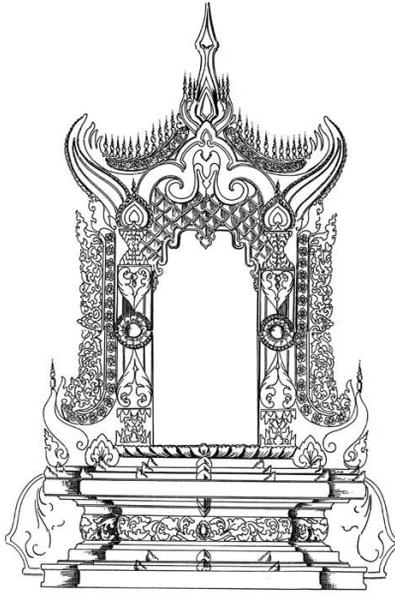


The Journal of Burma Studies



*Volume 10
2005/06*



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Alexandra Green

Chie Ikeya

Yin Ker

Jacques P. Leider

THE JOURNAL OF BURMA STUDIES

VOLUME 10

2005/06

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ISSN # 1094-799X

The Journal of Burma Studies is an annual scholarly journal jointly sponsored by the Burma Studies Group (Association for Asian Studies), the Center for Burma Studies (Northern Illinois University), and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (Northern Illinois University).

Articles are refereed by professional peers. Original scholarly manuscripts should be sent to: Editor, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. *E-mail*: seapeditor@niu.edu.

Subscriptions are \$16 per volume delivered book rate (airmail, add \$9 per volume). Members of the Burma Studies Group receive the journal as part of their \$30 annual membership. Send check or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank made out to Northern Illinois University to the Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. Major credit cards accepted. **Subscriptions** / *E-mail*: bbjorn@niu.edu; *tel*: (815) 753-0512; *fax*: (815) 753-1776. **Back issues** / *E-mail*: seap@niu.edu; *tel*: (815) 756-1981; *fax*: (815) 753-1776.

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The Journal of Burma Studies is abstracted or indexed in the following: *America: History and Life*; *Bibliography of Asian Studies*; *Historical Abstracts*; *MLA International Bibliography*.

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ARTICLES

- DEEP CHANGE? 1
BURMESE WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE
ELEVENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURIES
Alexandra Green
- THE 'TRADITIONAL' HIGH STATUS OF 51
WOMEN IN BURMA:
A HISTORICAL RECONSIDERATION
Chie Ikeya
- MODERN BURMESE PAINTING 83
ACCORDING TO BAGYI AUNG SOE
Yin Ker
- SPECIALISTS FOR RITUAL, 159
MAGIC, AND DEVOTION:
THE COURT BRAHMINS (*PUNNA*)
OF THE KONBAUNG KINGS (1752–1885)
Jacques P. Leider

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**SPECIALISTS FOR RITUAL,
MAGIC, AND DEVOTION:
THE COURT BRAHMINS (*PUNNA*) OF THE
KONBAUNG KINGS (1752–1885)**

Jacques P. Leider

Though they formed an essential part of Burmese court life, the Brahmins have hitherto attracted no scholarly interest outside Burma. Based on a study of royal orders and administrative compendia as well as recent Burmese research, this article¹ gives for the first time an overview of the origins, the ritual and ceremonial functions and the organization of the punna. The main section is preceded by an overview of sources and research questions. Special emphasis is given in the last part to the noteworthy role played by punna in King Bodawphaya's reform policies.

INTRODUCTION

For life in this world, Buddhism holds an ethical message for monks and for laypeople alike. But the rituals it produced proved insufficient for such earthly needs as the consecration of a king and the engineering of political questions by supernatural means. For such needs, the Buddhist courts of Southeast Asia heavily borrowed from the Indian tradition.² As generally acknowledged, Brahmins played an essential role in the ritual of king making (ablution ceremonies [*abhiseka*]) at the courts of the Buddhist kings, where Brahmins were also employed as astrologers. Their functions were related to the transmission

¹ This article is the revised and extended version of a paper presented at the eighteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies at Lund University (July 6–9, 2004). The piece integrates a chapter on the role played by the punna in King Bodawphaya's reform policies, which was presented at the Burma Studies conference (October 22–24, 2004) at Northern Illinois University. I appreciate critical comments made by Burmese and Indian colleagues, the two anonymous reviewers, and the editor as well as Gustaaf Houtman and Alexei Kirichenko, all of whom I thank. I particularly acknowledge what I learned during conversations with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Justin McDaniel.

² Cf. Yi Yi (1982:100): "I use the word 'Indian' because the ideas borrowed were neither purely Hindu nor Buddhist, but a mixture of true Hindu rituals together with Hindu-influenced Buddhist ideas, Hindu ceremonies modified to suit Buddhist needs and purely Buddhist theories."

and the practice of special knowledge imported from India. In Burma (Myanmar) and Arakan (Rakhaing), these 'Brahmins' were generally called *punna*. Though their presence at court is a well-known fact, they have as yet attracted no particular scholarly interest.

This is not a thesis paper, and its content does not aspire to present a comprehensive analysis. Regarding a field of study that has hitherto received little attention, the aim is to provide a close view of the *punna* as an object of study in the context of the Burmese kingship. This calls for a short description of available sources and a sketch of methodological and research questions. A further objective is to give a description of the organization and the functions of the *punna* during the last hundred years of the Burmese monarchy. Finally, special emphasis will be given to the role of court Brahmins under King Bodawphaya (1782–1819), a chapter that should contribute to the study of an important reign that is, the author hopes, finally receiving the scholarly attention it deserves.

PUNNA AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH AND STUDY

Brahmins have served at the courts of the Burmese kings from the Pagan period to the fall of the monarchy in 1885.³ They very likely played an important role in the Pre-Pagan city states such as Thare-khettaya (Sri Kshetra), Halingyi, and Thaton. Brahmins certainly lived at the courts of the little explored city-states of early Rakhaing, such as Dhaññawati and Vesali, where artifacts have been variously described as Hindu and/or Mahayanist.

Several Burmese terms have been used to refer to these court Brahmins, depending on their functions. References most commonly found in the early modern period employ "punna."⁴ This term will be used throughout this paper to

³ On the possible origins of the Brahmins in Pagan and later arrivals, see Bo Ma (1998:7).

⁴ One term found for the very early period is *gavampate*. Another one that will be introduced below is *huya* (or *hura*), which refers to a Brahmin astrologer. A distinction was made between a *huya phyu* (white *huya*), an Indian Brahmin astrologer; and a *huya nyo* (brown *huya*), a Burmese Brahmin astrologer.

collectively refer to those who served as specialists for ritual ceremonies, for magical devices based on a textual knowledge, and for devotional rites to Indian deities at the Burmese and Arakanese courts. The conventional use of the term also includes family members.

The term “punna” has an old history said to go back to Pagan times.⁵ Generally translated as Brahmin, punna does *not* refer to Brahmins alone. During the Konbaung period (and possibly much earlier), punna referred to an entire social group aside from monks, princes, slaves, and others. According to the traditional classification, punna comprised *brahmana*, *khettiya* (or: *khetra*; *khattiya*), *bishya*, and *shudra* (or: *suttiya*; *suddhiya*).⁶ This classification obviously reproduces nominal categories of the Indian caste system, whose traditional socio-professional attributions are also reflected in the explanations provided for these terms.⁷ Social diversity is reflected in the fact that punna are occasionally mentioned together with the *satta* (*chatta*), barbers, a group they included.⁸ Indeed, the punna were men employed at the Burmese court in functions of various dignity and importance, and the four-fold division essentially

⁵ Various etymologies are presented by *Myanma-min ok-khyup-pon satam* § 179 (hereafter *MMOS*). ‘Brahmana’ is the etymology given in the standard *Myanmar-English Dictionary* published by the Myanmar Language Commission (1993). In their studies of the punna, Bo Ma (1998:1) and Nwe Ni Hlaing (1999:9) following Than Tun, explain that the Burmese term “punna” derives from Mon *bonna* (brahmana) as found on an inscription at the Shwezigon pagoda in Pagan. It is more likely though that punna derives from *varna*. This is morphologically sound and makes sense, as the term “punna,” as shown above, applies indeed not to one, but to all four castes.

⁶ *MMOS* § 179–80, § 189. The alternate four-fold division of the punna found in the *Min-Rajagri Catam*, an early seventeenth-century Arakanese royal manual, is given by U Tin at the end of § 179.

⁷ Various accounts on the origins of races are found in *MMOS* § 178–82.

⁸ The Burmese court manual for criminal justice § 40 (see Than Tun, *Royal Orders of Burma* [hereafter *ROB*], 12 February 1785) indicates the way of executing a *punna satta*. It is unlikely that this should be read as “Brahmin, barber...” (following the *ROB* English summary) as the court manual’s § 33 specifies the way of executing a punna. In an order of 19 January 1811, we find the collective term *punna-suddhiya-satta*, which covers all the punna down to the barbers, who were considered *suddhiya*, the fourth and lowest ranking group. The expression in § 40 of the court manual has to be understood as referring to people of a distinctly low category. For references to *satta* (barber), see *ROB* 4 February 1789, 25 September 1817, and 10 August 1840. See also *MMOS* § 192.

reflected a hierarchical structure of functions inside the punna group. We must pay attention to this functional diversity of ceremonial specialists at the court, and when we translate the term “punna,” we should attempt to express the functions of such punna with appropriate terms. On the other hand, the conventional translation of punna as “court Brahmins” is not essentially wrong since, in most instances in the extant Burmese sources, punna were indeed court Brahmins belonging to the top stratum of ceremonial masters and astrologers.

Descendants of the punna of the Mandalay court continue to live today in Mandalay, Sagaing, and Yangon, among other locations. Their endogamous tradition has ensured their survival as a socially distinctive group though their contemporary socio-professional diversity points to their full integration into the Burmese society. Modern punna, for example, may still earn a living as astrologers around the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, but many more are doctors, engineers, businessmen, sales people, or state employees. In recent years, the loss of tradition and the loosening of caste rules have led to a situation of crisis that is well reflected in recent research done in Burma on the punna.⁹ Oral history is a viable option, and many Burmese scholars have based their research on personal interviews with learned punna.

To clarify a possible point of confusion, one should note that the punna are distinct from the Indian Hindus who came to settle in Burma during the colonial period, and that the Burmese, in general, do not refer to the punna as *Kalas* (the ordinary Burmese word for “Indians” and Muslims).

