THE CREOLE CITY IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA:
SLAVE GATHERING WARFARE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN BURMA, THAILAND
AND MANIPUR, 18TH - 19TH C.

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DEDICATION:

I thank Margo for supporting me in every way.
I will take you all over this world.
Abstract

This thesis is devoted to slave gathering warfare from the 18th to mid-19th centuries with a focus on the great reshuffling of human populations in mainland Southeast Asia due to the rise of the Konbaung Dynasty. Beginning soon after its founding in 1752, this powerful, expansionary kingdom conquered kingdoms and principalities far afield from its homeland in Upper Burma. Among these conquests were the distant kingdoms of Ayutthaya, sacked in 1767, and Manipur, raided repeatedly until its eventual depopulated between 1819 and 1826. The cumulative effect of these wars with Ayutthaya and Manipur was that many tens of thousands of foreign captives were forcibly relocated to Upper Burma. My research attempts to understand captives taken in mainland Southeast Asia’s campaigns of slave gathering warfare as potent historical actors capable of effecting artistic, cultural and political changes both minor and sweeping in their respective locations of captivity. Interstate slave gathering warfare was an endemic feature of pre-colonial Southeast Asian statecraft. Kingdoms rose and fell throughout Southeast Asia based on their ability to accumulate some portion of their rivals’ populations and to protect the people in the territories under their control from seizure and forced relocation. Numerous studies have been devoted to this subject, but in nearly all of them war captives are understood as something we might call “labor inputs” that are crucial for understanding the vicissitudes of power in the Southeast Asian context. Yet, in most of these studies the “input” of captives remains abstract—large populations equal economic power, ergo the introduction of additional captured people increase the state’s wealth and security. Yet, we know that communities of skilled artisans ranging from dancers and astrologers to metal workers and elephant veterinarians (to name just a few) were often valued objects of slave gathering warfare. Kings and their military generals targeted these artisans precisely because they hoped to utilize the skills and knowledge of these captives. For this reason, we can productively deepen our understanding of cultural development in mainland Southeast Asia by analyzing slave gathering warfare as a crucial vector for intra-regional cultural exchange; and to shift our analysis of
captive people and their descendants from reductively simple “labor inputs” to historical agents with the potential for effecting transformative cultural changes in the land of their captivity. This thesis is predominantly focused on captives that were incorporated into the royal service system as skilled artisans, royal advisors, and high-level military personnel. It is among this stratum of captives that the most discernible kinds of cultural exchange took place. This is largely due to the survival of their material culture and/or the vitality of these communities that has sustained into the present day. My research will combine analysis of conventional textual sources with a more unconventional use of “cultural” sources to uncover the complicated history of multilateral cultural exchange that occurred in Upper Burma due to the forced relocation of war captives from Ayutthaya and Manipur.
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Chapter 1

Creole Identities in Upper Burma

We should... get accustomed to the idea that our identity is going to change profoundly on contact with the Other as his will on contact with us.
-Edouard Glissant

1. Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to understand captives taken in mainland Southeast Asia’s campaigns of slave gathering warfare as potent historical actors capable of effecting minor and sweeping artistic, cultural and political changes in their locations of captivity. Inter-state slave gathering warfare was an endemic feature of pre-colonial Southeast Asian statecraft. Kingdoms rose and fell throughout Southeast Asia based on their ability to accumulate some portion of rival populations and protect the people in the territories under their control from seizure and forced relocation. Numerous studies have been devoted to this subject; nearly all of them treat war captives as something we might call “labor inputs” that are crucial for understanding the vicissitudes of power in the Southeast Asian context.\(^2\) The “input” of captives remains abstract in most of these studies: large populations equals economic power, ergo the introduction of additional captured people increases a state’s wealth and security. However, we know that communities of skilled artisans ranging from dancers and astrologers to metal workers and elephant veterinarians (to name just a few) were often valued objects of slave gathering warfare. Kings and their military generals targeted these artisans because they hoped to utilize their skills and knowledge. For this reason, we can productively deepen our understanding of cultural development in mainland

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Southeast Asia by analyzing slave gathering warfare as a crucial vector for intra-regional cultural exchange and shift our analysis of captive people and their descendants from reductively simple “labor inputs” to historical agents with the potential for effecting cultural transformation in the lands of their captivity.

My research is devoted to slave gathering warfare from the 18th to mid-19th centuries with a focus on the great reshuffling of human populations in mainland Southeast Asia during the rise of the Konbaung Dynasty. Soon after its founding in 1752, this powerful, expansionary kingdom conquered other kingdoms and principalities far from its homeland in Upper Burma. Among these conquests were the distant kingdoms of Ayutthaya, sacked in 1767, and Manipur, raided repeatedly between 1819 and 1826 until it was depopulated. The cumulative effect of these wars with Ayutthaya and Manipur was that tens of thousands of foreign captives were forcibly relocated to Upper Burma. These people were sorted according to their useful skills and then incorporated into Burma’s royal service system. Farmers were resettled in sparsely populated farming zones or charged with clearing and settling new farmland. Captives with military experience were incorporated into the Burmese military, sometimes in elite ranks. Gurus, scholars, and intellectuals were at times brought into the palace to serve as royal advisors, ritual specialists. Artisans were settled in the capital or surrounding suburbs, some into ethnically distinct quarters and villages, while others were incorporated into pre-existing work groups. Those that lacked skills of interest to the Burmese elite were often assigned drudgework such as building and maintaining dykes and weirs, mining, gathering wild grasses for palace elephants, or working as slaves in Buddhist temples.

This thesis is predominantly focused on captives that were incorporated into the royal service system as skilled artisans, royal advisors, and high-level military personnel because it is among this stratum of captives that the most discernable kinds of cultural exchange took place. These captives preserved their material culture and developed vital communities that have survived into the present day. My research therefore combines analysis of conventional historical texts with more unconventional “cultural” sources to uncover the complicated history of multilateral
cultural exchange that occurred in Upper Burma following the forced relocation of war captives from Ayutthaya and Manipur.

Before continuing, let me explain the terminology used to describe the geographic locations and polities discussed in this thesis. The Irrawaddy River courses along a rough north to south axis through the modern state of Myanmar. In the early 18th century this river traversed three ecological zones that each privileged different socio-political forms of organization. The northernmost mountainous regions had limited land suitable for intensive agriculture and were mostly inhabited by tribal peoples. Intensive agriculture was more possible in the mountain valleys, so population densities capable of supporting small principalities developed there. These principalities at times linked into larger confederacies that could assert power outside of this region, but the ecological barriers to large-scale state formation mostly stifled their political power. This region is henceforth referred to as “Upland Burma” in this thesis.

From these northern mountains, the river flows into a vast basin formed by the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers. This area is sometimes called the “dry zone” because it receives little rainfall. It encompasses an area roughly 400 miles north to south and 200 miles east to west. The two rivers were harnessed for agricultural irrigation long ago, so this basin has been a food-producing powerhouse for more than a millennia. Relatively large populations, typically ruled over by politically powerful states, developed in this area.³ Like many other scholars, I refer to this region as “Upper Burma.”

The Irrawaddy River joins with the Chindwin River and other tributaries in Upper Burma before flowing into the Irrawaddy Delta. In the 18th century, mangroves and soft delta soil dominated the delta landscape. Though the region was food rich in many ways, good farmland was limited and dispersed. This ecological zone privileged the development of numerous coastal trading polities. As in Upland Burma, these small, urbanized state-lets were occasionally united by powerful leaders and were able to project power outside of the coastal region. The delta

region is henceforth referred to as “Lower Burma.” I distinguish these three regions because using the singular term “Burma” disguises the regional and cultural diversity of this part of Southeast Asia, which must be avoided in any research project devoted to issues of cultural development and exchange.

The terminology I will use to describe the political units or kingdoms under discussion also requires a brief overview. Much of my research centers on the Konbaung Dynasty founded by King Alaungphaya in 1752. Between 1752 and 1885, the capital of the Konbaung Dynasty moved six times between the cities of Shwebo, Sagaing, Inwa, Amarapura, and Mandalay in Upper Burma. These cities were located close to one another, so many scholars refer to this region as the “capital zone.” The indigenous name for the kingdom sometimes also changed along with the movement to a new capital. To prevent confusion, I have elected to refer to the state that was founded and ruled by the Konbaung dynasty as the “Kingdom of Ava” or “Ava” following the convention of British colonial diplomats.

Figure 1.1: A colonial era tourist map of Upper Burma’s capital zone. Palace sizes are exaggerated for comic effect but the drawing nicely captures the landscape of the region and the geographic relationship between the former royal capitals (author’s collection).
This expansionary kingdom extended its power into areas far from the capital zone. While conquering numerous independent kingdoms and principalities, it gathered large numbers of people as war slaves and transported them back to Upper Burma. Prominent among these conquests were the sack of Ayutthaya (a kingdom located in modern Thailand) and multiple incursions into Manipur (a mountain kingdom now incorporated as a state in modern India). The capital city Ayutthaya was located at the boundary between two ecological zones: the vast agricultural plain formed by the Chao Phraya River and a coastal mangrove zone with easy access to the sea. This economically strategic location allowed Ayutthaya to harness great wealth and power from agriculture and sea trade. This region, ruled by the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, is herein called “Central Thailand.” The Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767 led to the complete destruction of the kingdom. War refugees built a new capital in the area of what is now metropolitan Bangkok. Problematically, Thai kings continued to call this new state “Ayutthaya” for more than seven decades before adopting the name “Kingdom of Siam.” To prevent confusion, the post-1767 state is referred to (somewhat anachronistically) as the “Kingdom of Siam” or as “Bangkok” in this thesis. The term “Central Thailand” is mostly used for the geographic area to distinguish it from Thailand’s northern and southern regions that contained kingdoms and principalities usually independent of the state in Central Thailand.

“Manipur” presents a similar problem of anachronistic naming. The Manipur kingdom was located in a populous upland valley separated from Upper Burma by treacherous mountains. This upland valley kingdom had many indigenous names, among them Kangleipak. These earlier names were abandoned in favor of “Manipur” in the early 18th century. The state was renamed following Sanskrit conventions following waves of conversion to Hinduism. To prevent confusion, I refer to this state anachronistically as “Manipur” for its entire history. Manipur was centered in a mountain valley; the two different ecological zones the kingdom encompassed are here referred to as “upland Manipur” and “lowland Manipur.”

As noted above, war captives obtained during slave gathering warfare throughout Southeast Asia were incorporated into indigenous hierarchical systems.
In Upper Burma, for example, captured ritual specialists and astrologers became advisors to Konbaung kings, captured dancers were incorporated into royal entertainments, and units of captured cavalrymen and archers ascended to the elite ranks of the kingdom’s military. Because of the high status of their positions in the hierarchy, numerous scholars have cautioned against using the word “slavery” to the system of capture and servitude in Southeast Asia in general and Burma in particular. They have argued that the word “slavery” is implicitly tied to the history of plantation slavery in the Americas and therefore describes a debased position of non-personhood in which the enslaved are both chattel and perpetual outsiders to the societies in which they are enslaved.⁴ Recent opinions have turned against this earlier verity. Support for broader definitions of the word “slavery” enables scholars to enter into cross-cultural and cross-regional comparative studies of historical slavery. Scholars now recognize that there have been many contrasting systems of slavery through time and across regions. The enslaved were subject to different levels of debasement or violence or permitted different levels of autonomy vis-à-vis their owners in various systems.⁵

This author is sympathetic to analytic moves that seek to broaden the definition of the word “slavery” or more simply to pluralize the word and understand world history as marked by slaveries of various types. Indeed, this thesis seeks to bring mainland Southeast Asia into conversation with emerging approaches to the study of various forms of slavery in the Americas. Cross-cultural comparisons have the potential to inspire fresh insights and open regionally specific scholarship to new modes of inquiry and analysis. I return to the significant issue of defining “slavery” later in this chapter.

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⁴ The collected articles in Reid’s edited volume are split between scholars arguing for and against use of the term “slavery” within differing contexts. In the editor’s introduction, Reid argues that the term “slavery” should be liberated from its narrow 19th century definition so as to facilitate comparative scholarship between world regions. Anthony Reid, “Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History,” in Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia, ed. Anthony Reid (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 2.

Southeast Asia has long been recognized as a region of flexible cultures and identities capable of assimilating outsiders and foreign ideas. Scholars suggest that this prominent regional feature is rooted in Southeast Asia’s geographic positions at the center of ancient global trading networks. Southeast Asian cities were polyglot trading entrepôt in which local elites commonly garnered power and prestige by harnessing foreign ideas (and foreign people) to local advantage. Acceptance of the region’s “power of assimilation,” I would argue, has contributed to a general scholarly apathy toward the history of war captives. The common assumption is that after two or three generations, captives simply disappeared into the population as intermarriage and assimilation made them indistinguishable from their indigenous neighbors. Like rainwater falling onto an ocean, their absorption was complete and without trace. Yet, as I will show throughout this thesis, this model of one-way “assimilation” is inadequate for understanding the complex processes through which Southeast Asian captives made lives in new lands. The cultural openness of these societies, in combination with the relatively high status of skilled captives, guaranteed that assimilation worked in both directions. This is especially the case when foreign artisans were targeted for capture by elites because they coveted their exotic skills.

I demonstrate that the assimilation of captives was a complex process of dialogical exchange or “transculturation.” For example, I argue that as captives from Thailand brought to Upper Burma gradually became more Burmese, Burmese culture assimilated Thai and hybrid-Thai cultural practices. The captives were not simply absorbed into the dominant society; rather, the two met after journeying towards one another on a transcultural roadway. While it must be stated that asymmetrical power relations and the psychological traumas inherent in capture and dislocation circumscribed these convergences, the captives in no way vanished.

6 See the two classics on this subject: O. W Wolters, History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives, Rev. ed, Studies on Southeast Asia no. 26 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Singapore: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999); Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands Below the Winds (Volume 1) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
7 The term “transculturation” is used here as a blanket term to describe all the overlapping and intermeshing forces that drive cultural intermixture and generate hybrid or novel cultural forms. The term is elucidated in the next section.
from the historical record through assimilation. Their artistic and intellectual contributions to the dominant society stand like road signs demarcating important events in a dialogical process of transculturation. Seen in this way, the assimilation of captives was a process of cultural exchange.8

Not all captives assimilated, however. My research has uncovered numerous villages and urban neighborhoods populated by descendants of war captives from Manipur, along with a small and dwindling number of families whose ancestors hailed from Central Thailand. These people are conscious of their foreignness and engage in ritual, religious, and artistic practices that self-consciously mark their foreign origins. Many of these identity-preserving practices bear little resemblance to the culture from which they originated, however. Hybridizing forces generated by the forced relocation of these groups inside Burma have had transformative effects on the natal culture of captive people. This gives rise to a seemingly paradoxical observation: the practices of the captive descendants that most mark their non-assimilation simultaneously call attention to their acculturation over time. The identities practices of these descendent communities are confusingly blended. They are neither from their original homeland nor of the dominant culture and they are also both.

The complex cultural positionality of captives and their descendants has mostly gone unstudied within the scholarship of mainland Southeast Asia. By contrast, rich theories and debates have developed in the scholarship on American slavery around the study of African cultures in the Americas. For example, “creolization theory” has been used productively to describe the development of African-American culture within the Atlantic plantation system. Creolization theory draws attention to the phenomena of cultural mixing or hybridization in the

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8 This process of assimilation/exchange stimulated by the incorporation of war captives is not limited to Southeast Asia. The subject has been studied across many regions. See the diverse articles collected in Catherine Cameron, ed., Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008). See also the classic study of slavery in borderlands America by James Brooks, Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
contexts of slavery and displacement. It is argued that the historical experience of slavery brutally severed the enslaved from their natal cultures and settled them into new cultural and ecological environments. While this process fragmented the cultures of the enslaved, it did not lead to their destruction, but rather the construction of new cultures from these fragments. It fell upon the enslaved to fashion some form of coherence, systems of meaning, and stability in their new homelands. African cultures were remodeled and recreated in a process of ad-hoc synthesis and cultural creativity in contexts where enslaved Africans could not help but interact with the cultural practices of their owners, other Europeans, nearby indigenous peoples, and other enslaved groups. A core concept of creolization theory is that the creolization process involved active “restructuring” rather than passive “mixing,” implying that the dispossessed enslaved were essential agents in the process. Rather than simply blending cultural parts, novel identities and cultural forms were born out of the combination of two or more cultural streams. The creolization process thus stimulated the formation of a new identity: the African-American.

I argue throughout this thesis that comparable processes of restructuring and exchange operated in mainland Southeast Asia. I use the collective term “Creoles” to describe historical communities of captive descendants who were deeply transformed by captivity yet remained unassimilated to the dominant society. The term “creolization” describes the multidirectional process of cultural exchange in the specific context of slavery and dislocation. More specifically, creolization applies to the process of constructing and sustaining new creole identities, the complex multilateral cultural exchanges between captive communities of different origins, and the exchanges between captives and the

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9 Creolization theory has also been used to study the processes of exchange among culturally displaced workers within a plantation system and has been productively used to describe cultural exchange in Hawaii. In this thesis the use of creolization theory is strictly limited to the displacements caused by slave gathering warfare.


dominant society. In the next section of this thesis, I discuss the many advantages of creolization theory in reconsidering the history of slave gathering warfare in mainland Southeast Asia.

Certain features of the Southeast Asian system of slavery sharply distinguish it from the American context. These differences require that the creolization model be expanded localized. Foremost among these differences was that most war-captives in Burma and other major kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia could become fully assimilated. In the Americas, the forces of racism and brutal legal codes combined to permanently “Other” African slaves and ensured their continued “outsider” status. Blackness signaled slave identity in the Americas and racism stigmatized the social position of the enslaved and ex-slave alike. In mainland Southeast Asia, by contrast, war captive status was not marked by sharp physiognomic differences, slaves filled highly varied status positions, and legal regimes made only inconsistent and ad-hoc efforts to prevent social mixing and intermarriage between captives and non-captives. Full assimilation was a mostly unimpeded social possibility for the majority of descendants of foreign captives and there were obvious benefits to shedding their foreign identities and merging with the dominant society.

In Burma, most captives passed quietly into the dominant society. Nevertheless, some villages and families retained “outsider” identities as descendants of captured peoples throughout the Mandalay area of Upper Burma. I have coined the phrase “elective alterity” to describe the seemingly counter-intuitive practice of some individuals and communities choosing to remain cultural outsiders and sustain their foreigner status. Nurturing outsider status further distinguishes the cultural dynamics of slavery in mainland Southeast Asia from what was common to trans-Atlantic slavery. Note that elective alterity in Southeast Asia did not isolate captive communities from hybridizing influences. Their cultural practices were deeply influenced by Burmese culture. Nevertheless, for reasons that

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12 Orlando Patterson, the famed scholar of comparative slavery has described this position as “social death.” See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
will be explored in depth as this thesis progresses, some captives and their descendants chose not to fully assimilate into Burmese society.

There appear to be two distinct causes of elective alterity in Upper Burma. One is when captives practice a minority religious system. Captured Muslims, Hindus, and some animists engaged in beliefs and rituals that marked them as different from the dominant Burmese Buddhists. Their continuing practice of a “foreign” faith ensured a sustained memory of community origins that were “outside” of Buddhist Burma. It is problematic to describe conversion as a choice, since the decision to leave the faith of one’s family and community is fraught with difficulty. With this caveat in mind, it can be pointed out that many captured Hindus and Muslims elected not to become Buddhists and remained outside the dominant Burmese-Buddhist culture. In addition, both Hindu and Muslim groups favored in-group marriage, consequently slowing assimilation via out-marriage with members of the dominant society.

Labor, especially highly skilled labor, was a second potent force for generating and sustaining identity in Upper Burma. I believe this to be a largely unstudied phenomenon. Burmese kings captured foreigners who had exotic and highly prized skills and settled them together in villages and urban quarters. These captives were in a sense labeled with positive “stereotypes.” For example, historical records make it clear that captives from Ayutthaya were considered to have exceptional talent in dance and music. The best singers and dancers were settled near the palace and well provided with grants of food and land from the royal palace. Ayutthaya people were also recognized as excellent noodle makers and embroiderers of gold thread; these chefs and artisans were settled in similarly segregated urban quarters. Manipuri people, by contrast, were considered great horsemen, carpenters, silk-weavers, and doctors skilled in mending broken bones. Thus, in the pre-colonial labor system of Upper Burma (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia), exogenous origins could be conjoined to assumptions about exceptional skills in given occupations. The positive stereotypes thus attached to certain ethnic

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13 See Noel Singer, “Ramayana at the Burmese Court,” Art of Asia (December 1989).
groups incentivized the maintenance of an outsider identity, the condition I call elective alterity.

In conducting research in the capital zone of Upper Burma, I found that the few families that remember their Ayutthaya heritage descended from a famous Ayutthaya troupe of court dancers and musicians. Similarly, numerous communities of Manipuri silk weavers continue to remember and celebrate their foreign origins. The British conquest of Upper Burma in 1885 utterly transformed the region’s economy, yet skilled occupations and artistic practices remained economically salient in the colonial and post-colonial social order. The continuing high status of these occupations combined with other forces favoring elective alterity explain the sustained, albeit seemingly unlikely, presence of Creole identities in Burma.

I would like to stress that religion and skilled labor were not mutually exclusive categories in the promotion of elective alterity. They could combine in interestingly complex ways. For example, high-caste Hindus from Manipur were considered the most skilled practitioners of palmistry and astrology. Their star-charts continue to be perceived as more efficacious than those of their Burmese competitors. Even today, descendants of astrologers captured from Manipur are sought out all over Burma for advice on love, health, and business. Their business cards and storefront signs sometimes announce their foreign pedigree alongside other qualifications in the field of astrology.\textsuperscript{14} The exotic skills and minority religious beliefs of these high-caste Hindus mutually reinforce the group’s self-conscious and self-professed position outside dominant Burmese culture.

The artistic output of captured artisans is another rich vein for the study of cross-cultural exchange. Several scholars have pointed to a relationship between creolization and creativity.\textsuperscript{15} The complex and compelling reasons for this have to do with the relationship slaves have to the dominant culture. In \textit{The Black Atlantic}, Paul Gilroy uses the term “intercultural positionality” to describe the ways African slaves and their descendants created “contact zones” between differing cultures and

\textsuperscript{14} The authoritative text on descendants of Burma’s captured Brahmins is by Dakoun (Doctor), \textit{Yazawin Teh Hma Punna [Brahmins in (Myanmar) History]} (Yangon: Thami Zatika Sarpe, 2008).

\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Creolization and Creativity,” \textit{Global Networks} 3, no. 3 (2003); Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara, eds., \textit{Creolization as Cultural Creativity} (University Press of Mississippi, 2011).
histories. Ulf Hannerz, a leading scholar of creolization, uses the more prosaic “cultural switchboard” to similarly describe the relationship between the Creole subject and the dominant society. The complex subject position of a forcibly displaced person is neither “from” the culture of their origin nor entirely “of” their captor’s culture. The artistic and cultural output of these captives (in situations where this kind of activity is possible) tends to synthesize, combine or actively hybridize the complex cultural spaces they embody. Baron and Cara suggest that the expressive manifestations of the creolization process are a crucial subject matter for the scholarly study of slavery. This discussion continues in the next section.

2. Towards a Southeast Asian Creolization

Creoleness is annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity... We bend toward [Creoleness]... confident of the necessity of accepting ourselves as complex for complexity is the very principle of our identity. Exploring our Creoleness must be done in a thought as complex as Creoleness itself.

-from the manifesto “In Praise of Creoleness”

In this section I will briefly describe the development of creolization theory in the Caribbean and the potential benefits of this theory for understanding the complex cultural interactions and exchanges that mark the historical development of mainland Southeast. I will also discuss the political potential of creolization theory as a method of study that draws attention to cultural complexity and foregrounds the role of traditionally marginalized people as important historical actors. The authors of the manifesto “In Praise of Creoleness” (1989), quoted above, believe that studies of Creole peoples, exchanges and identities call attention to the fabrications and iniquities of ideologies of cultural chauvinism and nationalism. Such ideologies, dependent on notions of “false universality...and of purity,” can be

18 See the introduction to Baron and Cara, Creolization as Cultural Creativity.
countered by interpretive frameworks that capture the complexities of cross-cultural human exchange that underlie the development of every ethnic identity and civilisation.  

The word “Creole” derives from the Spanish word “criollo,” which appeared in the second half of the 16th century to describe observed changes among European livestock, white Spaniards, and African slaves that were born in the Americas, so outside their place of origin. The word was used as part of a pseudo-scientific discourse about the forces that were stimulating these disconcerting transformations in Spain’s overseas colonies. By the 17th century, the term had drifted into English and French as “Creole.” In these languages, the word’s meaning gradually expanded to describe peculiar new syncretic languages developing throughout the Atlantic world and later to describe people with mixed cultural practices that were born in polyglot places. These languages arose on plantations and in slave trading ports as a result of the need to establish interethnic communications in polyglot cultural settings. Modern linguists recognized that the linguistic restructuring found in the phonology, morphology, and syntax of these languages necessitated treating them as “new” languages. They coined the term “creolization” to describe the process by which two or more languages converge to form a new language.

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As Cohen and Toninato describe it, linguistic creolization provided a powerful and engaging analogy for the study of cross-cultural contact; the term “cultural creolization” then developed to describe the “emergence of a new cultural formation out of contact between different parent cultures” that had not formerly been in contact. This concept engaged scholars because it provided an alternative to the conventional understanding of cross-cultural contact (i.e., between slaves and their masters in the Americas) as a linear process resulting in either “acculturation,” in which the enslaved adopted the culture of the dominant society, or cultural “survivals,” in which the enslaved retain unchanged fragments of their natal cultures.

According to the promoters of creolization theory, linear models of cultural exchange “shipwrecked” the cultures of slaves and their descendants outside of the realm of academic inquiry. For some scholars, the relative absence of survivals and the apparent differences between the cultures of ex-slaves and the dominant society were incorrectly interpreted as incomplete or inadequate assimilation. Creolization theory opened scholarly analysis to a far wider system for conceptualizing these differences in cultural practices.

Cultural creolization also extended the notion of agency to otherwise marginalized peoples by emphasizing their roles in fashioning novel cultural forms. In this context, “creolization” can describe a two-fold process. The first side of the process is the interaction between the enslaved and other groups from widely divergent cultural backgrounds; the second is the impact of these interactions on a wide variety of cultural practices. Academic inquiry into the processes of creolization began with the study of languages, but as the creole metaphor gained popularity, creolization theory expanded into analysis of religious ceremonies, musical cultures, and medical and culinary practices. It has since spread into the

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23 I borrow this term from Barnabe et al., “In Praise of Creoleness,” 896.
study of art, law, material culture, military organization, politics, and social structures.25

Creolization is only a useful term if it describes social processes that are distinguishable from other ways of thinking about cultural exchange. It must be more than a synonym for “mixing.” Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen parsed various related academic terms:

- **Hybridity**- directs attention to individuals and cultural forms that are self-consciously or reflexively mixed and describes the syntheses of cultural forms from diverse origins.
- **Syncretism**- is particularly focused on religious practice and describes the amalgamation of formerly discreet worldviews.
- **Diasporic identity**- describes a social category of people whose primary subjective sense of belonging is in another country.
- **Transnationalism**- describes people or groups whose social existence attaches them to several places or to none.
- **Diffusion**- looks at the flows of things or meanings between societies whether or not accompanied by social encounters.
- **Cultural pluralism**- directs attention to the relative boundedness of the constituent groups making up a society or the ways in which they do not mix (also called the “plural society model”).
- **Creolization**- directs attention toward cultural phenomena that result from displacement (caused by slavery) and the ensuing social encounters and mutual influence between and among the displaced and other groups. It results in an ongoing dynamic process of exchange leading to the generation of new cultural forms with varying degrees of stability that can be called “creole culture.”26

I would like to add the term “transculturation” to Hylland’s taxonomy. Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz used this helpful blanket term to describe all of the highly varied phenomena in the Caribbean that result in complex cultural exchanges and transformations.

- **Transculturation**- encompasses the overlapping and intermeshing forces that drive cultural intermixture in zones comprised of slaves, refugees, migrants, multiple religions, merchant communities, etc.

