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Chapter 2

“Both Benevolent and Brutal: The Two Sides of Provincial Violence in Early Modern Burma”

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Introduction

During a Buddhist festival in Rangoon at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in 1809, the Viceroy of Pegu (Min-Hla-Nawrahta), intent on providing a lesson that would prevent disloyalty spreading among his troops, had given orders for the execution of a number of men and their families. Four families were arrested, five men and four women, and three children. They were to “suffer cruel death,” having their bellies slit open and their legs removed at the knees. Although the Viceroy would soon reduce the number to be killed, two men were taken out for execution anyway, as were their wives, “both young girls” and one of them several months pregnant, as well as the infant, three-year old daughter of one of the men. The Viceroy believed only a “severe execution” would provide a serious enough example for his men.¹ The two men were stretched out on the ground before a crowd. Their arms and legs were tied to stakes that had been pounded into the ground. In order to make the cutting easier, a thick board was placed under the back of each man. The women were now to be tied down in the same way and similar boards were prepared to stretch them out as well and flatten their bodies to make things easier for the executioner who stood above them. It was decided that the body of the three-year-old girl was too small to need such a board or to be tied down at all. Presumably any blow would be sufficient.²

A Company officer, Captain John Canning, acting on the request of the *Ye-wun* (deputy governor) of Rangoon, persuaded the Viceroy to spare their lives and the latter agreed to a pardon which had to be brought to the place of execution by messengers. The Viceroy’s wrath was only half of the story behind the display of violence. The Viceroy had warned that his own people in the crowd were so enraged against these men that they ‘would not only kill them, but eat them’. In actuality, a great many in the audience were family members and friends. After the pardon arrived, an impending execution was still acted out. The executioner spent over a half hour after learning that the intended victims had been freed sharpening a knife as if about to execute them and in a great burst of theatrics leapt over the men tied prostrate beneath him. Meanwhile the Viceroy’s men, officers of the government, moved through the crowd gathering contributions from terrified friends of the victims to secure their release. One of those collecting this bribe money was the messenger who had brought the pardon! When 300 tickals had been collected and it was clear nothing more could be gained, the prisoners were untied and brought back to the jail where they were kept, along with the prisoners who had been pardoned earlier in the morning, until their friends and family paid more

¹ IOR/F/4/310 Canning to Company, 29 November 1809, pp. 68-69, 73-74; IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, p. 120, n. 20.

² Ibid.

bribe money, which took them days to do. We are told that due to fright, presumably the constant fear that they were about to be executed, some of these women, who had already been ordered freed, went delirious. Only then was everyone freed.³ The Viceroy is reported to have commented several times that the Burman population could only be kept under control through such ‘extreme severity.’⁴

Historians of the non-Western world might easily dismiss such observations by Company officials as the misinterpretations of Europeans who did not share a prior text regarding indigenous culture and would not have been able to understand, at least fully, what they saw. Such early nineteenth century accounts might also be taken as being influenced by a tendency to view Asian governments as being tyrannical. Such thinking often accompanied colonial conquests by Europeans who believed that they were in doing so ‘releasing’ the general population from unfair servitude in favour of the more egalitarian opportunities afforded by rational Western rule and the introduction of capitalism.

Nevertheless, documentation for such episodes of violence and often the same episodes as those found in European accounts can also to be found in the indigenous sources. Violence was an everyday part of living (and dying) in parts of early modern Burma and this violence appeared to increase in many areas of the kingdom as this period progressed. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of violence per se in everyday life in early modern Burma has not drawn much attention in the historiography. Nor has anyone explicitly used pre-colonial violence as a measure of Burma’s transition towards modernity. Instead, early modern Burma is seen as a period characterized by developments that would seem to have reduced violence, including increasing political centralization, the introduction and enforcement of laws and central standards on behaviour that worked to stabilize society under the umbrella of the king’s protection of Buddhism and enforcement of the Dharma. Everything looked, from the veranda of the royal palace, which itself was a metaphor for universal harmony, as if everything was under control.