⁹ Maung Dagon (1996), Bo Ma (1998), and Nwe Ni Hlaing (1999) contain extensive chapters on the living punna. Their research appears to be originally motivated by an identity crisis of the punna community, considered a threat to its survival. Bo Ma (1998:50) writes that since the colonial period the punna dropped the caste system as “they came to conceive that maintaining racial purity was more important than maintaining the caste system.” She also notes that the custom of marrying a girl of eight or nine years has disappeared, a custom the disappearance of which few people would by now deplore. But barely disguised complaints such as the following may sound a stronger note with contemporary observers: “Modern Chinese restaurants take the places of Brahmin residences as well as Hindu temples, thus leaving no exits for the Brahmins.” (Ibid., 57).

Written sources

To study the court Brahmins, historians face the problem that the nineteenth-century punna themselves saw no interest in communicating their knowledge and have left no detailed records of their functions at the court.. In her work on the Pali literature of Burma, Mabel H. Bode noted that Emil Forchhammer, the Swiss in the service of the British Department of Archaeology, “encountered an extreme reserve in the Hindu guardians of Brahmanic lore which baffled even his determination and patience as an inquirer” (Bode 1966:98–99). Most information on the functions of the punna has therefore remained rather general (e.g., Scott 1900 [part I, vol. II]:44–45).

The orders of the kings of Burma, dated between 1598 and 1885 and edited by Professor Than Tun in Kyoto, are a primary source for the study of the punna.¹⁰ This collection contains more than 3,200 (mostly) dated orders, which are actually texts of various length, nature, and content.¹¹ Among these, 134 orders refer solely or in part to the punna. Ninety-two percent belong to the Konbaung period (1752–1885). The few orders from the early seventeenth century refer mainly to the fabrication of magical squares by the punna. These royal orders are the main source used in this paper.

To appreciate the contents of a royal order as found in the *ROB*, they must be evaluated in the context of a reign, a particular policy, or a social and economic environment. A couple of remarks regarding the usefulness of the *ROB* as a source collection will be made here. First, only a small percentage of the orders of the Burmese kings has survived as copies on palm leaves. Nowhere do they exist in the form of a continuous series of documents. For many years, even during the nineteenth century, we have few or no orders at all while for certain years we have more than 200. The total

¹⁰ Than Tun, 1983–1990.

¹¹ This is not, unlike what a historian would hope for, a comprehensive collection. Further documents that fit into the category of texts published in the *ROB* continue to be found in the unexplored manuscript collections of Burmese and overseas libraries.

sum of royal orders in the *ROB* for the period from 1700 to 1750 is a mere 25, while there are 756 for the second part of the eighteenth century alone. Thus, the *ROB* as a source for historical investigations provides an inconsistent selection of material. We can rarely follow an evolution or a succession of events over the years, and the material is never complete enough to provide the substance for a thorough case study.

The author must strongly emphasize that more than sixty percent of all surviving royal orders date from the single remarkable reign of King Bodawphaya (1782–1819). Bodawphaya was an exceptional man, and there is little doubt that his was the most impressive and, in some ways, the most influential reign of the Konbaung dynasty. More than half of our punna-related selection of royal orders comes from King Bodawphaya's reign and is concerned with the organization of the Brahmins, their hierarchy, and their ceremonial, ritual, and devotional functions. The orders from the later Konbaung period are generally more detailed and provide data on particular punna, appointments, functions, and the composition of various punna groups. Much information regarding the punna can only be understood in the context of specific policies. For that reason, Bodawphaya's reign receives special attention in this article.

Another important source for our investigation is the *Myanma-min ok-khyup-pon satam* (Treatise on the Administration of the Kings of Burma), a work generally known to scholars of Burma by its acronym *MMOS*. This book was written by U Tin in the 1920s at the request of the English authorities.¹² U Tin had been a clerk of the two last Burmese kings and is often called "Pagan" U Tin because he was appointed as an administrative officer in Pagan in 1895. His work was translated into English by Euan Bagshawe (U Tin 2001). In

¹² The *MMOS* is fully cited in the bibliography here under U Tin 1963–1970 (Burmese text) and U Tin 2001 (English translation). U Tin was asked to compile a book on the public administration of the Burmese kings largely because at the time (ca. 1920) much historical information on the Burmese kingdom was still available; moreover the British were motivated to "provide a set of precedents upon which the government's own officials could act" (Euan Bagshawe in U Tin 2001:26).

this paper, references will not be made to page numbers of the *MMOS*, but to paragraphs (§) that are easily traced both in the original Burmese text and in its English translation. The *MMOS* contains a wealth of information on the institutions and the administration of the Burmese kingdom. Besides regulatory texts that prescribe rules of behaviour and moral precepts that punna need to follow at the risk of losing their status, the *MMOS* explains the origins and the functions of the various punna. Texts establishing norms are foundational as they define the identity of the punna in their own eyes and specify their role as a part of the structure of royal institutions (Maung Dagon 1996:14–28; *MMOS* § 10).

The information that can be gleaned in the Burmese and Arakanese historiography (with its various *rajavan*, *thamaing*, or *Aye-daw-pum*) is limited. The punna mainly appear as astrologers, masters of ceremonies, and participants at the royal *abhiseka* (making of the king). The last function also is highlighted in the *Lokabyuha-kyam* or in works that describe coronation ceremonies such as the *Maha-samata-rajavan* or the *Rakhaing Maha-rajavan-taw-kyi*, two Arakanese texts. Precious information on the relations between the Arakanese king and his punna can be found in the early seventeenth-century *Min-Rajagri Satam* (hereafter *MRS*), a manual written for King Min-Rajagri (1593–1612).

Nwe Ni Hlaing's above mentioned *History of the Myanma Ponna* (1999) and Bo Ma's *History of Rakhaing Punna in Mandalay* (1998) contain useful lists of references (published and unpublished material) to which the writer of this paper had little access.¹³ Some information can also be gleaned from

¹³ Both are Mandalay University master's theses the findings of which are based on both written and oral sources. Bo Ma's, the work of a punna lady to commemorate the knowledge of her community, is suffering from an obvious lack of methodology, but contains information based on interviews that is not available elsewhere. Nwe Ni Hlaing's essentially descriptive work contains a wealth of information, notably on the contemporary life of the punna in Upper Burma. The piece does not raise any research questions and fits well into the prevailing nationalist ideology by portraying the punna as ever-loyal and obedient providers of Brahmanic rituals to the kings who "are now gaining momentum by the social assimilation and cultural coalescence leading to the integration of Ponnas into Myanmar society" (1999:68).

Western, mostly English, narrative and administrative sources of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Pictorial sources as found on mural paintings unfortunately could not be further explored during the revision of this article.¹⁵

Brahmins and Brahmanism

A few years ago, a member of the punna community, Maung Dagon, compiled a work on the punna (in Burmese) that provides an extensive description of the punna community as it exists today with its surviving customs and traditions.¹⁶ It is a richly documented and enthusiastic paper designed to fend off prejudice against the punna and to provide a favorable picture of their community in the contemporary context.¹⁷ By the way Maung Dagon deals with his subject, his book raises the question of how we should study the punna. How, for example, should we view, in a historic perspective the relationship between punna and Brahmanism in Burma?

For Maung Dagon, there is a self-evident connection between punna and Brahmanism because he considers the punna essentially as upper-caste, strictly principled Brahmins. On the other hand, he embeds the punna in a suggestive Buddhist context (with references to positive role models of Brahmins in Buddhist literature, for example).¹⁸ The opening

¹⁴ Further sources and references are found in Maung Dagon (1996:479–87), Bo Ma (1998:92–96), and Nwe Ni Hlaing (1999:88–97). For more details than provided in the descriptions below, readers should turn to *MMOS* § 193 and *ROB* 1 April 1784. An interesting source for the study of the punna is undoubtedly the first Maung Daung Sayadaw's *Amedatophye* (see Pathama 1962). The author regrets that for various reasons no references from this work could be included in this study.

¹⁵ See, for example, pictures reproduced in Nyo Mya 2003. The author kindly acknowledges information provided by Alexandra Green, who has drawn attention to the representations of court Brahmins on mural paintings.

¹⁶ The author received this work, dated 1996, as a photocopy. There is no known project to publish it.

¹⁷ The portrait of loyal court Brahmins in the times of the kings may appear one-sided if contrasted with the ambiguous image of the "Brahmin" in Burmese Buddhist culture. In many Buddhist *jatakas*, for example the popular Vessantara *jataka*, the emblematic Brahmin is far from appearing as a sympathetic figure.

¹⁸ According to the common view, the Buddha's relationship with the Brahmins was oppositional. For a critical reassessment of this view, see Bailey and Mabbett 2003:109–37.

chapter of Nwe Ni Hlaing's *History of Myanmar Ponna* (1999), entitled "The Advent and Impact of Brahmanism," raises the same methodological issue.

In contrast, this author considers that the relationship between punna and Brahmanism should be seen as complex and problematic. Brahmanism and the history of the court punna are connected, but from a methodological point of view they should be treated as different subjects apart from each other. The study of Brahmanism in Burma can be understood as a part of what has earlier been called the Indianization of Southeast Asia, involving religious and cultural exchange.¹⁹ The study of the punna, on the other hand, is the study of a social group uniquely linked to the Buddhist monarchy, its origins, the specific services rendered by its members to the Buddhist kings, its organization, and its development in the context of the history of the kings who were their patrons. The introduction of Brahmanic cults and rituals cannot be dissociated from the presence of the punna, but, at least after Pagan, it is unlikely that the punna arrived as Brahmanic missionaries as hinted at in earlier scholarship. Moreover, as we have stated above, the term "punna" does not only refer to the sole group of the upper-caste Brahmins.

Despite the obvious link between court Brahmins of all ages, a historian should not assume that all Brahmins or punna over a period of more than a thousand years may be classified into one and the same category for description and analysis. For the largest part of Burmese history, we simply do

¹⁹ Other issues can only be hinted at here. While dealing with the cult of Hindu gods in Burma, the use of terms such as "Brahmanism" and "Hinduism" always needs to be balanced. Cultural exports such as doctrines, cults, and practices that were progressively localized, need to be assessed with reference to their origins (in India) and the men (and/or women) who were the original bearers of such beliefs or cults (see the studies of N. Ray 1932, 1936). Who were the Brahmins that were ready to leave India for foreign shores? When King Bodawphaya asked the English ambassador Michael Symes in 1795 to send him a Brahmin couple from Benares, Symes replied that Brahmins were not keen on leaving India. So, who were the Brahmins who came nonetheless to Burma at that time or at earlier dates? Brahmanism can hardly be called a constant element in Burmese culture. Sanskrit culture had much less impact on the language, for example, than in Siam. At a glance, it appears as significant only in ancient history and at the Konbaung court.

not have enough sources to say much about the punna. For that reason, the punna should be studied starting from the most recent period (the best-documented one) moving back into the past. Most written Burmese sources date from the nineteenth century, so that we have mainly reliable information for the middle and late Konbaung period.