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Transculturation can also describe the forces that generate hybrid or novel cultural forms.27

“Hybridity” is a potent scholarly term often used to describe the cosmopolitan places made diverse through colonial interactions or waves of migration from foreign lands. The term is frequently linked to discussions of cosmopolitanism in the post-colonial world.28 Yet creolization and Creole identities are different from most kinds of cosmopolitan cultural formations that develop in diasporic communities. Enslavement and forced migration were at the heart of the cultural exchanges that led to the development of Creole identities. These actions cut off the enslaved from their cultures of origin.29 Recognition of the condition of being mostly severed from one’s natal culture magnifies scholarly awareness of the agency and creativity of slaves in the creolization process. Sidney Mintz summarizes this point nicely in stating “creolization was not the fragmentation of culture and the destruction of the very concept, but the creation and construction of culture out of fragmented, violent, and disjunct pasts.”30 Creolization scholars debate whether creolization is a social process distinguished from hybridity or is a type of hybridity that occurs in the context of slavery.31 In this thesis, creolization is treated as a distinctive type of hybridity that can understood as one constituent part of the larger and more complex forces of cultural exchange referred to collectively as transculturation.

I avoid using the term “localization” in this thesis. Popularized in the work of O. W. Wolters, this term has had a long and sturdy popularity among most Southeast

Asianists. Wolters replaced the term “Indianization” with “localization” as a way of describing the influence of Indian culture on the early phases of state formation in Southeast Asia. Wolters rightly argued that interactions between Indian and Southeast Asian cultures did not transform Southeast Asia into a more “Indian” place. Rather, these cultural forms were “fractured” and “drained of their original significance” in a transformative process of cultural adoption that made them fit appropriately into “various local complexes of religious, social, and political systems.” Wolters used the term “localization” fairly narrowly to describe processes of transculturation in which potent extra-local philosophies and religious beliefs were reshaped to fit local Southeast Asian contexts. Many scholars have since expanded the term into a synonym for “hybridity.”

While the broad use of terms such as “hybridity” and “localization” is appropriate for many kinds of research, these terms are not suitable in my analysis of transcultural processes among war captives. Cultural exchanges are affected by the contexts in which they take place, the parties involved, the political and social relations between the groups exchanging culture, and so on. The complexity of these interactions requires language that can parse cultural exchange into meaningfully smaller pieces with a focus on the specificity of the interaction. Cultural exchanges occur within specific matrices and through different vectors that drive the exchange. The cultural exchange that results from encounters between slaves and their masters is a very different matter than the result of encounters between long distance traders and local elites or between hostile neighboring states. Transfers of culture are affected by whether power relations are asymmetrical or equal, the presence or absence of racism or prejudice, colonial or non-colonial settings, the friendliness or hostility of political relations, and so on. These are some of the forces that combine to form the matrices within which cultural exchange occurs. The forces that drive cultural exchange should therefore be seen as “vectors” that produce different interactions within a specific cultural matrix. I have chosen to use the word “creolization” to describe the cultural exchanges that occur as a result of

32 Wolters, History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives, 55.
slave gathering warfare (a specific “vector of exchange”) in the mainland Southeast Asian context (a specific "cultural matrix").

Several prominent scholars of creolization in the Caribbean are reluctant to see the term used outside of the region. Sidney Mintz, Stephan Palmié, and Aisha Khan share the reasonable fear that as the term gains popularity, it is being gutted of its specific historical context. According to Palmié, scholars are misusing creolization theory to suggest that cultural mixing in the Americas occurred within an environment of “liberating indeterminacy” when in fact there was a rigid system of caste and separation.33 Mintz and Khan argue that the development of Creole societies hinged on specific historical conditions and political events in the region, making export of the creolization model highly problematic.34

However, the majority of scholars agree that creolization theory is an exportable concept. Cohen and Toninato point out that the historical term “creole” has long been used to describe a region larger than the Caribbean, including plantation islands in the Indian Ocean, parts of West Africa, Louisiana, Cape Verde, the Mascarene islands, and Brazil, and that it has been used to describe mixing among many different racial and ethnic groups. For these authors, the danger of misapplication arises when the term is not grounded in historical processes of slavery and dislocation similar to those described in the Caribbean. They suggest that this concern need not preclude “imaginative comparison” with areas outside of traditional creole realms: “To be more prosaic, there is a vast difference between saying some phenomenon is creolization, is like creolization or can be imaginatively compared with creolization—the difference between a literal, analogical and metaphorical use of the expression;” there is thus room for “an open-minded exploration of the new frontiers of creolization.”35 Edouard Glissant aligns with this

outlook in arguing that creolization as a concept describes “processes” rather than
“outcomes” of exchange, so can be used in analyzing other regions that are
undergoing or have undergone similar historical processes.36

Several scholars have suggested that creativity is part of the creolization
process.37 The cultural conditions of slavery (being stripped of one’s culture and
having to rebuild it) and the complex social positions of the enslaved (as people
between cultures and no longer completely of any one of them) combine in ways
that can turn the enslaved into potent generators of novel and hybrid artistic and
cultural practices. Furthermore, the position of the Creole as a creative being at the
apex of transcultural exchange can be long-lasting (perhaps never ending) because
dialogical exchanges between disparate cultures remain open. For these reasons,
the creolization of culture and the cultural flexibility of Creole peoples have been
described as ceaseless and forever “unfinished.”38

The notions of creativity and exchange that were generated in the Caribbean
context illuminate interesting contrasts with the Southeast Asian cultural setting. As
noted earlier, Southeast Asian war captives had the potential to fully assimilate into
dominant society, which slaves in the Americas did not. It is thus necessary to adjust
the Creole concept to recognize that the open, flexible identity of the Creole does
“finish” whenever an individual Creole abandons elective alterity and merges into
the dominant society. Secondly, Southeast Asia’s relative openness to exogenous
artistic practices meant that the transcultural creativity of certain prized captives
was actively maximized through elite patronage. This process is elucidated in the
next section that discusses the development of creolized Thai-Burmese music in
Upper Burma. This hybrid music emerged through interaction between high-level
Burmese palace elites and unnamed performers and musicians from Ayutthaya and

36 See the discussion of Glissant in Dominique Chance, “Creolization: Definition and Critique,” in The
Creolization of Theory, ed. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham N.C: Duke University Press,
37 Baron and Cara, Creolization as Cultural Creativity; Eriksen, “Creolization and Creativity”; Gilroy,
in Mixed Identities and Cultures, ed. Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato (London; New York: Routledge,
2010), 376–388. Eriksen, “Creolization and Creativity.”
their Creole descendants. Elite projects to absorb the artistic and intellectual culture of captives distinguish the system of slavery in Southeast Asia from that in the Americas. These differences require the modification or localization of creolization concepts to make them more appropriate to Southeast Asian processes of enslavement.

I’d now like to turn towards the political implications of creolization as an approach to the study of history. The subject of creolization was both popularized and, in a sense, politicized by the 1989 publication of the manifesto “In Praise of Creoleness” written by three Martinican intellectuals (Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant) passionate to reverse the Western historical and intellection frameworks that were, in their minds, dismissive of Creole cultures.39 These intellectuals argued that falsely grounded attitudes toward the hybrid culture of the enslaved and their descendants diminished a fair accounting of their historical achievements and contributions. The descendants of the enslaved were believed to inhabit a cultural no-man’s land located at the extreme fringe of putatively “pure” cultures and religious beliefs. Creole scholars counter that all world cultures have undergone processes of transculturation. Reversing the intellectual hierarchy that put false notions of cultural purity at the forefront of academic inquiry are the central political and ethical projects of Creole scholars. Cohen and Toninato describe the implications of these research agendas as follows:

Creolization has become a powerful and even subversive concept allied to contemporary discussions of cultural globalization. Creolization undermines primordial ideas of purity, race and ethnicity because it points to the existence and growing numbers of people of mixed heritage or affiliation. It challenges territorial and language based notions of nationalism. It questions, finally, narrow religious fundamentalisms, as creolization illustrates the syncretic nature of most belief systems rather than their supposedly divine origins.40

This helps us understand the quote that began this section, in which Bernabe, Chamoiseau, and Confiant boldly asserted that studies of Creole humanity would

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39 Interviews with the authors and a description of the social context in which the manifest was written can be found in Taylor, “Creolite Bites: A Conversation.”
necessarily lead to the “annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity.”

Walter Mignolo reads the manifesto’s call for an exploration of Creoleness that is “as complex as Creoleness itself” as an epistemological challenge to analyze transcultural exchange from a location at it’s intersections, from a subaltern point of view, and from a position (promoted by the manifesto’s authors) of “conviviality and hospitality.”

The other famous Martinican intellectual and promoter of creolization theory, Edouard Glissant, believes that false notions of religious, cultural, and racial purity were at the root of many 20th century outbreaks of communal violence. He argues that the study of the creolization processes has the potential to dispel the toxic historical “imaginary” that toleration and exchange with the Other necessarily results in the “dilution and disappearance” of one’s own culture. At their most bold, proponents of creolization theory thus promote the Caribbean as a “master symbol” or metaphor for comprehending the modern processes of globalization. Conceived in this way, the Caribbean is transformed from a marginal place of academic interest to a more crucial central position because it is a region transformed by transcultural globalizing forces several hundred years before similar forces swept into metropoles in other parts of the world. Viranjini Munasinghe summarizes this view: “The ‘aberrations’ that defined the Caribbean in an earlier era are now perceived as ‘normal’ because the rest of the world is becoming more like the Caribbean.”

In mainland Southeast Asia, long-standing inter-regional hostilities dominate local narratives of warfare and captivity. Interstate conflicts inevitably lead to

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44 I borrow the term from Cohen and Toninato, “Creolization Debate,” 11.
45 Munasinghe, “Theorizing World Culture through the New World: East Indians and Creolization,” 551. Along with Munasinghe, Hannerz is most associated with promoting the use of the Caribbean as a “master symbol” for understanding the modern processes of globalization. Hannerz, “The World in Creolization.”
emotionally charged stories about slave-gathering warfare to signify a history of victimization of one side by the other. Histories of Burma taking slaves from Thailand, Thailand taking slaves from Laos, and both Vietnam and Thailand gathering slaves from Cambodia are all grist for nationalist polemics. These contentious histories find further expression in schoolbooks, film and television, nationalist holidays, separatist movements, political conflicts, and border disputes throughout the region. These nationalist narratives perpetuate and aggravate cultural and political conflicts in the region.

My research seeks to invert nationalist narratives of slave gathering warfare by relocating the subject of my study from the nation-state to the histories of the captives themselves, the villages and neighborhoods of their descendants, their bewildering cultural complexity, and their position as agents of cultural exchange and invention. The subject matter of this research is inspired by the ethical drive of Creole activist scholars who believe histories of exchange and accommodation contain redemptive or peacemaking possibilities. In today's rapidly globalizing world, many people experience the kinds of extreme cultural dislocations and encounters that were once the provenance of captured peoples. These experiences seem to inevitably produce nationalist anxieties, intolerance, and fear of the Other. For these reasons, there is an imperative to produce histories that focus on cultural complexity, accommodation and exchange. At their most optimistic, advocates of creolization theory believe that this research agenda produces both a “model of” and a “model for” our troubled world system. The history of captive communities in Upper Burma is very much a history of exchange and accommodation. At my most

optimistic, I too hope that it could serve as some kind of model for Burma’s uneasy present, marked as it is by communal tensions, religious intolerances, and rigid, antagonistic ethnic identities.

3. Creolized Identity, Religion, and Culture in Upper Burma

This section is designed to establish a preliminary understanding of the historical and analytical framework used in this research project. I discuss the concepts of Creole identity, creolized religion, and creolized art using two short case studies or snap shots. First, I explain how ethnonyms are employed to render the evolving cultural identity of captured peoples, which I call “creolized identity.” I next present a case study on creolized religion that examines highly syncretic religious practices among the descendants of captive people taken from Manipur and settled in Sagaing, a former capital city in Upper Burma. The final snap shot expands on the idea of creolized art by looking at the development of a hybrid musical genre generated by the creative interactions between captured musicians and performers from Ayutthaya and their patrons within Ava’s royal court. By pairing two captive communities—Manipur and Ayutthaya—with the two cultural practices that are of primary concern in this thesis—creolized religion and creolized art—I hope to paint a clearer picture of the research priorities of this project.

3.1 Describing Creolized Identity

God forbid I renounce or deny
My manifold ancestry, its complex alchemy of mixtures mixing,
Or the tripartite play of continents clashing
that sparks my being.
...I proclaim myself multiple!
  -Gilbert Gratiant, Credo of the Half-Castes; or, I want to Sing France

Identity, ethnicity, and culture are all mobile categories with unfixed boundaries in constant processes of flux and change. They are reactive to contact with foreign people and foreign ideas. As Edouard Glissant was recorded as saying, “[O]ur identity is going to change profoundly on contact with the Other as his will on

This idea has become common sense to scholars writing on the subject of cultural history or cultural exchange, but it provides a challenge to the project of history writing because any “object” of historical study must have a fixed label so it can be discussed and analyzed. However, when we write the history of a people and put an ethnonym (such as “Burman,” “Thai,” or “Khmer”) on that group, it invites us to imagine these identities as somehow stable or containing some essential untarnished core. An ethnonym can give the impression that a group of people is an object with a solid casing that travels undisturbed along the stream of time. When looked at over the long view of history, identity, ethnicity, and culture are really as fluid as the streams they float in.

The captives from Manipur and Central Thailand that were seized in war and brought to live in the capital area or Upper Burma were culturally transformed by the experience. The food they ate, clothes they wore, language they spoke, and the ways they practiced their religion were all transformed by dislocation. However, many did not assimilate. If you travel to one of the many villages that were settled by captives from Manipur, the people living there today will tell you they are not Burmese, but “Kathe.” Kathe is the Burmese language ethnonym for Manipuri people. In the Kathe villages of Upper Burma, villagers describe the many ways they are different from their Burmese neighbors. They eat Kathe foods and worship Kathe spirits and not long ago they lived in Kathe-style homes and wore Kathe-style clothing. As I demonstrate in later chapters, very little of what they call “Kathe” corresponds to the culture of Manipur. The ethnonym Kathe is therefore an ideal tool for de-solidifying notions of identity and capturing the transformations that affected people taken from Manipur. In this thesis, the people of Manipur valley will be referred to as “Manipuri,” while those that were brought to Upper Burma will be referred to as “Kathe.” Making this distinction is a partial step towards recognizing that cultural change is undergone by slave communities throughout the world, especially among the first generation born into the new homeland, the Creole generation. The same terminology will be used to describe captives taken from

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Ayutthaya. The Burmese ethnonym for Ayutthaya people is “Yodaya.” The word Yodaya will be used to describe the generations of Ayutthaya captives transferred to and born in Upper Burma.

3.2 A Snap Shot of Creolized Religions in Upper Burma

The Kathe people of Linzin Su Village in Sagaing, one of Upper Burma’s old royal capitals located across the Irrawaddy River from Mandalay, are the descendants of captives transferred to this area as a result of slave gathering warfare. In the first half of the 18th century, for a variety of economic and political reasons, the upland kingdom of Manipur emerged as a strong rival to kingdoms in Upper Burma. A series of raids by the Manipuri cavalry contributed to the eventual collapse of the Taung-­‐ngu (Taungoo) dynasty in 1752. The subsequent rise in that same year of the Burmese King Alaungphaya (r. 1752-­‐1765) and the foundation of a strong and politically centralized Konbaung dynasty (1752-­‐1885) swiftly blunted the military power of Manipur vis-­‐à-­‐vis Burma. Complicated political dynamics of peacemaking alternating with warfare continued between the two states until 1819, when political instability in Manipur made the country vulnerable to a series of slave gathering assaults that Manipuri call the “Seven Year Devastation” (*Chahi taret khuntakpa*).50 These attacks led to the capture and forced deportation of tens of thousands of Manipuri and the almost complete depopulation of the Manipur lowlands. When Burmese forces were finally chased from the valley in 1826, British sources reported that the once populated landscape had mostly returned to nature and that a likely population of several hundred thousand valley-dwellers had fallen to less than five thousand.51

Many Linzin Su villagers are conscious of their foreign origins and can speak knowledgeably about the cultural differences between themselves and their Burmese neighbors.52 My excellent tour guide, Daw Myin Myin Yee, explained that

51 Johnstone estimates the population declined from somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000 to just 2,000 inhabitants. See (Sir) James Johnstone, *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1896), 86.
52 Information in this section draws from interviews and research notes taken while in the field.
many people in this area were boatmen who worked in the royal service system. She showed me a canal running through her neighborhood. Now dry, in the past it was used to tow boats out to the nearby river. Some of the men in this village were galley rowers on the king’s elite boats. Their oars were gilded. A few families in Linzin Su have preserved them as family heirlooms. The other village industry in this village used to be making blankets using back-strap looms; there were also a few goldsmiths.

Daw Myin Myin Yee showed me pictures of her family. One was of her great-grandmother Ame Gyi Thant, who was taken from Manipur by Ava’s military (see Fig. 1.2). A well-known story was that on cloudy days when the weather was cool, the women of Ame Gyi Thant’s generation would face west towards Manipur and cry. Sagaing is a hot, dry area, but on cloudy days the sky resembled the mountain kingdom of Manipur. I was told that these women yearned for their original homeland so much that weeping on cloudy days became a common practice, almost a ritual.

Figure 1.2: Grandmother Ame Gyi Thant, family photograph of Myin Myin Yee (research photograph taken 5/11/10 by author).

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53 Daw is an honorific used for older or married women in the Burmese language.
I had been invited to Linzin Su by Daw Myin Myin Yee to tour the spirit shrines in her village. Local spirits, called nats, are regularly propitiated in all the villages of Upper Burma to ensure the health and welfare of their inhabitants. The spirits in Linzin Su are different from the spirits in other villages, however, because the people who live in this village are Kathe and the spirits they worship are called Kathe nats. Daw Myin Myin Yee is relatively wealthy since her father is a military man. She has long been a patron of the fourteen spirit shrines in her community and donates money and time to their upkeep. With the help of her friend, the village spirit medium Daw Khin Kyo, she explained that the people in Linzin Su worship a pantheon of eight Kathe spirits. Kitani is the most potent spirit in this pantheon.

One of the most striking and somewhat terrifying experiences of my eighteen-month research period in Burma was being invited into the Kitani spirit shrine in Linzin Su village by Daw Khin Kyo, who is charged with propitiating the spirit. I had spent the day interviewing village women about this female village spirit, who was described only in the most fearsome ways. The spirit is a spinster, never married because she does not like men. She is sensitive to slights and expresses her anger by manifesting poisonous snakes. There are stories of snakes emerging from under her shrine and chasing away offenders. Men are not allowed to set foot in Kitani’s shrine, but her connection to the women of Linzin Su is strong. Before a boy can take a bride in this village, he must stand on the stoop outside the shrine and ask the spirit for permission to marry one of her girls. I was standing in that place looking in at the women congregating around the statue of the Kitani statue when Daw Khin Kyo told me that she had consulted with Kitani and it was acceptable for me to enter. Evidently my curiosity about Kitani inspired equal curiosity in her about me. I was not tempted to enter and politely declined. Supernatural snakes scare me.

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Batabuti is another terrifying female spirit. Batabuti lives in a crypt and like Kitani has no fondness for men. Batabuti also has the power to send snakes against her enemies. Not all of the village spirits are women, but the Linzin Su spirit cult is almost entirely female-centric, if not matriarchal. The Kitani and Batabuti nats are unique to this village. The ways that the spirits are propitiated are also different from other villages in the capital zone.

These heterodox practices are explained by the origins of both the people and the spirits. The Linzin Su Kathe told me they brought their spirits and their ways of propitiating them from Manipur.55 Yet while Linzin Su villagers believe their village cult to be similar to religious practices in Manipur, there are no gods in Manipur that resemble those worshipped in this village. Without going too deeply into the differences and similarities between Burmese and Manipuri spirit beliefs (covered in Chapter Five), I would like to give a picture of how the two religious practices blended together in Linzin Su.

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Several scholars have pointed out the “primacy of the feminine” in Manipur’s indigenous pre-Hindu religion. There was a mostly female class of priestesses and many female gods. Manipur also had important state cults that propitiated the power of the serpent. The god associated with snake-like powers and with the royal family was male, however, not female as in Linzin Su. Moreover, no female spirits in Manipur were called Batabuti or Kitani and had supernatural powers that allowed them to control snakes. No Manipur spirits shared their biographies as spinsters with a hatred for men. The Batabuti or Kitani spirits may have some connection to Manipur, but they mostly suggest a complex creolization process and blending of traditions.

Women dominate propitiation ceremonies in Linzin Su village. Virgin girls are charged with bringing food offerings to the village spirits. The food is given raw, and then after an appropriate time it is taken away from the shrine. Spinsters are charged with cooking the raw food offerings into foods designed to celebrate the spirits. While the tradition of giving raw food as an offering and then taking it away to cook is a tradition in several parts of Manipur, the incorporation of virgins and spinsters into important positions within the ritual appears to have developed in Upper Burma. For reasons that are not clear, it appears that the “primacy of the feminine” increased in the religious practices that developed in Linzin Su’s spirit cult.

Creole religious practices contribute in interesting ways to the preservation of certain aspects of Manipuri culture. For example, Kathe nats prefer Manipuri food as offerings. As a result the ritual foods in Linzin Su continue to follow recipes similar to those in Manipur. One example is a dish that the Linzin Su people call faw lan made of milk, butter, sugar, coconut slices, and rice. In Manipur this dish is called “phola” and follows the same recipe with the addition of bananas. The spirits also

57 I thank the Manipuri anthropologist M. C. Arun for this observation.
enforce a food taboo against eating snakes, fish that resemble snakes, and the “snake bean,” a popular snack in Burma that gets its name because the bean pods grow in a serpentine shape. These food taboos are a rare example of what scholars of African-American history sometimes call a “survival,” a cultural practice that seems to have been preserved more or less intact from the origin culture of the displaced person. Before the early-19th century, food taboos were common among the Manipuri. The Manipuri clan system (described in Chapter Five) was rife with totem animals that accompanied dietary restrictions. The “national” totem animal was the python, the symbol of the valley’s leading clan, the Ningthouja, which produced all of the valley’s kings. The Ningthouja proliferated food taboos against snakes and snake-like foods across the valley. This valley-wide food restriction was joined by smaller local taboos based on individual clan totems. These food taboos have disappeared from modern Manipur, but remain among the Kathe in Myanmar.

Kathe spirits also prefer that their shrines have dirt floors. This follows the house building traditions of Manipur in which floors were made of a recipe of dirt and manure that was pounded and hardened to the consistency of baked adobe. Linzin Su Kathe live in modern Burmese style homes with wooden or cement floors, but the floor-making traditions of their ancestors are preserved in their spirit shrines.

In the study of slavery, the scholar’s ability to reconstruct a historical, developmental understanding of religious creolization is usually impossible. The lives of captives and their descendants were not often recorded in historical sources and there are no records of the synthesis and reformulations that created the Kathe Kitani cult. The existence of this heterodox ritual and the passion and devotion which Kathe villagers pour into their ritual practices nevertheless provide ample evidence of the creolization process and its ability to generate new religious practices. Scholars of Caribbean creolization face similar barriers towards historicizing the cultural past of the enslaved. The manifesto “In Praise of Creoleness” describes the cultural present of the Caribbean as a “flower unable to see its stem”

and urges the development of historical practices that can recover Creole history from the silence of colonial records.\textsuperscript{59} Throughout this thesis, I describe the hybrid ceremonies and ritual practices I witnessed that alerted me to the history of the creolization process in mainland Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, these descriptions must remain frustratingly incomplete. The hybridity of a given ceremony is evidence of a historical process in motion, of ongoing and unending cultural invention by the descendants of foreign captives, but the history of this cultural flowering—its stalk—remains almost invisible.

In addition to “creolized religion,” in later chapters I consider practices best described as “creolized ceremonies.” Captured Muslim and Hindus from Manipur absorbed certain ritual practices from Burmese Buddhists and Yodaya captives into their communal ceremonies. Most prominent among these was the adoption of the Burmese Buddhist \textit{shin phyu}, a ceremony in which a boy becomes a monk for the first time. The ceremony reenacts the renunciation event of Buddha Gautama’s life. The boy, his family, relations, and fellow villagers dress as ancient royalty and parade with music through the streets of their community. This ritual activity has been incorporated by Manipuri Muslims in their own coming of age ceremonies.\textsuperscript{60} In this case, captivity in the Burmese Buddhist milieu transformed aspects of ritual practice without transforming core Muslim praxis. There are also cases, especially among Yodaya captives from Ayutthaya, of creolized Thai ceremonies being adopted by non-Thai members of the community. This includes making sand pagodas, an innovation of Thai captives that was taken up by their non-Thai neighbors and continues to be practiced today. Another example is the transformation of a Thai spirit shrine built to bless palace dancers into a sacred site for Burmese jade merchants, gold-pounders, and rural hay farmers.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{59} Barnabe et al., “In Praise of Creoleness,” 896.
\textsuperscript{60} Research Notebook 5/4/10 and 5/22/10.
3.3 A Snapshot of Creolized Art in Southeast Asia

In 1996, at an international conference on Thai studies, U Myint Kyi, a scholar of Burmese classical music, presented a paper on the subject of Yodaya thakyin (Ayutthaya music), a genre of Burmese classical music named after Ayutthaya (Yodaya in Burmese), the Thai capital conquered by Burmese forces in 1767.62 Yodaya music is not the only performing art in Burma that bears the name of the conquered Thai capital. There are also well-known Yodaya dance (Yodaya aka) and Yodaya theater traditions (Yodaya zat-pwe).63

Myint Kyi performed a selection of the well-known Yodaya song titled “Ei ei chu yei chai.” The song, roughly 200 years old, retains a long poetic passage sung in Thai (i.e., the Burmese singers believe the passage to be in Thai) about the beauty of Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana.64 It is believed that the pronunciation of this passage has been passed down orally since the lyrics were introduced into Upper Burma sometime after 1767. However, Myint Kyi asked his mostly Thai audience, “Do [these words] have any meaning for my Thai friends? I rather think that you comprehend not much more than I do myself.”65 The befuddling observation that the song is sung in a seemingly invented language that is neither Thai nor Burmese could be said of Yodaya music itself. This classical music does not sound Burmese to Burmese ears, it sounds foreign. Yet Thai audiences find nothing in the music that they recognize as their own. The question is intriguing: What is the Yodaya musical genre in Burma?

62 Yodaya was also the Burmese word for people originating from the city of Ayutthaya. The term has a range of meanings including the political (non-ethnic) conception that a Yodaya person was a subject of the king of Ayutthaya. It was also used as an ethnonym for Tai-speaking people originating from Central Thailand. In modern Burmese, Yodaya and Thai are sometimes used interchangeably as ethnonyms for people from Thailand, but Yodaya is considered an out-of-date term.

63 The prominence of these Yodaya art forms in Burma’s past has prompted significant interest among Burmese scholars. Three early studies were Maung Htin Aung’s Burmese Drama: A study with translations of Burmese plays (first published in 1937); Khin Zaw’s “Burmese Music (A Preliminary Enquiry)” (1940); and U Maung Maung Tin’s frequently cited Burmese language article “The culture received from Ayutthaya” [Yodaya hma yashi thaw yinkyehe mya] (first published in 1963).

64 In a Burmese production of the Ramayana dance-drama, the song is played in the scene where the monkey hero Hanuman first encounters the imprisoned Sita while conducting reconnaissance on the island of the Ogre king.

I argue that Yodaya music is a creolized art form born from the cross-fertilizing interactions between Upper Burma’s palace elite and captive performers and musicians from Ayutthaya. It simultaneously resembles parts of both music traditions and has elements that are found in neither of them. It is best understood as a novel musical form. Considered in this way, Yodaya music is similar to other more commonly acknowledged creolized musical traditions such as calypso, the songs that accompany capoeira, and the emerging “chutney soca” genre.\(^\text{66}\) It probably developed in ways that are peculiar to the Southeast Asian cultural context because Burmese elite from the highest positions of the court hierarchy (e.g., princes, princesses, court poets, ministers) participated in melding the two disparate musical traditions.

