The Shan in the History of the Irrawaddy Valley: Towards a Federal "National" History

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One of the great confusions in Burma Studies and I would expect in many other area studies fields is that the major task facing decolonisers is the hold that western-shaped scholarship has defined Burma and its history. Having gained political supremacy in non-western areas, the West, in the case of Burma, were free to construct Burma in ways that legitimated Western dominance.

For Michael Aung-Thwin, the British did this by overemphasizing the role of ethnicity in premodern Burmese history, particularly the Shan and the Mon, and presenting the Burmans as inheritors of other people's civilizations.

Indeed, for some of the British at least, such as Cushing, pre-modern "races," there may have been, but it was really the case that the Burmans had been a minority people whose only advantage had been that they controlled the easily administered lowlands. In Cushing's view, many of those who might otherwise have emerged as members of other ethnic groups had been swallowed up by Burmese culture, religion, and language and so could not really tell themselves apart from the Burmans. The British helped to cement this transformation in place through making Burmese the language of the court and the administration and having it taught in the school.

These views are very different from those more recently put forward by Victor Lieberman. For Lieberman, the Burmese began to migrate from the highlands into Upper Burma in the 9th century. Pagan became the first kingdom to dominate extensive parts of the western mainland, although our epigraphic evidence suggests this was at first a very loose collection of areas under the King of Pagan and this fluctuated. Nevertheless, by the 11th century we have epigraphic evidence that Upper Burma was being referred to as "the Burmese country." In Lieberman's view what he argues were ethnic references became more pronounced in referring to parts of the country. For example, fourteenth-sixteenth centuries epigraphic references to the "Mon country," the "Shan country," as well. Lieberman then lays out some of the longer-term developments he has identified before for the emergence of Burma around the culture of the Burmans and their absorption of competing ethnic political centers and peoples.

By contrast, James Scott's model for the emergence of ethnicities among the highlanders is also, in a way, also shaped by the expansion of the state. While Lieberman dwells on how the state helped make the Burmans, Scott focuses on how avoiding the state helped make the Kachins, Chins, Shans, etc, not by name, but collectively as highland ethnicities. In all of these cases, there is an assumption or at least the implication that the state goes hand-in-hand with an embryonic and the maturing Burman (read by Lieberman as Burmese) identity.

In making their cases, each naturally centred attention on sources produced by the main focus of their subject. For Aung-Thwin, his evidence for Burmese history is mainly the historical view of Burman historical sources taken at face value as genuine and the rejection of non-Burmese sources, particularly Mon accounts, as later constructions. For Lieberman, we only hear of the state processes as they favored the Burmans, not those that shaped competing processes among the Rakhine, Shan, and others—I will return to this. For Scott, the discussion

is on the way those who fled the state remembered their history not the sources of the expanding state they fled. None of these approaches would be problematic in themselves—they are all telling different histories, with different foci. They are not telling ALL history and they are all constrained by their answers to the same question that faced the British and then the early Burmese Democracy, and Burmese politics since 1962—what is Burma?

The easiest default answer from a Western perspective, is that it is the state, where it began, where it was so many centuries ago, and where it is today, and where it will be tomorrow. But this is also the consequence of Western-defined norms of methodology and perspective. Western-defined histories have, like other societies, been court or state histories, but this model that has come to dominate thinking about the past, has been built on the national story.

But this is a Western perspective. It is for a story of integration and the singular not of division and plurality. In extending this model to Burma and elsewhere the imposition of the "national story" approach has given the Burman story a central place, a singular place, in the country's history. This is very problematic in explaining why the Burma of today is so divided compared to most Western European states where nationalism appears to remain a stronger bond. But what other option is there? How can we have a history of Burma that is not a "national story," but a federal one. By federal, I do not mean equal representation of every group at every time, an ethnicized version of history. But, instead, I use Federal in the sense of politically and geographically de-centred.

If we are going to understand Burmese history and I think we need to—what we know as Burma has been a major stage for a lot of developments over time with enormous consequences for a lot of people—we need to provincialise, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued about the modern globe, the Burman story. This does not mean erasing the Burman state narrative, but instead understanding it as one narrative that is intertwined with a lot of other narratives that are equally part of the country's DNA. The challenge though is how to do this is a way that will not make the history unintelligible.

A Medley of Unfinished Proto-National projects

Victor Lieberman's Strange Parallels is one of the great comparativist projects aimed at understanding how some states succeeded and others failed in carving up what James Scott has called state space. On the mainland in Southeast Asia a handful of kingdoms had by the 1820s swallowed up smaller rivals and set the template inherited by colonizers, then nationalists, and the Cakri court for the major countries and their national cultures we have today. Scott can be read as the other side of this process, lowlanders fleeing this state expansion and producing many of the ethnic groups we find in the mainland.

What is also missing in both overviews is a middle ground. There would certainly from the late eighteenth century be very powerful draws into Burmese society. Commercial, administrative, cultural and other structures favoured Burmans, Burman society decided the material and intellectual norms of the realm at large, and there were advantages in "Crossing over"—intermarrying with Burmans, choosing your father's or mother's Burman heritage over that of your other parent, learning to speak Burmese in addition to your native tongue. Burmanness which Matthew Walton has invoked to provide a parallel in modern Burmese society to the privilege of whiteness in the West was adopted perhaps just as consciously by choice as it was unconsciously through cultural diffusion in a society dominated by the Konbaung court and its elites.