What does the short description of the nature of our source material mean for our investigation? Most sources inform us *about* the high-ranking punna who were the elite at the court. One should bear in mind that the punna formed a complex and professionally diversified micro-society that was ruled by its own social restrictions, bound by its ritual prescriptions, and set at a distance from the main body of ethnic Burmese society. With a narrow textual basis, there is obviously a danger of extrapolating findings while the evidence is scarce. In analyzing the role of the Brahmins at the court, there is a danger of basing oneself on a kind of “model Brahmin” derived from the regulatory texts. As administrative sources, such as the royal orders, provide more insight into actual situations than prescriptive ones, a researcher will give preference to those when he or she wants to explore historical change. Ideally, general statements regarding the punna would have to be made with a view at the fluctuating conditions of a particular reign. The presence of Brahmins may well be considered as a constant element in Buddhist court culture; nonetheless, the political role of the punna must have varied. As much as possible, attention should be paid to the particular political and social context.

A method that puts the awareness of a specific context above the need to reach general conclusions should warrant a fair measure of historical accuracy without losing clarity. A puzzle, though fairly incomplete by its pieces, will suggest meaning once its available parts are set in a correct order.

THE PUNNA UNDER THE KONBAUNG KINGS

The functions of the punna at the court

The importance of the punna in the daily life of the court can

be illustrated by a citation of Father Sangermano, who lived in Burma between 1783 and 1806. He writes that “in this country, all is regulated by the opinions of the Brahmins so that not even the king shall presume to take any step without their advice” (Sangermano 1893:55). The duties and various functions entrusted to the punna corresponded to a social hierarchy proper to the punna. The social (or inner) hierarchy of the punna will be discussed below and includes a presentation of such tasks as were performed by low-ranking punna. The array of functions summarized in this paragraph belongs to high and middle-ranking punna. The analytical division operated here bears an artificial character, and the author is aware that most functions as presented would not have been dissociated in the minds of their performers.

Calculation of time and astrology

The function most generally associated with the punna was and still is astrology.²⁰ In the chronicles, astrologers are called *hura* (pronounced in Burmese “*huya*”), and the term can often be used synonymously with punna. The practice of astrology is grounded on the cosmological assumption that there is a relationship between the macrocosmic reality of planetary constellations and the microcosmic existence of human beings. To act in harmony with the macrocosmic order, or, in a word, to be successful, it is important to know the propitious moment for one’s actions. It was believed that paying attention to astrological calculations in the construction of a city could make it invulnerable. Here lay the task of the astrologer. Punna had to determine the auspicious moment for the foundation of a new capital (ROB 3 November 1755; for Mandalay, see ROB 13 January 1857, 1 February 1857), the foundation of a palace (ROB 14 January 1811) or a pagoda, moving into a new palace (ROB 13 June 1857;; making a royal sword (ROB 10 January 1811), announcing an appointment (ROB 20 April

²⁰ “The Brahmins are very much esteemed and respected in Ava, not only from their superiority as a religious body, but also from their knowledge of astronomy,” writes T.A. Trant (1827:267).

1853), leaving a place (Symes 1800 [vol.2]:55), making a visit at a pagoda, or starting a military campaign.

Such may be called the extraordinary tasks of the punna. Their regular tasks consisted of submitting reports on coming eclipses of the moon or the sun, making proposals for the New Year date, identifying the beginning and the end of the Buddhist Lent, preparing the *Thingyan-sa* (almanac), and communicating auspicious times and days.²¹ As expert punna occasionally disagreed, which made it difficult for the king to make decisions, an order of 15 April 1639 told the astrologers to present only one version of their predictions.

Ceremonial obligations and the organization of specific celebrations concerning the royal family were also directly linked to the specialist knowledge of the punna concerning the calculation of time and the establishment of the religious calendar (MMOS § 193; ROB 13 February 1811). Punna performing such duties belonged to an elite group that can indeed be called “superintendents of time-keeping.”²²

Devotional functions

Punna were required to make offerings to the planets, the sky, the moon, the sun, to a number of deities of Indian origin, and to any other *nats* (spirits) or guardian deities according to custom and specific requirements. Offering consecrated flowers is specifically mentioned in relation with punna, for example the offering of flowers to the Mahamuni (21 June 1799).

The cult of the *Phaya-ko-su*, to groups of nine “divinities” (The Buddha and eight *arhats*, or nine deities comprising five Hindu gods and four *nats*) was the domain of the middle-ranking “Nine-member punna,” who also performed the cult to the nine planets.²³

²¹ In an order of 1856, we learn that Nga Rama, an Arakanese punna, was accused of confusing people by using his own astrological terms. He was condemned to be exiled to the forest (a potentially lethal stay,) but pardoned a day later (ROB, 7 and 8 December 1856).

²² Euan Bagshawe’s translation of *nari-taw-hmu* (2001:143; MMOS § 193).

²³ Concerning the origins and the contemporary *Phaya-ko-su* cult, see the detailed analysis of C. Raymond (1987:271–305). The “Nine-member punna” were *khettara*

Frequently mentioned gods of Hindu origin in our sources are Ganesha (Burmese name: Maha-peinnay) and Candi (pronounced "Sandi" in Burmese).²⁴ It is said that the cult of Maha-peinnay/Ganesha was introduced by Indian traders during the early Pagan period, and the Hindu god became over the next centuries a truly Burmanized deity. Catherine Raymond has argued that the cult of Ganesha in Pagan should be seen in close relation with the frequent representation of elephants at Buddhist monuments and Hindu temples in Pagan. In the Buddhist conception of the monarchy, the elephant (and particularly the white elephant) is one of the 'jewels' of a Buddhist *cakkavattin* king. Under the Konbaung kings, the cult of Maha-peinnay occupied a prominent place in royal ceremonies, and offerings were indeed made to him as well as to Paramesvara (Shiva) because they were considered guardian deities of the elephants (ROB 14 November 1787).²⁵ In December 1810, Rama Swami, a rich trader from Madhura, offered the king a statue of Ganesha to which special powers were ascribed (ROB 26 December 1810).

Candi is better known under names such as Kali, Parvati, Uma, or Durga, the wife of Paramesva[ra] or Shiva.²⁶ Unknown in Pagan, she never became an important deity in Burmese iconography and is mostly represented in the company of her consort. In the later Burmese sources, she is described sitting on a lion, following the Indian model. In Arakan, her earliest representation is on a sculpture of the Vesali period, sixth to seventh century AD (Raymond 1987:211–14). Her cult has been practiced by the Arakanese punna since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and she was revered by the *shudras* as a goddess from whom one could expect wealth. According to Raymond, her cult was only introduced by Indian punna in the

punna.

²⁴ Maha-peinnay is derived from Maha-vinayaka, the one who dispels obstacles.

²⁵ See the extensive study done by C. Raymond (1987:102–23); ROB 14 November 1787, 8 February 1806, 11 January 1807, 5 October 1810.

²⁶ C. Raymond writes: "En Birmanie elle est considérée comme redoutable et brutale. Mais elle est aussi celle qui peut apporter richesse et prospérité. . . . jugée comme divinité maléfique, elle n'est jamais propitiée seule." (Raymond 1987:213).

nineteenth century. But the Sagaing punna, the oldest lineage of Burmese punna, are also associated with making offerings to Candi and Maha-peinnay (*MMOS* § 193). It is likely that the cult of Candi gained more favor after the deportation of the Arakanese punna to the court of Bodawphaya.²⁷ An order of 24 April 1794 mentions a group of 140 punna who had the duty to perform the ritual of Candi.

An interesting connection between the two above-mentioned deities may be found in the sculptural representation of the fight between Candi, identified as the lion, and the elephant. Together with the Lokanat, this representation is found on royal thrones and became in Burma a symbol of peace (Raymond 1987:111–12).

A report of 3 November 1755*²⁸ contains a list of various gods whose statues were put at specific places at the entrances of the capital city, in the royal palace, or in temples so as to ward off evil.²⁹ Besides Maha-peinnay and Canni (Candi), it includes Sakra (Sakka or Indra),³⁰ the four Lokapala, Paramiswa (Paramesvara or Shiva), Pissa-no (Vishnu),³¹ and the Asurin (Asuras).

King Bodawphaya reformed the annual ceremonial procession in the honor of Skanda, the god of war and son of Shiva and Candi (named Sakanta or Sakanta Tattika in the royal orders) following the indications of a Brahmin of Benares, Govinda-maharajinda-aggamahadhammarajaguru (*ROB* 30

²⁷ The cult of Candi is mentioned in royal orders of 17 September 1787, 24 April 1794, and 28 September 1839.

²⁸ All dates marked with * appear in brackets in Than Tun's edition and are provisional or hypothetical. There are several royal orders with the above date. The one quoted here is the first one in the sequence.

²⁹ The report concerns ancient royal customs and traditional means of keeping enemies and danger at bay while founding a capital. It was given to King Alaung-phaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, when he founded his capital in June 1753.

³⁰ He is celebrated at New Year (*Thingyan*) when he is said to come down to earth. He reigns over the world of the gods and is the dispenser of rain. He is present in hymns, legends, and the chronicles, but receives no special cult (Raymond 1987:189–209).

³¹ A popular Hindu god found in early times all over Southeast Asia; two temples were dedicated to him in Pagan. Raymond (1987:145) states that his importance declined under the Ava kings but that traces of his existence remained in certain royal ceremonies.

January 1810, 31 January 1810, 25 January 1811, and 9 February 1811).³² Another deity mentioned is Cittarapali-mar[a] (or Citrabali-mara) (ROB 14 and 26 February 1810). Both gods are connected to rituals that are mentioned in the *Rajamattan*, a book that became a standard reference for ceremonies at the court under Bodawphaya.³³

Some mystery surrounds the cult paid to the *Hum* (or *Hun*, pronounced “Hone”) *nat*, the Fire spirit. No clear explanation is found in the available literature as to the etymology, origin, and nature of this cult.³⁴ In our sources, the cult is generally related to the Manipuri and Arakanese punna. U Tin states that no more offerings were made to the Fire spirit after the reign of King Sane (1698–1714) (MMOS § 193 discussing the duties of the punna). This can hardly be true, as an order of 18 January 1788 confers the devotional tasks to the *Hun* spirit to a certain Cakravati and his men.³⁵

The important devotional cults practiced by the punna of Burma were significant in Arakan as well. The *Min-Rajagri Satam*, a source which leads us back to late sixteenth-century Arakan, confirms the cult of Candi, as mentioned above, of Mahapeinnay and the Hun spirit (MRS f° *khâ*:).