The capture of Ayutthaya’s urban population in 1767 entailed the transfer to Burma’s capital of many hundreds of Thailand’s royal elite along with Thai palace dancers, musicians, and other performing artists that had entertained these elite on a daily and weekly basis inside Ayutthaya’s palace walls. The result was a large-scale transfer of Thai performing arts traditions into the Burmese royal setting as well as an audience of recent captives that wanted to see them. Maung Htin Aung, Khin Zaw, and Maung Maung Tin all describe this process as a transformative event in the history of Burma’s performing arts.\(^\text{67}\) Khin Zaw cheekily describes the transfer of Ayutthaya’s artisans as the “time that our cultural store-house was filled with Siamese loot.”\(^\text{68}\)

The forms Ayutthaya’s musical traditions and its other theatrical arts took within the Burmese palace between 1767 and 1789 is difficult to determine. Maung Htin Aung, Khin Zaw, and Maung Maung Tin, along with numerous other Burmese scholars, are comfortable speculating that in this initial phase captured performers

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\(^{66}\) “Chutney soca” describes the blending of South Asian and Caribbean musical traditions that has become common since the 1980s on Caribbean islands with South Indian populations.


from the Thai palace enacted musical and dance performances for the captured Thai elite in the Thai language in a style that resembled its presentation in their former homeland. Maung Maung Tin’s discovery of a Burmese Royal Order from Crown Prince Shwedaung dated to December 1789 partially supports this speculation. The royal order created a committee charged with the translation of Ayutthaya’s (and Chiang Mai’s) songs and plays from Thai into Burmese. The order establishes a committee of eight palace elite personnel and poets, who, in collaboration with knowledgeable representatives from the Yodaya community, are expected to translate Thai plays and songs into poetic verse so as to render them “appropriate” for presentation in the king’s inner palace.69 One of the theatrical works was the Thai version of the Ramayana epic. The original 1789 translation no longer exists, but several other theatrical translations are still extant. (These are discussed in detail in forthcoming chapters.) The royal order suggests there was a phase in Burmese history in which Ayutthaya’s arts, performed in Thai, gained the interest and appreciation of Burma’s elite until it became necessary to make an official effort to render these popular arts into the Burmese language.

The translated theatricals from Ayutthaya and the music that accompanied them closely correlated to Yodaya identity in the minds of the Burmese. Michael Symes, the British envoy who visited Burma in 1795 and witnessed a performance of the Ramayana, was told by his Burmese hosts “that the best actors were natives of Siam, a nation which, though unable to contend with the Burmans and Peguers in war, have cultivated with more success the refined arts of peace.”70 Court presentations of the Ramayana were orchestrated for music from both Thai and Burmese ensembles, who participated simultaneously. One scholar’s analysis of the earliest surviving Ramayana stage play (dating to the late-18th or early 19th century)

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69 Pe Maung Tin, “Yodaya hma yashi thaw yinkyehmu mya [The Culture received from Thailand (Ayutthaya)],” 29–32.
found 508 different musical cues for the Thai orchestra and at least 16 occasions in which the Thai and Burmese orchestras were intended to play simultaneously.71

U Myint Kyi, in his highly-regarded history, A Literary History of Myanmar Music [Myanma tegita anusape thamein], suggests a three-part typology for understanding the movement of Thai musical elements into Burma’s court music: 1) “pure” Ayutthaya music; 2) Ayutthayan music in translation; and 3) the composition of Yodaya music. Myint Kyi describes the first phase, “Ayutthaya music,” as one in which recently resettled captives performed a “pure type” of Ayutthaya theater, dance, and music. The song “Ei ei chu yei chai,” discussed above, which still has lyrical passages of un-translated Thai, is a likely example of this early type, but adaptations were later made to its musical structure.72 This is followed by “Ayutthayan music in translation,” a phase dated to 1789 and the formation of the translation committee. Myint Kyi believes that in its time this music would have been predominantly Thai in composition and presentation, but with translated lyrics. Due to the profound differences between Thai and Burmese languages, numerous melodic adaptations would have to have been made to join the translated lyrics to the song’s melody. The third phase, likely beginning in 1804, is the composition of “Yodaya music,” or music that actively sought to hybridize desirable elements from both Burmese and Ayutthayan court traditions, thereby forging new genre of classical music in Upper Burma.73

Myint Kyi credits a musical competition held at an 1804 religious ceremony with initiating the development of Yodaya music. In that year the Burmese crown prince sponsored an umbrella-lifting ceremony for a temple in Mingun, a town a few

71 The text is known as the "Thiri Rama." It was composed by Neymyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung and is dated to the late-18th or early-19th century. Dr. Tin Maung Kyi, “Thiri Rama by Nadaka Kyaw Gaung (Translated in Abridged Form),” Unpublished manuscript (Siam Society Library, Bangkok, Thailand, 2006), 6. Similar findings are in Thein Han (U) and Khin Zaw (U), “Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Art,” in Yama Saung Ba Baung Khyo [Collected Articles on the Ramayana] (Rangoon: Pagan Book Printers, 2005), 297–8.

72 Today’s “Ei ei chu yei chai” cannot be said to closely resemble a Thai classical composition. It is believed that this composition continued to absorb Burmese musical characteristics in the two centuries since its was originally performed in Upper Burma.

miles upriver from present day Mandalay. The prince wanted to enliven the event with a competition between Ayutthayan and Burmese orchestras. He asked the court minister U Sa (b. 1766-d. 1853), a member of the 1789 translation committee and artistic polymath, to create a composition that both orchestras could play on relatively equal footing, making the competition more fair and perhaps more thrilling. U Sa produced the songs “Kha nwei san” and “Iwan pou aung.” Myint Kyi argues that these two works should be considered the first songs produced in what would become a decades-long project of merging Thai and Burmese musical traditions. Songs in this burgeoning style came to be called “Yodaya thakyin” (Yodaya music). U Sa would write later in his journal that “Kha nwei san,” an ode to summer weather and romance, was a “song styled in the manner of a Thai air.” This experiment quickly developed into a popular royal musical genre with roughly one hundred surviving examples. The two most prolific composers of Yodaya music were the aforementioned U Sa and the Burmese prince, Pyin Si. Between them they composed all of the surviving examples of Yodaya music.

Years later, U Sa headed a project to create a formal canon of Burmese court music in which roughly five hundred songs were collected into a single volume called the Maha Gita [The Great Songs]. The first anthology was completed in 1849. In 1870, by order of King Mindon, a more thoroughly organized manuscript of the Maha Gita was compiled in which every song was classified according to six official genres, one of which was Yodaya music. Later editions of the Maha Gita added or removed songs from the catalog based on the taste and judgment of the compilers, but the original six categories remained the core genres of Burmese classical music.

In this way, Yodaya music was canonized to become one of the core musical genres in the Burmese classical music tradition of today. The training of classical

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74 Ibid., 159.
75 Myint Kyi, “Three Yodaya Songs,” np.
76 The other five genres, in addition to Yodaya are Kyo (harp music), Bwe (eulogies), Thachin Kan (eulogies), Patpyo (court songs), and Mon (the Mon are an ethnic group settled in coastal Burma whose autonomous kingdoms were subordinated in the years immediately proceeding the conquest of Ayutthaya). See the discussion in Sayuri Inouie, “The Formation of Genre Division in Burmese Classical Songs with Special Reference to Song Anthologies on Palm Leaf Manuscripts” (presented at the Burma Studies Conference 2008, DeKalb, IL, 2008).
musicians, either through apprenticeship or through state training at a fine arts university, includes mastery of twelve Yodaya songs: eight composed by Prince Pyin Si prince and four by Minister U Sa. Yodaya songs are further subdivided into types; these categories are listed in Thai language. The pronunciation of these words has drifted from their original Thai sounds, but a few remain clear. The Yodaya term “pha yin khya” corresponds to the Thai word for “slow music,” while “ma ho thii” likely corresponds to “mahori,” a Thai word for a female musical ensemble that played and sang for kings in the inner palace.77

Ethnomusicologist Daphne Wolf’s study of Yodaya music points to several other interesting features of the genre that give some clues to the early creolizing process of merging two musical traditions. Beyond the grammatical differences between the two languages that would have necessitated adjusting the melodic structure of the songs, Wolf suggests that differences in singing styles between the two cultures affected the development of the Yodaya genre. For example, Thai classical singing has comparatively little vibrato when compared to Burmese singing. This carries into the Yodaya singing style in the present day. In interviews, classically trained Burmese singers describe singing Yodaya music from a different place in their throat compared to other genres of Burmese classical music. The tempo of Thailand’s classical music is slow and stately in comparison to the much more rapid percussive quality of Burmese classical music. This difference is also captured in Yodaya songs because they are often slower in tempo than other genres of Burmese classical music. In the classical tradition, each genre of music has a fixed tuning that is thought to produce a resonant emotion in its audience. The tuning for Yodaya music is called pule (pearl). It is designed to elicit “nice” and “pleasant”

77 The famous Thai historian, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, visited Burma in 1936 with the partial goal of locating Thai influences on Burmese culture. He and his daughter interviewed a woman who had been trained by a palace dancer from King Mindon’s reign. From this discussion he tentatively translated the following Yodaya musical terms: 1) Khamein (translates to khamen in Thai or the word Khmer in English); 2) Ngu-ngit (yu ngit or “incitement”); 3) Maho-thi (mahori or “stringed orchestra”); 4) Htuanauk (tanao or “people of Tenasserim”); 5) Hparan’tin (farang ten or “European dances”); 6) Khetmun (khaek mon or “Indians and Mon”); 7) Hparin (palin or “a type of Thai melody”); 8) Hparin-cha (phiang cha or “slow melody”); and 9) Hparin-chin (phlang reo or “fast melody”). See Damrong’s description of this encounter in (Prince) Damrong Rajanubhab, Journey through Burma in 1936: A View of the Culture, History and Institutions, trans. Kennon Breazeale (Bangkok: River Books, 1991), 225–6. See also Myint Kyi, “Three Yodaya Songs,” n.p.
feelings in some instances and the emotion of “longing” in others. For these reasons, Burmese audiences tend to describe Yodaya songs as calmer than other genres. Wolf points out that many well-known Yodaya songs were lyrically and musically composed to evoke “longing” in the audience, which she suggests could have related to the position of Yodaya people as captives in Upper Burma or to the perception of Burmese composers and translators that captives must have longed for another land.78

Wolf also noticed that Yodaya songs contain unique melodic flourishes or cadenzas that are not found in other genres of Burmese classical music. These fixed melodies are repeated between passages of the larger song, like a holding pattern that allows musicians to mentally prepare for the song’s next movement. Wolf suspects that these cadenzas are the aspect of Yodaya music that retains the closest affinity to Ayutthaya’s classical music tradition. She found that the introductory melody in the first verse of U Sa’s “Kha nwe sang” parallels the melody in the Thai classical composition “Kruang sai.”79 These melodic retentions might help explain the experience of Thai Prince Damrong Rachenubhab, who visited Burma in 1936 to uncover the cultural remnants of the Thai captured more than 160 years earlier. After watching a presentation of Yodaya music he reported:

There were about ten dancers, with the obligatory older woman-teacher who came out, stood and sang while leading the group. I noticed that the melody of her song was actually a Thai melody, because the Burmese tend to sing their songs in spurts, not in a long melody line like the Thai. The song that she sang for us was very pretty, but I had no idea what it was.80

Prince Damrong was a scholar of Thailand’s theatrical traditions and had penned several articles on the history of his country’s dance, music, and theatrical traditions. His description captures the reformulations that transformed Ayutthaya music into

78 Daphne Wolf, “Bamarische Musik: Yodaya-Lieder im historisch-kulturellen Kontext Myanmars” (Regiospectra, 2010), 49–53, 71–72, 90. I thank the author for providing me with a draft translation of key passages from her German language thesis and for pointing me to important Burmese language texts on this subject.
79 Ibid., 96–8, 104.
80 Damrong Rajanubhab, Journey through Burma in 1936, 204. Quoted in Wolf, 104.
Yodaya music. To Damrong, it retained something recognizably Thai in terms of melody and singing style while simultaneously remaining unrecognizable.

Yodaya music is a creolized art because it is best understood as a novel musical form, a genre unto itself, which is precisely how it is defined in the musical manuals written in the later Konbaung period. Yodaya music was just a part of a much larger transcultural interaction that also generated Yodaya dance and Yodaya theater. It has been argued that the latter in particular led to a creative transformation of the performing arts in Burma. In addition, we can call Yodaya music a creolized art form because it could only have been produced in the context of slavery. The intermingling of Ayutthaya’s and Ava’s palace musicians and theatrical artists that generated the production of Yodaya music was a byproduct of the 1767 sack of Ayutthaya. It is difficult to think of any other social force that could have put these two groups together for the sustained amount of time necessary to produce a new art form. More than thirty-five years passed between the time Ayutthaya was sacked and the first Yodaya song was composed. The “Thai” orchestra that played the first Yodaya songs likely included many musicians born in Upper Burma to the original captive generation from Ayutthaya.

However, the creolization processes that generated Yodaya music were different from those operating in Atlantic slavery because slave-taking elites were actively involved in hybridizing two cultures in Burma. A prince and a court minister composed all of surviving examples of Yodaya music. The moves to include Ayutthaya’s musical traditions in the palace, to translate songs and plays, and then to create a genre of classical music based upon this music is just one small facet of the larger aim of slave-gathering warfare in the region, which was to incorporate the skills of captive peoples into the palace and the larger society. This is a marked contrast with the Atlantic slave system in which the African cultures of the enslaved were denigrated and laws and social mores were enforced to stifle the flow of cultural practices between the enslaved and the dominant societies. Creolization in the Atlantic world flourished in seeming opposition to the social forces arrayed

81 See Maung Htin Aung, *Burmese Drama*, chap. 2; and Singer, “Ramayana at the Burmese Court.”
against it; it was relatively rare for the autochthonous skills of Africans to be recognized and exploited. By contrast, in the Southeast Asian setting, the useful skills of war captives were targeted for incorporation into different kingdoms’ labor systems. The issue of elite participation and the relative openness of mainland Southeast Asian societies to the incorporation of foreign ideas must be taken into account in any discussion of how mainland Southeast Asian creolization can be distinguished from Atlantic or Caribbean creolization. The issue of comparability between the system of slavery in Southeast Asia and the one that operated in the Atlantic is the subject of the next section.

4. Deliberating on Southeast Asian Systems of Slavery

Historical studies of slavery are, by definition, both global and comparative. Slavery, in fact, is an institution whose practice has covered most of the documented history of the world and has spread across many different countries and regions around the globe. Thus, very few societies have remained historically untouched by it.

-Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari

Slavery in Southeast Asia did not much resemble the system of slavery found across the Atlantic “plantation complex.” The plantations of the Americas were notorious for extreme violence, brutal racism, and a capitalist organization in which large numbers of chattel slaves produced valuable agricultural commodities for world markets. In contrast, the enslaved in Southeast Asia were frequently protected by law and tradition from undue violence and other egregious acts on their persons, it was unusual for the slave status to carry a permanent stigma or negatively racialized identity, and the enslaved were rarely put to work producing marketable commodities. One of the most marked differences with Atlantic

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84 There are some exceptions. For example, some scholars argue that the cultivation of spices such as cloves and nutmeg by slaves on the Indonesian islands of Ambon and Banda came to resemble plantation slavery in the Americas. See Peter Boomgaard, “Human Capital, Slavery and Low Rates of
slavery was the potential for a person owned by another person (i.e., a slave) in the Southeast Asian setting to hold a higher status than a free peasant who was not owned by another person. In his classic study on the subject, Anthony Reid elaborated the above distinctions between Atlantic and Southeast Asian slavery while insisting on the applicability of the term “slavery” in the Southeast Asian setting. He wrote:

There are few such institutions which appear to be so universal as "slavery". Yet many would have us abandon a term so laden with pejorative European-American associations. As soon as we replace it with "bondage", "dependency", "rights-in-persons" or "dyadic ties", however, we discover that we have exchanged a category with difficult boundaries for a category so broad as to be almost meaningless.85

More than 25 years after the publication of Reid’s essay, the debate over the word “slavery” among Southeast Asianists remains unsettled, so it is worth reviewing some of these issues.

Southeast Asianists arguing for the use of terms such as “servant,” “retainer,” “dependent,” or indigenous terms believe that the terms “slave” and “slavery” are implicitly linked to the experiences of Africans in the Americas and should only be used to describe unfree laborers in highly degraded social positions. There is much to commend this view, but adopting such strictures can have unintended consequences. First, defining “slavery” strictly as “the unfree labor system of the American plantation” negates uses of the word “slavery” that pre-date the plantation complex. Joseph C. Miller demonstrates that beginning around c. 1500, economic change gradually commercialized and transformed the Atlantic slavery system until it bore little resemblance to modes of slavery in the pre-capitalist era. Earlier slave systems, such as Biblical slavery, Greek and Roman slavery, Viking

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85 Reid, “Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History,” 1.

slavery, and medieval slavery, were mostly or completely non-commercial.86 Plantation labor was mostly absent from these earlier systems. Slavery was instead centered on household production, which made the incorporation of slaves into their captor family possible. Racialized exclusion of the enslaved was also less frequent. In a variety of these systems, especially within Greek and Roman slavery, it was common for the enslaved to assume high status positions.87 Carried to their logical conclusions, the arguments of certain Southeast Asianists would require us to rename all or most of the long accepted uses of the terms “slave” and “slavery.” While there may be adequate grounds for developing neologisms for systems of unfree labor in the pre-capitalist era, it is probably better to simply accept that the semantic range of the words “slave” and “slavery” has always been expansive enough to encompass the historical system of unfree labor found in Southeast Asia.88

These terminological issues are brought into even greater relief when we consider the widely accepted term “Muslim slavery” used by historians to describe the historical system of slavery that encompassed a vast Muslim-dominated region stretching from eastern Africa and the Middle East through northern India and Bengal. This system of slavery mirrored the system found in Southeast Asia. Here the idiosyncrasies of regional specialty and terminology become apparent. Among some Southeast Asian specialists, the fact that people who were property could attain a certain level of autonomy and ascend to a high social position makes using the terms “slave” and “slavery” inappropriate. However, specialists on Islam do not consider it problematic to produce a comparative monograph entitled Slave Elites in

87 The example of Greek slaves who served in high-status, high-skill positions such as surgeons, assayers, teachers, and secretaries is noted by Tracey Rihll, “Slavery and Technology in Pre-industrial Contexts,” in Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern, ed. Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 129–30.
88 This idea can be found expressed somewhat differently in Reid, “Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History,” 2–4.
the Middle East and Africa. The disparities among scholars of different area studies become more apparent if we imagine a 16th century merchant ship plying the trade route connecting Bengal and coastal Burma on which some members of the crew are the human property of the captain. These sailors would have left Calcutta as “slaves” to arrive in Pegu as “servants” and repeat this disorienting transformation with each crossing of the invisible terminological meridian that divides India from Burma (or more precisely the terminological meridian that lies between scholars of Muslim India and scholars of Burma).

Parochial definitions of the term “slavery” have the additional disadvantage of stymying broadly comparative analysis such as the kind proposed in this thesis. It is best then to recognize that global commercial development stimulated a stark division among slave systems: the plantation system that developed after the 16th century in the Americas and some other world regions versus the non-commercial slavery that existed before the 16th century and other world regions such as mainland Southeast Asia. The latter slave systems were not harnessed to the production of global commodities, but they were still systems of unfree labor.

In Slavery and South Asian History, Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton raise the important and often overlooked epistemological implications of using or not using the word “slavery” to describe a system of unfree labor. The Atlantic plantation model of slavery, they argue, created a hegemonic and Eurocentric definition of “slavery” conceptually married to the events of Western history. It forces scholars to treat non-Western forms of unfree labor as some other “thing.” Chatterjee argues that an unintended by-product of defining non-Western forms of unfree labor as “not slavery” is that it dams the historical experiences of these unfree people to a double silence. The first silence is because unfree people are historical subalterns. The second silence is because their status as “not slaves” casts

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them into a gray zone outside the realm of scholarly interest. There are no rich
comparative studies of servants or dependents, no audiences for such studies, and
no theories to draw upon. Eaton argues that plantation slavery should be considered
one well-known model of slavery, while South Asian models (and by extension
Southeast Asian models) can work to expand the “conceptual range of slavery” as a
“category of historical study,” with the goal of placing all varieties of slavery into
“broader frameworks” of comparative or world history. I share this goal.

Catherine Cameron, editor of the recent collection *Invisible Citizens: Captives
and their Consequences*, broadly defines slavery as the involuntary transfer of a
person from one society to another, but suggests sidestepping the issue of definition
altogether. She stresses that in studies focused on captive taking and cultural
exchange, a precise definition of the word “slave” is less important than determining
the ways in which captives were integrated and the roles they held in the society of
their captors. Fruitful analyses arise when scholars focus not on defining terms but
on the activities of captured people after they are transferred to new lands. Are the
enslaved integrated or held apart from the dominant society? Do they serve in high
or low status positions? Do they labor in households in cities or on plantations in the
countryside? Do they participate in religious rituals, hunt, raise food, or work in
craft production? Are they recruited into the military or religious institutions? Are
they permitted to assimilate fully into the dominant society or not? Answering these
kinds of questions should allow us to determine the potential for cultural
transmission and the comparative potency of enslaved people as agents of cultural
exchange within any given system of slavery.

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91 See Indrani Chatterjee, “Slavery, Semantics, and the Sound of Silence,” in *Slavery and South Asian
History*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Indiana University Press, 2006); Indrani
Chatterjee, “Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia,” in *Slavery
and South Asian History*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Indiana University
Press, 2006).

92 Eaton, “Introduction,” 2–3. However, the authors do not want to present this as a new universal
definition. They add that when the antithesis to “slavery” is not “freedom,” then the proper way to
understand the slave is as a person “relatively more dependent on the will and power of someone
else than were non-slaves.”

93 Catherine Cameron, “Introduction: Captives in Prehistory as Agents of Social Change,” in *Invisible
Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences*, ed. Catherine Cameron (Salt Lake City: University of Utah
Press, 2008), 1–2, 12–16.
Following Cameron, it would be helpful now to outline the basic parameters of the Southeast Asian system of slavery so as to develop a better understanding of its potential for generating cultural exchange. Anthony Reid’s 1983 introduction to *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia* is still considered a classic study of the Southeast Asian system of slavery. Historian Gwyn Campbell has recently expanded Reid’s comparative observations to the entire Indian Ocean region, an area stretching from the east coast of Africa across India to Southeast Asia. Campbell observes that throughout the Indian Ocean region, violence played a less significant role in the management of the enslaved, presumably because the constant demand for labor meant that an enslaved person had greater recourse to escape to another master when they experienced ill treatment. The enslaved generally had recourse to traditional and prescribed rights not seen in the American plantation system.

Plantation labor was rare and the enslaved served in a great variety of tasks outside agriculture such as soldiers, artisans, fishermen, concubines, gurus, weavers, merchants, and traders, and so on. Slave trade across the Indian Ocean was multidirectional, with multiple, crisscrossing points of origin and sale, which was also unlike Atlantic slavery where the enslaved originated in Africa and were transported westward for sale. It was also frequently the case in the Indian Ocean region that the slaves of high-status persons were often materially better off than commoners. Furthermore, women were consistently more highly valued than men, fetching higher prices for their attractiveness, reproductive ability, and exotic skills such as dancing or musicianship. Finally, slavery in the Indian Ocean was marked by the ability of the enslaved, over time, to assimilate into dominant cultures as non-slaves, often through absorption into the kinship networks of their captors.94

It is also important to recognize that the enslaved held complex social positions vis-à-vis non-slaves in this region. Unlike slavery in the Atlantic World, there was no meaningful distinction between “slavery” and “freedom” in the Indian Ocean region. Like slaves, non-slave commoners were required to surrender unremunerated labor to the state in the form of corvée, in-kind taxes, and other

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94 This paragraph draws from Campbell, “Introduction,” vii–xxvi.
labor services. They could also be forced to move to new locations or change assigned occupations and they could be given as gifts by the king to other elites. Thus, free (non-slave) persons might best be understood as filling the roles that serfs and peons did in other cultural zones.95 In some periods of Southeast Asia, kings required such onerous corvée labor from their putatively free subjects that significant numbers of people sold themselves into bond slavery to escape these demands on their labor.96 This reinforces Reid’s point that slavery in Southeast Asia was never sharply demarcated from other forms of unfree labor, some of which could be equally oppressive.97 Campbell concludes that it is best to view the enslaved in this region not as outsiders (as they were in Atlantic slavery) but as people existing within “a social hierarchy of dependence” in which each person “possessed a status with concomitant rights and obligations [that] embraced both slaves and non-slaves.”98 In summary, following Campbell’s discussion, we can observe that in Upper Burma and throughout the Indian Ocean region, slaves and non-slaves worked side-by-side within an unfree labor system in which non-slaves did not necessarily hold higher status positions nor work in more desirable professions.

This comparative summary of regional slave systems allows us to return to Cameron’s injunction to analyze the way captives were integrated into the society of their captors. In Upper Burma, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region more generally, the boundaries between enslaved and free were indistinct and fluctuating. There was a greater tendency to integrate enslaved into the larger society than free commoners because foreign skills were highly valued. Skilled captives could be incorporated into the unfree labor system in high status positions. Religious and racial intolerance was unusual. The exchange of enslaved people was both circuitous and circular, as captives were shuttled back and forth across hostile borderlands of different kingdoms. Finally, in general, female captives had a greater

95 Ibid. vii-xxvi.
96 In these situations, some states such as Mataram, Bangkok, Ava, and Chiang Mai or Lanna took steps to impede the voluntary movement of free persons into slavery.
capacity to stimulate cultural exchange because they were more quickly absorbed into their captors’ family structures through marriage and sexual relations. In Southeast Asia where elite men often took many wives, female slaves were valued for their reproductive ability which would have further accelerated this vector of exchange.

This broad combination of factors demonstrates that mainland Southeast Asia was amenable to the forces of transculturation and creolization. In fact, the obstacles to transcultural exchange in Southeast Asia were markedly lower than in the Atlantic plantation system. I therefore argue that the creolization process was just as potent in Upper Burma as in the French speaking Caribbean, the region where creolization theory developed.

There is no doubt that siege warfare in Southeast Asia was bloody and horrifying. For months on end, soldiers slaughtered one another, bombarded and burned cities, and waged psychological warfare. If city walls were breached, the inhabitants were usually bound together and forcibly marched hundreds of miles back to the victor’s territory. This can only be termed “slave gathering” warfare. At least at this stage, the captives should be understood as “slaves.” Any other terminology seems evasive, even outlandish. Should we call this “servant recruiting warfare” or “dependent collecting warfare”?

On arrival, enslaved captives were incorporated into the labor system of their new homeland. Some enslaved people were put into high status positions as royal advisors or skilled soldiers. While aspects of their lives remained highly circumscribed, it would no longer be possible to think of them as “slaves.” Other enslaved people were placed in middle status positions such as royal artisans or in low status positions as gem miners, land clearers, galley oarsmen, or irrigation repairmen. Some captives were placed in labor categories that bore a social stigma or outcast status, such as temple slaves or prostitutes. Very low status captives worked at tasks that closely resemble the kinds of work called slavery in other parts of the world, while those who held high and middle status jobs bore little resemblance to even the widest definition of “slave.”
Thus the incorporation of enslaved foreigners into other Southeast Asian societies was a complex, many-tiered process and each tier had a different potential for assimilation and exchange. Rapid social integration and advancement was possible for some captives, so the transition from foreign outsiders to cultural insiders may have occurred soon after their relocation. Similarly, the transition from being a slave (i.e., someone who is sellable property of another person) to an unfree laborer (i.e., someone whose control over the conditions of their labor is highly circumscribed, but is not considered property) might also have occurred quickly for some captives. Conversely, captives given to temples were forced into a status as polluted outsiders, a status that transferred to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity. For temple slaves, social incorporation and cultural exchange were much less possible. Even today in Mandalay the descendants of temple slaves hide their family history to avoid stigma and discrimination.99

In Upper Burma, within the immense system of unfree labor that was the engine of the urban economy, the distinctions between enslaved captives and non-captive unfree laborers is difficult to discern. The court documents we are left with do not answer even the simplest questions about the lives of captive people: How quickly did they learn Burmese? At what rates did they intermarry? For how long were captives seen as outsiders? For one generation? For two? Over an unknown amount of time and employing means that we can only guess at, enslaved foreigners could become local unfree workers, but historical details of the movement across these social boundaries remains elusive. These indistinct, ill-defined boundaries reveal something significant, however: captive and non-captive people worked side-by-side and it was possible for potent networks of transcultural exchange to form within this hodgepodge.

5. Chapter Outline

Anthony Reid correctly argues that the control of labor through slavery was a key means by which power was accumulated in Southeast Asia.100 War captives enlarged the state’s labor pool and were symbolic representations of elite pomp and power. However, captives had their own kind of cultural power. They were potent agents of intra-regional Southeast Asian cultural exchange and they both invented and stimulated the creation of novel artistic and cultural practices. By using interviews and other unconventional sources, this thesis aims to reach beyond court histories and other elite documents to uncover a history of these transcultural exchanges. To this end, the remainder of this thesis is divided into four chapters.

The next two chapters paint a picture of slave gathering warfare and labor organization in mainland Southeast Asia. Chapter Two examines mainland Southeast Asia’s endemic inter-state warfare from the 18th to mid-19th century. It demonstrates how warfare reshuffled the population of mainland Southeast Asia on the eve of European colonial expansion into the region and had a profound effect on mainland Southeast Asian cultures. Chapter Three outlines the pre-colonial labor systems of Burma, Thailand, and Manipur, focusing the incorporation of foreign captives, particularly artisans, into these labor systems.

