanese king and his son came to observe.^{xxiii} The Dominican priests who came to serve Chittagong in 1601 had come to administer the sacraments and to teach and instruct members of the Portuguese community.^{xxiv} Similarly, the two priests who arrived at Syriam in February 1604 generally preached to and heard confession mainly from Portuguese soldiers and merchants.^{xxv}

The services of these priests became crucial not only to the daily life of Portuguese communities in Burma but also to their perceived performance in battle. Of the two priests at Syriam in 1605-1607, one, Pires, was stationed at the church where he conducted teaching, preaching, and hearing confessions to the population within the walls of the fortress, while the other was nearly always embarked with the fleet for battle service. The latter priest, Father Natal Salerno was said to have been present during all of the fighting in order to hear confessions, but also to pray for success in battle and victories appear to have been credited to him. This activity led to his own death in battle in 1607. Afterwards, Pires went with the fleet, which refused to move without a priest and another Jesuit, Father João Maria, took the former's place in the church.^{xxvi}

BURMESE ROYAL PATRONAGE ON THE PERIPHERY

Confusion is likely when one considers central patronage by indigenous courts of the churches or priests of local Portuguese communities. Buddhist courts had incentives to tolerate and even fund such Catholic activities as one means of assuring some form of political control or allegiance. Portuguese enclaves, such as that at Dianga, manipulated their distance from the *Estado da Índia* and their membership in the Portuguese diaspora to cause endless trouble for local rulers. Because of their maritime trade connections and especially their command of firearms and skill in using them, they were too dangerous a force to ignore on the outer limits of

the royal domain. But their access to and facility with firearms also made it difficult for indigenous kings to exert much authority over these frontier communities. By patronizing priests established in these communities, they could indirectly establish influence. They did so by paying for the construction of churches and supporting the priests with their own purse, so that these priests were symbolically under royal authority but also in practice, these priests had an incentive to use their own influence over the community to prevent alienation from the royal court. The best example is the simultaneous sponsorship by the Arakanese king of both the Catholic church at Dianga and the Buddhist monastic order in the royal city. The 1599 meeting between Fathers Fonseca and Fernandes with the Arakanese king, for example, had been significant. Before the end of their meeting, the king explained to them that he wanted Catholic priests in residence both at Dianga and at his capital at Mrauk-U. He would also provide them with money to support and maintain them and that this money would increase the following year.^{xxvii} Other examples are of the tolerance shown to Catholic communities in the Lower Chindwin from the second decade of the seventeenth century. There are fewer examples, or at least less evidence, of the patronage of local Buddhist monastics during this period, which provides an interesting contrast.

On the basis of anecdotal evidence, there appears to have been some pacifying effect on the volatile communities of Portuguese renegades, traders, and outcastes. According to one source, the indigenous population ‘accustomed not to see nor to hear among [the Portuguese] anything but fighting, grunting, and ferocity, were enchanted with these seizures of humanity and gentleness’.^{xxviii} The presence of a religious clergy that could exercise such an influence over such a community would thus be welcomed so long as there was little attempt to challenge indigenous adherence to Buddhism or the respect of lay Buddhists for the religious authority of Buddhist monastics. Moreover, accepting royal patronage meant recognition that the king remained the main patron in the kingdom and Buddhist Arakanese kings had, after all, built Muslim mosques for similar reasons. As Father Sebastião Manrique observed when he accepted patronage from

the Arakanese king decades later, 'Because all those naciones believe that the Christians of these parts esteem very much the Religiosos and Padres, when the king saw that I had placed myself in his power, he was completely self-assured'.^{xxix}

What the Buddhist ruler gave, he could easily take away, but despite the portrayal of religious persecution in Western documents, such moves were deeply political. In the case of the Portuguese community at Dianga, which soon expanded to include Sundiva Island outside the port, for example, its expansion only lasted until March 1603, when a different Portuguese community at Syriam rebelled against the Arakanese. The Arakanese court retaliated by plundering the Portuguese settlements at Dianga and elsewhere and seized control of Sundiva Island. During this attack, people were killed, churches were burned, and the Jesuit fathers André Boves and Fernandes were imprisoned; the latter died shortly after his ordeal.^{xxx} This, however, was not a general assault on Catholics, priests, or even Portuguese generally, only those in a particular community who seem to have been selected as an example for some unrecorded connection with De Brito. This is clear for the Arakanese king did eventually turn on Christians elsewhere in his kingdom two years later, seizing five thousand Christians as well as three priests, and reportedly desecrating their crucifix.^{xxxi} However, as soon as the difficult political matters had been resolved, the Arakanese king returned to employing many of the same Portuguese he had abused and resumed his patronage of the very church at Dianga he had so recently desecrated. Indeed, shortly after the attack, the Arakanese king made it a condition of peace with the Portuguese there that they should keep Catholic priests in Arakan and then set about building for the Dominican priests there a new church and residence, all completed quickly, by the middle of 1603. The reason for the Arakanese king's peculiar generosity to the church was that he believed that 'peace with the Portuguese would never be stable unless they had priests with them'.^{xxxii} Politics and not religion, then, motivated the Arakanese court's interventions among the Portuguese on the periphery of the kingdom.