³² For details on the nineteenth-century royal cult of Skanda, see C. Raymond 1987:219–20. When the troops left to crush a rebellion in Arakan, offerings were made to Skanda (ROB 7 January 1812).

³³ According to Thant Myint-U (2001:96), Bodawphaya replaced the cult of Ganesha (Maha-peinnay) with the cult of Skanda following the advice of Govinda-maharajinda-aggamahadhammarajaguru. As his source, he quotes three royal orders of which two do not exist in Than Tun’s edition of the *ROB* and the third is not related to the matter. A correct reference would be MMOS § 394 (*ja*) E. Bodawphaya did not abolish the cult of Ganesha. On 26 December 1810, an order informs us that a rich trader from Madhura donated a statue of Ganesha that was placed at the southeast corner of the palace. Rather, the king replaced the statue of Maha-peinnay with the statue of Skanda in a yearly procession in the month of Tabaung, stating that both gods had been confused in Burma. He also abolished the offerings made to Maha-peinnay in the month of Tazaungmon.

³⁴ The author has been unable to establish any connection with what Raymond says on “Mi”/ “Agni” in her study (Raymond 1987:217–18).

³⁵ Maung Maung Tin (1975:118) also makes special mention of the “Hum-nat revering punnas.” U Maung Maung Tin (1866–1945, not related to the aforementioned author) spent his youth at the court and became, after the British conquest, one of the main chroniclers of the late Konbaung dynasty. See also Scott (1900:I, 2:101) and Than Tun (1988:146 [1st ed. 1960]).

In the context of devotional functions, a curious problem is raised by the existence of punna religious servants (*kywan*) at the shrine of the Mahamuni, the sacred statue brought from Arakan in 1785. In 1822, one of the exiled Arakanese princes stated that in Arakan, punna had never been religious servants (ROB 3 January 1822). But it seems well established that punna had been attached to the service of the Mahamuni in Arakan and that they performed this function in Amarapura as well.³⁶ In an order of 21 June 1799, they are called *kywan punna*, and they were indeed low-ranking punna as they did not wear any *salwè*.³⁷ On the other hand, it seems that being appointed as a religious servant at the Mahamuni was a kind of punishment for punna (ROB 30 August 1802).

Ritual functions at the court

The role that the punna played in the king-making ceremony, the *rajabhiseka*, may be considered their most important function at the court. The anointing or consecration of a king was an elaborate ceremony that did not necessarily occur at the very beginning of a reign.³⁸ In the *Sasanalinkaya*, it is said that King Bodawphaya followed the example of his father, who had established his control over the administration of his country and purified the religious institutions before being consecrated king (Mahadhamma Thingyan 1954:150–51). There are a number of other ritual ceremonies performed at the court that qualify as *abhiseka* ceremonies (Burmese: *beik-theik*), such as the *muddhabiseka*, where the king vows to work for the propagation of the Buddha's teaching (ROB 31 May 1784, 9 February 1824), the *vijayabhiseka*, made for conquering enemies, or the *jayabhiseka*, to ensure success (ROB 31 May

³⁶ An order of 22 January 1803 tells the *Maha-dan wun* to find quarters for six Arakanese punna who, while in Arakan, it was said, had lived at the Mahamuni shrine at a distance from their colleagues. This order does not use the term *kywan* to refer to these punna.

³⁷ The *salwè* is the shoulder thread (with a various number of threads) that the punna of the three upper castes wear. The first Maung Daung Sayadaw provided Bodawphaya with a treatise on the *salwè* based on Sanskrit and Pali works (ROB 3 June 1784).

³⁸ For a detailed description, see MMOS § 163.

1784, 9 February 1824, 31 January 1827).³⁹ One core element of the ritual was the pouring of water from a conch “on the head of the king telling him what to do or not to do for the love of his people and warning him that if he fails to oblige he might suffer certain miseries” (Than Tun, *Note to ROB* 31 January 1827).

The ablution rituals lay in the hands of “Eight-member punna.” As we frequently find the expression of “*bhisik-chak punnas*” (pronounced “beik-theik-sek”)⁴⁰ associated with “Eight-member punna,” it is likely that there was a group inside the “Eight-member punna” that was uniquely qualified to perform the king-making ritual. Before the ceremony, these punna were required to remain chaste (*ROB* 9 February 1824). One special group was in charge of the consecration of the *uparaja* (Burmese: *eim-she-min*, crown prince).

Rituals performed at auspicious ceremonies in which punna were involved were numerous. Nwe Ni Hlaing enumerates the construction of a new city,⁴¹ the consecration of a new palace, the royal ploughing ceremony (*ROB* 28 April 1810),⁴² the naming ceremony, the first rice feeding ceremony, the anointing of the head at certain occasions, and the king’s participation at the New Year (*thin-gyan*) celebrations (Nwe Ni Hlaing 1999:21). At New Year, “Eight-Member punna” sprinkled water (over which a group of eight monks had been reciting *parittas*) at the palace, the royal council, the various courts, the major gates, and the four corners of the capital (*ROB* 14 April 1879).⁴³

³⁹ There are theoretically fourteen *abhiseka*, but in the case of the Burmese kings, we have little concrete information on their performance at the court. For an overview, see Than Tun’s note following *ROB* 31 January 1827.

⁴⁰ Also *bhisik-swan*, “to pour the *abhiseka*” (as in *ROB* 31 May 1784).

⁴¹ Father Sangermano (1893:55) writes on King Bodawphaya’s construction of Amarapura: “When the work was completed, the King went in solemn state to take possession of the city and palace, on the 10th of May, 1783, observing many superstitious rites and ceremonies prescribed by the Brahmins.”

⁴² For a short description of the royal plowing ceremony (and other court feasts and ceremonies), see Scott 1900:I, 2:98–104.

⁴³ The limited amount of sources regarding these rituals does not allow for a detailed overview of their occurrence. Many may have been revived or newly instituted at the

Other functions of the punna had more of a ceremonial than ritual character. The punna were obliged to attend public audiences granted by the king where they had to “chant prayers” as Symes tells us in his account of the 1795 English embassy (Symes 1800 [vol. 2]:357).

Occult techniques

Ceremonies and rituals bear a supernatural and occasionally secret character. This supernatural character is related to the cosmological dimension of kingship and the universal moral law governing the king’s actions. An ablution ceremony is valid and has an auspicious potential (being its efficiency) mainly because it is executed by punna considered as pure Brahmins and in a way that punctiliously follows a standard procedure.

Though occult techniques form part and parcel of many ceremonies and rituals that have been mentioned, they can be listed separately. By “occult techniques,” one should understand this to mean techniques to conjure and influence the way that future events will happen, to prevent dangers, and to fend off the threat of enemies. The incantation of mantras (Burmese: *mantan*) and the inscribing of mantras and magic squares (Burmese: *an*, pronounced ‘ing’) on cloth (ROB 9 May 1635), on drums (ROB 2 February 1784, 28 June 1795), on city gates (ROB 7 May 1795), and city walls (10 March 1784) were performed by the punna. While an *abhiseka* ritual takes its meaning in a context where the king seeks to fulfil his destiny in harmony with a universal law, the intention behind such practical techniques is to engineer the world of senses by supernatural means.

Early and late royal orders refer to punna who followed the army not only as astrologers, but also as magicians and interpreters of (super)natural signs (ROB 11 and 14 December 1637, 2 July 1867). Punna who accompanied the army were in a way made responsible for the success of the campaign (ROB 16

end of the eighteenth century by King Bodawphaya, who liked to follow Brahmanic manuals imported from India.

February 1605, 14 December 1637; *MRS* f° *khû* v°). The punna's knowledge of mantras had to ensure an adequate response to a threat or a problematic situation.⁴⁴ The recitation and the inscription of correctly spelled mantras at a precise moment was also an integral part of the implementation of urban planning and construction (*ROB* 7 and 9 May 1635). These techniques were considered as efficient means of protecting a city, a palace, or a pagoda (*ROB* 10 March 1784).

Exercise of occult techniques was not a privilege of the punna, and the recitation of mantras takes but a modest part of the vast field of magic and occult science.⁴⁵ In as far as we are interested in the smooth working of the Burmese Buddhist kingship, it is noteworthy that the ritual-cum-occult functions exercised by the punna were integrated in what was most probably a monthly or yearly schedule of the court and thus probably one of the oldest collateral institutions of kingship.

Royal counselors

Since King Tharrawaddy's time (1837–1846), we find mention of a special group of punna who are called *panya-shi* (wise men or pandits as Professor Than Tun generally translates the term). It should be noted that the expression "*panya-shi*" is quite common in historical literature as the standard attribute of the emblematic wise minister at the court ("*panya-shi amat*"), and punna were not the only men who could be *panya-shi*. These wise men were selected among the "*beik-theik-set* eight-member punna" (*ROB* 31 December 1845) and specially appointed (*ROB* 24 March 1843). Several orders show that *panya-shi* were appointed as leaders of the "Eight-member punna" (*ROB* 18 May 1843, 31 March 1853). It is not perfectly clear if the appointment as *panya-shi* referred to a specific function or was rather an honorific title. They may have formed a restricted group of men whose knowledge and

⁴⁴ In 1867, "Eight-member punna" petitioned the king to discharge them from walking with the army. The petition was granted, but those who were already with the army were required to stay on (*ROB* 2 July 1867).

⁴⁵ For occult practices in the time King Bodawphaya, see Than Tun 1960 and Singer 2004.

advice the king particularly appreciated (ROB 13 June 1857, 9 April 1880), but individual *panya-shi* were still under the authority of their leaders (ROB 9 May 1855).

THE ORIGINS, SOCIAL HIERARCHY, AND ORGANIZATION OF THE PUNNA

The punna of the Konbaung period did not form a single undifferentiated socio-professional group. They differed first by their geographic origins, as this section will show. By birth, punna belonged to a certain group (or caste), which assigned them a place in a social hierarchy. Next, they belonged to specific functional groups such as the "Eight-member punna" or the "Nine-member punna" whose membership was linked both to their origins and their place in the social hierarchy. This professional and organizational hierarchy will be dealt with in the last paragraph.

Origins

The origins of the punna during the Konbaung period are seemingly clear. U Tin lists the Manipur punna, the Arakan punna, and the Sagaing punna. The actual picture is slightly more complex.

The Manipur or Kassay punna

It is generally known that in the first half of the eighteenth century, Upper Burma became the victim of several successful invasions by the troops of Gharib-Newaz (Pam-heiba 1709–1748), the raja of Manipur.⁴⁶ But several embassies, or tribute missions, sent from the early eighteenth century show that Manipur repeatedly accepted the subject position of a vassal state, reluctantly sending tributes and a daughter to the royal Burmese harem.⁴⁷ Punna from Manipur arrived in Upper

⁴⁶ Referring to a daring attack of the Manipuris on Sagaing in 1738, it is said that "a Brahmin" had "assured them that they would be preserved from all evil by drinking and bathing in the waters of the Irrawaddy river" (Dun 1975:37–42).