Chapter Four deals more specifically with the intertwined histories of Upper Burma and Central Thailand. It describes the long history of warfare between the two states and the captives that were taken from Ayutthaya and settled in Burma’s capital zone. The second half of this chapter then reconstructs the history of cultural exchange that was stimulated by the presence of Yodaya people in Upper Burma. Although Yodaya captives have mostly assimilated into Burmese society, so the study of their communities is no longer possible, Thai artisans, musicians, dancers, and other skilled people made a significant impact on the culture of Upper Burma. Evidence of their artistic influences is used to supplement the limited documentary evidence about the Yodaya community. Chapter Five is a parallel study of the Manipur case. It looks at the history of warfare between this state and Burma and

100 Reid, “Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History,” 8.
the creolizing forces set in motion by the presence of Kathe captives in Upper Burma. Reconstructing this history has benefited from the numerous extant communities of Kathe people in the capital zone. Interviews and observations of rituals and ceremonies in these communities are used to supplement archival research.
Chapter 2
Violence, Warfare, and the Creole City in Mainland Southeast Asian History

Slavery populated the most flourishing of Southeast Asia’s cities. It changed people’s ethnic and cultural identities on a massive scale... Finally, slavery must remain as a cross-cultural concept because, like trade and warfare, it is one of the modes of interactions between peoples of different languages and cultures.

- Anthony Reid

We bend toward [Creoleness]... confident of the necessity of accepting ourselves as complex. For complexity is the very principle of our identity. Exploring our Creoleness must be done in a thought as complex as Creoleness itself.

- Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant

1. Introduction

This chapter examines slave gathering warfare in the 18th and 19th centuries and the ways that the resettlements of captive peoples and war refugees shaped the cultures and histories of urban places in mainland Southeast Asia. Creolization theory posits that areas where captives from many different backgrounds are settled can become highly generative places for complex, multilateral forms of cultural production. As captives struggle to (re)build their cultural traditions in a new place, they inevitably draw on the traditions of other captured peoples and of the dominant society in which they are held. The dominant society is simultaneously transformed as various hybridized artistic, culinary, musical, and religious forms and practices pass from captive communities into the dominant culture. I call urban areas where captives and war refugees were settled “creole spaces.” The size and number of creole spaces in Southeast Asia were considerable. In Siam during the reign of Rama III (r. 1824-1851), Sir John Bowring estimated the total number of war captives in Bangkok at around 46,000 out of a total urban population of some

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1 Reid, “Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History,” 36.
300,000 people. At approximately 20,000 captives, the largest of the groups were the Lao, followed by 10,000 Cochin Chinese, 10,000 Mon [Peguans], 5,000 Malay, and 1,000 Burmese.3

The first section of this chapter is a peripatetic history of a creole space in Bangkok, the capital of modern of Thailand. This space encompasses several dense urban neighborhoods that lie between the Bangkok Yai and Bangkok Noi canals (khlong) on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River. This was just one of many creole spaces located in Bangkok. In Bangkok as in other prominent cities in Southeast Asia, such creole spaces had important culturally generative roles in the dominant societies.4 Capturing artisans was an important part of interstate warfare in Southeast Asia and the Burmese Royal Chronicles bragged about the quantity and skills of the people seized from the fallen capital. Viewing mainland Southeast Asian history through the lens of slave gathering warfare has the benefit of shedding light on an unstudied vector of intra-regional cultural exchange while at the same time broadening our understanding of cultural exchange in urban places and situating exchange in the agency of war captives, people otherwise marginal to the national history of Southeast Asian states. The overlooked importance of these modes of exchange, especially in urban areas, is why I have titled my thesis “The Creole City in Southeast Asia.”

Creole Cities, however culturally generative they may become, were built on human suffering and cultural dislocation. Creole spaces in Southeast Asia were settled by people who survived siege warfare, were seized at the point of a sword or a gun, then tied together and marched hundreds of miles or thrown into the hull of a junk and sailed off to a new land. The many records that we have of these forced movements of captured people demonstrate that fatality rates of captives reached

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3 John Bowring, The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to That Country in 1855, vol. 1 (London: J.W. Parker and Son, 1857), 189–90. Note that population estimates varied widely among different Western observers in this time period, so these numbers are only an educated estimate. See the discussion in Porphant Ouuyanont, “Bangkok’s Population and the Ministry of the Capital in Early 20th Century Thai History,” Southeast Asian Studies 35, no. 2 (September 1997): 240–260.

4 The next several chapters apply the same framework to studying the capital zone in Upper Burma, an area similarly dotted with creole spaces.
as high as fifty percent. Despite these records, the dominant historical narrative asserts slave-taking warfare in Southeast Asia was less brutal than warfare in other world regions. Two scholars argue that a widespread “low casualty thesis” of Southeast Asian warfare is in need of serious revision. Francis Bradley, looking specifically at the case of 19th century Siam-Malay warfare in Pattani, found documents demonstrating high levels of violence and the cruel treatment of Malay captives in the aftermath of rebellions on the Malay Peninsula. The second scholar, Michael Charney, looked more broadly at indigenous manuals for warfare and descriptions of battles and made a similar argument for the whole of the Southeast Asian region. Both studies raise questions about the long held assumption that casualty rates in pre-colonial warfare were minimized due to the high value placed on captives in Southeast Asia. Since violence - the violence of capture, violence of transport, and violence of plantation labor - is at the forefront of every history of Atlantic World slavery, an intellectual project of adapting creolization theory to the Southeast Asian cultural context must grapple with the differences and similarities in levels of violence between Southeast Asian and Atlantic World systems of slavery. The issues of violence and slave gathering warfare are explored in the second half of this chapter.

2. Bangkok, Creole City

The Bangkok Noi district of Bangkok lies on the Thonburi side of the river almost directly across the Chao Phraya River from the Grand Palace. The district is named for the nearly 500-year-old canal (khlong bangkok noi) that cuts through its center. On the south bank of the canal, not far from the great river, narrow walkways link several traditional artisan communities. To walk through this area is

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5 These sources will be discussed below.
6 See Bryce Beemer, “Southeast Asian Slavery and Slave Gathering Warfare as a Vector for Cultural Transmission: The Case of Burma and Thailand,” The Historian 71, no. 3 (March 2008). Also see Reid’s introduction to Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia.
to engage with the cultural and demographic consequences of slave gathering warfare in mainland Southeast Asia.

In Chapter One, I introduced the concept of elective alterity to explain the continuing existence of outsider identities maintained by descendants of war captives in mainland Southeast Asia. As many scholars have noted, ethnicity was a loose category in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. It was possible for individuals to move easily between and among these loosely bounded ethnic identities. Building upon this insight, scholars frequently assume that the foreign identities of captive descendants disappeared long ago because of the obvious benefits that accrued to the individual or community that fully assimilated into the dominant society. I demonstrate that this assumption is wrong, since communities of the descendants of foreign captives continue to exist. Two separate but interlocking forces could have retarded the full assimilation of captive peoples. The first was that skilled labor was positively associated with an exotic or exogenous origin. The positive stereotypes associated with skilled workmanship facilitated preservation of the foreign identities of the descendants of captives. The second force was religion. Heterodox religious practices (such as Mon New Year celebrations) or minority religious faiths (such as Islam or Hinduism) work to instantiate and re-instantiate the Otherness of the practitioner. While this subject will be explored in more detail in later chapters, it is worth pointing out its relevance to the walking history of Thonburi outlined in this section. The strongest examples of captive descendant identities are found clustered around places where skilled labor affiliated to a specific foreign identity is still being practiced (e.g., flute making, silk weaving), or was recently practiced (e.g., brick baking, boat making). They are also found around sites of religious practice (e.g., Temple Mon and the many mosques of Thonburi).

To date, historians writing in English have devoted little energy to the role of artisans in mainland Southeast Asian history. The histories of these artisans are nevertheless inscribed upon Southeast Asian cities. In Central Thailand, Upper Burma, and the Manipur valley, it is common to find urban neighborhoods, districts, and villages that bear the names of the types of specialized labor that were carried out there. In Bangkok Noi, urban neighborhoods have such names as Baan Bu (Metal
Pounding and Shaping Village), Baan Chang Hlo (Molten Metal Pouring Specialist Village), Baan Khao Mao (Rice Pounding Village), and Baan Matoom (Bael Fruit Village), where dried bael fruit snacks can still be purchased.

In 1767, artisans fleeing the conflagration in Ayutthaya settled here. Unlike artists who were captured by Ava’s soldiers and forcibly relocated to Upper Burma, these people managed to escape from the burning capital and make their way southward to congregate in the medium-sized trade town Europeans called Bangkok. Bangkok is located twenty miles up the Chao Phraya River from the sea. Here, at a defensible bend in the river, the Sino-Thai warrior-king Taksin (r. 1767-1782) began the long, fraught process of reestablishing rule in Central Thailand. Refugee artisans sought safety and protection in this fast emerging power center. King Taksin built his palace south of the Bangkok Noi canal in the shade of the famous Buddhist temple, Wat Arun (“Temple of the Dawn”). Outside this palace, nestled between military garrisons and the fortified households of Taksin’s trusted commanders, were communities of resettled artisans. Just as the skills of captured artisans from Ayutthaya passed into Burmese culture after phases of adaptation and hybridization, the skills of refugee artisans played an important role in establishing the new Kingdom of Siam.

Skilled labor can preserve refugee histories and knowledge of the traumas experienced during warfare. For example, the people in Baan Bu, a narrow urban

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8 Bangkok is a short form of the Thai bang makok, meaning “riverside settlement with olive trees.”
9 The temple was originally known as Wat Makok or “Olive Temple”. When King Taksin fixed the temple, he changed the name to Wat Chaeng. The name by which it is known today, Wat Arun Ratchawararam, was not given until the reign of King Rama IV (r. 1851-1868).
11 This is also true of the Baan Batr community on the other side of the river located at the foot of the famous Temple of the Golden Mount (Phu Khao Thong). Batr is a Thai word meaning “monk’s begging bowl.” This community makes metal bowls following traditional techniques that are at least three hundred years old. Hiran Saurus, a community leader in Baan Batr, took me to a community shrine where artisans regularly pay their respects. Within the small shrine was an ancient teak piston
quarter that runs along the Bangkok Noi canal, remember their family histories as refugees from Ayutthaya who narrowly avoided capture by Ava’s military. During an interview with eighty-year-old Wira Roonsaeng, a community leader and expert on neighborhood history, he produced his family sword. He traced his finger across the unsheathed blade, drawing my attention to stains and scratches on its surface. “These nicks,” he said wryly, “were made by Burmese bones.” Wira, like many Thais, believes that potent objects contain *winyaan* (soul or soul-like stuff). He wanted me to take the sword from his hand, but warned me repeatedly that a weapon like this was “thirsty for blood” and might leap at my face if I did not grasp it confidently. In the end I dared not take up the sword.¹²

In the past, Baan Bu was a well-regarded place for the study of a martial art and weaponry style known as *krabi krabong*. The style originated with Muslim soldiers in King Taksin’s army and the last remaining school teaching this technique, though it is run by Buddhists, respects this history by banning pork and alcohol from all school functions.¹³ In wartime, metalworking artisans typically made weapons rather than carry them into battle. This was the case in neighboring Baan Chang Hlo, where artisans molded cannons for the Siamese military during wartime and made Buddha images using the lost wax technique during times of peace. In recent times the small Buddha foundries in this neighborhood were forced to relocate when Bangkok’s pollution laws were upgraded in the early 1990s. Fortunately rice snacks and dried fruit treats can still be purchased in Baan Khao Mao and Baan Matoom.

War captives and foreign war refugees were also settled near this area. Exiting Bangkok Noi, one comes to Itsaraphab (Freedom) Road, named to celebrate

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Siam’s early military victories over the Burmese. Heading southward toward the Bangkok Yai canal leads to a Mon community situated around Wat Pradit, a Mon Buddhist Temple locally called “Temple Mon” (Wat Mon).\textsuperscript{14} If one wanders by in May, as I did, one will likely see a large banner outside Temple Mon advertising the upcoming Mon New Year celebrations. The exotic New Year stupa blessing ceremonies of the Mon have long been popular with ethnic Thai and Chinese Bangkokians.

Until the early-18\textsuperscript{th} century, the political center of the Mon ethnic group was located along the southern coastline of Lower Burma. Such coastal states formed political and cultural buffers between the Burmese-controlled Kingdom of Ava in Upper Burma and the Thai controlled Kingdom of Ayutthaya in Central Thailand. Edward Van Roy writes that, beginning in the mid-16\textsuperscript{th} century, warfare between Upper Burma and Lower Burma created a somewhat steady flow of Mon refugees into Siam that were punctuated by large migrations whenever a coastal state was decisively conquered. The phase of Ava’s military expansion that began after 1752 and resulted in the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 also led to the collapse of all the Mon controlled polities in the middle ground between these two kingdoms. Even larger flows of Mon refugees sought the relative safety of Central Thailand. These inflows of refugees continued up to the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century; the last recorded in 1815 was comprised of roughly 40,000 refugees. Siam’s kings, like their rivals in Ava, also battled with and seized captives from Mon coastal polities. As Van Roy points out, Mon war captives taken by Ayutthaya’s army in 1595 were some of the first settlers in Thonburi. Thai kings sent these Mon war captives to man newly built fortifications in Thonburi that were designed to block Ayutthaya’s access to the sea. Mon war captives from a much later date built Temple Mon. The aftermath of the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) destabilized Lower Burma. Siam’s King Rama III (r. 1824-1851) took advantage of this situation by seizing Mon captives from the troubled region. One captured group was conscripted to build military boats in a

\textsuperscript{14} The term wat means “(Buddhist) temple.”
shipyard located on the Bangkok Yai canal. These people were the builders of Temple Mon (Wat Pradit).\textsuperscript{15}

Mon refugees and captives were crucially needed for labor. They contributed to the economic and cultural development of Bangkok and Central Thailand. Writing around this time, a British Envoy to Siam reported of the Mon people: “The best troops and artisans and in fact the most useful subjects belonging to Siam are either emigrants from Pegu [the largest of the Mon controlled polities in Lower Burma] or descendants of those who formerly fled from Burmese usurpation.”\textsuperscript{16} The royalty in Upper Burma recognized that losing Mon labor to Siam gave the Siamese kingdom an advantage. In 1802, during a meeting with the envoy Michael Symes, King Bodawphaya (r. 1782-1819) complained that Siamese power was eclipsing the strength of his Ava kingdom, not because Ava was weak, but because so many refugees from Lower Burma were strengthening their workforce.\textsuperscript{17}

The Mon carried out specific kinds of skilled labor in Siam. Some of these skills are still associated with Mon identity in the present day. The Mon came to monopolize brick making. One of the major manufacturing sites for Mon bricks was in the immediate vicinity of Temple Mon.\textsuperscript{18} They also introduced several varieties of utilitarian pottery popular with Siamese farmers. The best known of these are large jars used for storing rainwater. In popular speech, these items are still called “Mon bricks” and “Mon pots” and the skilled boatmen that hauled these two products on the river are called “Mon boatmen.”\textsuperscript{19} The areas of modern Bangkok where Mon cultural practices are most preserved are places where masons, potters, and boatmen still ply their trades. This is not a coincidence. History shows Mons assimilating easily into Thai society. This is probably because Thai and Mon practice

\begin{itemize}
  \item Michael Symes, \textit{Michael Symes: Journal of His Second Embassy to the Court of Ava in 1802} (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), 211.
  \item Van Roy, “Safe Haven,” 175 n. 31.
\end{itemize}
only slightly different variations of the same faith (Theravada Buddhism) and consider themselves members of related ethnic groups.20

Van Roy estimates that the Mon population in Central Thailand was near 150,000 in 1820, but that it declined to 94,000 by the early 1970s, demonstrating a steady rate of assimilation amongst the descendants of Mon captives and refugees.21 Brian Foster’s anthropological study of ethnic identity and assimilation amongst the Mon discovered that ethnically specific commercial activities and artisanal specializations had a retarding effect on rates of assimilation. Mon villages associated with Mon bricks, pots, or boats maintained a stronger sense of Mon identity vis-à-vis Thai identity than non-specialized villages of farmers, most of which had nearly fully assimilated into Thai culture.22 (The complex relationship between skilled labor and identity preservation among the descendants of captured people receives further attention in upcoming chapters.)

One of the most notable effects of the Mon influx into Siam was on the Thai practice of Buddhism. Before ascending the throne in 1851, Siam’s famed King Mongkut (Rama IV: r. 1851-1868) lived for more than twenty-five years as a Buddhist monk. In that time he observed the more austere Mon practices of Buddhism and consulted with learned Mon monks. Mongkut was impressed with what he perceived to be a closer adherence to doctrinal Buddhist practice by the Mon. In the 1830s, the future king founded a new sect (nikaya) of Buddhist practice called Thammayut. Like the Mon, this sect promoted Pali studies and a greater textual mastery over sacred texts. It also promoted new forms of ordination and daily rituals for monks. Thammayut monks distinguished themselves from Siam’s dominant Buddhist sect, Mahanikai, by dressing in the Mon manner of covering both

20 Niyaphan Pholwaddhana, “Ethnic Relations in Thailand: The Mon-Thai Relationship” (Anthropology, University of Kansas, 1986). This thesis examines the indistinct boundaries between Mon and Thai ethnicity and the mutual cultural respect each of these peoples has for the other within Thailand. For example, when Thai and Mon marry, it is not typically thought of by either family as marrying outside the culture. This is distinct from marrying a Sino-Thai, who might be thought of as having a different culture.
shoulders with their robes rather than one. Mongkut’s new Mon-inspired sect drew adherents from Siam’s elite families. While today the sect remains small, its political and social powers are greatly magnified by its elite origins and membership.\textsuperscript{23}

To continue one’s journey around Bangkok Noi, take a right turn and walk east of Temple Mon. One arrives in Bang Sai Kai, a community more commonly known as Baan Lao or the “Lao Village.” The origins of this community date back to the 1778-79 Siamese conquest of the Lao capital Vientiane. During this war Siam, also conquered the Lao states of Luang Prabang and Champassak. The conquest resulted in the forced deportation to Bangkok of thousands of families, including farmers, artisans, and members of the Lao nobility. The total population of Lao captives is unclear, but Thai documents suggest that two-thirds perished on the journey. Besides Bangkok, these captives were settled along the southwestern frontier with Lower Burma in provinces such as Ratchaburi along the Gulf of Siam and Saraburi northeast of Bangkok.\textsuperscript{24} Ongoing Thai-Lao warfare moved more Lao populations into Bangkok, until the brutal destruction of Vientiane in 1827-28. Repeated slave gathering warfare demographically devastated Laos. As Edward Van Roy writes in his excellent history of Lao war captives, today the number of people residing in Thailand’s northeast provinces (where the majority of Lao captives were settled) is five times larger than the population of Laos itself.

Lao artisans were settled near the palace and incorporated into the Thai king’s corps of royal artisans called the Department of the Ten Royal Artisans (Khrom Chang Sip Mu). They were especially valued as court dancers and musicians, metalworkers in gold, silver, and bronze, woodworkers, and architects. The Lao who were settled in Thonburi joined the 5,000 Lao and 10,000 Cambodian war captives charged with digging defensive moats and canals when the capital relocated from the Thonburi side of the river to the Bangkok side in 1783-84. Van Roy believes the Baan Lao people also helped construct many of the royally sponsored temples built


in the new capital at that time. The Baan Lao population shrunk considerably after 1828, when Siam's King Rama III conscripted most of them to labor in a new shipyard located several miles downriver from Bangkok.25

Although Baan Lao is a remnant of what it once was, it remains famous as a site where Lao artisans design and manufacture elaborately decorated bamboo flutes. Uthit Imbupha is one of these Lao flute (khluy) makers, though at age seventy-five he is mostly retired from the family business. In our interview, he told me that only about seventy Lao still live in the neighborhood. If language change reflects acculturation, then the languages used in Uthit’s family present a story of gradual adjustment to a new cultural environment. His grandparents spoke only the Vientiane dialect of Lao. His parents spoke Thai in the household, though Uthit remembers that his mother was bilingual. Uthit himself cannot speak a word of Lao.

Not long ago Baan Lao artisans specialized in crafting many things from bamboo, including blowguns for bird hunting, birdcages, and another well-known Lao musical instrument, the khaen, or bamboo mouth organ. The bamboo for these objects used to grow close to Baan Lao, but the rapid development of Bangkok transformed the village into an urban neighborhood. Bamboo now has to be trucked in from remote areas and today only flutes are made here. The high quality flutes are beautifully crafted. The fire resistant surface of the bamboo is incised with floral or abstract patterns and then molten lead is gently ladled over the flute, singeing the exposed designs to a warm toasty brown color. The uneven inside surface of the bamboo is coated with beeswax to give the flute an even tone. Only gifted artisans know where to drill the finger holes so that the flutes will have the proper tone. High quality flutes can cost several hundred dollars, though they are not where the profits lie for the Baan Lao artisans. Uthit tells me that many decades back, the Bangkok city school system contracted with the families in this area to make flutes for music classes. These days, flutes are made very quickly from PVC pipe. It is impressive to think how many school children have pressed pursed lips to a Baan Lao flute over the last several decades. Asked if he made a good living, Uthit looked

serious for a moment, then rubbed his thumb back and forth across his fingertips in the international sign for lucre.\textsuperscript{26}

After plucking a flute up from a nearby bucket and playing it for me, Uthit boasted that in the past most of the music played in Bangkok was Lao. Miller and Jarernchai affirm that in their history of Thai music. After the 1828 depopulation of the Vientiane kingdom, Lao music became extremely popular among the Siamese elite. European visitors reported that nearly every noble family in Bangkok had a troupe of young male performers who danced and played the Lao mouth organ (\textit{khaen}) to entertain guests. In 1836, members of the U.S. diplomatic mission to Siam met with the Siamese Prince Chutamani, the brother of King Mongkut and second highest-ranking official in the kingdom. The Americans who were shown the musical instruments in the prince’s private collection particularly admired the Lao mouth organ. The instrument is impressive to Western eyes, having fourteen pipes, several of which can be eight or more feet long. They asked the prince to have one of his servants play the strange instrument for them, but the surprised Chutamani is reported to have said, “Wow- I will play for you myself.” He then picked up the \textit{khaen} and played while a servant crouched at his feet to sing accompaniment. The prince played two songs. The Americans described the first as a lament and the second as a more upbeat tune. The royal history of the Rama IV reign reports that Prince Chutamani built a Lao style pavilion in his garden in which he practiced music and describes him traveling to rural areas where captive Lao farmers were settled. He also felt free there to perform Lao dances and a kind of improvised and bawdy comic singing. The source reports that if one were not looking at the Prince in his royal finery and only listening to him, one would have thought him a “real Lao.”\textsuperscript{27}


While the racist brutalities of American plantation slavery were mostly absent from the Southeast Asian system of slavery, the Siamese elite, including King Mongkut himself, generally held the Lao in disdain and believed their culture to be less civilized than that of the Siamese.\(^{28}\) Nevertheless, as scholars of Atlantic World slavery have long noted, slavery creates opportunities for intimacy and human entanglements even in settings of violence and dehumanizing racial prejudice. Culture can spread across the bonds that are created between owners and the owned.\(^{29}\) Although the evident Lao-philia of Chutamani was likely unusual, Bangkok urbanites enjoyed Lao musical entertainment. European visitors in this period described Lao music coming out of windows throughout the city. In 1855, the British diplomat John Bowring wrote, “I felt great interest in the Laos [sic] people from the first. Often I heard sweet music and sweet voices as I passed along the streets, or floated upon the waters of the [river]; and, on inquiry, I learnt that the sweetest was the music of Laos.”\(^{30}\) This example, like many others in the coming chapters, demonstrates a key point of this research project, the ability of captive artisans to powerfully influence the culture of their captors.

Shortly after his brother Prince Chutamani died, King Mongkut moved to ban the performance of Lao music in the capital. In a Royal Order dated to 1865, the King states that while the “alien entertainments” of foreign people had always been performed in Siam, “alien singing and dancing should not have priority over ours.” The King claimed that in important ceremonies such as monks’ ordinations and topknot cutting ceremonies, Thai orchestras were no longer being hired and certain traditional forms of Thai music were disappearing from the capital due to the rising popularity of Lao entertainment. Mongkut took particular umbrage at the performance fees commanded by Lao musicians. The King stated: “Laokhaen [also called mor lam, a partially improvised form of musical story telling] must serve the Thai; the Thai have never been the Lao’s servants.” Mongkut went on to blame the


\(^{30}\) Quoted from Miller and Jarernchai Chonpairot, “A History of Siamese Music,” 44.
popularity of the *Laokhaen* on recent flooding and drought. He then commanded a one or two year ban on the performing of Lao music, accompanied by an effort to revive the Thai musical traditions that had been fading in popularity. Breaking this ordinance, the King warned, would result in a stiff fine for both the patron and the musicians. Miller and Jarernchai believe that the ban likely curbed the broad and growing appeal of Lao music in the capital, though instruments like the Lao mouth organ remained popular with Bangkok audiences.\(^{31}\) The rural and remote northeast area of Thailand, called Isaan, where the majority of Lao captives and migrants were settled, was unaffected by the ban on Lao music. Today one can still hear traditional *mor lam* songs that recount trials of warfare, capture, and forced diaspora among the Lao people.\(^ {32}\)

Exiting Uthit Imbupha’s house and continuing another fifty paces or so down the main street brings one to a sign announcing that one is crossing into the Baan Somdet Mosque Community (*Chumchon masayid baan somdet*). Baan Somdet is the closest of roughly twenty mosques in the vicinity of Baan Lao, several of which, like Baan Somdet, are over a hundred years old. These include the well-known Kudi Khao Mosque, the Ton Son Mosque, the Charoen Pas Mosque, and the Bangkok Noi Mosque. The Muslim community on both the Thonburi and Bangkok sides of the river is very diverse. It includes descendants of many trading communities dating to the early-Bangkok period and before. These include Muslims from the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and various Indonesian islands. All these groups are demographically dwarfed by the descendants of Malay Muslim war captives who make up the vast majority of the Bangkok metropolitan area’s conservatively estimated 375,000 Muslims (out of a total urban population of some twelve million). Uthit Imbupha describes relations between the Baan Somdet Mosque Community and Baan Lao as having always been cordial. He said when he was young, people in the two communities developed close friendships, although there was never any intermarriage between the groups. Grimacing and pantomiming a scissor motion,

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\(^{31}\) All quoted text in this paragraph from *Ibid.*, 43–5.

Uthit conveyed that the painful notion of adult circumcision kept Lao boys from courting Muslim girls. However, he added that these days there are some marriages between the two communities.

Ethnic Cham and ethnic Malay make up most of the Muslim population in the neighborhoods around Uthit’s house and along the Bangkok Yai canal. The Cham people originated in southern Vietnam, where they able to take advantage of Southeast Asia’s maritime trade routes and maintain potent seafaring states. Cham power was reduced toward the end of the 15th century by invasions and immigrations of ethnic Vietnamese from the north. As a result, many Cham fled westward towards Cambodia to take refuge along the banks of the Mekong River north of Phnom Penh and along the ocean coast. Other Cham traveled as far as Ayutthaya and offered their services to the Thai military. Thai documents dating to the 17th century describe them working as respected naval soldiers in royal service. Some of these Cham escaped Ayutthaya and settled in Thonburi, however the majority of the population arrived there as a result of the near continuous warfare fought in the Cambodian countryside between Siam and Vietnam between 1810 and 1845. Cham regions were economically and politically destabilized by ongoing warfare. Battles waged in Cham areas had a push-pull effect on the people. Warfare pushed refugees to the relative security of Siam, while at the same time Thai forces seized the Cham and pulled them to the capital. Their skills as seagoing people were utilized by the Thai state. Cham worked as boat builders along the Bangkok Yai canal and as naval bodyguards for several Thai kings. Sources show them serving in the latter position in both the Rama IV and Rama V reigns.33

The Cham are most associated with two mosques located along the canal, the Kudi Khao (also called the Bang Luang Mosque) and the Tonson Mosque. Recent research found that all of these Cham descendants are Thai speakers; surviving

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Cham language speakers could not be located. Cham women are remarkably gifted silk weavers. As Thailand urbanized, many Bangkok people gave up weaving. However, it has continued as a tradition among the Cham. Across the river, near the present-day Siam Square shopping district, the Cham were settled in a village called Baan Khrua. The famous American entrepreneur Jim Thompson was struck by the quality of their weaving. When he founded his silk company in 1948, he used silk commissioned from Baan Khrua to excite fashion houses throughout the West. The Cham of Baan Khrua remained the production center for Jim Thompson silk through the early years of the company. His success led to the resuscitation of silk production throughout Thailand and the global branding of Thai-style silk, now a ubiquitous part of Thai national identity. It may seem strange that the workers at the center of this global economic development were the descendants of refugees and war captives seized from Cambodia. However, this thesis presents many similar examples of foreign captive artisans creating objects and cultural practices that have come to signify national identities in the places to which they were forcibly relocated.