FILIFE DE BRITO AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE PERIPHERY

A better example of the confusion over politics and religion in local community formation is provided by the trials and tribulations of De Brito and his followers at Syriam in Lower Burma. Old chroniclers and modern historians alike have considered the failed Portuguese enclave at Syriam, in Lower Burma, from 1599-1613 as a key example of a cultural and religious barrier, either representing the impermeability of indigenous mainland Southeast Asian society or the failings of a poorly conceived Portuguese imperial project. An early generation of Iberian chroniclers, represented by such men as Manuel de Fariah y Sousa, focused on moral decline and poor leadership as the reasons for the retraction and eclipse of the *Estado da Índia* after decades of seemingly huge unrealised opportunities, and this line of thinking was reflected in older and 'naïve' secondary literature on the history of the *Estado da Índia*.^{xxxiii} Amongst the examples of unfortunate Portuguese projects were the activities of De Brito, mentioned above. De Brito had been employed as a member of the Arakanese royal bodyguard in the late sixteenth century. When the Arakanese moved against Pegu, the royal seat of the crumbling First Toungoo Empire, in 1599, they placed De Brito and a Portuguese contingent, as well as a Muslim contingent, to stand guard at Syriam, overlooking the Rangoon River and a major passage to the sea. Since control of Syriam afforded control over rich Burmese maritime trade, the commercial prospects were huge and the Portuguese at Syriam abandoned the Arakanese court, overthrew the Muslim garrison, and established control over the strategic port-town.^{xxxiv}

De Brito is responsible for some of the confusion about whether or not Syriam belonged within the *Estado da Índia*. It resulted from his efforts to resolve a personal rivalry and an early leadership contest between Salvador Ribeyro and De Brito, reflected in different accounts that support the claims of one or the other men. Ribeyro the Spaniard, if we trust the account of his biographer Manuel de Abreu Mousinho, shored up the Portuguese position at Syriam from 1602-1603 without the help of either De Brito (he was away in Goa) or the *Estado da Índia*.^{xxxv} De Brito, however, won because he reached out to Goa and was able to negotiate material and

manpower support from the viceroyalty, as well as the promise of further aid through his marriage to Dona Luiza de Saldanha, the niece of the Viceroy of Goa, and his being awarded the *habito de Christo* (making him a Knight of the Order of Christ, a very high honour).^{xxxvi} Compared to Ribeyro's few and weary men, De Brito's ships and men brought from Goa easily allowed him to assert control, legitimated by the backing of the Portuguese viceroy, although the latter by itself probably would have meant very little. De Brito would attempt to force passing Portuguese and other shipping to come to Syriam and pay a duty.^{xxxvii} This plan, despite approval from the Portuguese crown, yielded little fruit and orders for all passing Portuguese shipping to stop at Syriam and pay De Brito did not arrive before De Brito had already been killed.^{xxxviii} Indeed, De Brito's relationship with Goa had little influence in the long term on the fortunes of his port-city other than to secure his personal control over a rival at a key moment. Afterwards, the *Estado da Índia's* help was not as important and De Brito seems not to have sought their involvement in Syriam's affairs aside from circulating a few 'feelers' for large-scale support for a campaign against the interior of Burma. While in Goa in 1603, for example, De Brito wrote a report detailing how with control of Syriam, the Portuguese crown would gain control of Burma as well.^{xxxix} De Brito is remembered most, however, not for his relationship to the *Estado da Índia*, but for his zeal in developing his personal fortune at local expense. De Brito would come to influence or control outright large parts of the Irrawaddy delta over the years that followed, buttressed by marriage and other kinds of alliances with indigenous rulers of important towns upriver and on the coast.