The present chapter looks at early modern violence in Burma by de-centering its historiographical lens away from the view of the court. Burmese chronicles mainly discuss developments in the royal court and the trials and tribulations of centrally dispatched military expeditions to suppress rebellions in the provinces or to conquer foreign kingdoms. Most daily events outside of the royal centre are not discussed.⁵ We do have numerous other sources, including first-hand accounts and a fairly dense set of royal edicts from the period, which confirm why and when some of the episodes of violence occurred. Bringing sources together in this way can provide information and raise questions that relying on either indigenous source material or European source material alone cannot. But differences in perspectives regarding these episodes of violence also indicate that provincial violence was viewed one way from the court and another in the province; the king saw in the execution of measured violence only the enforcement of royal will and the Dharma, while provincial appointees saw in the threat of extreme violence a means of monetary gain. The co-existence of two perspectives on early modern violence in Burma were due to a particular irony of state formation in pre-colonial Burma – political centralization did not bring the village community closer to the court (or vice versa) but made the village more distant and autonomous from the

³IOR/F/4/310 Canning to Company, 29 November 1809, pp. 74-75.

⁴Ibid, p. 71.

⁵ Frank N. Trager & William J. Koenig, *Burmese Sit-tans 1764-1826: Records of Rural Life and Administration*, with the Assistance of Daw Yi Yi (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1979), p. 1.

royal court. This process involved the replacement of local royal and noble families with temporary, centrally-appointed officials. The officials lacked the local networks, the ritual roles, and the traditional loyalties that had bonded local royal and noble families and the village together in the past. Yet these officials were also burdened with huge demands by the state for manpower and revenues. Moreover, these officials remained under threat by other rivals in the provinces who constantly sought to unseat them by causing problems between their rivals and the royal court. Temporary and insecure, outlying officials pushed local village communities to their limits for manpower and other resources, in ways that did not register with how just royal rule was maintained in the royal imaginary. Violence and the conspicuous threats of violence proved the only means that worked. Personal, bodily violence, whether merely threatened or actually inflicted, thus became an increasing feature of early modern state formation in outlying, frontier areas, the non-state spaces, of the Burmese state.

This chapter will first examine the phenomenon of administrative violence in the Konbaung state's outlying provinces, in particular the two ways in which the state viewed the place of violence in the kingdom, and why this has obscured the significance of everyday violence and its increasing prevalence in late early modern state administration in Burma. The second section looks at how the relationship between the state and the village had changed over the course of the early modern period in ways that encouraged the use of violence. Finally, the chapter will look at how the application of administrative violence provoked the mobilization of collective violence against the state.

Two Burmas Beneath One King

Despite well-documented state expansion and centralization, by the early nineteenth century, the reach and capacity of the state in different parts of the kingdom was extremely uneven. Recent scholarship has dispelled the myth of oriental despotism at the beginning of the early modern period in favour of relatively weak states that developed administrative apparatus and relied up various additional structures for ruling the kingdom and collecting revenues. These structures ensured that by the late early modern period, in the major lowland kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia at least, royal rule did not have to depend on physical force in areas close to the centre of the state, what might be called the political “core” of the state. In the case of Burma, by the end of the early modern period, this consisted of the Burmese lowlands north of the Lower Burma Delta. By 1830, as demonstrated by Victor Lieberman, the state template for modern Burma, that which would reconfigure itself as colonial Burma and then as independent Burma, had been set.⁶ Like Lieberman, upon whose work James Scott draws, Scott views the state's expansion over lowland Burma as fairly complete by the end of the early modern period, forming an example of what Scott calls the “padi state,” because it was possible here to concentrate grain production. Scott uses “state space” to refer to areas that are easily governable. Burmese state space paralleled the relatively easily traversable and governable lowlands of the Burmese dry zone.⁷ Here was a concentration of extensive pockets of closer central administrative scrutiny, the royal

⁶ See Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels*, Volume 1: *Integration of the mainland Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); idem, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁷ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 13.

court was a powerful force that exerted an immense influence over daily political, economic, social, and religious life. This was where most of the wealth of the kingdom, the major monastic centres, the main agricultural reserves of the kingdom, and most of the royal bondsmen (*ahmudans*) were concentrated. Here, much of the population lived and remained relatively poor and were pressured to till the land through various forms of what Johan Galtung has described for more recent states as structural violence in which the essential element is that ‘the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed’.⁸ Governing institutions in precolonial Burma were devised to extract revenues and manpower and to keep people, if they were free, tied to the land to raise crops or if they were service-people, to keep hold them into assigned occupations for the king or the other elites who owned them. Villages were assigned to the landed gentry for the latter to “eat” the resources of the former. Anyone who had other aspirations in life found it impossible to move beyond their station in life except in times of political collapse.