Malay Muslims, who make up the bulk of Bangkok’s Muslim population, originally hailed from four provinces on the Malay Peninsula: Patani, Kedah, Terengganu, and Kelantan. These areas comprise the current border region between Thailand and Malaysia. Many of the sultanates in this region were politically autonomous tributaries of Ayutthaya when that state was strong. When Ayutthaya fell to Ava’s military in 1767, the Malay states regained political independence. King Taksin then reasserted control over the Malay south. During the reign of Rama I, efforts were made to further curb their autonomy and bring Malay areas more under control of the Thai monarchy. These conflicts resulted in the capture and relocation of thousands of Malay people. Starting in 1791 and continuing until 1839, frequent rebellions against Siam’s rule flared up on the Malay Peninsula.

35 Scupin, “Cham Muslims,” 489–90.
suppression of each inevitably resulted in relocating many thousand more Malays into Siam. Malay captives were commanded by the state to conduct marsh draining and canal digging projects throughout Bangkok. For example, they made up the bulk of workers who dug the Saen Saeb canal that runs nearly the length of modern Bangkok. The Cham silk weaving village mentioned above is located along this canal, as is Jim Thompson’s house, a popular tourist sight.

Malay Muslims were largely responsible for the gradual invention of one of Thailand’s most vibrant and well-known theatrical traditions, a bawdy, comedic-romantic musical theater tradition known as likay. Likay developed in Bangkok in the 1880s, the unlikely product of mutual borrowings between Malay and Thai religious traditions. The Muslim tradition of Dhikr or Zikr is a ceremony in which the participant invokes a remembrance of God through the chanting of the many names of God or by reciting passages of the Koran. In Malay this ceremony is called dikay (in Thai the “d” slips to a “y” and is pronounced yikay). It is presented in a visually arresting style, including rhythmic chanting accompanied by drum-like tambourines (ramana) and stylized dance movements. The same presentational style is also used in a secular version of this ceremony in which two teams competitively chant and dance while improvising insults and lewd jokes to win the favor of the audience. As Surapone Virulrak’s impressive research has shown, both versions were popular with Thai audiences. In 1880, for example, the Thai Prince Damrong Rachanuphab witnessed a secular, competitive performance that included an interlude for a shadow puppet performance. A month later he saw a more formally religious version in which forty-seven Malay chanters were commissioned to perform the sacred version of dikay at the funeral of a Thai queen.

While dikay was cleaving into two secular and religious forms, so was a Thai Buddhist performance tradition called the suat phramalai. In this tradition, Buddhist monks pantomimed foreign characters by acting out comic scenes and affecting foreign accents. Conservative religious reforms in the Rama IV era put pressure on monks to eliminate these heterodox practices from religious ceremonies. As a result,

these popular humorous skits about foreign languages and behavior (called *ok phasa* in Thai) developed into a separate secular genre called *sipsong phasa* (literally "the twelve languages," but meaning all the world's languages). The earliest performers of this genre were ex-monks. In these performances, skits, singing, and dancing were used to poke fun at all the "known" people of the world, the speakers of twelve languages.\(^{38}\)

Surapone writes that between 1880 and the late-1890s, these two secular entertainments merged into a single theatrical performance called *yikay sipsong phasa* that was performed by both Malay and Thai theatrical troupes. It appears that each of these two performance traditions absorbed the appealing qualities of the other in order to expand the popularity of their performances. Prince Damrong, observing a performance by a Malay troupe in 1881, noted that it had a three-part structure. The first part consisted of Muslim chants accompanied by drum-like tambourines. In the second part, a Malay actor dressed as an Indian Hindu came onto the stage to perform a water blessing, another Malay actor dressed as a Thai joined him. The two talked about the meaning of the blessing and then danced a duet. The final sequence involved the Malay performers taking the stage in different national costumes and performing skits and dances. Surviving theatrical documents indicate that the ethnic groups (represented by the "twelve languages") included in these shows were the Malay, Vietnamese, Lao, Burmese, Cambodians, Southern Thai (from Nakhon Sri Thamarat), Europeans, Chinese, and Indians from Surat. The songs in a particular story or section (*chut*) of the performance were frequently sung in foreign sounding gibberish and actors spoke with comically affected accents.\(^{39}\)

While the Thai elites sometimes hired these troupes for public entertainments, *yikay sipsong phasa* was a theatrical form that percolated up from the lower classes and was designed to entertain popular audiences. The dialogue was coarse and often

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39 Thai *yikay sipsong phasa* troupes began the performance with Thai style music and dancing, had a second act in which a player dressed as an Indian performed a water blessing ceremony, followed by a third act of foreign entertainments (Surapone, 51).
vulgar, the ethnic humor was broad, and the stories were filled with magic and bawdy romance. Around this time, numerous casinos were established in Bangkok (sixty-seven by 1887) by the growing number of Chinese entrepreneurs. *Yikay sipsong phasa* troupes were hired along with Chinese opera performers to entertain audiences at the casinos.

This mode of performance gradually developed into the theatrical form called *likay* (the “y” in *yikay* slipping to an “l”). The form grew more complex over the next several decades. As the Thai elite began sponsoring Western art forms, *likay* absorbed traditional styles of dance and music that had once been the preserve of the royal court. The stories grew longer and more complex so that only one might be performed over the entire course of the third act. Theaters seating several hundred people were built all over Bangkok for *likay* as the popular entertainment solidified its hold over rural people and the urban working class. As *likay* spread from the city to the countryside it took a particularly strong hold in Thailand’s northeast Isaan area where the population is overwhelmingly composed of Lao speakers, many descending from prisoners of war. It took root there, blended with Lao musical and improvisational singing traditions, and today remains a popular and vibrant theatrical tradition. Meanwhile, the number of Malay troupes declined. Today it is usually considered a very Thai art form and its roots in the history of Malay captivity are little known outside scholarly communities.

### 2.1 Considering the Creole City in Southeast Asia

The streets of Thonburi between the Bangkok Noi and Bangkok Yai canals reflect a fascinating history of people and settlement. Many living here today descended from war refugees or people seized during slave gathering warfare. This area exemplifies what I call a “creole space.” It is a place where the density of captured and displaced people has facilitated complex and surprising processes of cross-cultural exchange. Thonburi’s history is a story of uprooting and re-rooting, re-invention and invention, trauma and accommodation. In order to narrate the history of this particular location, one must simultaneously narrate a history of dislocation. This is a common feature of creole spaces worldwide, where histories of
location and dislocation entwine like banyan vines. Many districts and neighborhoods have similar histories not just in Bangkok, but also in Imphal (Manipur) and Mandalay (the primary subject of the next four chapters) and in other capital cities of mainland Southeast Asia.

Caribbean Creole activists, the descendants of African slaves, claim creole “history is a braid of histories” because to tell their story one must tell the story of all the cultures and peoples that they have encountered and from which they have borrowed in the complex process of rebuilding their society. Thonburi’s creole spaces are similarly braided. It is a location in which Lao, Mon, Malay, and Cham war captives rubbed shoulders with the Thai and with each other. The history of any one of these communities must address cultural entanglements with the others. Captive people were transformed by the wrenching act of being dislocated, but they were also agents in multiple transformations of the larger societies within which they were resettled. This insight calls for a different kind of history of the Southeast Asian city, a creole history.

If Bangkok is a creole city, then likay, especially in its earlier incarnation as yikay sipsong phasa, is as perfect an example of a creole art form as one could hope to find. Robin Cohen summarizes the cross-fertilizing creativity that can develop in a creole environment as follows:

When creolizing, participants select particular elements from incoming or inherited cultures, endow these with meanings different from those they possessed in the original culture and then creatively merge these to create totally new varieties that supersede the prior form.

Let’s unpack this dry description of the creolization process using the example of likay. Malay and Thai innovators of likay creatively fused elements from sacred Muslim and Buddhist ceremonies, the result being a theatrical form with meanings “different from those they possessed in the original culture.” The creative merger produced something “totally new” that superseded its original cultural source.

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material. Hybridization is an often-discussed feature of the creolization process and creole art forms. Creole arts remain open to continual adaptation and change. As we might predict, likay has continued to grow by incorporating royal dancing traditions, Isaan folk music, and recently international pop, disco, hip-hop, and Las Vegas production values. What is even more remarkable about the yikay sipsong phasa is that it generated satirical commentary on the creolizing culture that produced it. In Bangkok, around 1885, it was possible for a Thai patron in a Chinese casino to watch a dance production in which descendants of Malay war captives dressed as Cambodians, spoke Thai in comically thick Cambodian accents, danced and sang in exaggerated Khmer style, and enacted a vulgar comedy-romance in which star-crossed lovers were kept apart by supernatural intervention before their eventual reunion and love conquered all. This would be followed, after a musical interlude, by a similar story about Lao, Burmese, Vietnamese, Europeans, Indians, and so on. It was a creole art form that was about the creole city in which the performers lived and plied their trade.

The processes of creolization are not just part of the lifeblood of Bangkok, they are also represented in Thai Buddhist death rituals. While King Mongkut (Rama IV) did not want to see Lao music displace Thai music at elite social functions, he held no similar anxieties about the music of Mon people. Beginning in his reign, Mon orchestras (piphaat Mon) were incorporated into elite Thai funeral entertainments. By the early 1900s, they had driven the specialized Thai funeral music ensembles called naang hong into extinction. To Thai ears, the timbre of Mon music, played on exotic gong and reed instruments, has a melancholy air. This is true even when the Mon song is about romantic or happy subject matter. The sorrowful quality of Mon music, so enjoyable to Thai ears, could be described as productive cross-cultural miscommunication.

To remain competitive, Thai musicians and orchestras incorporated the emerging genre of Mon funeral songs and Mon musical instruments into their own repertoires. As Deborah Wong’s research shows, famous Thai composers such as Luang Pradit Phairoh (1881–1954) composed and adapted their own “Mon” funeral songs, which then flowed back to Mon orchestras such as the one run by Caangwang
Thua Phatayakoson (1881-1938) who lived in Thonburi near Wat Kalayanimit. Wong writes that while funeral music is considered “more Mon than Thai,” in fact, “[i]t is difficult if not impossible to pull apart the Thai and Mon elements that are now joined in this ensemble...”42 Given our discussion of likay above, it may not be surprising that Wong describes the Thai funeral as a ritual in which the music is both appropriating and representing the Other. The most anticipated song at every funeral is the *phleng sipsong phasa* (Song of the Twelve Languages), in which the orchestra presents a long medley of foreign sounding music. Over the course of this “thrilling” song, which may last as long as 45 minutes, the orchestra cycles through musical impressions of Lao, Burmese, Khmer, Chinese, and other musical traditions.43 Even in death, the creole liveliness of Bangkok is celebrated and enjoyed.

However, it is not entirely appropriate to end this peripatetic history of Thonburi’s creole spaces with a discussion of music and theater. Stephan Palmie, a critic of creolization theory, rightly complains that the focus of cultural exchange within slavery has a “deeply troubling ideological ballast” that suggests that cultural mixing in the Americas occurred within an environment of “liberating indeterminacy” when in fact there was a rigid system of caste, racism, separation, brutality and violence.44 A creole city is created by violence and dislocation and the central force that generates creative cultural exchange is the trauma of being ripped from one cultural region and planted down in another. It is a process of rebuilding what has been uprooted and destroyed.

To encounter the violence of captivity and warfare we need only travel back to the neighborhood where we started, Baan Bu, the metal pounding quarter on the banks of the Bangkok Noi Canal. Most of the Baan Bu people and their neighbors worship at Wat Suwannaram, a temple that pre-dates the fall of Ayutthaya.45 Like many of Bangkok’s humble Buddhist monasteries, it was upgraded to meet royal

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43 Ibid., 123.
45 The original name of the temple was Wat Thong. The name was changed to Suwannaram when the temple was upgraded to the level of royal patronage.
standards when the capital relocated to the Bangkok area. The temple is difficult to find, as it is nestled on the canal away from traffic, but admirers and students of traditional temple art visit Suwannaram regularly. Mounted on the gable of the ordination hall is a rare surviving woodcarving in the Ayutthaya style, a magnificently ornate image of the god Vishnu riding the magical bird Garuda. Inside the temple are painted masterworks by two renowned muralists of the Rama III era (r. 1824-1851).

Beside this impressive temple, in the quiet canal-side garden, is a bilingual historical marker the second sentence of which relates a disturbing event: “During the reign of King Taksin, this temple was where Burmese prisoners of war from Bangkaew Camp were executed.”46 The court chronicle of King Taksin’s reign describes the event in more detail. In 1775, King Taksin was organizing his army to confront an invading military force from Ava and dislodge them from their stronghold in Phitsanulok, a province 225 miles north of Bangkok. At that time, Burmese soldiers captured in earlier battles were kept in a prisoner of war camp in Bang Nang Kaeo (forty miles west of Bangkok in today’s Ratchaburi Province). These Burmese were asked to take an oath of loyalty to Taksin and join the Thai army in its march to Phitsanulok. The Burmese soldiers refused. The royal chronicle reports Taksin’s words:

They are not loyal to us at all; they are still faithful to their masters, and we must go off to war. Only a few of us will be left behind to keep the peace but they are many. They will endeavor to escape from captivity and create future unrest. They cannot be allowed to live. Our instructions therefore are to take them and execute every one of them at Wat Thong [former name for Suwannaram Temple] on Bangkok Noi Canal.47

Violence plays a role in every system of slavery, but it is frequently overlooked in studies of Southeast Asian slavery because it was comparatively less frequent than in other systems of slavery that have been more thoroughly

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researched. The next section of this chapter discusses the violence that was perpetrated in mainland Southeast Asian slave gathering warfare and in the transportation and resettlement of captives.

3. Violence and the abyss: Captivity and cultural dislocation in the mainland Southeast Asian context

*Experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.*
- Edouard Glissant

In *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant recounts the Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas in dark poetry. The slave ship is described as a sea monster. Its lower deck was a “belly” that, like a “stomach,” dissolved the cultures of the Africans and then like a “womb” expelled them onto the shores of foreign lands. The slave ship on the middle passage to the New World crossed an “abyss” that opened to devour the slaves’ languages, gods, foods, and all the comforting sights, sounds, and objects of their former daily lives. As Glissant describes it, the African was then expelled or born into the Americas as an ascetic destined to rebuild all that had been stripped away by the abyss. This violent stripping away was the root experience that activated the remarkable and on-going processes of transcultural exchange in the Atlantic World.

Because creolization presupposes that trauma and dislocation work as solvents on the cultures of the enslaved, any comparison of creolization processes must examine the warfare, violence, and trauma that occurred in different systems of slavery. Comparisons between the Southeast Asian and Atlantic systems of slavery conventionally suggest that the levels of violence visited upon slaves in the two systems were very different. Observers familiar with American and Southeast Asian systems of slavery almost uniformly observed that in mainland Southeast Asia,

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49 Ibid., 6–7.
the treatment of slaves had a paternal or familial character. They wrote that slaves within the household were treated as lower status family members, not as despised outsiders. Some 19th century commentators went so far as to argue that slaves in Southeast Asia were treated as well as household servants in Europe.

I revisit assumptions about levels of trauma in Southeast Asian slavery systems by trisecting the experience of enslavement into somewhat artificially separated experiences: 1) being captured as a result of warfare, 2) being relocated, and 3) being incorporated into new labor systems.

3.1 Warfare and Capture in Mainland Southeast Asia

Within Southeast Asian studies, historical discussions about endemic slave gathering warfare are often reduced to assertions that people rather than land constituted power. Reid, for example, writes, “The perception of forest land as infinitely available and manpower as scarce ensured that competition was fundamentally over control of people.” As a result, it has frequently been argued that the object of warfare was to acquire manpower for the state rather than to slaughter the state’s enemies. The guiding assumption among Southeast Asian scholars is that the monetary and symbolic value of slaves acted as an invisible armor that shielded losing parties from gross acts of violence by their captors. A corollary assumption is that war captives were actually well treated by victorious armies. Reid quotes from several 17th century Turkish, Persian, and European sources that described warfare in Southeast Asia as less brutal than in the West. The Abbe de Choisy, a late-17th century French emissary to Ayutthaya, stated that

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50 Sangermano’s observations from the late 18th century are a good example of this. “The Burmese will receive the pariahs of other groups... with the same respect as the natives of the most favored country, and will have no scruple of transacting business, or even of eating with them. The slaves are, for the same reason, treated as his children, and as forming part of the family of their masters; indeed it is not a rare thing for them to become the sons-in-law of their master.” (Father) Vincenzo Sangermano, The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago as Described by Father Vincenzo Sangermano (Westminster, England: Archibald Constable and Company, 1843), 156.


52 Reid, Age of Commerce, 122.
Siamese, Burmese, and Lao soldiers made war “like angels,” and stated that guns were fired into the air to scare the enemy and attempts were made to round up non-combatant populations without injury.53

Francis Bradley’s recent scholarship on late 18th and early 19th century warfare between Siam and the Malay state of Patani directly challenges the notion that Southeast Asian soldiers fought like “angels.” In these wars, Siam’s military sought not simply to cull the Patani population but to break the back of this Malay sultanate so as to prevent it from gaining future power or autonomy. Following a Siamese victory in 1785, British sources report that the military killed captured men as well as older women and children. After another victory in 1832, European observers believed that the Thai slave gathering was designed to permanently depopulate the Patani region. British reports describe Malays being packed densely into junks and war boats for transport back to Bangkok, a journey during which one-quarter of the captives were said to have contracted small pox (which was likely fatal). J. H. Moor, a witness to the arrival of a group of 400-500 captives from Patani, reported that the captives were covered in lice, their eyes reddened with infection, and that “[m]ost of the Malays have immense large ulcers about their feet of legs, and the stench from them alone was enough to breed a plague.” Still healthy captives were responsible for carrying the sick and dying. Captives were divided into groups of forty or fifty as gifts to different Thai elite. In parceling them out, children were sometimes separated from their parents, which Moor writes uniformly brought the mother to “howling, tearing her hair, and begging and praying to be allowed to accompany her only child...” Sources also indicate that Siam’s victorious forces destroyed houses and villages and despoiled farmlands in an effort to prevent Patani from repopulating. The Thai put diplomatic pressure on

53 Warfare in Southeast Asia was usually seasonal. It started in the dry season and ended before monsoon winds brought the heavy rains that would make traveling through jungles and farmlands impossible. This made it possible for soldiers and civilians on the losing side to escape to the mountains and forests and wait out their enemies, who would eventually be forced to return home with whatever unfortunates they had succeeded in capturing. Ibid., 121–9; Anthony Reid, Europe and Southeast Asia: The Military Balance, Center for Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper Series 16 (Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1982). Similar descriptions of warfare are found in Quaritch Wales, Ancient South-East Asian Warfare (London: Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., 1952).
their regional allies to refuse entry to Patani refugees. Bradley believes this evidence of post-battle massacres and strategic environmental destruction suggests that warfare in mainland Southeast Asia transformed during the 18th and 19th centuries to allow greater levels of violence.54

Michael Charney asserts a somewhat different position. In his recent monograph on pre-colonial warfare, he expresses skepticism about Southeast Asian warfare ever having been less sanguinary than European warfare. Like Bradley, he dismisses the “low casualty” thesis and points out that its proponents have overlooked indigenous warfare manuals that describe brutal methods for dispatching enemy combatants. He also mentions European sources that describe Southeast Asian warfare as bloody and violent. Charney sums up: “One common feature that emerges is that killing and death was fundamental to warfare in the region [Southeast Asia], throughout the early modern period and earlier.”55 Charney does not believe there was a change in the levels of violence practiced in warfare but that killing was fundamental to Southeast Asian military conflict and remained relatively constant through time.

My reading of mainland Southeast Asia’s military history suggest that a more rigorous analysis of regional warfare is needed to determine if intra-regional warfare grew more violent starting in the 18th century. It is also unclear whether increases in violence on the mainland paralleled trends in island Southeast Asia. However, Bradley’s overall position is supported by evidence of violent warfare fought outside of Patani. For example, Charney points out that during the 1563-64 assaults on Ayutthaya, the famed Burmese King Bayinnaung (r. 1551-1581) awarded prizes to his soldiers for taking Thai heads on the battlefield.56 Bayinnaung’s eventual 1569 conquest of Ayutthaya contrasts with the pillaging and burning that followed Ava’s second conquest of the city two centuries later in 1767, however. Burmese sources describe the king as respectful of the Thai capital, profoundly impressed by its organization and architectural beauty, especially its

55 Charney, Southeast Asian Warfare, 17–21.
56 Ibid., 2–3.
well-designed networks of canals and bridges. This appreciation for the city’s grandeur is certainly related to the boasting in Burmese chronicles of many kinds of Thai artisans taken into captivity after this war. Thai royal chronicles also describe the uncommon kindness shown by Bayinnaung to the defeated Thai king, Mahinthathirat (or Mahin, r. 1564-1569). The victor invited Mahin to meet him as an equal, personally gave him betel to chew, and said, “Do not be distressed. We will invite you up to Hongsawadi [the Burmese capital] and we will live there together.” King Mahin, the Thai chronicles report, was conveyed from the city with his royal adornments, concubines, and servants. Unfortunately, the Thai king grew ill as the returning army approached the Burmese frontier. Bayinnaung halted the march and instructed his physicians to cure Mahin on threat of death. After the king died, an enraged Bayinnaung had eleven Thai, Mon, and Burmese physicians punished. A royal cremation was conducted and the king’s bones, possessions, and concubines were returned to Ayutthaya under guard by Burmese, Lao, and Mon soldiers. For these reasons, Bayinnaung, though a conqueror, remained a revered figure in traditional Thai historiography and later in popular culture.

Indigenous histories can also tell stories that reveal a complex mix of violence and humanity on the battlefield. The Lao chronicle Nidan Khun Barom describes late 15th century warfare between Lao kingdoms and invading Vietnamese with sanguinary imagination. The chronicle describes the charge of elephanteer

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58 Following the 1569 conquest of Ayutthaya the Hmannan Yazawin Dawgyi [The Great Royal Chronicle] states that after the fall of Ayutthaya the populace was divided according to more than twenty skills ranging from singers, dancers, blacksmiths and goldsmiths to trainers of ponies, embroiderers of gold thread, and those skilled in the culinary arts. Nai Thien, trans., “Burmese Invasions of Siam, Translated from the Hmannan Yazawin Dawgyi,” in Selected Articles from The Siam Society Journal: Relationship with Burma, Part 1 (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1959), 50.
59 The Thai lord of Phitsanulok, who allied with Bayinnaung, was appointed the new king (King Thammarachathirat) and ruled Ayutthaya from 1569 to 1590.
61 Sunait Chutintaranond, “King Bayinnaung as a Historical Hero in the Thai Perspective,” in Comparative Studies on Literature and History of Thailand and Myanmar (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1997).
soldiers: “To kill and to pierce endlessly could not bring victory before the riders had to take their elephants away to drink water.”\textsuperscript{62} Armies numbering twenty million soldiers are reported as leaving hundreds of thousands of people dying or dead. Of course, these numbers are fictions; their use is likely meant to convey the emotional and political importance of Lao warfare in this era.\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{Nidan Khun Barom} chronicle goes on to describe the aftermath of a battle in which over a hundred Lao Buddhist monks from temples that had not been destroyed by the invading Vietnamese soldiers removed injured Vietnamese from the battlefield for medical care. The chronicle reports: “Some Kaev [Vietnamese] who recovered from their wounds ran away, but others who recovered and preferred to stay could do so. So there were [Vietnamese] in Meuang Lao [Lao country] from that time to the present.”\textsuperscript{64}

The \textit{Syair Sultan Maulana} is an unusual document because it is an indigenous description of warfare written by neither victors nor vanquished. It was composed for the Malay Sultanate of Kedah to celebrate the role of Malay soldiers allied with Thai in the unsuccessful 1808-09 attempt by Ava to seize control of the Thai maritime trading center located on Junk Ceylon (Phuket island). It describes the warfare with unblinking frankness, saying of the victors:

Their eyes began to sparkle...looting all that was valuable and picking up what they could find. / Malays and Siamese were of one mind / in seizing whatever they could from the Burmese... / The looters fought amongst themselves...\textsuperscript{65}

The \textit{Syair Sultan Maulana} continues:

When the pillaging was over, / attention was turned to the Burmese / who were lying wounded on the ground and unable to speak- / the Siamese cut them down, every one of them. / ...[O]thers were taken


\textsuperscript{64} Souneth Phothisane, “The Nidan Khun Borom,” 233–4.

prisoner / and handed over to the Siamese. / [One Thai leader] was quite ruthless / wielding not one but two swords; / along with the rest of his men he went chasing after the Burmese / and when he came across one, he cut him down.66

Another source, a pre-colonial Burmese war manual entitled *Byuha Saki,* describes two similar 16th century victories over Mon soldiers during the reigns of King Mingaung (r. 1401-22) and King Tabinshweti (r. 1531-1550). The first was the Battle of Naungyo (1539), which ended when the Mon king was outmaneuvered by an elephant-back assault and fled the battlefield leaving his forces in disarray. The war manual reports: “The banks of the river became congested with prisoners of war like insects joined together in mass... When Kyawdin Nawratha [General Bayinnaung] presented all these prisoners of war with their weapons to King Tabin[s]hweti... His Majesty, pleased with the victory, praised his Commander...”67 A later passage describes a scene of riverine warfare between the Burmese and Mon forces approximately one hundred years earlier c. 1415.68 In this battle, Mon and Burmese military heroes faced off in a duel between war boats. The seemingly undefeatable Mon hero was severely wounded and taken captive. When he died shortly after, the Mon army panicked and “gripped with fear” began a disorganized flight from the battlefield:

Some Mon soldiers swam to the shore and entered the jungle. Some swam in the river and were instantly killed by the Burmese troops. The number of enemy dead in those bloody actions was uncountable and the color of the river was red and the water smelt rank with blood.69

The *Byuha Saki* is interesting because it describes similar circumstances in which the Burmese army cornered its foes at a riverbank. While in c. 1415 their foes were

66 Ibid., 219.
67 The *Byuha Saki* is a war manual similar in many ways to Sun Tzu's *Art of War.* It was written during the reign of King Bayinnaung (1782-1819) and can be found translated in Myo Myint, “The Literature of War and Tactics in Pre-Colonial Burma: A Study of Two Eighteenth Century Texts” (MA Thesis, Monash University, 1978). Quotes from pp. 86-7.
cut down without mercy, in 1539 they were captured and presented to the king. From these sources we get a strong sense of the differing and contingent forces at play when mainland Southeast Asian armies chose to capture or slaughter defeated foes.

More study would have to be done before it would be possible to conclude that battlefield violence increased between the 15th and 19th centuries. At the very least we can conclude along with Michael Charney that Southeast Asian states’ labor requirements had little influence on the behavior of individual soldiers fighting for their lives on the battlefield. However, Charney and Bradley’s positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While killing may always have been of primary importance on the battlefields, the nature of warfare in mainland Southeast Asia changed noticeably from the mid-18th to 19th centuries. This change in the character of warfare correlates with Victor Lieberman’s thesis that economic changes, the influx of new European technologies, and emerging religious orthodoxies after the 17th century combined to facilitate consolidation and centralization of power in the Southeast Asian mainland. In a region containing many small and medium-sized polities, two major powers emerged to dominate the landscape: Ava and Siam. Consolidation resulted in larger and thus bloodier confrontations. As Burmese and Thai political power expanded, both states increasingly sought to permanently destroy, rather than merely subjugate, rival polities.

We can discern the earlier approach in a passage from the *Byuha Saki*, the above mentioned Burmese warfare manual, that describes the strategy of “successful completion (*siddhi byuha*)” as follows:

> When the enemy country is conquered all their instruments of war such as elephants, horses, weapons, and soldiers much be captured and taken to one’s own country in order to prevent the enemy from making another challenge. Persons with suitable ability must be appointed in that country [to collect revenue] with sufficient troops.72

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The strategy of “successful completion” aligned with the concept of a potent Buddhist monarch as a cakravartin, a universal sovereign or world ruler whose power is demonstrated by being a king who rules over many kings. In the days and weeks after victory in war, the conquering king or his representatives took various steps that often resulted in the continued existence of the conquered state. A losing king might be allowed to remain on the throne after swearing an oath of allegiance and promising a regular supply of taxation in the form of valuable trade items; the losing king and his allies within the court might be relocated to the capital of the victor (often incorporated into the court) and replaced with a more compliant faction within the existing elite infrastructure; or the existing elite could be replaced by a member of the victor king's family such as a princeling son. All of these options served to reinforce the “world ruling” qualities of the victorious Buddhist king.