One might have expected, given the way in which De Brito portrayed himself to the *Estado da Índia* when he needed its help, that encouraging large-scale conversion efforts would have been a sensible thing for him to do, in order to obtain assistance from Goa in the future. Moreover, Lower Burma would seem to have been an ideal place to engage in such an effort. For the past half century and more, Pegu, just upriver from Syriam, had been the core of the Burmese kingdom. But the kingdom had begun to unravel from the early 1590s until it finally

collapsed in 1599. Because of war and economic collapse, perhaps hundreds of thousands from the region had sought refuge elsewhere, in particular amongst the new political centres that broke away from Pegu as it weakened. Peguan patronage of Buddhism and the monastic order had also collapsed. In other words, a political centre had taken on the character of what might normally be considered a periphery. Added to this the doubt and uncertainty that follows the collapse of a political, social, and religious order and one might have expected greater receptivity to a new faith championed by a new and, at least at the time, apparently more successful and promising order.

Nevertheless, references to conversion, at least in the early years of Portuguese Syriam, are brief and relatively un-detailed. Portuguese accounts claim that when the Arakanese king had originally stationed the Portuguese at Syriam in 1599, they were mandated not only to garrison the spot, but also to gather and protect indigenous refugees from the wars who might return, or, in other words, to foster the growth of a lively and populous port-town. By October 1602, De Brito had organised the construction of settlements for these people, some fourteen to fifteen thousand in total, who engaged in cultivation around the city and all of whom, we are told by Catholic sources, were disposed to be baptised.^{xi} Certainly, the Jesuit Fernão Guerreiro argued that the main purpose of the Portuguese fortresses in the region, and hopefully of Syriam as well, was to give shelter to local populations who could then be converted to Christianity.^{xii} Pimenta observed in a lengthy letter written at Syriam in 1602 that Lower Burma was ripe for conversion, that Buddhist monks had admitted that they were merely waiting for someone to teach them a better religion, and that these monks also came to Christian churches to venerate the images of the Saints and the crucifix.^{xiii}

Despite the optimism of Pimenta and Guerreiro, reality proved very different. Missionaries found it difficult to find converts among the indigenous population in either Arakan or Lower Burma. When Father André arrived at Syriam in 1599, he bemoaned the fact that it was not possible to introduce Christianity here, for the recent wars had left the land a

wasteland, devoid of inhabitants.^{xliii} The father thus abandoned hope and Syriam for Dianga.^{xliv}

De Brito himself wrote to Pimenta in 1601 that although priests would presumably be welcomed by the Portuguese among his followers, there was little hope so long as warfare prevailed of spreading Christianity: ‘as the country is still disturbed, it holds out no promise; but we hope with the help of God that, when it is pacified, it will yield some good fruit’.^{xlv} The two priests who arrived in February 1604 were also to preach to indigenous Christians. Moreover, they were said to have sought converts, but no indication is given as to how or how vigorously this was done. By 1605–6, however, even Guerreiro admitted that in actuality little evangelistic effort was being directed toward the indigenous population, not because of a lack of interest on the latter’s part, but because they were reportedly too disturbed by warfare and that the priests were waiting for a period of tranquillity for this work to commence. In most cases, the few baptisms that took place occurred among sick children in the vicinity of the Portuguese settlements.^{xlvi}

During the entire period from De Brito’s installation at Syriam until the end of his wars with Arakan in 1607, the failure to convert large numbers of Peguans to Christianity seems to have had little impact on De Brito’s willingness or ability to recruit soldiers from among the local population. Although their role is not stressed in the Portuguese accounts, occasional references indicate that the Portuguese soldiers at Syriam and in the various expeditions dispatched by De Brito were vastly outnumbered by Peguans who might include some Christian converts but who were probably mostly Buddhists.^{xlvii} Without conversion to Christianity, at least until after 1607 as will be discussed further below, it is unclear by what means a community of tens of thousands of Buddhist Peguans and scores to hundreds of Portuguese cooperated under De Brito’s leadership in years of warfare against the Arakanese. Most of the sources for the period refer to Peguans amongst Portuguese forces at Syriam, but shed little light on how the little port polity functioned internally. Given later developments as well as De Brito’s correspondence with the institutions of the *Estado da*, however, it is fairly certain that the ‘glue’ that kept this community together was not Christianity.