In the royal imaginary, the king sat at the centre of the world and maintained universal harmony. The king was the earthly equivalent of Indra, the king of the city of the Gods and the protector of the religion. The king maintained peace and harmony and supported the Sangha so that monks could keep accruing merit and continue on their path to Enlightenment. Good kings succeeded and bad kings failed in this task. It was the explicit purpose of U Kala’s chronicle, the chronicle on which all others that come after it are based or informed by, to show the current and future kings the differences between bad and good ruler-ship and the consequences of both. In this imaginary, the only story lines of relevance were those that were directly relevant to the court; when outlying provinces entered into the story they remained in focus only so long as they were relevant to the king’s own story. It should be no surprise that (1) mundane episodes of daily administration outside of the court rarely show up in the chronicles and (2) that historiography which allows the chronicles to frame their discussions have a tendency to emphasize the stability of the court as the measure of stability in the kingdom. Certainly, few historians, after the colonial period, relied solely on the chronicles for their accounts, but usually extra-chronicle evidence was merely used to verify the information in the chronicles. In terms of its spatiality, from the perspective of the court, the royal imaginary was supremely inclusive, in some utterances, the king was said to rule the world, but in more practical daily administration, merely the entire kingdom. Court histories are, as Scott has suggested, to a certain degree “histories of state spaces” and they “neglect or ignore altogether” non-state spaces.⁹

There was also another Burma characterized by land that was less easy to govern and where it was also difficult to concentrate grain production that Scott identifies non-state space. In the Burmese context, highland areas, part of the larger Southeast Asian massif, are non-state space.¹⁰ Scott admits that other terrains, including “swamps, marshes, mangrove coasts, deserts, volcanic margins, and even open sea, like the ever growing and changing deltas of Southeast Asia’s great rivers,” can be non-state space for the same reason, but they do not attract his attention to the same degree as do the highlands no doubt because they are not presented this way in the state sources or the resulting historiography.¹¹ To steal a phrase from J.C. Van Leur, the early modern

⁸ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): p. 171.

⁹ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Burmese state presence in these areas was ‘never more than a thin, flaking glaze’.¹² Lower Burma, like many parts of the kingdom, remained outside of the immediate economic, social, and cultural life of the royal capital. To be sent out to the provinces meant a gap in time and space that made regular interaction outside of written correspondence impossible.

In reality, the Burmese state could only claim dominion and depute men with royal grants of authority with a mandate to govern over these non-state space areas. Such appointees had a significant challenge before them, for the structures that overlapped to ensure popular submission to the state in the centre of the kingdom were nearly wholly absent in the non-state spaces. There were agricultural and trading colonies, villages along rivers or in clearings in the delta, for example. Here state demands were made with a lighter touch because if a village was demanded too much, the villagers might rebel, as they did in 1740, requiring a costly military expedition and possibly costing the local governor his head. Or, more commonly, a village would just move further out of reach of the local governor who was unwise enough to demand too much. This situation began to change in the 1790s due to the bloody wars of King Bodawhpaya (r. 1782-1819) against neighbouring Siam and a great famine in the central dry zone (1805-1812) that contributed to labour flight. Combined, these two crises forced the court to find additional sources of manpower and foodstuffs.¹³ A light administrative touch in the Delta area was no longer possible; the payment of taxes, the levying of troops, the securing of food supplies and the like in outlying parts of the kingdom could only be achieved at the point of a sword.¹⁴

Despite their physical distance from the royal court, central appointees were the solder behind the royal imaginary that connected the royal centre to the provinces through daily administrative practice. On the one hand, these officials saw their main identity as appointees of the royal court and never identified too much with the local population. Once despatched to the provinces, central appointees remained concerned primarily with court politics and their respective positions within court factions in on-going power struggles. They saw their appointments as dependent upon always changing court politics, which they kept tabs on and influenced through their wives and allies who remained at the court. Appointments were temporary, often of short duration, and usually viewed as a stepping-stone on the path to a higher position somewhere else. Whether they achieved this or not mainly involved their success in revenue and manpower gathering, not the happiness of the local population, success in war when called upon, and, above all, their continued support by a strong faction in the court. When in the provinces local rivalries reflected court factional infighting and local official competition was interpreted in this context.¹⁵

The main events examined in the present paper occurred within the course of less than a year, beginning in about May 1809 in South-eastern Burma. The Viceroy enjoyed, we are told, a status second only to the king and his heir-apparent, with the powers of a king in the lower half of Burma.¹⁶ In May 1809, another official, the

¹² J. C. Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian and Economic History*, translated by James S. Holmes and A. Van Marie (The Hague: Van Hoeve, 1955).