This repertoire for demonstrating kingly power started to be abandoned in the mid to late 18th century. Helen James' study of the 1767 fall of Ayutthaya describes terrible levels of violence and turmoil, as well as indiscriminate killing of the urban population once Ava’s forces breached the city's defensive walls. In her comparison of the 1569 and 1767 conquests of Ayutthaya, she makes the following observation about Ava's changing strategies:

In the 1500s [King] Bayinnaung had treated Ayutthaya as a vassal state to be incorporated [into] his sphere of influence... The city's destruction in 1767 suggests, by contrast, that King Hsinbyushin had no intention of incorporating the defeated kingdom into his own realm. Rather, he appeared to have been implementing a politico-economic strategy intended to weaken a dangerous rival irreparably by destroying its marketplace and by depleting its manpower through the deportation or killing of its citizens.

A similar pattern is seen in the Konbaung dynasty's many conflicts with Manipur. King Alaungphaya’s 1759 invasion of Manipur found the capital city,
Evacuated. The king gathered as many captives as he could find and returned to Upper Burma. In many of the subsequent invasions and political interventions, Ava’s forces were used to settle Manipuri succession disputes or to replace a rebellious Manipuri monarch with a royal relative presumed to be a better client for Ava’s king. After 1819, the strategic calculus changed and Ava sought to permanently destroy this troublesome neighbor. For seven years, a Burmese garrison was stationed in the valley to prevent Manipuri rivals from resettling the valley.™

Thai warfare in the 18th century presents a similar pattern. I have already discussed Bradley’s research on the Thai conquest of Patani. Thai warfare with Laos provides a second example. The 1778-79 conquests of the Lao states Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champassak ended with the relocation of royal elites to Bangkok, the forced relocation of many thousands of Lao families into Siamese territory, and the looting of valuable state treasures, including the famous Phra Kaew Buddha image. The states continued to function as Thai clients, however. For example, the vanquished ruler of Champassak, King Sayakumane (also transliterated Xainyakumin) (r. 1737-1791), was taken to the Thai capital as a prisoner, but within a few years allowed to return and rule Champassak as a loyal subordinate to the Thai state. This contrasts to events half a century later, when the Thai response to a rebellion by the ruler of Vientiane, Chao Anuvong, resulted in two devastating attacks on the city in 1827 and 1828. The Thai king, Rama III (r. 1824-1851), ordered the once populous city be pulled down and burned so that it would return to jungle. The Vientiane area remained unpopulated for many decades until it was restored as an administrative center by French colonial authorities. The Thai army also spent months capturing refugees from the countryside and relocating them to Thai territory. The death toll from this war was high. A Thai court document reported that only nine men were captured for every two to three hundred women and children, suggesting a very high death toll for combat-aged males. When the rebellious Chao Anuvong was finally seized, he was put in an iron

77 Stuart-Fox, The Lao Kingdom of Lan-Xang, 112.
cage and taken, along with his daughters, wives, and concubines, to Bangkok. The cage was put out in the open sun so that Bangkok’s commoners could taunt and poke the deposed rebel king. Torture instruments (hooks, a boiler, a human size mortar and pestle, etc.) were placed near Chao Anuvong, though he expired before the threatened torture could begin. Many in his entourage were later killed.78

One factor likely constrained battlefield and post-war violence in mainland Southeast Asia even after the 18th century. Low-level Southeast Asian soldiers were only sometimes paid for their part in military actions because their service was one facet of their many obligations as subjects to Southeast Asian monarchs. Payment, when it came, was a share of the plunder after a successful conquest. Human captives were sometimes counted as part of the plunder. The Burmese chronicles suggest that following the sack of Ayutthaya, Burmese soldiers were allotted human payment according to their rank. According to the Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung, for example, each colonel received 100 families, majors received 75 families each, captains 50 families, sergeants 5 families, and common soldiers 2 families each. These numbers are likely exaggerated but suggest that human captives were divided up as war booty.79 While all accounts report that the sack of Ayutthaya was marked by horrific violence, soldiers may have been constrained in their violence towards Ayutthaya’s citizenry by viewing them as human paychecks for their military service.

In Arakan, an independent state on the eastern coast of Burma, sources report that the naval forces were also paid with a percentage of the total number of captives they procured from maritime raids into Bengal.80 Such policies may have curbed battlefield decisions to kill or capture a foe bested in combat, but they were not universal policies and there were regional and situational variations in their application.

80 Stephan van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk-U Kingdom (Burma) from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century AD” (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2008), 231.
For example, it was still possible in the early parts of the 19th century to find some Southeast Asian military leaders instructing their troops to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Such reports support the descriptions of warfare highlighted by Anthony Reid. The Manipuri chronicle *Aawa Ngamba* (Defeat of the Burmese) recounts instructions Gambhir Singh gave his troops in 1826, preceding the liberation of their homeland. He instructed the soldiers not to lose their “composure” and kill enemies fleeing from the battlefield or any enemy soldier that has set his weapons and armor aside to surrender. He connected his instructions about refraining from unnecessary killing to cultural understandings of auspicious and inauspicious behavior on the battlefield:

Hitting Brahmins, women, children, beggars and lepers even by mistake will attract divine retribution...

Any person who has wrapped himself with a cloth around his neck, or bites a blade of grass in his teeth, or holds both palms together in submission, or has sought the protection of a devout recluse, or has climbed up a tree, or sits on a termite hill, should not be killed.

Anyone who is asleep or in the act of love-making, or anyone who is eating or counting rosaries in prayer, or wears his hair in a bun on top of the head, or rides a bull, or anyone who is pruning a shrub of flowers, or is in meditation, or playing the cymbal, or blowing the conch, or playing the percussion, or practicing vocal music, or reading the scriptures, or playing the strings, should not be killed.81

Gambhir Singh, who would ascend the Manipuri throne after victory in this battle, was clearly interested in minimizing battlefield casualties during the assault on Burmese forces. He seems to have based his instructions on concern to avoid supernatural repercussions rather than an abstract need to obtain laborers, however.

To summarize, warfare in Southeast Asia could be bloody and horrific. Diverse contingent factors sometimes led armies to fight like “angels” and capture their enemies alive from the battlefield and conquered cities. Other times, armies

81 Quoted from the loose translation of the *Aawa Ngamba* by M. C. Arun in his introduction titled “Humanitarian Tradition In Manipur: Study on the Ancient Code of War” in the forthcoming M. C. Arun et al., *Chainarol: Way of the Warrior* (Imphal: Human Rights Alert, Forthcoming). I thank Professor Arun for giving me a draft of his chapter in this important publication.
fought like “devils,” killing captured or injured soldiers and committing atrocities among non-combatant populations. The low population density of Southeast Asia coupled with a constant demand for labor could and sometimes did affect military strategies and levels of violence in battlefield settings, but these demographic factors did not govern the nature of warfare in mainland Southeast Asia.

I have noted that Francis Bradley, using Siam-Patani warfare as his case study, tentatively suggested that Southeast Asian warfare grew more violent in the 18th century. Certainly, as I have shown above, the frequency of state destruction increased in this period. There was no watershed year in which a strategy of state destruction emerged, however. Efforts were also made by Southeast Asia’s “classical” states to permanently destroy rival states before the 17th century. However, during the 18th and early-19th centuries, annihilation of rivals became the dominant military strategy of Thai and Burmese elites seeking to expand their political boundaries. Whether or not the strategy of state destruction made warfare measurably more violent requires further study.

3.2 Capture and Transport of Enslaved People

I now turn to the second area where there is potential for violence in the Southeast Asian slavery system: the capture and transport of people defeated in warfare. As discussed above, indigenous sources suggest that the violence perpetrated during battle was only irregularly curbed by the desire to take captives alive so they could be enslaved. Furthermore, captives were not necessarily treated well after capture. Transportation seems to have been a universally harrowing and brutal experience in Southeast Asia. Some sources report that the capture and transport of slaves resulted in mortality rates as high as twenty-five to fifty percent or more of the transported population. Mortality rates were probably unequally distributed. Captured royalty and their entourages were sometimes conveyed with the dignities that befitted their social position and some valued artisans also seem to have been given decent treatment. Transport by land and sea took to a high toll on the majority of captured people, however.
Diverse sources from Mughal India, the Dutch, and the English about the 17th century slave trade from Arakan provided the most detailed picture of slave gathering methods, transport, and sale in mainland Southeast Asia. The slave trade, along with sales of rice and elephants, propelled Arakan to wealth and power. It became one of the most important states in the Indian Ocean region for much of the 17th century. The Arakanese navy was composed of both Portuguese freebooters and Arakanese sailors. They marauded throughout coastal Bengal taking captives, who were delivered for inspection to the Arakanese royal elite. Skilled captives were claimed directly by the throne, while the remainder were sold at Arakan's international slave market. Profits were often divided between the navy and the palace. In the next paragraphs, I describe the Arakan slave trade in greater detail, including how captives were treated.

Arakan began its rise to power in the 15th century. The state was an entrepôt for valuable commodities such as elephants and rubies that were in great demand among states around the Indian Ocean. Its military strength was demonstrated in the 1590s when Arakan joined with Burmese allies to lay siege to Pegu, the capital of the First Toung-ngu Dynasty, which was the preeminent power in Lower Burma. Pegu was located up river from the coast approximately miles northeast of modern Rangoon. The victory over Pegu brought treasure and manpower to Arakan. Both Mughal and Portuguese sources from this period note a large influx of Mon captives into the Arakanese military. Portuguese sources suggest that out of 80,000 soldiers, 10,000 were Mon. Leider points out this is likely an exaggeration of military size. The proportions may be correct, however, leaving us to conclude that more than ten percent of the Arakanese military in the early-17th century was comprised of captive Mon and their descendants. Of greater importance to the development of Arakan’s slave-gathering network was the addition to the military of a naval force comprised of Portuguese freebooters. These freebooters were only nominally under the control of Arakan’s king and sometimes exercised their autonomy by raiding and looting.

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within Arakan. Following a military confrontation in 1617, the Portuguese force collaborated more closely with the Arakanese state for several decades.83

As Steven van Galen argues, two political-economic changes stimulated the emergence of Arakan as a slave gathering state. The first was the late-16th century expansion of Mughal Muslim power into Bengal. The Mughals emerged as adversaries to Arakan. The maritime boundaries between these two powers developed into a region of constant raiding and naval conflict. The second factor was the decision by the Dutch East India Company (or VOC) in 1631 to seize direct control of the growth and harvesting of nutmeg in eastern Indonesia. The violent removal of the nutmeg trade from Indonesian hands meant that the Dutch were in urgent need of a labor force for its expanding nutmeg plantations in the Spice Islands.84 The Dutch began scouring the region for sources of new slaves. These events converged as Arakan entered a phase of intensive slave raiding throughout Mughal territories along the Bengal coast. Such raids had long been conducted to enhance local labor needs, but were expanded in the 17th century to meet the intense demands of the Dutch for plantation slaves.85

Arakan slave traders also sought to capture skilled laborers. Many indigenous and foreign sources describe Bengali captives being brought before the king in Arakan to be assessed for their value as artisans. This is best described in a 1777 British report by Major R.E. Roberts:

In February last the Mugs, or Aaracaners, carried off from the most southern parts of Bengal about 1800 men, women and children; they arrived at Aracan... after a voyage of 10 days. Upon their arrival they were conducted to the... sovereign of the country, who chose from

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83 Charney writes that the Portuguese freebooters were forced to leave their families on shore when they went to sea as a way to assure their loyalty to the king and their return from slaver raiding and looting operations. Michael Charney, “Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 2 (1998): 203.
84 The Dutch planted 180,000 nutmeg trees in 1634 alone.
among them for his slaves all the handicraftsmen and most useful persons, amounting to about one-fourth of the whole number, the rest he returned to the captors, who conducted them, by ropes around the necks, to a market, and there sold them...86

The palace kept a careful accounting of the skills of the captives. The human cargo of the Dutch merchants was carefully inspected against written court documents to ensure that no skilled artisans or slaves belonging to the king ended up amongst the Dutch purchases.87 The Arakan king used slave gathering in order to gain a corner in the profitable market for high-quality textiles. As the historian van Galen and others have pointed out, Arakanese slave gathering campaigns appear to have concentrated on Dhaka, Sripur, and Sonargaon in eastern Bengal, the heartland of Bengal’s weaving industry. Captured weavers, who would have been scattered throughout many villages in Bengal, appear to have been settled together into weaving villages in Arakan, where they were put to work producing sumptuous textiles for export.88 Unskilled laborers were sold at prices relative to their strength and abilities either to the Dutch or to the Arakanese to work on farms. Charney estimates that by 1770, three-quarters of the population in Danra-waddy (the agricultural area closest to the capital) was comprised of Muslim captives and their descendants.89 Roberts estimated that Bengali captives and their descendants made up one quarter of Arakan’s total population.90

Portuguese and Arakanese slave-raiders used narrow, shallow draft galleys of various sizes that could be fitted with sails or rowed. These galleys could travel quickly through the shallow, tangled waters of the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta. Raiding in this area was mostly seasonal, occurring in the cold season after the monsoon rains had subsided, when the seas were relatively calm and the rivers high

87 van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal,” 236.
88 Ibid., 225, 235.
89 Michael Charney, “Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)” (Ph.D., The University of Michigan, 1999), 171.
90 Ibid., 142, 144.
Raiders struck at night, overcoming smaller boats or raiding riparian villages, and carried people away as slaves. They could also strike during the day, scouting for large groups of people who had assembled in one place as on market days or for weddings and festivals. Sarkar describes their raids:

> From the [time]... when Bengal was annexed to the Mughal empire...Arracan [Arakan] pirates, both Magh [Arakanese] and Feringi [Portuguese], used constantly to [come] by the water-route and plunder Bengal. They carried off the Hindus and Muslims, male and female, great and small, few and many, that they could seize, pierced the palms of their hands, passed thin canes through the holes and threw them one above another under the deck of their ships.

Note that this method of securing prisoners by piercing their hands with rattan was also used by Ava’s military during their raids in Manipur, but in those cases prisoners were pierced through the hands and joined together into groups of ten so that they could not slip into the jungle during their march along narrow mountain roads. This is discussed further below. Sarkar goes on to report the conditions of the captives under transport:

> In the same manner as grain is flung to fowl, every morn and evening they threw down from above uncooked rice to the captives as food. On their return to their homes, they employed the few hard-lived captives that survived [in jobs] with great disgrace and insult in tillage and other hard tasks, according to their power. Others were sold to the Dutch, English and French merchants...

The Moghul source concludes on the economic and demographic results of slave raiding in Bengal for the Arakan:

> As they... continually practiced piracy, their country prospered, and their number increased, while Bengal daily became more and more

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91 Jadunath Sarkar, “The Feringi Pirates of Chatgaon, 1655 A.D. [from the Contemporary Persian Account of Shihabuddin Tallab],” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 3 (1907): 424. I thank fellow UH graduate student Richard Forster for bringing this source to my attention. See also an enlightening discussion of Southeast Asian war boats and naval practices in Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, 107–123.

92 van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal,” 230–1.


desolate… Not a householder was left on both sides of the river on their track from Dacca to Chatgaon [Chittagong]… They swept it with the broom of plunder and abduction, leaving none to inhabit a house or kindle a fire in all the tract.96

The Bengali word for the Arakanese ethnic group is “Magh.” The Bengali expression “mager muluk,” according to Swapna Battacharaya, is rooted in the word Magh and the historical experience of Arakanese slave raiding. Mager muluk means “world of disorder,” suggesting that this traumatic period remains alive in Bengali folk songs.97

The Mughal source quoted above implies that transport killed many captives. Unfortunately, most sources provide only limited information on the numbers of casualties in the first stage of transport of captives into slavery. More accurate pictures of mortality rates come from Dutch sources that discuss the deaths of slaves upon arriving in Arakan and during their second stage of transportation to Dutch plantations in Indonesia. In 1624, for example, a quarter of the 400 Bengal captives purchased by two Dutch boats expired, some before departure, others on the two Dutch slave ships. In 1625, Dutch sources reported that an epidemic swept through the captive people held in Arakan. Of the estimated 10,000 slaves off loaded from the slaving boats, 4,000 died within a few months of arrival. High-ranking Arakanese soldiers who received between 400 to 500 captives saw their ‘payments’ reduced to 50 to 100 people. Lower ranking slavers, who had received between 20 and 24 slaves, saw their holdings reduced to almost nothing. Of the 544 purchased by the Dutch, only 100 lived long enough to make the trip to Batavia. Partially in response to this fiasco, future Dutch missions to Arakan were instructed to purchase only slaves aged between eight and twenty years old.98

F. H. Turpin’s recounting of Burma’s 18th century assaults on Ayutthaya provides other compelling descriptions of the violence and trauma experienced by

96 Ibid., 422–3.
98 This event is described with differing details in Prakash, “Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680,” 99. And in van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal,” 231–2.
war captives in Southeast Asia. Published in 1771, Turpin’s history drew from the reports of French Christian missionaries that had survived the fall of Ayutthaya and evaded capture or managed to escape after being captured. Turpin’s prose is overwrought and the overall theme of his narrative is the perseverance of Christian society amongst the despotic and war-like peoples of the Far East, but his recounting of the individual experiences of both European and Asian Christians in the aftermath of Burma’s assaults on Mergui and Ayutthaya was probably closely based on the documents he worked from. Turpin described methods used on wealthy foreign and indigenous captives to extract information on the locations of buried and hidden riches. In Mergui, he writes:

> Women were bound above the ankles so tightly that the cords cut into the flesh. Their inexorable tormentors made them answer questions by striking them with the flat of their swords… Men received still harsher treatment. Their ankles were bound in the same way… and, to add to their miseries their arms were tied behind their back so that the elbows touched… So severe were the agonies caused in the joints, that the victims swooned in many cases.99

The text goes on to describe the Burmese soldiers cruelly inducing cooperation from their captives by putting their feet into fires and tying them naked in the noonday sun. The text also describes families being separated as the Burmese military elite divided people as spoils. Ayutthaya’s Christian community was separated out by the conquerors. The leading French missionary, the Bishop of Tabraca, was put on a ship with sixty-three other Christians. The bishop was treated well, but his flock was put to work manning the ship; many died as a result of the toil. Once on the Burmese coast, the bishop was marched across lands previously subdued by the Burmese forces on their way to Ayutthaya over a year earlier. The region had not recovered from their earlier passage; it was “a country destitute of houses or inhabitants.” The

army, unable to find provisions, halted the march in the port city of Tavoy. The bishop secured his escape aboard a British trading ship that had anchored to sell food to the Burmese forces.\textsuperscript{100}

Oral and written sources for Burma's westward expansion into northeast India are richer in their descriptions of the post-war experiences of defeated people. For example, professional and non-professional historians in modern Manipur frequently use the word “genocide” to describe the “Seven Year Devastation [Chahi Taret Khuntakpa],” the period between 1819 and 1826 when Burmese forces occupied the Manipur valley. These writers all use the same statistics to claim genocide occurred, stating that at least 400,000 people lived in the Manipur valley before the Burmese invasion, but that most were killed, leaving only 2,000 in the valley by 1826.\textsuperscript{101} Western scholars usually reserve the word “genocide” to describe an attempt to exterminate a people. By Western standards, it would be inappropriate to refer to the Seven Year Devastation as genocide. The Burmese sought to permanently disable the autonomy of the Manipur state, not exterminate the Manipuri. It is estimated that three-quarters of the valley population actually escaped to neighboring kingdoms and settled as refugees in parts of today's Bangladesh and Assam. Burma’s garrison in Manipur was designed to prevent this sizeable population from returning to the valley. Nevertheless, the use of the term “genocide” by Manipuri historians reflects the emotional valence that the Seven Year Devastation had on Manipuri refugees at the time and continues to have on the sensibilities of many modern Manipuri. The Seven Year Devastation occurred at a

\textsuperscript{100} A second group of Christians made up of adult men and women (children were transported separately) was being marched to Burma when Thai bandits attacked the group. The Burmese soldiers fled or were killed and the Christians found themselves unexpectedly freed, but penniless and in a war zone. They made their way to the Thai seacoast, where after a month spent foraging shellfish they were able to negotiate passage aboard a Chinese junk. Some of the group thought the Chinese sea captain a dubious character, so only fifty-three boarded the junk and sailed to Cambodia. In Cambodia, the group was taken in by a Vietnamese Christian community. The group that stayed behind, it was later learned, died of hunger and exposure. Turpin, History of the Kingdom of Siam, 143–6, 167–73.

\textsuperscript{101} Any pre-1819 population figure is an estimate. Some sources suggest it was as high as 600,000 though this seems very unlikely given the region's overall low population densities. The current population of the Manipur valley region (not including the mountains) is just over 1,385,000. British soldiers that took part in the liberation of the valley estimated the post-occupation population at numbers ranging between 2,000 and 10,000.
time when the Manipuri kingdom and culture hung on an agonizing knife’s edge. An estimated third of the population was dead or in captivity, the rest scattered across numerous neighboring kingdoms. Had the Manipuri elite not secured British assistance to push the Burmese from the valley, the steady processes of assimilation would surely have meant the destruction of a unified Manipuri culture—ethnocide if not genocide.

The court history of the life and reign of King Gambhir Singh (r. 1821 and 1825-1834), the *Gambhir Singh Nongaba*, described the Burmese occupation as follows:

... in the wilderness of devastation the Burmese swept away many of the traditional structures of Meetei and substituted them with their temples and houses. Most of these demolitions were made in the fort of Kangla and in the four central districts... where they erected afresh stockades ... in wild drunken orgies the Burmese occupation forces entered the villages and massacred untold numbers of their inhabitants like chasing animals in the wild.102

Drawing from oral histories of the event, the Manipuri historian N. Birachandra Singh describes the traumatic events even more vividly:

As soon as the Burmese occupied the capital of Manipur they started the work of plunder and torture... It is told by our elders that big crowds of civilians consisting of women and children were forcibly pushed into big houses... when the houses were full...dry chilies were burnt inside the houses till the crowds died of suffocation... Whenever one smells the burning chilies we utter today the word “Awa lal Lakle” i.e. the Burmese war is coming.103

Manipuri captives were marched over the precipitous mountain trails that led back to Upper Burma. Oral histories record that women were forced to carry plunder claimed from Manipur; some expired under the weight of these burdens. Men were pierced through the palms and a cane creeper, called *yairi* in Manipuri, was forced

102 Quoted from Raj Kumar Somorjit Sana, *The Chronology of Meetei Monarchs: From 1666 CE to 1850 CE* (Imphal: Waikhom Ananda Meetei, 2010), 244.

103 Birachandra, *Seven Years Devastation, 1819-1826*, 60-1.
through the holes. Ten people were strung together in this fashion to prevent their escape into the jungle.\textsuperscript{104}

From their base in Manipur, the Burmese military was able to extend their power into northeast India. They invaded the Kingdom of Assam (a.k.a. the Ahom Kingdom) located in the Brahmaputra valley three times. Manipuri and British sources recounted frequent, gruesome atrocities during the third invasion in 1821. British investigators reported Assamese being decapitated, disemboweled, flayed and burnt with oil, or driven into houses that were set on fire. John Butler conducted interviews with survivors of a reprisal attack on alleged family members of Assamese rebel fighters. He wrote:

\begin{quote}
To strike terror into the minds of the inhabitants... [a] large building was ...erected of bamboos and grass, with a raised bamboo platform; into this house were thrust men, children, and poor innocent women with infants, and a large quantity of fuel... [and] it was ignited.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

When British forces invaded Burmese-held Assam in 1825, the Burmese retreated with a reported 30,000 Assamese captives. In Assam, as in Manipur, the trauma and grim history of these events are reflected in a variety of story telling traditions.\textsuperscript{106}

In 1822, the French missionary M. Pecot investigated the aftermath of the Thai invasion of Kedah and witnessed the treatment of Malay war captives. Pecot described the sight as so painful that writing about them later brought him to tears. He found Kedah burned and abandoned. The Thai had put up temporary prisons to hold captured Malay, principally from the island of Langkawi.\textsuperscript{107} Men, women, and children were penned separately. Men were bound by the hands and legs and yoked around the neck with a wooden collar that was so tight “they have a hard time swallowing the terrible rice they are given as food.” Children were kept separate and bound together in groups of four with rattan in such a way that they could

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{105} John Butler (Major), \textit{Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam, During a Residence of Fourteen Years} (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 248.
\textsuperscript{107} Pecot’s description of this island is imperfect and he may have meant another island such as Pinang located off the coast of Kedah.
barely perform “their natural needs.” Women were kept together with their infants, but Pecot described their prison as flooded with water, so the women stood in deep mud. Pecot could speak Malay and talked with the prisoners. He reported that each day a few prisoners were selected for decapitation, but it was unclear why they were being killed.108 Were the Thai trying to dispirit the Malay captives and make them more docile by brutalizing them? Were they sorting captured soldiers out from non-combatants and killing them to prevent organized unrest? We can only speculate, but Pecot was of the opinion that the Thai could have chosen to execute all of the captured Malay or send them off to Bangkok as slaves.109

3.3 Reconsidering the “Low Casualty” Thesis and Bloodless Warfare

As was discussed above, both Charney and Bradley have drawn attention to an assumption within the field of Southeast Asian studies that warfare in this region was less sanguinary then in other world areas; they both call this “the low casualty thesis.” I believe that “the low casualty thesis,” combined with observations by European observers about the relatively non-violent, even familial treatment of slaves in urbanized Southeast Asia, minimized scholarly interest in the conditions and experiences of people captured during periods of slave gathering warfare. Scholars may have been unconsciously biased to assume that the value of slaves to the state as laborers and the relatively kind treatment of household slaves protected war captives from ill treatment, rape, torture, separation from family members, and other traumatic experiences. I have tried to demonstrate above that this invisible protective barrier did not exist. Captured people were liable to undergo many forms of trauma and mistreatment at the hands of enemy soldiers.

The Thai anthropologist Katherine Bowie is the only scholar to make a sustained critique against something we might call the “low trauma thesis” implicit in historical analyses of slavery in mainland Southeast Asia. Bowie suggests that “scholarly apathy” stifled critical inquiry into the subject of slavery. She points out


109 Ibid., 136.
inherent problems in the texts scholars use to structure their understanding of Southeast Asian slavery. Indigenous documents such as court chronicles, praise poems, and legal codes that seem to verify the benign treatment of slaves were almost universally composed by and for the slave owning class. For this reason, they deserve much more critical readings than they have so far received. More importantly, Bowie observes that the contemporary European sources that describe the benign nature of slavery were almost always discussing debt bondage. Debt slaves were much more protected than war slaves. Using the Lanna Kingdom of Northern Thailand as her case study, Bowie compiles interview materials along with historical European sources that focused on war captives in order to emphasize the trauma, dislocation, and mistreatment that accompanied kidnapping or capture, forced transport, and enslavement in the Thai context.110

3.4 Settling and Incorporating War Captives

In spite of the violence of warfare and capture, the vast majority of European sources reported that the treatment of slaves, even those captured in war, was much less violent than that found in the West. They also commonly observed that it was not easy to distinguish slaves from a low ranking family members within any given household. This presents a conundrum if, based on the discussion above, we now accept that captives were exposed to harrowing levels of violence during the first stages of their captivity. The efficient cruelty of their captors sometimes led to staggering mortality rates similar to those found in slave-trade systems in other regions of the world. What could explain the disparities in how slaves were treated?

The missionary Harry Marshall’s analysis of slave raids conducted by tribal Karen people, an upland group mostly located along the modern borders between Thailand and Burma, provides an interpretive framework for understanding the disparities in treatment. Marshall describes captive-taking raids in this upland context as constant, low level warfare between rival villages. In the immediate

110 Katherine Bowie began conducting interviews about rural life and slavery in Northern Thailand in 1974, focusing on people over eighty years old. Her interviewees were old enough that slavery was still a part of the living history of their villages. Her contribution to the study of Thai slavery is therefore significant. See Bowie, “Slavery in Nineteenth Century Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices.” Quote from pp. 102-3
aftermath of each battle, captives were frequently harangued, beaten, and sometimes murdered. This would last until the captives' family members sent intermediaries to the victorious village with offers to buy back their captured relations. Unredeemed captives continued to be ill treated until it became clear that they would not be ransomed back by their home village. They were then either killed or sold to travelling merchants for re-sale at a distant location. The captives that were not killed or sold away were taken into the households of the village elite. At this point, their treatment altered. Marshall writes that “as time went on [the slaves] became more and more accepted as members of their masters’ families, while the children of the slaves became ordinary villagers.”