⁴⁷ Gharib-Newaz sent a twelve-year-old daughter after the failed attack in 1749. The *Lokabyuha-kyam* gives this date as 1742 (Dun 1975:38).

Burma at the head of such embassies.⁴⁸ Possibly those who stayed on in Burma did so at the request of the Burmese court or were deported during Burmese invasions of Manipur in 1742, under Alaungphaya (1752–1760) in 1758 (Bo Ma 1998:11) or in the first years of King Sinbyushin's reign (1763–1776).⁴⁹ Dynastic conflicts at Manipur's court after 1799 favoured Burmese meddling and a number of King Bodawphaya's orders illustrate this interference in the years 1806 and 1807. According to one order, Manipur Brahmins also came for the reason of studying astrology in Amarapura (*ROB* 18 September 1817).

In this context, it is noteworthy to pay some attention to important changes in Manipur itself. It is only in the eighteenth century that Manipur became Hinduized by Brahmins coming from Bengal (Dun 1975:16). The Burmese call the country "Kassay" and the author of the *Lokabyuha-kyam* states that the name "Manipura" was only adopted when a faction of the Manipuri court openly favored the changes promoted by the immigrant Bengal Brahmins (ca. 1742) (*Lokabyuha-kyam* 2003:186). Thus, it seems reasonable to admit that the so-called Manipuri Brahmins of Burma originally came from Bengal. According to Bo Ma (1998:13), King Bagyidaw brought more punna from Manipur to Burma.

The Arakanese (or Rakhaing) punna

The arrival of punna from Arakan at the end of the eighteenth century was a direct consequence of the conquest of the Arakanese kingdom by Bodawphaya's son in 1785. The whole Arakanese court with the last king of Mrauk U, Mahasamata, together with many punna, was transferred to the suburbs of Amarapura.⁵⁰ A few years later, remaining punna and

⁴⁸ *Lokabyuha-kyam* (1993:169–90 passim); *ROB* 25 March 1807: Eight Brahmins accompanied the bride submitted by the Manipur Raja to the king.

⁴⁹ Father Sangermano interpreted as campaigns of revenge King Sinbyushin's (1763–1776) marches against Manipur in 1764 and 1765. Shway Yoe says that the punna were captives from Manipur (1989:135).

⁵⁰ "...the southeast section of Amarapura where Rakhaing Brahmins were settled was named Rakhaing Su. The plot at the east of Meitaw Kyaung, Thami Taw Bazar, in

their families were summoned to come to the capital and live south of the palace (*ROB* 4 February 1789); according to their functions, they were given separate places to settle a few months later (*ROB* 5 June 1789). But not all of the punna moved to Burma. Vasithabrahma, the acting *punna-sasanabaing* in 1811, requested that the king bring together the punna from Dhanyawati and Rammawati (the Kaladan and Lemro valleys and the island of Ramree) that were scattered since the conquest (*ROB* 19 January 1811). The creation of the *punna-sasanabaing*,⁵¹ a supreme head of the punna, points to the further existence of punna in Arakan (on the *punna-sasanabaing*, see *MMOS* § 192).⁵² In 1817, one order shows, punna remained living in Arakan.⁵³

There are quite a number of references in the royal orders that specifically mention the Arakan punna.⁵⁴ From their arrival, many joined the elite of the punna becoming members of the “Eight-member punna” group. In 1822, an Arakanese was chief of the Brahmins (*ROB* 3 January 1822). In 1842, we find a sizeable group of Arakanese punna freed from any public duties to work on the calendar (*ROB* 5 May 1842). The strong association of the Arakanese punna with the “Eight-member punna” group translated in the appointments of Mahasiripandita-dhammarajaguru and Sirimaharajinda-dhammarajaguru who were appointed as chiefs of the “Eight-

the north-east section of Amarapura where the punna community settled was named Punna Su and Hsatta Su” (Bo Ma 1998:12). According to the oral tradition quoted by Bo Ma, the number of punna families was no less than five hundred (*ibid.* 25).

⁵¹ The title “*sasana-baing*” suggests that the punna were essentially considered as a religious community in charge of its own set of practices and beliefs.

⁵² The term is found in the order of 19 January 1811 quoted above and in an order of King Bagyidaw of 6 August 1824. According to U Tin, punna lived also in other cities of the kingdom. We know little about them. Symes states that many important people in the kingdom followed Bodawphaya’s infatuation with the punna astrologers and maintained “Brahmins.” He cites as an example the great number of “Brahmins” of the governor of Pegu (Symes 1800 [vol.2]:55).

⁵³ An order of 25 September 1817 summons once more all Arakanese punna to come to the capital.

⁵⁴ *ROB* 4 and 19 February, 5 June 1789, 21 June 1799, 19 January 1811, 24 September 1817, 3 January 1822, 5 May 1842, 18 May 1843, 7 December 1846, 3 and 11 May 1847, 8 October 1848, 31 March 1853, 7 December 1856.

member punna," but were also in charge of the Arakanese punna (ROB 11 May 1847) of King Pagan confirmed by an order of 31 March 1853 issued by King Mindon).⁵⁵

U Tin notes that punna from Arakan had possibly come to Burma during a much earlier period, but he does not bring any proof to his claim, referring vaguely to the land roads that connect Burma and Arakan over the Yoma mountain passes (MMOS § 193). Bo Ma, who specifically studied the Arakanese punna, states that in the fifteenth century punna she calls "Shantipura Brahmins" left Bengal, moved to Manipur, and from thence went on to Arakan where they settled in 1452. In 1624, it is said, King Sirisudhammaraja brought sixty-four Bengali Brahmin families to Arakan (Bo Ma 1998:10).⁵⁶

*The Burmese or Sagaing punna*⁵⁷

This term refers to the punna who lived at the courts of the Burmese and Mon kings before the arrival of the Manipuri and Arakanese punna. On one hand, they are considered the Burmese punna who trace their origins back to the Pyu city-state of Sri Kshetra (Thare-khettaya) near modern Pyay (or Prome).⁵⁸ However plausible this may be, we have no source material to bolster the claim. On the other hand, the term seems to refer to punna that were brought to Sagaing by King

⁵⁵ Mahasiripandita (dhamma) rajaguru appears in eleven royal orders between 1842 and 1867 and made an outstanding career. An "Eight-member punna," he became, in 1843, a leader of the Arakanese Brahmins. In 1845 he became a pandit (*panya shi*); and, in 1847, he cumulated the charge of a *punna ok* of "Eight-member punna" and took care of the Arakanese punna. In 1853, he became a *punna gaung* of the "Eight-member punna." In 1866, he was appointed as *punna wun*.

⁵⁶ Bo Ma (1998:19) states that Rakhaing punna comprised Shantipura punna, Bengali punna, and Dhañawati punna, but explanations regarding this classification are lacking. Quoting an interview with an elder punna community member, she merely tells us that "since the origin of Brahmins was Shantipura of Calcutta township, Rakhaing punna were Shantipura punna. Racially they were Bengalis." (ibid. 9).

⁵⁷ The capital of a Burmese-Shan kingdom (1315–1364) known since the late eighteenth century for its numerous pagodas and monasteries, Pyay's classical name was Jayapura.

⁵⁸ There is a risk of confusing *khettaya punna* with punna from Thare-Khettaya (ancient Sri Kshetra), ie Prome (or modern Burmese, Pyay) as found in Euan Bagshawe's translation of MMOS § 193. This point needs utmost attention if one is to investigate the punna in the pre-Pagan period.

Athinkaya, who reigned at Sagaing in the fourteenth century (Bo Ma 1998:9–10).

The Indian punna

Ultimately, all punna would trace their origins back to India. The term “Indian punna” specifically refers to the Indian punna from Benares who arrived in Upper Burma in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Further research would be needed to understand the exact origins of these Brahmins and why they chose to move to Burma.

One question concerns the religious affiliation of the punna. Were they Shaivites or Vaishnavites? It should be possible to answer this question with reference to the gods to whom they paid their devotions, but the imported Brahmanic cults in Burma were not merely a copy of the Indian Hindu world and its religious affiliations but had often been Burmanized. Some nineteenth century royal orders enquiring about the religious affiliation of punna show that there were both Vaishnavites and Shaivites. At least since the reign of King Bagyidaw, the “Eight-member punna” had to be Vaishnavites (ROB 9 February 1824); Shaivites were excluded for reasons the sources do not reveal (ROB 28 September 1839).⁵⁹

Another question is raised by the geographic origin of the punna in India, or simpler, whether the punna were of North or South Indian origin. Little is known in detail. As we have stated, the nineteenth-century newcomers came from Benares; the Manipuri punna were originally Bengalis, just as the Arakanese punna. Some of the latter bear names which suggest that they were of South Indian origin.

To end this presentation of the origins of the punna, it is interesting to have a look at the way the punna themselves explained their origins. They told King Bodawphaya in 1784:

⁵⁹ By their sheer number, the Arakanese punna probably dominated the “Eight-member punna.” The Arakanese punna were most likely Shaivites. This looks contradictory and only further research could enlighten this point.

Regarding the lineage of the punna, King Dhammaceti [had sent a mission] to Sri Lanka to ask for *bhisik* punna and the Sri Lanka king sent him Dakkhinatha, Lokanatha, Mahanatha, Naranatha, Jalanatha, Nandanada and Sirinatha. As there was one punna missing [to the full number required], to get the full number of eight, [the king] had the shape of a punna made from *neja* grass wearing the ceremonial dress and holding the conch. This punna received the name of Vamsanatha and the *bhisik* was held. From the reign of Dhammaceti to the line of kings of Ava and further on down to this reign, they were making the ablution ceremony of the *bhisik* and they offered the *parit* flowers to the king. They were requested [to attend] the taking of possession of the golden palace and the golden city, to perform the ceremony of the flowing of the pure water of Indra (ROB 1 April 1784)

Based on what we know, this explanation of the origins of the punna does not sound very convincing. But it is highly interesting how this myth combines the figure of a great Buddhist reformer king, Dhammaceti of Pegu (1472–1492), with Sri Lanka, the cradle of Theravada Buddhism, and the punna themselves in a way that enhances the punna's credibility by associating them closely with established Theravada Buddhist references.