¹³ Michael W. Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty, 1752-1885* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 102.

¹⁴ IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, p. 36.

¹⁵ Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819*, p. 155.

¹⁶ William Koenig says that in 1809 the official's jurisdiction had expanded to include all of the land that was to the east of the Irrawaddy River and South of Prome. William J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity*,

Atwinwun, was despatched by the King with “broad powers” to go to Tavoy, build up resources for a military expedition, and then lead an attack on Siam.¹⁷ Their rivalry set off a series of acts of violence that contributed to the near collapse of the kingdom.

The political contest between the two officials was partly waged through letter writing campaigns to the royal court. This began when the Viceroy of Pegu and the Governor of Martaban had challenged the Atwinwun’s right to gather resources in the area for the expedition because they had apparently out-dated orders from the king which revealed no such royal authority backing the Atwinwun’s actions. The latter then wrote a letter to the king accusing the officials of obstruction. Other members of the Atwinwun’s faction in the court, mainly princes of the royal family, now sent a letter to the Atwinwun indicating that the Atwinwun was safe as the king had received the Atwinwun’s complaint and was going to send orders that the Viceroy and the Governor of Martaban would be removed from their positions. Moreover, the king had appointed as their replacements the Ye-wun of Rangoon as the new governor of Martaban and the king’s grandson as the new viceroy of Pegu.¹⁸

The Viceroy and the Governor of Martaban got wind of this and had sent their own letters to the king in the hopes of changing his views. These letters recast the events in Lower Burma so that they would find context in the royal imaginary and thus capture the king’s attention and command his intervention. The Atwinwun, they claimed, was not acting as military commander or administrator as had been ordered by the king, but instead was preparing to make himself king instead. The stockades were really more like the walls of a royal city and significantly included the twelve buildings that represented the cardinal points, a symbolic motif of the royal palace and in the performance of duties, the Atwinwun had begun to use royal words for their own comings and goings. As the two men had expected, Bodawhpaya saw these activities as personal threats to the royal person and to the king’s place at the centre of the royal imaginary and was enraged. The King now ordered the Viceroy to prepare for an attack on the Atwinwun by sending men to Martaban.¹⁹

The main underlying tensions between the officials in the provinces were actually issues regarding personal control over local manpower and the resources necessary to support it. In a low population country, it was difficult to keep bondsmen from fleeing to the service of another patron who offered a better deal. Local elites competed fiercely locally for control of manpower but lacked the kind of royal mechanisms the court had to keep them in place. All the officials mentioned in the present paper sought personal bondsmen and the money extorted through violence and bribes to prevent violence was necessary to maintain growing retinues. In the opening example, the cause of the Viceroy’s unhappiness was that four of the men who were to have been killed initially had been his bondsmen but they had deserted to the service of long-time rival the Ye-wun. Canning had not been moved merely by distaste to seek the rescue of these people; Canning had been asked to do so by the Ye-wun.²⁰ In this particular case, violence had been threatened as a means of extortion, but additionally

1752-1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Center for South & Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), p. 155.

¹⁷ Wung-gyi-hmu-gyi-mya Akyang’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (1962): p. 149; Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Cyril Skinner (trans.), ‘The Interrogation of Zeya Suriya Kyaw: A Burmese Account of the Junk Ceylon (Phuket) Campaigns of 1809- 1810’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 72.1 (1984): p. 65.

¹⁹ Skinner, ‘The Interrogation of Zeya Suriya Kyaw’, pp. 65-66.

²⁰IOR/F/4/310 Canning to Company, 29 November 1809, p. 75.

as a form of what Stuart Carroll calls vindictory violence,²¹ in the context of a feud between the Viceroy and the Ye-wun. The Atwinwun now wrote to the king, promised to establish the truth of the matter once his military campaign was finished. The king agreed, ordered the troops who had been sent to Martaban recalled, and the Atwinwun moved against Siam, took the town and island of Phuket, and was rewarded by the king with the title 'Maha-Thiha-Thura,' inscribed on a gold nameplate, and seven scarlet coloured victory drums.²²