If we were to accept the version of De Brito presented in the Portuguese or Burmese literature alike, why he did not simply attempt to convert the local population to Christianity from the beginning of his revolt against the Arakanese becomes an interesting but difficult question to answer. As with the Arakanese king's approach to the Portuguese community at Dianga, it seems that De Brito's hand was often guided by political necessity. Again, De Brito had stated all along that he did not think conversion was wise until he had secured his position at Syriam. This could have been because he would need to recruit locally for manpower to supplement his ship crews, build his fortress walls, and garrison his positions. If he should engage in forcible conversion before he had finally beaten off the Arakanese, he might be dealing a fatal and self-inflicted blow. Or, he may simply have played lip service to plans for local conversion and had no long-term plans to follow through with his promises to the church or to the crown. This may have changed, however, when his attention was turned, after many years, from the need to defend his position and to a more exclusive concern with enriching himself from the local landscape, especially after plans to force Portuguese shipping to stop at Syriam and pay for a permit did not reach expectations.

From late 1607, De Brito seems to have felt secure enough to energetically pursue what appears only on the surface to have been service to the cross. De Brito now began to raid local pagodas to steal wealth donated to Buddhism and to melt down Buddhist temple bells to cast cannon. There is ample corroboration for De Brito's raiding temples for their bells to melt down for cannon, beginning in 1608 with that closest to him—the Shwe Dagon Pagoda across the river-- which had a bell that was at that time and remains today, the largest bell in the world. Since this bell would have been the obviously the biggest prize in terms of metal and because it was so close to De Brito's fortress, it seems likely that De Brito's seizure of this bell marked the beginning of De Brito's temple desecration. In this case, De Brito used elephants to pull the gigantic bell donated by King Dhammazedī to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda down to the river, loaded it onto a raft, and then lost it to the muddy depths when the raft broke near Monkey

Point near modern Rangoon; attempts to recover the gargantuan copper bell continue to the present day.^{xlvi} Burmese sources also hold that De Brito sought to extract other resources from the temples as well. Gold and silver enshrined in the *ce*ts and iron finials as well as bronze drums were all removed to be resold overseas.^{xlix}

While religious wealth was stolen, there does not appear to be any evidence of the wholesale destruction of more poorly endowed religious buildings, despite a vague assertion by U Tin in the 1930s that De Brito destroyed all Buddhist structures in Lower Burma.¹ There is no evidence of anything quite so extreme, but it is true that early during De Brito's presence at Syriam, abandoned temples and monasteries were occupied by Catholic priests and turned into churches, hospitals, and colleges. For example, during this period a Buddhist monastery at Syriam was made into a church for the secular clergy (under the Bishop of Cochin) and a Buddhist pagoda was assigned to the Jesuits and renamed St Paul's Church. But there is little evidence of Buddhist monasteries being destroyed at any point.^{li}

Burmese royal sources attempt to portray the Portuguese at Syriam at this time as engaging in what amounted to massive forced conversion and the destruction of Peguan religious culture. De Brito is said to have ordered that donations were no longer to be made to Buddhist monks, such monks were thus forced to flee the region, and only Catholics were allowed to remain within the walls of his city. Both Peguan and Burman monks who remained accepted conversion and took to drinking alcohol and wearing woollen hats and other accoutrements of Christian priestly wear.^{lii} According to the Mehti *Hsaya-daw*, a Burmese monk writing in the 1790s, the introduction of the practice of religious men wearing hats came under the rule of De Brito, whom the Burmese refer to as Nga Zinga, at Syriam (in Burma, Thanlyin). Unfortunately, the Mehti *Hsaya-daw* is not more detailed than this and it is unclear what the dynamics were at work here. For example, the monastic historian could mean that De Brito's rule disrupted normal Buddhist courtly management of the religion and hence some irregularities slipped in amongst Buddhist monks. Certainly, he also asserts that unorthodox practices

regarding the wearing of monastic robes were also introduced during this period because, it is implied, no one forced a resolution of monastic differences.^{liii} Taken as a whole, these activities were said to have driven those Buddhists who remained underground. Some conversion, however must have taken place, for although the Portuguese had numbered about one hundred when Syriam was besieged in 1613, before the fighting and the reported slaughter of many Portuguese had occurred, Fonseca, taken prisoner with the rest, reported in his letter of 29 December 1616 that there were five thousand Christians amongst their imprisoned number. One can only assume that most of these were Peguan Christians, perhaps with groups of Indian converts.^{liv}