Social hierarchy

The social hierarchy of the punna corresponded to a four-fold division that reproduces the Hindu caste divisions: *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* (*khetaya*), *vaishya* (*bishya*), and *shudra* (*suttiya*). Punna belonged by birth to such a group. The social hierarchy was

mirrored in a rank division recognizable in the number of threads of the *salwè* (shoulder thread) that the punna wore. Punna of the highest ranks wore a *salwè* with nine threads, middle ranking punna could claim six threads, and lower ranking punna three threads. The fourth class wore no *salwè*.

From U Tin's depiction of the functions of the punna, one may infer that members of the "Eight-member punna" were "*brahmana punna*." U Tin states that the *khettara* and *bishya punna* (originating from Manipur it is said) translated non-religious books into Burmese. This description of their activities fully corresponds with what we know about King Bodawphaya's reformist policies that included a vast translation program. Manipuri punna likely had an excellent knowledge of Bengali and Sanskrit. But it leaves open the question what tasks these punna fulfilled at an earlier date.⁶⁰ As members of the "Nine member punna" group, *khettara punna* also appear as those who fulfilled the cult to the nine divinities and the nine planets (MMOS § 193). Sagaing, Manipuri, and Arakanese *shudra punna* carried fans and blew conchs in the king's escort when the sovereign lord left or entered the palace. They also carried the water pots at the ceremonies when water was drawn, and they held the umbrellas and banners at the royal donation ceremonies (MMOS § 193). According to Bo Ma (1998:13, 21), lower-caste punna were also serving in the infantry and cavalry.

The *Min-Rajagri Satam* gives a slightly different account of the hierarchical order of the punna and their functions in Arakan. Its author attributes a single task to the *brahmana punna*, the coronation ceremony (*abhiseka mangala*). The *khattiya punna* were obliged to write and recite texts. When the texts used by the *suttiya-punna* had lacunae, the *khattiya-punna* had to mend them. As for the *bhisha punna*, the MRS says simply: "Let them do trade." The traditional functions of the *suttiya punna* are listed as fortune telling, the interpretation of dreams and omens, the fabrication of magic squares and *yatras*, the

⁶⁰ U Tin clearly states in § 193 that his presentation of the punna's duties was derived from a now lost royal order of 5 October 1786.

recitation of mantra verses, and the practice of traditional medicine. The *suttiya punna* are also told to revere Candi and other gods and to shave and cut the nails of their feet and their hands. Additionally, the author lists another group (perhaps a sub-group of the *shudra*) labeled as *ka-nan-da*⁶¹ and *kha-nok punna*, who did fortune telling, prepared *yatras*, recited mantras, and practiced medicine (*MRS f° kû v°*, *ghi v°*).

Such lists may not answer all our questions on the functions and the social hierarchy of the punna. In an account on court customs, the *MRS* also mentions the *parit rwat punna* who “alternately recited the *parit*” during the night and the *huya-tat punna*, astrologers who “alternately watch at night time the regular course, the variations of the receding and approaching movements and the positions of the eight planets, twenty-seven stars and nine constellations and report [to the king] their observations and opinions” (*MRS f° gha*, *r°*). We wonder to which one of the four divisions they belonged. And what about the occasionally mentioned “flower offering punna?” This was an important issue for the kings themselves. No *bishya punna* were in the royal service (see *ROB* 12 October 1810), but enquiries were made regarding the birth and the status of punna so as to know if they were worthy to serve the king.

The lowest-ranking punna in Arakan were not just servants and ceremonial auxiliaries. They were text specialists of their own and practitioners of devotional ceremonies and the occult sciences. This comes in striking contrast with our observations on such punna under the Konbaung kings. It is also interesting to note that the *khettaya punna* were foremost text specialists, just as they were in Manipur. Overall, a comparison of lists that identify specific functions makes it obvious that there was diversity, change, and fluctuation in the social structuring of the punna.⁶²

⁶¹ Bo Ma (1998:37) associates this term with *satta* (barbers).

⁶² An analysis of the social hierarchy of the punna is further complicated by the fact that the *MRS* gives a list of the four classes of society that differs from the standard Hindu version. It presents: 1) the *khattiya* as the race of the kings 2) the *mahasala* as the class of the ministers, officers, and rich men surrounding the king 3) the *brah-*

If punna practiced activities that were irreconcilable with their required tasks, they lost their position and could be downgraded. Those who were not listed for performing a certain ceremony had no right to do so (ROB 21 June 1799). The particular case of Nga Pwint and Pathanapa, who were at the time “Eight-member punna,” may be referenced here: In an order of 24 March 1806, they were condemned to death because they had performed a ceremony that they were not allowed to perform. Three days later, they were pardoned, but their group chiefs were arrested the next day. The group leaders were released when the “Eight-member punna” intervened in their favor, but they had to produce guarantors for Nga Pwint and Pathanapa, who themselves were both threatened to be burnt alive with their families if they repeated their mistake.

We may be surprised that the *MRS* restates that the *brahmana punna* should not work as farmers or traders (*MRS* f°ke r°). They were also strictly forbidden to recite mantras, write magic squares, or practice astrology or herbal medicine. They were precisely those who did *not* (or should not) try to obtain supernatural powers (*MRS* f° gô v°; f° kô v°). For upper-class Konbaung punna, sound astrological knowledge was absolutely necessary to enter the king’s inner circle of “wise men” advisors (*panya-shi*).

To keep their caste pure, *brahmana punna* were not allowed to mix with women of other punna groups. In Arakan, trespassers had their *salwè* and their sacred basil garland taken away, the front part of their scalp shaved, and they were put into the group of the punna who made the flower offerings (*MRS* f° kam, r°).⁶³ But King Min-Rajagri (1593–1612) punished

mana being those who do not study the occult sciences but respect the *brahmacariya* (Brahmin precepts) and perform the royal king-making ceremony and 4) the vast class of *suddhiya* who “make magic squares, *mantras* and *yatras*, practise fortune telling, [try to obtain] supernatural powers, make written prophecies, [develop] strategies, [make] spells, [who are] physicians, maritime traders, peddlers, farmers, fishermen, hunters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths or elephant and horse keepers.” U Tin quotes this list in his account on the origin of the four races in the Sanskrit texts (§ 179). Our translation follows the original text of the *Min-Rajagri Satam*.

⁶³ “The punna who perform the royal consecration ceremony should not mix with the punna who make the flower offerings, play the harp, are astrologers, [perform the cult

punna who transgressed the precepts of their group in a much harsher way. *Brahmana punna* who joined the punna devoted to the cult of the gods, who played the harp, offered flowers, or practiced astrology were put into the *halya* group of those who carried away the excrements (*MRS* f° *ga v°*).

In the orders of King Bodawphaya, we find a case where a punna named Siri Deva Brahma and twenty-two relatives were downgraded to *shudra* status because it was found that an ancestor had married a *shudra* woman (*ROB* 27 July 1787).

Organization

The planning, organization, and execution of the major rituals and ceremonies at the capital were in the hands of the so-called "Eight-member punna." They are the most often-quoted group in the royal orders. Another less frequently mentioned group was the group of "Nine-member punna." They were thus identified because, in particular ceremonies and rituals, they would perform as eight or nine-member groups. We do not exactly know from what time these groups existed or how they recruited their performing (male) members.

An order of 9 February 1824 states that the "Eight-member punna" were organized in three groups (with three leaders). Other clearly defined punna groups in charge of lower functions do not appear as such in our sources.

The orders of the Konbaung kings suggest that there was some effort to keep the complex body of the punna society under observation and control. The main instrument of control was the appointment of punna "ministers" (*wun*), punna "chiefs" (*up*, often transcribed and pronounced as "ok") or punna "heads" (*khaung*, pronounced "gaung"). The *punna wun* (punna minister) was in charge of all the punna groups and he had full authority over them.⁶⁴ We find him in the royal

of the] goddess Candi or act as mediums" (*MRS* f° *kô v°*). The mixing of punna was considered as one of the signs of the decline of the country (*MRS* f° *khû: v°*).

⁶⁴ Maung Maung Tin 1975:118 (§119). U Tin writes (somewhat vaguely) that there were *punna wuns* in other divisions of Burma as well to take care of punna affairs (*MMOS* § 192; *ROB* 7 April 1807). For a typical appointment order in the time of King Mindon (and Thibaw), see *ROB* 5* August 1853 (and Than Tun's comment).

orders as a member of the Calendar commission (ROB 19 April 1837) and as a member of the group of *panya-shi*, close advisors of the king (ROB 18* July 1837). The terms of *punna ok* and *punna gaung* refer to chiefs of punna groups or families who performed specific functions or tasks. A *punna gaung* was the chief of an important functional group of punna, such as the “Eight-member punna.”⁶⁵ A *punna ok* was the head of a smaller group of punna, for example those who were appointed to the service of the crown prince or the sister of the king (ROB 12 December 1846). Punna could petition the king to be put in charge of punna groups (ROB 7 December 1846 grants such a petition).

On the basic social level of Burmese society, family heads had authority over their family members. In the case of the punna, this partly legal, partly moral authority did not differ from the rest of the society. As, on the other hand, punna were organized under the authority of *punna oks* or *punna gaungs*, these two types of authorities could collide and family heads would try to seek a favour for a relative or to keep relatives under their authority.⁶⁶ A number of the later Konbaung orders reveal—admittedly to a modest degree—rivalries between individual leaders and contested claims for legitimacy.

ROLE OF THE PUNNA IN KING BODAWPHAYA’S REFORM POLICIES

Status of the punna at the court of the Konbaung kings

Depending on the way we figure out the relationship between the king and his leading punna, we can argue that the punna were either very influential men who could bend the king’s views and decisions (Bodawphaya’s reign would figure as such a case) or a slavish troupe of yes-men who had to satisfy a king’s whims and fancies with ritual scenarios.

Judging by many of the orders issued by the Konbaung

⁶⁵ According to Bo Ma (1998:34), this term did not appear before 1855. That is incorrect, because one may find it as early as 1802 in the royal orders (cf. ROB 30 August 1802).

⁶⁶ In royal orders where a punna requests a favor for members of his family, these aspects are highlighted (ROB 8 May 1855, 10 January 1857, 15 March 1866).

monarchs from King Bodawphaya to the last King Thibaw (1878–1885), there is no doubt that for the kings the punna were important people, because their competence would guarantee, in principle, a stable and prosperous reign.⁶⁷ Formulated in a more relaxed way, the punna had to make sure that the kings could sleep quietly.