With the Ye-wun's help, the Atwinwun now had his revenge on the Viceroy. They did so not by pointing to the Viceroy's local transgressions of administrative propriety but by, like their rivals earlier, depicting the Viceroy as being guilty in ways that would register as violating the royal imaginary. The Atwinwun and the Ye-wun wrote letters to the Bodawhpaya accusing the Viceroy of being unfit to command by claiming the latter did not maintain discipline among the royal troops. Worse, the Viceroy violated royal orders by allowing them to publicly smoke opium and drink alcohol. By contrast to the king's concern earlier that the Atwinwun was putting too many people to death, these letters accused the Viceroy of not executing enough people. As they claimed, the Viceroy had 'taken off few or no heads since his arrival,' indicating that no discipline must have been enforced at all. According to palace sources, when the king received the letters, 'he grasped his sword and spear (the usual signs of fury).'²³ The Viceroy was removed from office and all other dignities, as was his brother, the Governor of Bassein, both were ordered to come to the court with chains around their necks, and the governorship of Martaban was now finally given to the Ye-wun.²⁴ In order to ensure that the Viceroy obeyed the royal order, the Ye-wun took the precaution of first arresting all of the Viceroy's 'principal vassals and adherents...together with their families.' The slightest resistance, the Ye-Wun warned, would bring the 'immediate destruction of these people.'²⁵ The Atwinwun now received all of the Viceroy's old powers in addition to retaining those already possessed as the commander of the army in the south, as well as other powers and honours.²⁶

Changed Obligations

Demonstrating why the enforcement of state demands on local populations relied on violence more heavily in the early nineteenth century in places like Lower Burma than they had in the fifteenth century requires a look at how the relationship between the village and the state had changed. Although the royal imaginary of the kingdom remained a superficial overlay, changes had occurred in the outlying parts of the kingdom that made it possible for local officials to abuse their charges. Provincial violence demonstrated some of the ways in which early modern state formation had changed everyday life. Political Centralization ended the presence and the patronage of local families with claims to royal status and a place in local rites. In the fifteenth century, for example, the counterparts of eighteenth century centrally-appointed officials were local royals, members of independent royal or noble families or branches

²¹ Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 83.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 66, 69.

²³ IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, pp. 119-121.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122; ROB 26 February 1810, in Than Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of the Kings of Burma* (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1984-90), vol. 6, p. 193.

²⁵ IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, pp. 162-163.

²⁶ ROB 26 February 1810, in Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of the Kings of Burma*, vol. 6, p. 193; 26 February 1810 Royal Order in *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 193-194

of the main royal family, they undertook the expectations of royalty and nobility in society, providing for festivals, patronizing monks and pagodas, and heeding the basic tenets of good ruler-ship by not pushing their charges to the point of starvation, because they were more susceptible to being overthrown by local rebels or displaced by a neighbouring 'small king' who could easily legitimate his campaign as one of restoring peace and ensuring universal harmony.

Under the Konbaung Dynasty however, centrally-appointed officials in the provinces owed their posting instead to the dynastic court which monopolized all royal and ceremonial functions, performed on behalf of the kingdom as a whole in the royal capital, out of sight and mind of much of the rural population. If they choose to do so, central appointees might patronize the local religion on behalf of the community, sponsor great festivals, or conduct their rule with a view to the tolerance of the local population. The two problems of this path were its inherent political dangers and its certain ineffectiveness. First, becoming a local patron of the religion and local communities to a scale sufficient to entice cooperation from villagers to the degree of extraction required by the court would roused the suspicions of the court that they were either growing too close to the population to squeeze out revenue sufficiently or that they might have pretensions to the throne. From the court's perspective, its officials in the provinces were to do the king's bidding in the provinces, not to become patrons of village communities. Second, many provincial appointees were not in place long enough to develop the kinds of loyalties and degree of patronage that would be necessary either. Such officials had to pursue the most immediate and effective means to an end.

As the Konbaung state centralized, it effectively pushed provincial villages further away, rather than pulled them closer to the court. The limited development and clarification of provincial administrative organization in Burma even by the early nineteenth century meant that in several cases where officials were despatched to prepare for especially important military campaigns or administrative charges, the authority granted them to meet their responsibilities remained vague. Worse, it could dangerously extensive in order to allow them the freedom to deal with any obstacle that lay in their way. These assignments were often uncoordinated and created a range of problems, including everything from jealousy among other officials to genuine jurisdictional issues. Lacking credentials backed by anyone other than a distant royal court or access to networks that transcended local village communities (as discussed further below), Konbaung officials placed in the provinces depended on regular, spectacular, and local displays of violence, both for resources but also to reconfirm their authority and these displays grew fiercer as demands of state placed more heavily on themselves. As Martin Thomas has observed regarding colonial policing, 'coercive policing ... was a powerful indicator of the colonial state's limited reach.'²⁷ This could also be asserted for provincial administrators in the early modern Burmese state for the reason that they had few other means at their disposal.