Marshall’s observations imply that the force that shielded slaves from violence was not their abstract value (monetary or to the village labor pool), but their incorporation into the patron-client network of relationships within the captor society. Expanding this observation to include state-to-state warfare better explains the high levels of violence experienced by captives immediately following their capture and during their long-distance transfer to a different polity and the relatively less violent treatment received after they are settled as slaves in urban areas. Settlement was the moment at which their status transformed from being “unclaimed” or “un-owned” spoils of warfare to being attached to a king, noble household, or work group within the capital. The treatment, welfare, and health of “owned” slaves reflected the status and dignity of their elite owners.

Gwyn Campbell describes slavery in Southeast Asia and the larger Indian Ocean region as existing within “a social hierarchy of dependence” in which elites, slaves, and non-slaves were linked through culturally understood “rights and obligations” and superiors owed their inferiors protection in exchange for their labor and services. In most cases, the end of violence and beginning of bodily

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security began for slaves only after they were incorporated into the Southeast Asian cultural system of patronage and protection.

3.5 The Lao Phuan as a Case Study for Enslavement and Trauma

I began Section 3 by pointing out that creolization theory posits that the experiences of violence, trauma, and dislocation combine to destroy the culture of the slave, forcing enslaved people to begin the hybridizing process of rebuilding their culture in the place of their final settlement. I have shown that forces of violence, trauma, and dislocation were indeed at work in the mainland Southeast Asian setting. But where is evidence of cultural erasure? The process of cultural erasure is rarely supported by textual evidence even within the study of slavery in the Americas. The existence of new hybrid religious and artistic practices usually provides the only available evidence of erasure and rebuilding. They are the end results of unrecorded historical processes.

However, we have one remarkable indigenous source that discusses the disintegrating effects of slavery on culture in the Southeast Asian context. It is the Poem of the Phuan Country [Kap Muang Phuan], a court document composed in honor of a daring 1835 escape from Thai slavery by a Lao Phuan prince and several hundred of his followers. A close reading of this text, translated by Volker Grabowsky and Khamhung Senmany, lends support to core tenets of creolization theory.113

Following the destruction of Vientiane at the hands of Siam’s soldiers in 1828-29, Siam and Vietnam began a phase of violent competition for the allegiance or conquest of the smaller kingdoms in the Lao hinterlands. Prominent among these was the Kingdom of Xiang Khwang located in the area commonly known in the West as the Plain of Jars. It was ruled by the Lao Phuan ethnic group. When Vietnamese forces from Hue asserted control over Phuan areas around 1834, the Phuan elite requested military assistance from the Thai governor in Nong Khai (Nong Khai borders the Mekong river 375 miles north of Bangkok and 125 miles south of Xiang

Khwang). The Thai sent a small army that forced the Vietnamese into retreat from the valley.\(^{114}\) They then informed the Phuan elite that any further assistance from the Thai would require them to move their people southward over the mountains away from the growing sphere of Vietnamese influence. The Phuan were probably unaware that the Thai had adopted this policy in the 1830s to create depopulated buffer zones between themselves and expanding Vietnamese power in Laos and Cambodia. The policy relied on slave gathering warfare and forced relocation to create the buffer zones, though in this case, the Thai tricked the Xiang Khwang Phuan into relocating their people.\(^{115}\) The Thai troops promised to relocate the Phuan to Nai Thaen (present day Bolikhamxay) a rice plain on the other side of the mountains, but their real goal was to drive the Phuan even further southward into territory firmly under Siam’s control. The poem says the Phuan “believed the lies of the Thai / who enticed the families to go” by promising them rice fields to cultivate in “a large country” where “they would no longer face any hardships.”\(^{116}\)

The Phuan were forced by the Thai to prepare quickly for the march out of the Xiang Khwang valley:

Rice, water and food / were left behind. / They [the troops] fought and hit [the people] / paving the opportunity for cleansing the mueang [the polity] / [The people] were crying and sobbing. / The troops carried the population off.

As a result the journey was ill provisioned and the Phuan “suffered [hunger] beyond what can be imagined.” Their stay in Nai Thaen (Bolikhamxay) was brief. They were then marched southwest to Nong Khai, a town under Thai control. In that town, the poem reports, their poor diet had begun taking a toll on the population; people “were dying everyday” from hunger and fever. Eventually, the leader of the Thai “wandered around / and informed [the people] about their fate: / ‘You will be

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\(^{114}\) According to the poem: “The troops swarmed out, / spears, lances as well as rifles / and cannons were fired, / [The Vietnamese] fled from their camp. / Angry people were fighting and killing each other… / A lot of blood was shed, / the people lay dead like lumber piles… / They were dispersed / dying amidst the plain. / Others could flee / crying for their wives.” Ibid., 93.

\(^{115}\) The formulation of this policy is described in Chapter Two “Phuan Migration Patterns” of Breazeale and Snit Smuckarn, *A Culture in Search of Survival*.

gathered and moved away, / no one will escape.” The Phuan realized they were being taken into slavery and that the Thai military commanders intended to divide them up as property. Two large groups of Phuan attempted to escape through the jungle back to Xiang Khwang. The first, led by Prince (chao) Sali, was ill fated. Their food supplies ran low, so they began foraging for fruits and tubers. Many Phuan ate fruit from the nong tree, which is highly toxic.

While wandering / they discovered fruit... / Good savour, pleasant smell, sweet / like honey, strange... / Not long thereafter, / the delicious food / caused an illness... / Those who had eaten only a little / ...took a long time to die. / Those who had eaten much / died quickly... / Oh! Those who did not die / continued their flight.117

Prince Sa, the younger brother of Prince Sali, remained behind in Nong Khai and feigned loyalty to the Thai while organizing another escape plan. When his group trod the same paths as had his brother, “they saw human corpses... / They wanted to take a rest... / But they could not stay there, / [so intense] was the smell of dead bodies.” While this group was better organized, the human cost was still high. The sick and injured had to be abandoned to the forest:

Husbands and wives / abandoned their mothers-in-law. / Children / left their mothers. / Wives / murmured with their husbands compassionately. / They abandoned their children / who had not yet died.

In the end, though traumatized and numerically diminished, this group arrived back in the Phuan homeland. The poem closes with praise for Prince Sa and his effort:

Sunset had come / the rays disappeared. / The sun had vanished / the handsome prince [had led] large numbers of people / back to their homes.118

This wrenching poem is pertinent to the discussion of the relationship between cultural loss and enslavement because it describes how the Phuan people reacted to realizing that their “rescue” from the Vietnamese was actually an attempt by the Thai to transfer them into slavery. Their experience in Nong Khai is described

117 Ibid., 94–100.
118 Ibid., 100–1.
as a “kaliyuga,” an “age of darkness” or “apocalypse” in Buddhist terms. The poet interweaves supernatural signs of the kaliyuga with the collapse of Phuan social norms and cultural practices by describing a world in which the natural order has been overthrown:

The world is reversed / in many different ways. / There [appeared] a comet / and the earth was quaking/...Rice corns in the baskets / were flying away/...cave bees / occupied branches of trees/...Fire spread / on the grounds of waters.

Human relations were similarly upended as people resorted to crime to survive:

In Nong Khai...extreme turmoil occurred, / people lost their lives. / A lot of families / lacked food and water/...Young children / were now heads of households/...alms were stolen [from monks] / to feed infants/...[and] Buddha images were taken / and melted into money.119

Their eventual flight from captivity is presented as a desperate but necessary action to recover from collapse and decay. The Kap Muang Phuan is a rare document that paints a vivid picture of the Phuan cultural world in collapse and the human cost required to rescue both the culture and the people from slavery.

In 1876, roughly 40 years later, a British consular official investigated another Thai military seizure of Phuan people. He wrote of the forced migration: “This horrible march occupied more than a month and is hardly surpassed in its details of miserable suffering by any story of the slavers in Africa.” The Phuan, many loaded with heavy burdens, were hurried along in their march into Thailand. The Thai feared that men without families would rebel or escape, so they were put into “wooden collars” that “were tied together by a rope.” Men with families were unbound and allowed to look after their families. The consular official reported that half of the nearly 6,000 deported people died in route from “sickness, starvation and exhaustion” and that more would likely die of dysentery after resettlement. When Phuan captives fell by the roadside, Thai soldiers delivered them to nearby houses, but when none were nearby “the sufferer was simply flung down to die miserably in

119 Ibid., 96–7.
the jungle” while his or her companions were dispersed and “driven on with blows.”

I opened this section with a quote from the great Creole intellectual and poet Edouard Glissant who described the Middle Passage as an “abyss” that opened beneath the slave ship to devour the culture of the African slave. My contention is that the abyss does not require Atlantic waters, it can open under the feet of mainland Southeast Asian slaves as they were marched over mountains, through jungles and across sweltering rice plains, or as they were shipped down rivers and along tropical coastlines. The abyss, according to Glissant, is an elemental force in the process of cultural exchange or creolization. Acts of erasure followed by rebuilding, remaking, hybridizing, merging, and inventing in the context of slavery results in the creation of novel cultural forms.

4. Conclusion

In an insightful discussion of globalization and nationalism in Thailand, historian Craig Reynolds, pauses his analysis to make a sly and disruptive observation about the age of globalization in the Thai historical context. Drawing on the history of the Lao Phuan enslavement and forced resettlement (discussed above), he writes:

The relevant point to make here about the dispossession and resettlement of these peoples is that while Siamese administrative mechanisms encouraged assimilation and identification as Siamese, the policies, at least in the nineteenth century, did not subjugate the minority cultures to the point where they were extinguished... A kind of hybridization was possible, and was even tolerated and encouraged, for those who wished to retain a semblance of the culture of their ancestors. Central Siam in the nineteenth century was accustomed to a polyethnic population long before the term "multiculturalism” was invented.

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120 From the private correspondence of E. B. Gould, 4/8/1876, in the British Public Records Office and quoted in Grabowsky and Khamhung (Ibid., 87) and in Breazeale and Snit Smuckarn, A Culture in Search of Survival, 54.
121 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 6–7.
Reynolds observation is fundamental to the research presented in this thesis. Intra-regional slavery had a “globalizing” effect on regional culture no different than the better studied forces of international trade. Southeast Asian slavery made both regional integration and cultural creativity possible because it brought the cultures of hostile states into alignment as they localized and absorbed different aspects of their captives’ cultural practices. Simultaneously, slavery generated creolized cultural forms out of colliding cultural traditions. Following the lead of creolization studies, it is important to locate the agency for these interactions with the captives. Certainly, the social milieu or polyethnic character of Southeast Asian states contributed to processes of exchange and hybridity. However, it was the slaves themselves that made new cultural achievements through sweat and labor, survival and accommodation, and their own creativity.

This chapter was designed to make a particular point. I began with a peripatetic history of the creole culture that has developed in a series of connected Bangkok neighborhoods that stretch between the Bangkok Noi and Bangkok Yai canals. This section could be read as a celebration of these people and the creative forces of transculturation and creolization that they brought to Thai society. However, these communities were originally inhabited by people brought to Bangkok as slaves. They were not willing migrants, so any celebration of these neighborhoods must be tempered by an understanding of the extreme levels of human suffering that resulted from slave gathering warfare and forced relocation. The cultural creativity of any Southeast Asian Creole community came out of rebuilding what had been lost, destroyed, and stolen. As Glissant stated, creolization is a human story of recovery from the “abyss” of dislocation. Appreciating its fruits must be paired with an equal appreciation for the human agency involved in overcoming the traumas of warfare and enslavement. This agency is the running theme in the following chapters on the histories of Thai/Yodaya and Manipuri/Kathe peoples in Upper Burma.
Chapter 3
Identity and Labor in Mainland Southeast Asia

As our distance from Ummerapoora [Amarapura] diminished, towns and villages on each side recurred at such short intervals, that it was in vain to enquire the name of each distinct assemblage of houses; each, however had its name, and was for the most part inhabited by one particular class of people, professing some separate trade, or following some peculiar occupation.
- Colonel Michael Symes, 1795

1. Introduction

As the British Envoy Michael Symes sailed up the Irrawaddy River towards the capital in Amarapura, he began to notice villages that specialized in particular trades. The first village that drew his attention was Golden Boat Village, “inhabited by watermen in the service of the King.” This village was a naval outpost, likely positioned to defend the waterway from piracy or invasion. Next was a poor village “where the inhabitants get their livelihood by extracting molasses from the palmyra tree, of which they make tolerably good sugar.” A bit later he encountered a village where the “sole occupation of the inhabitants” was the “manufacture of saltpetre and gunpowder” for the king’s military storehouse. Another manufactured the coarse cotton preferred by the country’s poor. On a second boat trip he visited a village of potters, marble Buddha carvers and polishers, and a village that made impressively large fireworks measuring nine to ten inches in diameter and twelve to twenty feet in length. Symes further observed as he drew closer to the capital that the villages ran together into a single indistinguishable suburb, but followed the same economic structure he had observed in the countryside in that each village or section of the suburb had a name and was “inhabited by one particular class of people… following some peculiar occupation.”

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1 Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 142.
2 Ibid., 137–42, 195–6.
Symes was describing what is sometimes called Burma’s “royal service system,” a mode of economic organization in which skilled people were, in the words of historian Toe Hla, “perpetually attached to the various services of the crown.” Crown service workers (ahmu-dan) were organized into crown service work groups (asu ahmu-dan) assigned to labor at specific tasks for the palace. They were considered the property of the king and their social position was inheritable. Many crown service workers were war captives or their descendants.

Evidence of this form of labor organization has been retained in the urban areas of Upper Burma, which has proved a great boon to my research project. The British relocation of colonial Burma’s primary administrative functions to Rangoon and the Burmese failed experiment with socialist self-sufficiency inadvertently helped sustain traditional artisan communities in Upper Burma. The economic development that doomed traditional art forms in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia was slow to arrive in Mandalay, Sagaing, and Amarapura. U Ohn Maung, the sixty-year-old owner of a prominent gold leaf workshop in downtown Mandalay lives in a neighborhood crowded with gold pounders. Sitting on a wooden chair in his sales room, he gestured to the other traditional artisan communities that were around when he was young, many of which are still present in one form or another. Woodworkers still have workshops on 35th Street; they once made thrones and temple bookshelves, but today build modern household furniture. A street farther down was once the tapestry-making quarter, but this art form has fallen out of style, so only a few tapestry studios remain. Near them, U Ohn Maung told me, used to be rosary bead makers and hair comb manufacturers.

U Ohn Maung’s recollections are reinforced by a remarkable Burmese language history by Nat Mauk Tun Shein, *The Royal City made of Many Quarters* [*Win twe neh thekheh thi win ne pyeh*]. The author points out that the 1859 construction of the new capital in Mandalay was accomplished very systematically. Areas were

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4 Ibid., 35–6.
5 Interview with U Ohn Maung, Owner King Galon Gold Leaf, Mandalay, Burma, Research Notebook, 12/22/10.
set aside for the construction of temples, mosques, and Christian churches and people were settled in assigned neighborhoods according to their skills or ethnic background or a combination of the two. His book can be read as a peripatetic history of Mandalay and Amarapura, though it is organizes like an encyclopedia. He describes more than 250 notable locations and neighborhoods. He discusses the tasks or specialties that were performed for the palace at each locale, whether or not the current neighborhood still labors at those trades. Neighborhoods of crown service workers were frequently named for the tasks they performed. Some of these names have a surreal charm. For example, Somersault Mosque Compound (jun: bali win) on the block between 81st and 82nd streets between 27th and 28th was named after the palace acrobats (called “somersault specialists” in Burmese) that were settled next to one of Mandalay’s mosques, not because of any particular tumbling skills possessed by the mosque itself.

More pertinent to this thesis, Nat Mauk Tun Shein also describes the numerous quarters that were ethnically specific, such as the Kathe weavers’ quarters where the descendants of captives from Manipur made the famous royal silk lower body garments called luntaya acheik. Kathe ritual specialists (called Ponna in Burmese) who performed Hindu court rituals on behalf of the king were settled in another quarter. A division of the Kathe cavalry was settled close to the palace on 83rd street between 17th and 18th streets. Another division of Kathe cavalrymen was settled between 29th and 30th streets between 73rd and 74th near a famous temple, but this neighborhood and the temple were destroyed during WWII.

Nat Mauk Tun Shein also describes the two large Yodaya communities in Mandalay. Ayutthaya’s captive royalty were located in the Mintha Su (Prince’s Quarter), while lower status Yodaya were settled in Monti Su (Noodle Ward). Thai-style and other types of rice pasta continue to be manufactured in Monti Su. Both areas are unique for a sand pagoda building tradition that is still being carried out.

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6 Nat Mauk Tun Shein, *Win Twe Neh Thekheh Thi Min Ne Pyi [A Royal City Made of Many Quarters]* (Mandalay: Min Ma Haw Publisher, 2005), 67–82.
7 Ibid., 202.
today. These Yodaya and Kathe communities and other subject matter pertaining to these creole peoples form the basis of the next two chapters.

The urban spaces of Upper Burma had what I describe as “cellular” labor organization. Crown service workers were settled in specified communities and assigned different forms of obligatory labor such as wood turning (lathe working), noodle making, or embroidery. Each of these specific quarters had to meet production quotas to supply the palace with specified goods at specified intervals. Ritual specialists and performing artists were also part of this system. They were settled in distinct urban quarters, but were expected to travel to the palace at specified times to perform their duties. There were also quarters of what could be called service providers. Pedicurists, barbers, doctors, and masseuses took care of the bodily needs of royal people. Similar systems of labor organization were present in Manipur, Ayutthaya, Bangkok, and many other urban areas throughout Southeast Asia. Each of these labor systems is summarized and compared in this chapter.

The labor systems set up to serve royalty in Southeast Asia have received little attention from historians, perhaps because they have been thought of as innocuous means for provided luxury products to palace residents. I argue that studying crown service systems can provide insight into the complicated processes of identity formation among captive peoples and their descendants and cultural exchange between captive and non-captive peoples throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Leonard Andaya’s recent study on trade and ethnic formation in the Straits of Melaka demonstrates a complex relationship between ethnic formation and cross-regional (or international) trade in Southeast Asia. Andaya’s point of departure, similar to my own, is that ethnic identities are porous, flexible, and responsive to historical events and interactions with people and groups from outside cultures. The last two millenia of cross-regional trade have been seen as the life-blood of the Southeast Asian economy. Andaya shows that over this long time frame, ethnic identities have developed, grown larger, shrunk, split, and disappeared as large human communities organized to exploit various niches within the regional and

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9 Reid describes this as a region-wide phenomenon. See Reid, Age of Commerce, 100–3.
global economies. For Andaya, ethnicity is unpredictable, dynamic, and responsive to the opportunities and consequences of political and economic shifts within the region. This regional dynamic is poorly documented and understood because, as Andaya states, "the role of trade in the process of ethnic formation" has been "[l]ittle noticed by historians."¹⁰

My research follows the same vein as Leonard Andaya’s, but with a shift in subject matter and focus. Andaya’s focus is trans-regional, as he examines the repercussions of global trade and extra-regional peoples on ethnic formation among Southeast Asians. My research is intra-regional, as I look at ethnic formation among different Southeast Asian peoples brought into economic interaction by intra-regional warfare and population transfer. Finally, while Andaya focuses on “trade” (the verb), I concentrate more squarely on “trades” (the plural noun), that is, the skills and occupations of captured people.

In his now standard study of state development in mainland Southeast Asia, Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Victor Lieberman argues that the growing complexity of mainland Southeast Asian economies ultimately served a politically integrative function. State organized systems of production and exchange created lateral linkages between the different peoples and cultures that participated in this economic system. At the same time, this system created vertical linkages between palace elites and the lower ranks of society that produced goods and services. When these interconnections were stable, shared cultural and religious practices, modes of dress, architectural practices, and languages could develop among people within the network. This model correlates phases of economic acceleration with ethnic consolidation. Lieberman uses Upper Burma, his region of specialty, as an example. In 1400, the Burmese lowlands were a “medley” of ethnic identities “in which Burmans may not have been a majority.” By the 1830s, the valley basins were overwhelmingly Burman, but trade linkages to upland Shan states (composed of ethnically Tai, non-Burman peoples) created a parallel dynamic in which Shan people could be seen absorbing artistic, religious,

¹⁰ Leonard Y Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 3-9, 238. Quote from p. 3.
and linguistic culture from the lowland state. In Lieberman’s model, stable powerful lowland states generate a political and economic environment that facilitates the standardization of culture across a large territorial space. Economic interconnections and forces of standardization were resisted and rebelled against, but over time increasing numbers of people assimilated into the expanding network of ethnic affiliations and identities.¹¹

Lieberman’s model of lateral and vertical exchanges through economic networks is mostly unidirectional and driven by elites. Culture moves from the center (or capital city) to the periphery (villages) and from the palace to the lower tiers of the society. Lieberman allows for the possibility of “cross fertilization” between different groups and ethnicities in the periphery and for the possibility of cultural or religious practices “ascending” from the bottom to the top of any given Southeast Asian society, but does not explore these counter movements of culture very seriously.¹²

The model of cultural exchange I propose in this thesis is compatible with Lieberman’s arguments except in two ways. These differences result from my shifting research focus from the state (Lieberman’s primary object of analysis) to captive peoples. I agree with Lieberman that the state-level economic networks that developed in the Konbaung period (1752-1885) and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries served to culturally integrate large states and increase the size of certain ethnic groups through complex processes of assimilation and integration. However, focusing analytically on captive laborers provides a clearer understanding of how foreign skills and ideas were incorporated into evolving state-based ethnic identities. In addition, the processes of “cross fertilization” between diverse cultures, a subject proposed by Lieberman but not pursued in his research, becomes a much more visible object for analysis. The diverse populations of captives (and all the other ethnic minorities that labored within the Konbaung state) were integral actors in the project of building the Burmese ethnic identity that they subsequently joined or gradually assimilated into.

¹² Ibid., 37.
Secondly, Lieberman argues that the thickening of economic and cultural interconnections promoted the integration of ethnic identities. My model adds a level to this interaction that is unrecognized in Lieberman's work. The dominant force may have been integration (even as reaction and resistance to integration by some minorities and rebel groups), but contained within this large, complex economic dynamic of integration and assimilation were countervailing forces of non-assimilation by captive peoples and their descendants. These countervailing forces, though comparatively small, stimulated lasting notions of alterity and cultural difference among some segments of captured populations. The fact that certain “foreign” identities were preserved within this otherwise integrated labor system allowed for long-term cross-cultural interactions that may have stimulated still longer term processes of hybridization or creolization than has previously been assumed.

Two separate though sometimes interconnected forces promoted the alterity of captive peoples: religious difference and exotic skills or knowledge. The first of these alterity-promoting forces is unsurprising. Buddhist believers dominated lowland areas of Upper Burma, so the practice of Islam or Hinduism amongst non-Buddhist captives severely limited their full assimilation. Having different faith traditions meant these captives tended to marry among themselves, though intermarriage with Burmese appears to have been fairly common. In these cases, the Burmese were required to convert to the captive’s faith, suggesting that assimilation processes moved in both directions. Moreover, the practice of a non-Buddhist faith in a cultural environment where Burmese-ness was associated with Buddhist belief and practice would have encouraged a sense of alterity among the captives and their descendants. This factor requires little further explication. More surprising is the way that heterodox Buddhist practices and cult belief systems worked to sustain outsider identities among captives who were Buddhists and Buddhist converts. In the example of captives from Ayutthaya, sand pagoda making traditions and certain cult practices among artisan communities developed into “Yodaya” ceremonies; ongoing participation in these cults and ceremonies sustained Yodaya identity. Similar, heterodox religious practices developed among Kathe converts to
Buddhism who transformed gods from the indigenous pantheon of Manipur into local spirits that they worshiped in village level cults. We can think of these spirits as local spirits that served to de-localize the people that worshipped them by serving as a persistent reminder of their origins in another land. These religious and cult practices are covered in depth in the next two chapters.

As I stated earlier, throughout mainland Southeast Asia, slaves were pragmatically incorporated into the labor systems of various states and kingdoms. War captives were sorted according to their skills and then plugged into the state labor system to perform tasks similar to the ones they performed in their homeland. In urban areas of Upper Burma, captives were sometimes, though not always, settled according to both skill and ethnicity. As a result there were quarters for Kathe Brahmans, Kathe weavers, Kathe boatmen, Kathe goldsmiths, and so on. Yodaya people were settled into different areas for silversmiths, dancers, and gold thread embroiderers. Units within the military were also settled in this way, so there were urban quarters and satellite villages of Kathe cavalrymen, Yodaya musketeers, and Kathe galley rowers.

The royal service system of Upper Burma was designed to be self-sustaining. The palace assigned people to a particular labor sector in numbers adequate for producing the desired amount of a good or service. Since these jobs were inheritable, children were expected to follow parents into their profession, which kept the population of each work group relatively stable. The palace encouraged marriage within labor groups to prevent laborers from slipping out of low-status jobs into high-status jobs. Marriages by crown service workers (ahmu-dan) to someone outside of their work group had to be registered with the palace. These laws seem not to have been strictly enforced, but they served to slow out-group marriage among skilled laborers.\(^\text{13}\) When we consider the fact that numerous labor groups were composed entirely of war captives of one ethnicity or another, then we can see that this system had the unintended side effect of inhibiting marriages between ethnic Burmese and certain segments of the captive populations and their

descendants. The labor organization of Upper Burma produced a similar outcome as captives holding non-Buddhist religious faiths. Skilled laborers lived in the same communities and married amongst themselves, thereby slowing the processes of ethnic integration that we might otherwise have expected to occur in an expanding, interconnected economic system.

Another alterity-producing factor was the association between ethnic status with prestige within the royal service system. Writing in the context of ethnic formation within networks of transregional trade, Leonard Andaya suggests that competition among groups to maximize their economic, social, and political standing and corresponding perceptions of “status and prestige in the eye’s of others” have transformative effects on the historical processes of ethnic formation.14 The same could be said of interactions within the royal service system. Certain ethnic groups were believed by the Burmese elite to possess special skills. For example, Yodaya people were recognized for their dance skills and Kathe people for their weaving skills. These perceptions generated what we could call positive stereotypes attached to particular ethnic group. These stereotypes produced a kind of market incentive for preserving the group’s alterity from the larger Burmese population. The status and prestige attached to Yodaya dancers, for example, made it desirable for individuals to maintain a Yodaya identity rather than the benefits they might have realized by fully assimilating into Burmese society. In the first chapter, I described the decision not to assimilate as “elective alterity.” Note that the primary causes of “elective alterity”—religion and labor prestige—are not mutually exclusive. Certain Kathe Ponna ritual specialists, for example, were considered to have a special talent for palm reading and astrology. This created a demand for their services amongst non-palace Burmese that has lasted until the present day. This, in combination with the Hindu faith of the Kathe Ponna, magnified the likelihood of “elective alterity” within that community. We could also include the Thai tradition of guild cults as an example. Some Yodaya artisans and performers employed special rituals that they believed blessed or improved the labor that they performed. These

14 Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka, 8–9.
guild cults could also be seen as pairing with labor skills to sustain the otherness of the artisan.

I would like to close this section with a discussion of the importance of royal artisans to state power in Burma and the other states of mainland Southeast Asia. State artisans are an overlooked subject in English language studies of Southeast Asian history and politics. Only art historians have studied them to a limited degree. Likely this is due to the largely non-economic function of these artisans, since they were primarily producers of goods for consumption and use within the palace or for distribution through royal networks of exchange. Royal artisans worked within a planned economy organized by the state that ran in parallel to the mercantile, capital-producing, global economy for which the region is widely known. Excess production within the palace system could filter into the mercantile market. Amarpura and Mandalay held royally sponsored silk markets where the products of royal weavers were sold to international merchants. However, most of the cash generating trade of Southeast Asia was the entrepôt trade (the secondary marketing of extra-regional products to international traders) and the sale of local exotic trade goods (rubies, jade, camphor wood, or spices) and raw or lightly manufactured materials (teak wood or deer hides). This trade generated capital for regional elites that could be used to magnify their personal power and increase the size or strength of their respective states.