As a ritual was only efficient if the performing punna was a true and qualified punna, it is not surprising that the kings insisted on having at their disposal a chosen troupe of peerless men. The royal orders suggest indeed that the Konbaung kings since Bodawphaya were obsessed with the purity of the punna who performed the consecration ceremonies. At the beginning of his reign, Bodawphaya told the various punna that they should not mix with each other (ROB 1 April 1784), and he inquired about their origins. Apparently, this issue was not yet clear a few years later, when he inquired about the traditional way that punna were admitted to the “Eight-member punna” (ROB 19 March 1806) and called for a full list of all punna. He wanted all punna to live together in a single community (ROB 21 April 1807), but King Bagyidaw decided that “Eight-member punna” must keep away from punna who could not clearly establish their group of origin (ROB 9 February 1824).

The ceremonies to bestow the *salwè* (the shoulder thread with either three, six, or nine strings) were also an opportunity to check the origin of the punna (ROB 19 March 1806; 20 April 1807; 7 July 1807; 10 July 1807).

Decisions regarding the status of particular punna may sometimes have been controversial depending on the authority of a particular punna leader. In an order of 17 October 1839, we find that a group of six punna named Durga, Dumaram, Harram, Lakkhana, Ramadeva, and Somra were dismissed as

67 The king, in return, should act in favor of punna and monks, encourage food donations to the monks, pray for the welfare of the religion, and be hospitable and generous towards them (cf. MMOS § 65). Regarding the relationship between the punna and the monkhood, the sources do not provide us with conclusive information. King Bodawphaya considered his monk astrologers as incompetent and preferred the punna astrologers. This may have led to rivalries between monks and punna during his reign.

members of the “Eight-member punna.” Less than a month later, they were reinstated following a revising of the lists of Shaivites and Vaishnavites (ROB 6 November 1839). We know that three of these men (Dumaram, Harram, and Lakkhana) had petitioned two years earlier to be recognized as being of the same rank as Madhava, the *punna gaung* of the “Eight-member punna” (ROB 3 June 1837). Only punna who were duly listed were allowed to perform ceremonies (ROB 8 October 1848).

The material situation of the punna at the court must have been similar to that of other courtiers. Evidence on the payment that punna received is sketchy. Punna received lands from which revenue they lived (ROB 15 July 1801, 28 and 29 August 1819; Bo Ma 1998:31–32). Cash payments are also mentioned (ROB 17 October 1859). Under Tharrawaddy’s reign, we find a couple of orders relating to monthly rations of paddy handed out to punna of the “Eight-member punna” group (ROB 11 March 1841; 28 April 1842). An order of 9 September 1867 gives a favorable reply to a petition of the *punna wun* Mahasiripanditarajaguru, who did not want to pay taxes on land sales in the village where he lived. Under King Mindon, punna were exempted from paying the poll tax, the income tax, and the Sasamedha tax (ROB 23 May 1871).⁶⁸

King Bodawphaya’s quest for reform and purity

In 1752, a new royal power was established in Burma by Aung Zeyya, later known as King Alaungphaya (1752–1760). He laid the basis for the rise of the Konbaung dynasty that reigned during the eponymous and last period of Burma’s monarchical history. Aung Zeyya was a chief from Shwebo, and he tried to connect his dynasty as best as he could to the traditions of court procedure and ceremony of the kings of Ava (fourteenth–eighteenth c.). This endeavor brought about the composition of a number of technical and literary works written during Alaungphaya’s reign and his successors’, which fixed the tradition for the coming generations.

⁶⁸The Sasamedha tax was introduced by King Mindon (1853–1878); originally a tax to be paid every ten years, it soon became a yearly tax.

King Bodawphaya (Badon) pushed this quest for the pure tradition to the limits. He wanted to reinstate the true way of Buddhist practice so as to reform the monkhood, and he wanted to renew the cults of Brahmanic origin practiced at the court so as to be a monarch fully in line with old Indian prescriptions on kingship. In form and appearance, he wanted to be a pure Buddhist and a model king because he always saw himself as an ideally Buddhist, just, and powerful sovereign. But Bodawphaya's inquisitive mind took him beyond these "professional interests," and his seriousness for reform exceeded the traditional zeal of kings to burnish their Buddhist credentials by purifying the monastic order.

Bodawphaya wanted to discuss current practice in comparison with textual evidence. His desire for reform was intimately linked, on one hand, to a radical criticism of large parts of the religious tradition and, on the other hand, to a return to the canonical sources of religious conceptions and practice.

He also wanted to increase his knowledge, and he liked controversial discussions. Books were brought from India to be translated and studied. Much of the newly arrived material was eagerly put into practice. The result of this policy was indeed not merely reform and renewal, but radical change and innovation. Not all of what the king wanted to implement was graced by success. Much of it was abandoned after the great king's death and even years before he passed away. In his calendar reform that was based on Indian treatises of astrology, the king was forced to withdraw revisions after some years because people did not understand the new method of calculating time.⁶⁹

In the king's policy that could be conveniently labeled as "return to the sources," the punna played an important role.

⁶⁹ "The new orders issued were perfectly correct, but they proved very difficult for people to understand and to comply with. Even when officials gave demonstrations and explanations of this difficult matter to the people in the remote towns of Burma, the Shan country and other such places, instead of understanding they only said that the King was mad, that he wanted impossibility and that the whole thing was wrong." (MMOS § 393, translation E. Bagshawe).

The 'new' punna at the court

To legitimize his attempts at change and reform, the king needed, above all, valid sources of authority. New punna who arrived at the court during the king's reign were themselves sources of authority, and they brought reliable texts and books. These new punna came, as we know, from Arakan (after its conquest) and from India. The Arakanese punna were men of various ranks. Many certainly joined the "Eight-member Punna" who provided the coronation specialists, and some entered the circle of the *panya-shi*, the king's closest advisors. Two groups of "Eight-member punna" were formed by what appear to have been exclusively Arakanese punna (ROB 19 February 1789).⁷⁰

The new punna from India came from Benares, as has been noted above.⁷¹ It is regrettable that we have no records of the recruitment of these "original" Brahmins who gained a tremendous influence at the court and obtained special privileges. The infatuation of the king with Brahmanic concepts resulted even in an order to classify the whole population of the kingdom according to the four *varna* (ROB 8 March 1813).

While we do not know the Indian Brahmins' own motivations to come to Burma, it is a little bit easier to argue

⁷⁰ Middle-ranking Arakanese punna were the *paritta* reciting punna (*parit-yut punna*), experts in making magic squares, and violin and harp players (ROB 5 June 1789). Violin and harp players would have been mainly attached to devotional activities and the cult of a particular god. Low-ranking Arakanese punna were *satta* (barbers) who are rarely mentioned in the royal orders (see the collective term as found in ROB 19 January 1811: "*punna-suddhiya-satta*").

⁷¹ To provide a glimpse at a typical Indian immigrant punna, one may quote a short notice of Arthur Phayre (then a member of the Yule mission to Ava) in his *Private Journal* of 1855, included in the publication of the account of Henry Yule: "I omitted to mention that one of the Brahmin Pundits from Benares was with me when the W. came in. He arrived here 13 years ago [1842] via Arakan with seven others and their families. Four returned, one or two died and only one other family besides his now remain. He had a son with him born while on the road here. He had with him two Brahmins, from the southern parts of Chittagong I believe. He is consulted about their almanac arrangements and performs the ceremony of consecration. On our public reception he will with other Brahmins attend to chant a sort of hymn which he told me would be in the Sanscrit language." [11 September 1855] (in Yule 1968:xxiv). A "Burmese hymn chanted by the Brahmins" (extolling the king's qualities) noted by A. P. Phayre appears as Appendix C in Yule's account (ibid. 352-3).

the king's reasons. Given his intellectual curiosity, it is likely that he had a great interest in the king-making ceremony in Arakan, a long established and legitimate tradition that he would have seen as an inspiration. The last coronation of an Arakanese king had been celebrated in 1782, a little bit more than two years before the Burmese conquest, so that memories of the ritual must still have been fresh. The *Mahasamata-rajawin*, a yet unpublished Arakanese description of this coronation ceremony, may have been written by a punna around the time of the Burmese conquest of Arakan.

Bodawphaya rejected the traditional methods of fixing the dates of the annual monastic retreat, and he spent years appealing to specialists and trying to introduce a new calendar.⁷² There were also monks who considered themselves as experts in the field of calendar-making, calculation of time, and astrology. But it comes with no surprise that he faced a reluctant and resisting Sangha. It is likely that the newly arrived punna were supporters of the king's reform project (see *MMOS* § 193), and the monks may have perceived the punna as rivals.

The new Indian punna also brought along change in the field of devotion and rituals. The cult of the *rishis* Aggamahapati (*ROB* 8 Aug 1817) and Kapilamuni (*ROB* 21 June 1812, 18 May 1814) involved Brahmanic rituals that may have been abandoned after Bodawphaya's reign.

India as a source of books, statues, and political worries

Since the Pagan era, Sri Lanka had always been the major reference for authoritative text copies of the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures. The visits from Sri Lankan monks to Upper Burma and missions sent to Sri Lanka prove the continuity of these relations under Bodawphaya.⁷³ But the reign of this king

⁷² Symes notes the great veneration for the punna and underscores Bodawphaya's strong belief in their astrology, which set a fashion in the country (Symes 1800 [vol.2]:26).

⁷³ In a note, M. Symes refers to two such missions sent to Sri Lanka to obtain religious books (Symes 1800 [vol.2]:174). Interestingly, he states that, according to his inquiries, the laws and the religion of the Burmese had been introduced by the Arakanese and

clearly marks a new trend with his intriguing interest for India. Bodawphaya saw India, on one hand, as a land of pilgrimage for Buddhists and, on the other hand, as the land in which highly learned Brahmins were the safe-keepers of a written tradition that had authoritatively defined kingship.⁷⁴ As a truly Theravada Buddhist king, Bodawphaya felt responsible for the Buddhist pilgrimage places such as Bodhgaya (Frasch 1998, 2001), and he wanted to share his wealth so as to increase his merit.⁷⁵ As a king standing in the Hindu-Buddhist heritage of kingship who wanted to revive the ritual and ceremonial sources of kingship, he was looking for dependable texts from India. Therefore, he requested manuals on astrology, the cult of the gods and ritual practice that were either in Sanskrit or in Bengali (MMOS § 393–94). While the validity of the existing ceremonies had to be ensured by their conformity with written texts, it is likely that the Indian newcomers instituted ceremonies that had never really been part of the tradition at the court.⁷⁶

At the end of October 1795, when the English Embassy was on the verge of a return to India, King Bodawphaya sent Michael Symes a letter requesting for him to send to Amarapura certain Sanskrit books and a Brahmin with his wife. The ambassador interpreted—correctly—that the king wanted to institute, in Symes' terms, “a hereditary race of

originally came from Ceylon. As this statement appears in the context of a discussion of the Burmese legal code, his remark is probably valid for Arakanese *dhammathat* that were brought to Upper Burma after the conquest.