Such officials were thus often merciless in their imposition of demands for soldiers for royal campaigns but in particular for revenue.²⁸ Those who could not pay

²⁷ Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 75.

²⁸ As Canning described the situation in Lower Burma, 'the people are exposed to the unrestrained violence and exactions of [the Governor of Hanthawaddy's] Ministers and followers of every description. This system of uninvited rapine finds its excuse in the nature of the Burman Government, which allowing no salary to any of its officers and exacting on the contrary from the high in office and they again from those under them, considerable sums every year of the privation of their respective situation all from the

the taxes or provide the supplies were sold off as debt slaves.²⁹ In terms of remuneration, there were no limits to what Konbaung officials in the outlying provinces could wring from local populations so long as nothing occurred that would challenge the harmony and royal benevolence emphasized in the royal imaginary. Using the threat of execution in this way offered a perfect means of doing so. Those threatened with execution were charged with crimes and thus criminalized and within the Buddhist context that informed the royal imaginary, releasing someone from captivity or death or securing this release accrued merit. In addition to securing funds, an official could also present himself to the king as a benevolent administrator whose actions helped to contribute to the field of merit that sustained the Religion in the kingdom. By sending funds to the court, the official could also represent that they were an effective administrator as well, so long as once in a while someone was actually executed for an offense.

Going too far did indeed bring royal suspicion that something was amiss. Viewed from the royal court, the Atwinwun was a royal army commander who had been sent to South-eastern Burma to raise troops and build an army that would then attack the Siamese and secure the frontiers of the kingdom and hopefully deliver booty to the royal court as well. The Atwinwun appears to have gone through the motions of acting out this role, but prioritized the enhancement of his political strength, through the acquisition of manpower and wealth to support it.³⁰ When opposed, the Atwinwun was also fairly violent in his response. The Atwinwun charged twenty opponents with attempted assassination and had them put to death. In fact, the Atwinwun was putting so many people to death that it roused the concern of the royal court. The king finally intervened when the Atwinwun began to put soldiers defeated in battle to death as well. The king now gave orders for all of the Atwinwun's prisoners to be released and ordered an investigation into why so many executions were taking place.³¹

In Burma the early modern period had not witnessed the same transformative effect the church had on gender relations in Europe, in isolating women's activities to those that did not involve violence nor in making them the legal responsibility of men.³² Women were legally the equal of men, and were as responsible for the behaviour of their husbands and their husbands were for theirs. This provided much incentive for women to play major roles at the court in promoting the careers of their husbands sent out to the provinces and to participate in court intrigue and act as negotiators on their behalf. In his initial moves to punish the Atwinwun, for example, Bodawhpaya had also arrested and imprisoned the Atwinwun's wife, who had remained in the royal court and who would play a key role in the collection of money and the payment of bribes to the right people to save both their skins.³³ Violence also further reinforced the equality between men and women in the provinces. Burmese peasant women were, like men, expected to work in the fields, in addition to responsibilities in the home and in the marketplace. They had equal rights under the law to property and inheritance, and equal responsibility for taxes. Violence by officials, legal and extra-legal, directed against the village also had to put men and women (whether adults or children) on an equal footing

Governor of a province to the lowest writer in service to plunder indiscriminately whenever power or opportunity exists.' IOR/F/4/310 Canning to Company, 29 November 1809, p. 64.

²⁹ IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, p. 36.

³⁰ Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819*, p. 155.

³¹ Skinner, 'The Interrogation of Zeya Suriya Kyaw', pp. 70-71.

³² Julis R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 4.