The testimony of the Burmese accounts, however, is suspect. Rather than local sources, these accounts draw solely upon the archives of the royal centre at a time when Burmese armies came south and defeated De Brito. Political and economic reasons certainly must have weighed heavily in the Burmese expansion to the south and De Brito was probably seen more as a threat to Burmese material and political wellbeing than as a threat to Buddhism in the kingdom. Both the sacrilege against Buddhist pagodas and the reportedly forced nature of religious conversion in the episode are used as examples of the misguided policies that brought the enclave's collapse. As a result, we are told, of his insults to Buddhism, De Brito's fortress was besieged by angry Burmans, he was taken alive, and impaled on an iron stake. Hanging from this, he bled to death three days later. The image of a 'skewered' De Brito was also a symbol in the Burmese narratives of what happened to those who challenged the prevailing indigenous system of beliefs. In a similar way, one late eighteenth-century Burmese chronicler, associated residual Catholic influences after the fall of Syriam with the subsequent impurity of Buddhism in southern Burma and hence the need for northern Buddhists to purify it.^{lv} Buddhist accounts thus misinterpreted what was in fact the assertion of political authority as the assertion of central religion, masking a political motivation as a religious one..

A more nuanced interpretation of what underscored the Burmese siege and capture of Syriam in 1613 is supported by the treatment of the Portuguese captives, which was very similar to the Arakanese king's treatment of the community at Dianga after 1603. The Buddhist royal court wanted to keep the newly captured Portuguese in a contained community as a resource under its control. The survivors of De Brito's men, Portuguese of various origins, were dragged off to lands deep in the interior, where they became hereditary artillerymen in the Burmese royal army. Strangely, despite the religious tone of the historical accounts of the episode, from both the Portuguese and Burmese sides, the Portuguese deportees were allowed to freely practice their faith, openly ministered by Portuguese Catholic priests. Although Nunes had died on the way up to Upper Burma, the community still had the services of the Gonçalo and Fonseca, again, a Dominican and a Jesuit respectively. Moreover, over the years, they were allowed to receive new priests dispatched by their respective orders.^{lvi} The Portuguese taken at Syriam thus appear to have been returned to a situation akin to that of the Portuguese at Dianga. The Buddhist court thus allowed them a Catholic priest and provided patronage, and the community was maintained in a subordinate and felicitous relation with the indigenous court.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to determine which of the many obstacles to understanding cultural and religious change outside of the political centre is the most problematic in dealing with sixteenth century Southeast Asia. Perhaps the most serious is the straightforwardness of accounts in centrally-controlled paper archives. These seem to have ready-made easily digestible answers for all of our potential questions regarding why Catholic priests were in Burma at the time, how much a part Portuguese communities there were of the *Estado da Índia*, and why De Brito fell. Such sources blind us to the need to question the paradigm of conquest and conversion, from the Portuguese side, or desecration and punishment, from the Burmese accounts. Nevertheless, despite the paucity of local sources, local realities always leave their imprint on the written records if they are

examined closely enough and with a commitment on the part of the researcher to different kinds of questions. But it also requires looking outside of the parameters, political, religious, and economic, established by the scholarship of one's own time. If one wants to understand the Portuguese in Burma within the framework of the *Estado da Índia*, it is fairly easy to do so, if one holds that the *Estado's* boundaries moved wherever members of the Portuguese diaspora went. Local activity during the period, however, suggests otherwise, affiliations with the *Estado da Índia* being temporary invitations made by men who were in search of help to resolve immediate political and economic crises. As I have attempted to show in this paper, religious conversion or patronage, by both the Portuguese leadership and the Buddhist courts, was often heavily guided by considerations political and economic.

While political leadership often enabled and disrupted local community formation, through religious fraternity or otherwise, it did not change local realities. Religious influence in the overlap of the frontiers of Buddhist kingdoms and the Portuguese diaspora more properly rested with individual Catholic priests, as it did in other areas of Burma with Buddhist monks, with the cooperation of local interests, to fashion a flock. These priests played an important role in pulling together renegade Portuguese communities through preaching, hearing confession, and conducting religious rituals. It may seem unusual that priests who wrote enthusiastic letters back to their superiors about the lucrative prospects for evangelisation proved to be rather unenthusiastic about actually initiating mass conversions of indigenous populations. Perhaps that phenomenon can be best attributed to local expediency and the place of agents of religious and cultural change in these areas where the Portuguese diaspora and Burma's frontiers overlapped. In this zone, improvisation and cooperation, between priest and renegade was an essential part of making local communities work.

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