⁷⁴ India is called *Majjhimadesa*, a common term in Southeast Asian texts that contextualizes India as a holy land where the Buddhist faith originated. The term is not used though when Burmese sources refer to India as a land that had largely come under the control of the English *East India Company*.

⁷⁵ Sangermano, who lived in Burma between 1783 and 1806, states that the king had the plan to conquer India (1893:58). An order of 11 April 1813 reflects the king's bold intentions regarding India: establishment of direct contacts with the original country of the Buddha, conquest, and pilgrimage to the holy places.

⁷⁶ There are several orders that point to the performance of ceremonies and to astrological calculations with reference to specific texts. It seems that later kings followed Bodawphaya's way: An order for the preparation of King Bagyidaw's consecration ceremony mentions the necessary consultation of the old texts.

astronomers" (Symes 1800 [vol.2]: 377).⁷⁷ This was not the first time that the king boldly requested the English to send him a Brahmin astronomer. He had done so already in a letter to Governor General Shore (Symes 1800 [vol. 2]: 226). To receive the texts and the books was not enough. Bodawphaya needed qualified men who would read and apply them.

Since the first years of Bodawphaya's reign, punna were included in the missions that were sent to Benares (see for example *ROB* 18 and 20 August 1806) to collect books on "religious and secular subjects." At Amarapura, the books were translated into Burmese either by monks⁷⁸ or punna (*ROB* 3 July 1783, 16 December 1807; 30 April 1810; 12 October 1810).⁷⁹ In 1795, an Armenian interpreter at the court finished a translation into Burmese of William Jones' English version of the *dhammashastra* (Symes 1800 [vol.2]:347). The total number of these books is said to have been 253 (Mahadhamma Thingyan 1956:202). Besides the book collecting missions sent to India, monks from Sri Lanka brought religious and medical texts (in Pali) from Sri Lanka that needed to be transcribed into Burmese (*ROB* 6 July 1807).

A thorough analysis of the titles mentioned in the sources could reveal the identity of these books and stimulate our interpretation of the king's ideas and intentions. In the royal orders, there are unfortunately few titles to be found. Occasionally, the *Rajamattan* is referred to as it was used to establish the calendar of ceremonies at the court. One title is the *Vitakkamukha mandani* by Dhammadaśa the Rishi (*ROB* 21

⁷⁷ King Bagyiḍaw was just as keen to obtain fresh Brahmins. T.A. Trant, an English officer, records that, "... so anxious were the Burmahs to retain a number of this sect in the country, that at the conclusion of the war [Anglo-Burmese war of 1824–1826], when all the British prisoners were released, we found that six sepoy had been detained at Ava merely because they were Brahmins." (Trant 1827:267).

⁷⁸ Translations of twenty-three books into Burmese are ascribed to the *sasanabaing* (head of the Sangha) Nanabhivamsa Dhammasenapati Mahadhammarajadhirajaguru, the first Maung-Daung Sayadaw (Maha Dhamma Thingyan 1956:202–3).

⁷⁹ Translations were done with utmost care. As the spelling of Burmese was unregulated (as modern historians discover to their disadvantage while using the old manuscripts), orders were issued to specify the spelling of Burmese words and Sanskrit loan words (for example, see *ROB* 3 July 1783).

June 1812) and, in an order of King Thibaw, we find the *Graha-laghavarahassaramancari*, the *Jotitatta*, and the *Suriyasiddhanta* mentioned as books concerned with astrology (ROB 9 April 1880). U Tin mentions that a list of the imported astrological texts is given in a work called *Pasangavisodhani* (MMOS § 393).

More than twenty titles of the translated works are given by the author of the *Sasanalinkaya Ca-tam*:

Sarasvati-Vyakarana, Balapabodhana,
Abhidhamma, Ekakkharakosa,
Nanattthadhvani, Rajamattan, Purohit, Saradve,
Jatisujataka, Laghusamgraha, Supinadhayaya,
Lakkhana-kyam, Suriyasiddhanta, Bhasuti,
Rajabhiseka-kyam, Drabyagun, Sarakomudi,
Osadha-ratanakara, Sararatukathana,
Dhatuprasamsa and Kamaratana.
(Mahadhamma Thingyan 1956:202)

Books were not the only things brought back from India. The king also ordered statues of the Buddha from Benares (ROB 31 January 1810, 17 May 1810, 4 November 1834) and of hermit saints that were brought to Amarapura. The case of the statue of the Kapilamuni is fascinating as the statue, as seen until today in Mandalay, is strictly identical to the one in Benares.⁸⁰

Other precious items brought from India were Bodhi tree saplings and earth brought from Bodhgaya, where Buddhists revere the tree under which the Buddha was said to have reached Enlightenment (ROB 8 May 1810, 17 May 1810, 14 December 1810, 4 November 1834). The saplings were kept in golden pots, and the king himself wanted to plant a Bodhi sapling (ROB 25 December 1810). Bodhi tree saplings were also brought by Sri Lankan monks; these could have stemmed from Anuradhapura, where a descendant of the original Bodhi tree

⁸⁰ This information was kindly provided by Don Stadtner, who did extensive research on the history of the statue. One should take note that the veneration paid to hermit saints was not limited to the reign of King Bodawphaya. A statue of Aggasita the hermit is mentioned in an order of King Thalun of 24 July 1638.

is said to have been planted in ancient times (ROB 12 March 1806, 3 July 1807).⁸¹

As the punna were familiar with Indian affairs, and particularly the increasing power of the English in India, much information of a political nature could arrive at the court thanks to them. Punna sent on missions to buy books could also usefully collect intelligence and spy on English activities. A. Phayre writes that in 1813, a “Burmese was arrested while on his way to Delhi, ostensibly in search of religious books.” The English learnt that the king was “actively engaged in intrigues with some of the native princes of India.” One may disagree with Phayre when he thinks that any punna sent to buy books in India was an undercover agent spying on the English. Moreover, not all men who were sent to India were punna. The men who came back to Burma submitted reports to the court. The third part of the *Majjhima-desa Aye-daw-pum* contains a memoir of the long mission of Nemyo-jeya Kyaw Htin, who led the eighth of Bodawphaya’s missions sent to India. He copied texts, discussed philosophy and religion with the Brahmins of Benares, and brought a wife for his king.⁸² An undated document published in the ROB contains, on the one hand, a surreal account of India that matches with the traditional Burmese conception of *Majjhimadesa* as found in the Sinhalese chronicles and, on the other hand, an anti-English sketch of the rise of the British power in India of a rather superficial character.⁸³

In January 1824, King Bagyidaw went a step further

⁸¹ In the ROB, between 1806 and 1812, there are altogether fifteen orders concerning the Bodhi tree saplings.

⁸² Nemyo-jeya Kyaw Htin was a former tax officer (*akhwan wun*) in Arakan and later governor (*myo wun*) of Pegu. He left Burma on 2 December 1812 and arrived back in Amarapura on 12 February 1815. See Hla Htun Phru’s critical edition of the *Majjhimadesa Aye-daw-pum*. The writing of the report on the mission was only finished on 17 November 1823. Their first and second parts contain a description of the conquest of Arakan in 1784 and the crushing of the revolt of Chinbyan in 1811/1812. Nemyo-jeya Kyaw Htin mentions a single volume of the texts he copied, the *Godhamma-purana-kyam* (this title is quoted as *Godhammapuraka-kyam* in another manuscript version of Nemyo-jeya Kyaw Htin’s memoir).

⁸³ Than Tun ascribes it to 21 January 1823.

and sent three punna of the "Eight-members punna" to India to foment troubles against the English in connection with local lords. They were also assigned the mission to propagate the official viewpoint of the Burmese court stating that Chittagong and Dhaka belonged to the Burmese king as these territories had, allegedly, once been part of the kingdom of Arakan, now a province of Burma (ROB 6 August 1824).

CONCLUSION

The punna were a tiny and somewhat obscure social group whose secluded existence seems far away from the vistas of major social, political, and economic questions. Historical investigations of the punna could be considered a marginal field of our research on Southeast Asian kingship. As this paper has been essentially descriptive and explorative, readers may indeed wonder whether there is any great interest in studying the punna beyond the intrinsic interest of studying the subject for itself. So, how relevant is the matter discussed here? A few concluding reflections may be welcome.

During the past two or three decades, scholars working on the Theravada monarchies of Southeast Asia have been doing an excellent job delineating the structures of state-building and the administrative and economic networks that sustained kingship. No student of Southeast Asian history will nowadays explore the political history without reading events in the light of these analytical frames. But as we are growing accustomed to this altogether abstract reconstruction of history with its lessons on institutional development, we may feel the need of a deeper understanding of the workings of particular Southeast Asian courts. In many ways, this marks a quest for the culturally specific and appeals to the questions and methods of intellectual history and micro-history (or *histoire du quotidien*). Questions such as "How did the kings think?" or "What was the intellectual environment of the court?" are not a privilege of Western historians working on Western courts. In the case of Burma, we have substantial material to inform us on the Konbaung dynasty, which, at its beginnings, was keen

to adopt the ceremonial and ritual heritage of the Nyaung-yan dynasty (1597–1752).

This article has shown that under the Konbaung kings, and especially in the reign of King Bodawphaya, the punna played an overwhelming role at the court. The detailed study of the punna' functions as part of the daily routine of the court is one step towards a better understanding of the men and women at the court. The author has also shown that punna were part of a program of change, reform, and innovation under Bodawphaya. In the context of the study of Burmese history, this is an important topic. To the eyes of his contemporaries, both Burmese and English, Bodawphaya appeared as a choleric tyrant, a foolish destroyer of tradition, a man blinded by his ambition. Because the king never saw enough reason to be afraid of the English, English colonial historians attributed to him a heavy share of responsibility for the first Anglo-Burmese war (which ensued five years after his death). True, he was brutal, mistrustful, and unloved, and he did not sense the rise of a greater power than his own in India. However, a comprehensive look at relevant sources demonstrates that, in terms of an affirmative territorial policy, of administrative zeal and rigour, of political vision and intellectual boldness, the reign of Bodawphaya is the greatest of the Konbaung dynasty. King Mindon (1853–1878) has been much admired for his reform projects and religious policy, but Bodawphaya not only possessed a greater personality, he maintained a personal vision of himself and the kingdom, and exuded the determination to push forward radical change. That he failed in so many endeavors compels respect rather than disdain.

In the larger context of the relations between India and Burma, the role of the punna would also warrant further investigations. Questions have indeed been raised in this paper on the origins of the punna and on books that were brought to Burma in Bodawphaya's time, questions that could only be hinted at, but that should be even more interesting when studied from an Indian perspective.

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