³³ Skinner, 'The Interrogation of Zeya Suriya Kyaw', p. 66.

regarding corvee labour impositions and taxation demands because it was mainly women who remained in the village. Additional abuses included rape and the forced enslavement of the children of households that could not pay their tax.³⁴³⁵

Violence or the threat of violence was also used to secure wealth from the extended families of the soon-to-be-punished. The Atwinwun had secured some bribe money from the families of men defeated in battle and sentenced to death as a result, before the royal orders contravening their death sentences arrived. In the case of the officer Zeya Suriya Kyaw, his wife paid the bribe to the Atwinwun's wife back in the royal court.³⁶ But had these death sentences remained only threats, they would soon have lost their power of persuasion very quickly. What made them so frightening and persuasive was that such punishments were indeed frequently carried out. In February 1810, the royal court issued orders that anyone caught using golden umbrellas, the peculiar appurtenance of royalty, they should be arrested and brought back to the royal capital.³⁷ As one account describes the execution of several men apprehended for this crime:

... we went to the spot, and saw the bodies of three men who had been beheaded lying at full length, their bellies, which had been ripped open, being next the ground, with stakes driven into it through their left sides, the viscera also appearing between the bodies. The heads were placed to their respective necks, the faces being upwards as if *staring* at you, having also a stake driven through the mouth and throat into the ground. In this state they are to continue three days, exposed to the action of the sun, which will greatly add to the horridness of their appearance.³⁸

Observers commented that what was more shocking than the scene described was the 'indifference with which the Burmans regarded this tragic scene.'³⁹ Such violence then was probably a normal part of everyday life in such outlying parts of the kingdom.

Popular Responses: Flight and Fight

Collective violence was an increasingly popular response to the application of violence in administration in Lower Burma. It is difficult to identify where a line can be drawn between the quotidian violence and collective violence in Lower Burma at the end of the early modern period. Periodic displays of violence represented one way to bridge the chasm between the village and the centrally appointed official but while this violence was accepted as legal, it was not accepted to be legitimate, provoking entire villages to pull up stakes when they could and move further out of the reach of the state (and by this period, this meant leaving the kingdom altogether) or turn to banditry and rebellion. As Konbaung administration in the outlying provinces was 'light touch,' unofficial low-level violence between villages was fairly common as a means of working out local disputes, but when it turned upon the royal centre (against the state)

³⁴ Skinner, 'The Interrogation of Zeya Suriya Kyaw', p. 70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66, 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁷ ROB 9 February 1810, in Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of the Kings of Burma*, vol. 6, p. 182.

³⁸ 'A Burma Diary of 1810', ed. by B. R. Pearn, *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 27.3 (1937): p. 292.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

it threatened the stability of the kingdom. Either course indicated the weak subscription that villages in places like Lower Burma maintained to the royal imaginary.

As mentioned above, Konbaung state administration in the provinces represented only a thin layer over a countryside dotted with self-contained villages.⁴⁰ The basic units of social organization remained village communities. It was the village headmen who answered the demands of the state and local state officials but who came from the village, owed their position to it, and always saw the village and its survival as his first priority. Even at this late stage of early modern Burmese state development when the king wished to know how much manpower, resources, and revenue remained in the kingdom to be tapped, there were a hierarchy of reports supplied through centrally-appointed officials, but the basic report upon which all others drew was that of the headmen.⁴¹ Further, by the early nineteenth century, the king commanded that each headmen in the kingdom send a report directly to the court, giving them two to three months to fill out specific royal forms to do so, the difference in time depending upon the distance of the village from the royal court.⁴² The village headmen's report was also an imaginary of the village and what it could offer the state. This made it possible for the headman to protect the village from excessive state demands, by understating its resources. The state could get around this by simply placing increasing demands on it, regardless of what its stated resources were, until the village could tolerate no more.

Unhappy bondsmen and overstretched villages were different phenomenon that worked themselves out in different ways. Bondsmen sought personal refuge by fleeing the service of one master to another, the occurrence of which was frequent and well documented, including by examples in the present paper. Despite suggestions that the villages themselves were porous and always changing,⁴³ so far as we have documentation, villagers did not generally flee local areas on their own, leaving behind as this would both kith and king. Instead, village communities moved together out of areas with excessive demands into areas on the frontier further out of the reach of state officials, which gave them more autonomy. As the Konbang state's reach expanded over the full extent of the Irrawaddy Delta, fleeing (as opposed to resisting) excessive demands of outlying officials increasingly required fleeing the kingdom altogether, leaving numerous villages along the Irrawaddy River abandoned or depopulated.⁴⁴

Without much direct management of local affairs, provincial appointees had few incentives to intercede in local conflicts between villages. Although inter-village conflict might be rare in the kingdom's core area, in the outlying provinces they were fairly common as villages fought out issues regarding everything from access to particular forests, control over spirit shrines, and water rights. Various forms of raiding of other villages occurred even in good times, but especially in bad times. In the period examined in this paper, villagers moved out of areas in the face of excessive exactions by Konbaung officials and looked further afield. When delta villagers pushed north into the dry zone closer to the royal centre they found security measures much weaker than they had those in the delta. The Irrawaddy River that connected the Upper Burma, the

⁴⁰ Scott refers to these as "the elementary units of political order," Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 36.