But Burma was not Germany. Germany and Italy, amongst others, could be built on structures that emerged independently of or in parallel with the same developments within rival states that would come together in the late 19th century (or not, consider how Liechtenstein, parts of Switzerland, Austria and so on underwent similar developments as in other parts of

Germany but for most of the period, aside from Austria during Anschluss, would not be part of the German state, or for Italy, regarding San Marino, Monaco, the Holy See, and the Territory of the Knights of Malta). The rival polities and societies Burma absorbed were not Burmese-speaking (and I take this to the degree of differentiating Rakhine from Burman), not Burmese Theravada Buddhist, and had very strong, local cultural, social, and historical traditions that were not Burmese either.

Standing in the 1820s there was an awareness inside and out that the mainland had not been so permanently divided. For all of the processes Lieberman identifies as ensuring Burman eventuality for Burma we can find comparable, in quality if not numerical intensity, processes in the rival being swallowed up. Instead, as David Wyatt has shown, it is useful to remember that there were some very powerful political centres undergoing the same processes heading towards a modern existence as a state that failed just before reaching the 1820s finish line.

One of those areas consists of the competing polities of what is today the Shan states, but not just those of Burma today, those that spread across the interior of mainland Southeast Asia, extending across northern Siam, and into Western Laos. Under kingdoms such as Chiangmai, these areas were also in the process of becoming some version of what today has broken up separately into Shan, northern Thai, and Lao. Then in the early 19th century they are in effect bifurcated into the Burman Shan states and the Siamese Shan states, and then the latter are divided yet further, in effect, between the survivor Siamese state and French Indochina. Ironically, they get placed more within the non-state space areas of zomia than they do the state space of the lowlands, but until the early nineteenth century at the latest, they experienced robust developments in culture, language, religious orthodoxy, and administrative practices. What happened to their wreckage? In a kingdom which even in the colonial period was very weak in outlying areas, what did people do with pre-existing political culture, local religious beliefs, traditional social practices and the like? How did they inform the lowland Burmese state and cultural project? And despite Cushing's view of the lowlands as a Burman melting pot, did British administrative device and Christian missionaries not help to reduce the very recent intensity of the Burman impact?

When the British took the remainder of lowland Burma in the Third Anglo-Burmese War and the Pacification Campaign, the Shan areas still resisted forceful inclusion in yet a new reiteration of a Burman polity, so much so that it earned them and other highland societies the label of martial races and decided the British that indirect rule was better here than the costs of direct administration.

Unfortunately, when Burman and ethnic experiences are considered in a longterm historical trajectory, the emphasis on the Mon experience to conclude the process is unfair and a little misleading. The Mon as a lowland group often living in mixed communities with Burmans in several longterm military contests were defeated and largely absorbed without the protection of the highlands. The British created no protective "Mon-land" they remained within the sphere the British allowed to be most intensively Burman. The Shan, like the Kachin and Chin, were much more immune, because of the divided administration of colonial rule but also because of the longer-term spread of Shan Buddhism, on the one hand, and the more recent spread of Baptist Christianity on the other.

The key points to be made here are that first, Burman integration of the Shan areas, as with the Kachin, the Wa, the Karens, the Chins, and so on was very late, very weak, and too brief to make much change to the longer term local developments that had centuries to develop. I would argue that of all the non-Burman areas, only Rakhine was substantially influenced and even here we can see today how significant separate developments had been.

Burma under colonial rule was stuck in this limbo of weak integration between historically competing cultural, religious, and political centres and colonial decisions to keep lowlands and highlands administratively separate would deny, as they did in Laos and

Cambodia under French rule, the kind of continued lowland integration of outlying areas that continued unabated in Siam.

Conclusion

My main point is that when we do Shan history we do Shan history but when we do Burmese history we do Burman history and this needs to change. This should be part of the current efforts to decolonise the academy. Decolonizing the academy promises to do much good in rectifying the imbalance in favour of the West in the creation of the main academic disciplines and the delivery of knowledge about the non-West. Control over knowledge as Said laid out vividly regarding the Near and Middle East is power that simultaneously limits the object just as it empowers the subject. The problem to be resolved is not uniform, however, throughout the non-West, colonization by the West is a common layer that can be identified across the board, but prior to this are layers of other states and other projects whose handiwork was not erased by the colonial state but, in influencing the colonial state, knowledge was inherited from them and filtered into the Western knowledge-building project. Historians usually deal with the lowland Burmese state as a Burman history and those who touch on ethnic minorities write their histories as ethnic and local, a perspective complemented by anthropological work that by its nature is often focused on local, community-specific studies. But what would a history of Burma that, to draw on Dipesh Chakrabarty, provincialises the Burmans and pays equal attention to other co-existing "ethnic" centres of historical, cultural, and religious development within Myanmar in a "federal" way look like? I am going to take a lead from Dipesh Chakrabarty here and suggest that we need to have a new history of Burma that provincializes the Burman spaces of Mandalay and Rangoon of the 19th and 20th centuries and adopts a multi-centred (not a multi-ethnic approach) to understand how "national" developments were fed and experienced throughout the country, Tachileik and Sittwe, two name just two centres, being just as much a subject of attention as Mandalay for example, without doing so to the degree of excluding non-urban areas from historical agency.