⁴¹ Trager & Koenig, *Burmese Sit-tans 1764-1826: Records of Rural Life and Administration*, p. 5.

⁴² ROB 8 February 1810, in Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of the Kings of Burma*, vol. 6, p. 179.

⁴³ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ IOR/F/4/333 Canning Report 8 May 1810, p. 160; the depopulation caused by people fleeing excessive demands for soldiers and taxes is independently confirmed by Felix Carey in 'A Burma Diary of 1810', p. 293.

central dry zone, and the southern delta together, no longer remained a safe channel of communication requiring the appointment of a special officer, the town officer in charge of the ‘nine towns,’ with an armed force to patrol the river and protect important shipping and within the first four months in the post had publicly executed over seventy captured river pirates.⁴⁵ As mentioned, members of dacoit bands who were caught were punished with death unless redeemed, at the place of execution.⁴⁶

The rolling effect of administrative violence in the south had thus rippled back toward the royal centre as towns on the edge of the royal city now succumbed to the depredations of ‘numerous bands of dacoits, robbers, [and] insurgents’ in the 1809-1810 period.⁴⁷ There is substantial evidence that this violence, as it turned back against the royal centre, shattered the royal imaginary and caused a crisis of kingship. Manifest violence within the kingdom was taken as a sign that the Religion was in crisis and that the current king had an insufficient store of merit and thus would have been viewed as being unsuitable to remain on the throne. In 1811, the king sought to distance himself from the bad karma of the existing royal capital by building a new one at Mingun, as well as constructing what, if it had been finished, would have been an unprecedented work of merit, the Mingun Pagoda, followed in 1812 by defrocking the monastic leadership and declaring himself the next Buddha. Although the king would abandon this effort in 1817 and die in 1819, the instability of the kingdom that was produced was not reined in and Burma succumbed to British arms in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) waged over the issue of punitive expeditions against rebel villagers in two other difficult Burmese frontiers, Arakan and Assam.

Conclusion

Burma’s early modern experience with violence depended a great deal on which part of the state one was experiencing, the core part of the kingdom, in which the rationalization of administration, economic growth, the homogenization of culture and language, the adoption of Orthodox observances of Buddhist practices, and pursuit of the ideals of Buddhist kingship contributed to compliance with state demands and a greater ability to meet the latter, or in the provinces where officials ground down local communities for resources through the threat of violence. In the provinces, early modern state formation saw a greater reliance by the end of the period on conspicuous displays of violence and the threat of violence. As a result, the kingdom experienced population dislocation and collective violence that were more consistent with disintegrating societies rather than with political stability.

Villagers obeyed state officials because of the threat of execution and its implementation, presumably fluctuating in the density of its occurrence. In especially bad times, when central demands were heaviest, and officials in the provinces were hard-pressed to both deliver resources to both the court and pocket a sizeable portion themselves, the frequency of execution and threat of it must have been extreme. But even in periods of lighter central demands, coercive violence probably remained to the end an important part of the everyday life of the early modern Burmese state in the provinces,⁴⁸ however much its enactment and the threat of its imposition was invisible

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 37-38; ROB 6 May 1810, in Tun (ed.), *The Royal Orders of the Kings of Burma*, vol. 6, p. 241.

⁴⁶ Carey, ‘A Burma Diary of 1810’, p. 300.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 146-147.

⁴⁸ Adam White (ed.), *The Everyday Life of the State: A State-in-Society Approach*, foreword by Joel S. Migdal (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

to or misunderstood by the royal centre. In the royal court, the king watched over the people and judged the good and the bad and the eyes of all in the kingdom were upon the throne. This royal imaginary gave cohesion to the kingdom within a moral system that emphasized unity, harmony, and peace. This imaginary blinded the court to the everyday activities of centrally appointed officials who abused the local populations under their charge for their own benefit. Abuse led to resistance and flight, which led to more violence and in the end, undermined the security of the royal imaginary. Political centralization in early modern Burma, by replacing locally responsible royal and noble families with temporary central appointees encouraged, at least to some degree, increasing violence of this kind over time.

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