If we expand our notion of what constitutes “capital” and “an economy,” we can better assess the value created by royal artisans. Pierre Bourdieu has famously argued for expanding the conceptual notion of capital past “economic capital” to include what he calls “cultural capital,” the non-economic means by which class and status are expressed within a society. The original thrust of his argument was that wealth was not the sole signifier of power and status within modern societies. Rather, elite status was dependent on non-economic signifiers such as educational background, taste, cultivated knowledge of certain artistic and cultural practices,
possession of certain kinds of artwork, and modes of expression.\textsuperscript{15} Scholars in cultural studies, art historians, and others seized upon these insights to explain all kinds of non-economic expressions of power and prestige. In mainland Southeast Asia, for example, several wars were fought toward the goal of acquiring a famous Buddha image. Pierre Bourdieu’s insights into “cultural capital” allow us to more fully understand the productive power advantages achieved through such warfare. The acquisition of a regionally renowned Buddha image magnified the power and prestige of the monarch who obtained it in ways that were cultural but thoroughly non-economic.

These insights can be applied to the products manufactured by royal artisans. Artisans produced signifiers of royal power and prestige in Burma and throughout Southeast Asia. The heavenly palace architecture, the marble Buddha images and gilded and painted walls of royally sponsored temples, and the jewelry and ornamentation of princes and princesses were all made by royal artisans. The highly ordered sumptuary laws of Upper Burma, Ayutthaya (Bangkok), and Manipur meant that art objects and clothing were status markers that pegged an individual within the elite hierarchy of the palace. In this light, it is interesting to consider the following observations made by Michael Symes in 1794:

[In the palace] almost every article of use, as well as ornament, particularly in their dress, indicates the rank of the owner; the shape of the betel-box, which is carried by an attendant after a Birman of distinction wherever he goes, his ear-rings, cap of ceremony, horse furniture, even the metal of which his spitting-pot and drinking-cup are made (which, if of gold, denote him to be a man of high consideration), all are indicative of the gradations of society; and woe be unto him that assumes the insignia of a degree which is not his legitimate right.\textsuperscript{16}

Symes’ warning “woe be unto him” was an understatement because, as William Koenig points out, violating Burmese sumptuary law was considered \textit{lese majeste},

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 152. I first encountered this quote in the work of Koenig cited below.
\end{itemize}
punishable by death. Clifford Geertz argues that the pomp and display so prominent in pre-colonial Southeast Asia was an integral aspect of state power. These ceremonials were as much a means for creating state power as they were about representing state power. Geertz coined the term “theater state” to describe this kind of political activity. If we pair Bourdieu’s insights with those of Geertz, we can better appreciate the role of artisans in Southeast Asian states. While the palanquins they diligently manufactured, for example, were not wealth generating products, they created a different kind of capital that was as central to strong state functioning as Spanish silver coins. If we consider further that a high percentage of artisan communities were comprised of war captives and their descendants, then we gain an even greater appreciation for their role in the production of state power.

2. The Royal Labor Systems of Burma, Thailand, and Manipur

In pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia, land was abundant... [and] labor was scarce. The rulers of these countries occasionally waged wars against their neighbors in order to obtain the working hands they desperately needed... In Burma’s case, the ahmu-dans [crown service workers] of the Kon-baung society were chiefly made up of war captives. They were ethnically or functionally organized into asus—service groups such as lamaing (crown praedial slaves or crown farmers), myin (cavalry), hsin (elephantry), hke-tu (lead miners), and thagya-chet (sugar boilers).

-Toe Hla

In this section, I further demonstrate that crown service labor systems were integral to state power throughout Southeast Asia. Although these labor systems shared the primary goal of asserting elite power through artistic and ritual production, their organization varied considerably. I describe labor organization in Upper Burma, Central Thailand, and Manipur to demonstrate the complicated bifurcated effect the labor system had on identity formation. That is, it integrated

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many identity groups into large, somewhat unified “state” identities, while simultaneously preserving certain outsider identities, though they existed within these large cellular systems of labor.

2.1 Captives and the Royal Service System in Upper Burma

The crown service groups established in the reigns of noble kings are the foundation of the state and should be distinctly established for a long time... The true religion flourished when the affairs of the country are tranquil, and these are tranquil when all the crown service groups give their allegiance and perform their duties.

-King Bodawphaya [r. 1782-1819]20

Slave gathering warfare in Southeast Asia likely facilitated higher levels of cultural transfer than might be found in slave systems in other world regions because Southeast Asian captive peoples were plugged into many different status positions within the societies they were settled into. Enslaved people with highly valued skills were put to work in the higher ranks of society, while lesser-valued or unskilled people were forced to work in the bottom ranks. For this reason it is difficult to talk about war slaves having had a collective experience of “slavery” once they were settled in their new homelands. In previous chapters, I argued that the violence of warfare and the brutal treatment of war captives while they were being transported into slavery make the terms “war slave,” “slave gathering warfare,” and “enslavement” appropriate or describing the historical experiences of people defeated in regional warfare. After settlement, it becomes more appropriate to use the terms “captive people” and “captive descendants” because of the highly varied experiences of different captured people. Captives forced to work in demeaning low-status jobs can still be referred to as “slaves.” High status workers, such as the artisans discussed in this thesis, were well treated and rewarded financially for their labor. Although they were considered the property of the king and could not leave the profession to which they were assigned, the word slave is ill applied to their condition. Since other workers fell into a gray area between these two extremes, the

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20 Quoted from Koenig, The Burmese Polity, 108.
word "captives" is the best collective noun for the resettled people taken during warfare.

Burmese court documents demonstrate that the palace conceived of society as divided into eight tiers. Though centered on the elites, this heuristic model provides insight to the varied statuses of captive people:

1. Buddhist monks  
2. The king and royal family  
3. Brahmans and wise men  
4. Nobility and court officials  
5. Wealthy men  
6. Athi [tax paying peasants]  
7. Paupers and the destitute  
8. Kyun [slaves] and bondsmen

The placement of monks at the top of this hierarchy should be understood as a reflection of their status position and not their political power vis-à-vis the royalty, which was nominal. In Chapter Five, I discuss the communities of captive Brahmans whose status was only below the royal family and the Buddhist sangha (monastic community). Royal captives were often incorporated into the nobility and captured military leaders served the court as officials and ministers. At the lowest ranks, captured people were made into temple slaves (hpaya kyun), a degraded or outcaste form of slavery that was considered lower than paupers and the destitute in the social hierarchy (there will be more on the subject of kyun below).

For reasons that are not entirely clear, crown service workers (ahmu-dan) were not slotted into the palace conceptualization of Ava’s social structure. Toe Hla states that they inhabited a position above the tax-paying peasant and below men of wealth. Crown service workers were divided into four grades or status levels, some of which may have ranked higher or lower than the position Toe Hla suggests. From top to bottom these divisions were as follows:

1. Su-gyi: Literally “big corps,” this category encompassed elite military units such as cavalry, artillery, and musketeers;

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22 Ibid.
2. **Su-thei:** Literally “little corps,” this included soldiers devoted to palace security and personal protection of the king;
3. **Su-nu:** “refined corps,” comprised of royal artisans;\(^{23}\)
4. **Su-gyan:** “rough corps,” encompassed menial or low status occupations ranging from boatmen to executioners.\(^{24}\)

War captives were sorted into these four grades of crown service work.

The development of this elaborate system of labor management is commonly dated to the 17th century state-organizing programs of the Burmese King Thalun (r. 1629-1648).\(^{25}\) By the Konbaung era, crown service was viewed as the state’s “chief resource” and a great deal of administrative energy was put towards maintaining and preserving this system. Based on his analysis of census data, Koenig believes that 43 percent of the state population worked in the crown service sector in 1783. By 1802, this percentage had declined to 37 percent of the population. Koenig further estimates that of 35 percent of state service workers were captives or the descendants of captive people.\(^{26}\) Burmese historian Toe Hla believes that crown service workers were “chiefly made up of war captives.”\(^{27}\)

Sometime in the post-Pagan period, ten specific artistic skills became symbolically associated with the healthy functioning of the kingdom. Evidence that these arts existed in the Pagan era is found in many of the surviving temples and monuments, but they were not symbolically grouped together as classical arts until after the 15th century. They then started being listed in written documents and poetry such as the *Pan Seh Myo*, almost always translated by modern scholars as “The Ten Flowering Arts.”\(^{28}\) The number “ten” appears to have been a symbolic

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\(^{23}\) Toe Hla translates this as “tender corps”


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 37.


\(^{27}\) Toe Hla used a more diverse cross-section of indigenous economic documentation than Koenig, which may explain his higher estimation of the number of captives in crown service work. Toe Hla, “Money-Lending and Contractual Thet-Kayits,” 36.

\(^{28}\) The original meaning of this phrase was the more prosaic “Ten Art Styles.” The mistranslation is due to the shifting meaning of the Tibeto-Burman word “pan.” “Pan” was the ancient Tibeto-Burman word for “art,” no longer used in Burmese. In modern Burmese, *pan* means “flower.” The phrase “Pan Seh Myo,” literally “Flower-Ten-Styles,” is interpreted as a metaphor in which “flower” represents the flowering of the arts, hence “Ten Flowering Arts.” I thank Patrick McCormick for this observation. For a similar discussion of the word’s etymology, see (Dagon) Nat Shin, *Myanma Yoya Lo-ngan Seh Pwin*
number, since some chronicles describe twelve artistic traditions, but list them as ten.29 These ten arts were:

5. *Pan-beh*: blacksmithery and iron work
6. *Pan-pu*: carving wood or ivory
7. *Pan-tain*: gold and silver metalsmithery
8. *Pan-tin*: bronze casting and working
9. *Pan-taw*: shaping and molding stucco
10. *Pan-yan*: brick work and masonry
11. *Pan-tamaw*: stone sculpture
12. *Pan-bouq*: lathe working and wood shaping
13. *Pan-gyi*: painting temple murals and *parabaik* (books)
14. *Pan-yun*: making lacquerware

The Burmese state showered attention on organizing these important artisanal practices, including settling captured artisans into work groups according to their skills. Ayutthaya and Bangkok palace authorities also focused state attention on ten artistic practices (discussed briefly in the next section).

Burmese palace ministers used a surprisingly elaborate system to organize and police crown service workers. In *Myanmar Wun Tiya* [One Hundred Myanmar Ministers] Tin Nein Toh describes a hundred ministerial posts from the Konbaung era and, based on surviving court documents, provides short biographies of the individuals that held these positions. Some ministers oversaw the state’s military defenses, including the Minister of Elephants, Minister of Horses, Minister of Boats, and Minister of Guns and Cannons. Other ministers oversaw artisan groups, such as the Minister of Bronze, Copper, and Brass Workers, Minister of Blacksmiths, and Minister of Gold and Silver Smiths. Many ministerial positions specialized in organizing and overseeing captive people and their descendants, sometimes as a collective and sometimes based on their specialized skills. For example, a Minister of the Kathe appears in the records of King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763-1776), though Tin Nein Toh believes the office began in the previous reign of King Naungdawgyi (r. 1760-1763). The first minister to hold this position, Nemyo Pyoun Khyi, had led

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troops in one of Ava’s assaults on Manipur. Other ministers were in charge of specific types of captives taken from Manipur. For example, the Minister of Hindu Ritual Specialists [Ponna] would have overseen many Manipuri captives. King Alaungphaya is reported to have captured more than 2,000 cavalrymen from Manipur. They were under the command of the Minister of the Kathe until 1784, when the position of Kathe Cavalry Minister was established.

Similarly, in 1769 the court appointed a Yodaya Minister to oversee the captives obtained following the conquest of Ayutthaya. In 1826, British envoy John Crawfurd briefly spoke with the Yodaya Minister and learned that he was in charge of sixteen thousand Yodaya people. The position of Minister of Theater was created during King Hsinbyushin’s reign. This ministry oversaw Yodaya palace performers and other performing artists, performance protocols, and construction of theaters within the palace. By the reign of King Mindon the palace had a stage with wire machinery that allowed actors to fly up into the air.

Surviving financial documents from the end of the Konbaung era list payments made to court artisans. Interestingly, these payments seem unregimented and were perhaps traditionally governed. Some crown service workers were paid in large quantities of rice, some portion of which must have been sold by the workers to meet their other life needs. Others only received cash payment (usually silver coins). For example, the Minister of Blacksmiths was responsible for delivering 5,582 baskets or rice to the 253 blacksmiths under his command in payment for the swords, lances, guns, and other weapons they had made for the palace. The 22 bronze smiths charged with making spittoons, spoons, and bowls for the palace

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32 John Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), 246–7. He also met a Minister in charge of 1000 “Cochin-Chinese” a British term for the area encompassing southern Cambodia and far southern Vietnam. The Minister could not explain how Cochin-Chinese came to live in Upper Burma. Crawfurd assumed that they were living in Ayutthaya when it was sacked by Ava’s military in 1767.
33 As discussed in the next chapter, at least one of the men who held this position was Yodaya.
34 Tin Nein Toh, Myanma Wun Tyia: [One Hundred Myanmar Ministers], 209–10.
were paid 406 baskets of rice per month. In contrast, the 20 woodcarvers charged with carving lions, flying elephants, peacocks, angels, and floral patterns were paid 210 silver coins, probably meaning kyat, the local currency. Two large contingents of sixty men each were in charge of gilding the palace and royal temples. They also monitored older gilded buildings and informed the palace when the gold leaf had begun to dim, so that the money for restoration could be organized. Each of the two groups received 349 kyat from the palace.

I would like to now shift attention from captives who were relatively high in the social hierarchy to those at the bottom of the hierarchy, the “kyun.” Kyun is frequently translated as “slave,” but this is somewhat controversial. In idiomatic Konbaung-era Burmese, kyun was used in a variety of ways. All subjects of the king, outside of the royal family, were described in royal texts as kyun to the king. When one addressed the king at court, one was required to describe oneself humbly as kyun (or a variant of the word) in relationship to the monarch. Kyun is also used in texts to describe a believer’s relationship to the teachings of the Buddha. Conflating these uses of the word kyun with the social status of “slave” is problematic. The entire society may symbolically have been the slaves of the king, but they were not all debased chattel. However, when kyun was used as a juridical category for people whose status formally ranked below paupers and the destitute, it can be unproblematically translated as “slave.”

The kyun work category was also tiered. The higher rank of kyun was comprised of debt slaves. Their slave status was supposedly impermanent. In principle, they were in bondage only until they or their family members had raised enough money to cover their debt, at which point they reverted back to peasant status. Close study of debt slave contracts reveals that many debt slaves were permanent slaves, however. When a debt obligation reached a certain value, a person could gain permanent ownership over the debt slave in lieu of repayment.

36 Ibid., 237, 241–2.
37 For example, see the argument made in this vein in Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 33–4.
This system of purchase through debt was the origin of Upper Burma’s slave prostitutes, as some young women were unable to be unredeemed by their families due to the accumulation of debt. Even permanent debt slaves were protected from unjust beatings and sexual violation within Burmese law, however.

Of all the people working within the category called kyun, temple slaves (hpaya kyun) were of significantly lower comparative status. They occupied a social station below that of other kyun. Their station mirrored that of people called “outcastes” and “untouchables” in other parts of the world. Temple slaves were owned collectively and in perpetuity by Buddhist monasteries, so they were owned by institutions rather than individuals. Their work included cleaning the monastery buildings, caring for the monks, protecting sacred books, caring for and storing temple donations, and so on. Throughout the Pagan period, which ended in the late 13th century, their social category seems to have been respected within society. For reasons that are still unclear, by the first half of the 17th century, temple slavery had become a degraded category of labor and temple workers were treated as outcasts from the society. Criminals were condemned to temple servitude, a disgraced status that passed to one’s children in perpetuity. Temple slaves were not allowed to marry outside of their class and eventually even being touched by a temple slave was thought to be polluting or bad luck.

Father Sangermano vividly described the wide social gap between the two kinds of kyun in the late 18th century:

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38 Toe Hla, “Money-Lending and Contractual Thet-Kayits,” 44. Symes observed, “Prostitution in this, as in all other countries, is the ultimate resort of female wretchedness, but here it is often attended with circumstances of peculiar and unmerited misery. Many who follow this course of life are not at their own disposal, or receive the earnings of their unhappy profession; they are slaves sold by creditors to a licensed pander, for debts more frequently contracted by others, than by themselves... The wretchedness into which this inhuman law plagues whole families is not to be described. Innocent women are often dragged from domestic comfort and happiness, and from the folly or misfortune of the master of the house, in which they perhaps have no blame, are sold to the licensed superintendent... who, if they possess attractions, pays a high price for them, and reimburses himself by the wages of their prostitution.” See Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 123-4.


The [debt] slaves are... treated as children, and as forming part of the family of their masters; indeed it is not a rare thing for them to become the sons-in-law of their master. But it must be remembered that slavery is not for life in these parts. If a man can save sufficient to pay the debt for which he was enslaved, he becomes free.

...Hence none but the slaves of the Pagodas, and those who are employed to burn in bury the dead are considered as infamous, and with these [people] alone... no one will contract marriage.41

Crawfurd described their social status in similar terms a few decades later:

[S]laves to a temple... are reduced, hereditarily and forever, to the same degraded rank in society as the burners of the dead [in India]. They cannot intermarry with the rest of the people, nor indeed in almost any manner associate with them, and few persons will even condescend to sit down and eat with them.42

The slow advent of British colonialism in Burma, beginning in 1824 and ending with the complete colonization of the state after 1885-86, facilitated the rebellion and escape of many temple slaves. Taw Sein Ko, the famous Sino-Burmese intellectual who worked in the British colonial archeological department, wrote that during his 1892 survey of Pegu he found that stone inscriptions of temple slave donations had been broken. “In some cases,” he wrote," the names of persons dedicated as pagoda slaves have been carefully chiseled out." He attributed this vandalism to treasure hunters and “pagoda slaves who were anxious to obliterate the record of their origin.”43 Even though the British colonial administration and the post-colonial socialist Burmese government attempted to ameliorate the plight of temple slave descendants, not all temple slaves were able to hide their backgrounds and disappear into mainstream society. My interviews with the descendants of temple slaves indicate that the stigma continues to the present day.44

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41 Sangermano, The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago, 156.
42 Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, 1:397–8.
44 See Scott's discussion of "Slaves and Outcastes" in the colonial period. James George Scott, The Burman: His Life and Notions by Shway Yoe (New York: Norton Library, 1963), 427–434. Interviews conducted in the temple slave descendant quarter near the Mahamuni Temple, Amarapura were recorded in my Research Notebook on 1/21/11 and 1/22/11.
This is relevant to our discussion because the bulk of temple slaves were war captives or their descendants, although they were supplemented by criminals and other people being punished. In his now classic text, *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson argues that the status of slaves was perpetually rooted in their origins as captives in warfare. The victors could have killed the captives, but instead allowed them to live on in a diminished status, a “social death.” A socially dead slave was a perpetual outsider, without community connections or access to kinship networks; they were held in status of “generalized dishonor.” Applying Patterson’s notion of “social death” to the Burmese social category of *kyun* magnifies the semantic range contained within this term. Social death is a poor analytic concept for understanding the social status of those who fell into *kyun*-hood due to debt, however, since these *kyun* were often incorporated into the family network of their temporary owners, as noted by Father Sangermano above. On the other hand, *kyun* assigned to temples clearly experienced “social death.” They were ostracized from Burmese society and, along with other outcaste categories, treated as pariah, “forbidden to dwell in the towns and villages, and must reside apart in the suburbs or outskirts, nor must they even enter the house of those deemed respectable and un-contaminated.”

This section and the two that follow reiterate the well-understood and well-studied feature of mainland Southeast Asian states that labor organization was a central focus of state administration. I have shifted the treatment of “labor” as an abstract force that contributes to the construction of state power and wealth to focusing on how the labor system was composed. I have demonstrated that many skilled and unskilled workers labored within a highly elaborated cellular system

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45 Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava*, 1:118. He writes, "Prisoners of war and others, are frequently condemned to be hereditary slaves for the service of the temples, and this class of persona seems here to be alluded to. According to this practice, we found at Rangoon a large body of Talaing [Mon] under a chief of their own, who were considered slaves to the Shwe-dagong Pagoda."

46 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.

47 Crawfurd noted that temple slaves were one of several kinds of outcasts within Burmese society. Others included burners of the dead, prison jailers (a position held by former inmates whose crimes were tattooed on their faces), executioners, lepers and other incurables, and prostitutes. Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava*, 1:133–5.
designed to provision the state with both necessities and luxury goods. War captives were placed in many different levels within this labor system, ranking as high as royal advisors and as low as temple-sweepers. These different statuses would have set different processes of creolizing exchange into motion. It is impossible to reconstruct all these different processes since they are not captured in any Burmese documentation, but we can be assured that court singers, blacksmiths, and mango farmers would have experienced different transculturation processes and social interactions, so each would have had different potentials for affecting change in Burmese society.

2.2 Captives and the Royal Service System in Ayutthaya and Bangkok

This chapter began with a discussion of the British envoy Michael Symes’ 1795 trip up the Irrawaddy River towards the Burmese capital and his numerous encounters with villages that specialized in particular skills and trades. In 1655, the Dutch VOC employee Gijsbert Heeck made similar observations of the villages that lined the Chao Phraya River along the approach to the capital city of Ayutthaya. Interspersed among traditional farming villages, Heeck saw villages where “there lived none but various types of potters, and in others only cutters of firewood.” Furthermore,

In some villages there lived only boat-builders, and in some only carpenters or those who had tree nurseries...We also passed a village where only coffins were made; at several of the houses five or six of these stood for sale as finished products. The coffins were very artfully made, elegantly carved and beautifully painted and gilded, but we were told the deceased are not burned in these, but in the simple coffin that stands inside it.48

Labor organization on the outskirts of the capital in Central Thailand paralleled that in Upper Burma. Many villages were dedicated to specific occupations, manufacturing utilitarian and sumptuary products as part of the larger provisioning economy.

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Ayutthaya’s urban and suburban labor organization also ran parallel to that found in the capitals in Ava. Sadly, today Ayutthaya is a ruin. It is not possible to conduct research as Nat Mauk Tun Shein did by wandering through neighborhoods gathering information on the city’s artisanal past. However, Thai scholars armed with GPS mapping software and descriptions from foreign and indigenous sources have re-created a serviceable picture of Ayutthaya’s urban labor organization. Chris Baker, in a recent article on the economic life of Ayutthaya, summarizes the Thai language research and pairs it with a translation of a late 18th century Thai language document, *Description of Ayutthaya*, that is rare for its detailed discussion of the city’s economic geography. The places described in the translated text are linked to a map that accompanies the text (see Figure 3.1).
Figure 3.1: A map of craft manufacturing areas and market places, reproduced from Baker, *Markets and Production in the City of Ayutthaya before 1767*, p. 69.

As in Upper Burma, most of the villages and quarters in Ayutthaya were named for the kinds of labor or products they produced. Baker explains that there was a Silver Quarter, Gold Quarter, Noodle Quarter, Medicine Quarter, Howdah (elephant sedan) Workshop Village, and a Fireworks Village. These are just a few of the forty or so areas named for different craft specializations or for the objects that
were sold there. The textile market was especially elaborate, segmented into thirty-five different kinds of cloth. Over all, few textiles were produced in Ayutthaya, most were imported. A group of Cham weavers were identified in the text, as were Pattani Malays who painted and printed floral designs on cloth.\textsuperscript{49} The \textit{Description of Ayutthaya} provides still more detail about some of the items that were produced:

At Potters’ Village they make rice pots; curry pots, large and small; skillets; grills...stoves; wick lanterns; torches; candle holders; flower trays; beeswax candles for offering at the start of the Rains Retreat; earthenware bowls; and spittoons.

At Tile Village they make wife-husband tiles, turtle-scale tiles, hooked tiles, and corrugated tiles for sale... Lime Hall Village has braziers to make red lime for sale.

Flask Village makes and sells earthenware spittoons, flowerpots, candle-holders, stoves, and various dolls in the shape of elephants and horses.

[People in] Nang Loeng Village, Royal Document Translation Hall Village, make \textit{khoi} paper, black books, and white books for sale.\textsuperscript{50}

The document also provides a good sense of the participation of extra-regional and intra-regional foreign people in the economy of Ayutthaya, as in the description of a “village beside Wat Phrao [where Brahman] and Thai [work together to] make fragrant powder and oil, ...scented water, ...incense sticks... and perfumes for sale.”\textsuperscript{51} Unfortunately for this project, the text does not distinguish captives from merchant or voluntary migrant populations. It lists villages and quarters inhabited by Lao, Mon, Cham, Vietnamese, and Malay, but they are not identified as captives, though some surely were.\textsuperscript{52}

To the best of my knowledge, European sources that discuss status and rank in Ayutthaya and early Bangkok have never mentioned groups of people being

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 53–6.
\textsuperscript{51} Baker \textit{Ibid}, 53. Baker assumed Brahmans hailed from India, so translated the Thai word “\textit{brahm}” as “Indian.” Since place of origin was not indicated in the original Thai text, I have substituted Brahman.
\textsuperscript{52} By the Bangkok period, information on the role of captive artisans and laborers in the economy became much clearer. See my discussion of this topic in Chapter Two.
treated as pariahs or outsiders within Thai society. Some prostitutes in Ayutthaya may have been slaves of a sort, but they are not described as housed on the outskirts of the city as they were in Ava. The *Description of Ayutthaya* shows them to have been centrally located. It states that near a large market and Chinese temple at the mouth of Khun Lakhonchai Canal, one can see that "actress-prostitutes have established four halls behind the market where they provide men with sex for hire..."\(^{53}\) Ayutthaya and early Bangkok also had temple slaves (frequently called *lek wat* or *kha phra* in Thai). As in Burma, records show that war captives were made into temple slaves. For example, Lao war captives from Vientiane were assigned to Wat Boworniwet during the reign of Rama III (r. 1824-1851). They were low status and assigned to temple slavery for life. However, as Craig Reynolds’s research shows, their legal status does not appear to have been lower than other workers in the royal service system or people outside the system who were required to perform several months of corvée labor for the state each year. Documents from the 19th century show that temple slaves were required to give three months of labor to the temple each year, an obligation that freed them from corvée service to the state. Temple slavery was still an unappealing position and temple slaves were tattooed, like many other workers in Central Thailand’s royal service system, to prevent them from fleeing labor obligations. Tattoos were insufficient for preserving the integrity of the royal service system. As Reynolds writes, it was only those Thai monarchs “with sufficient manpower and vigilant officials” that could prevent slaves from escaping their monastery assignments.\(^{54}\)

Ayutthaya’s and Bangkok’s system of social division was called the *sakdina*. It slotted individuals into the social hierarchy based on a point system that was much more elaborate and precise than Ava’s eight-part division of society (see Figure 3.2 below). B. J. Terwiel has written that the "*sak*[d]*jina* scale may be likened to an

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 52.

ascending system of titles, with distinct 'slots' in which a person was fitted."\textsuperscript{55}

Interestingly, but somewhat confusingly, sakdina literally translates to “power of the fields;” the ranking was measured in rai, quarter acre plots of farmland. Each point was evidently thought of as a small imaginary rice field. The system likely evolved from a royal system of reward in which the king awarded gifts of land and villages to subordinate lords in his court. It is assumed that this reward system developed into an abstract, symbolic system of measuring status in the early part of the Ayutthaya period. The king was the only member of society who was not given a sakdina ranking because he owned all the land and both the symbolic and real control of property by his subjects was entirely at his pleasure.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} B. J. Terwiel, Thailand’s Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times, 1st ed. (Bangkok: River Books Press, 2006), 22.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 21.
### Royalty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position in society</th>
<th>Sakdina Ranking in points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The King</td>
<td>Infinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The upparat (or Second King)</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A prince heading a government department</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince with blood relation to the king</td>
<td>15,000 to 20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s offspring by lesser queens in government office/without office</td>
<td>11,000 / 6000 to 7000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other lesser nobility</td>
<td>500 to 5000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Commoners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position in society</th>
<th>Sakdina Ranking in points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commoner raised to high government office</td>
<td>400 to 10,000 (the highest sakdina ranking allowed a commoner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty Officials</td>
<td>50 to 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Officials within the Department of the Ten Artisan Groups (Krom Chang Sip Mu)</strong></td>
<td>100 to 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled artisans attached to a government department</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribes, soldiers that lead squadrons, skilled soldiers, legal counselors, court clowns, etc.</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians in a military band, semi-skilled workmen, soldiers that lead platoons</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commoners both men and women, women working as servants for government departments</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base commoner</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The poor, beggars, perpetual slaves and debt slaves</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.2: A selective list of sakdina rankings in Ayutthaya.\(^{57}\)

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Terwiel sees the graduated system as fundamentally breaking the society into “four broad classes” with royalty (chao) at the top, followed by nobility (khunnang), then commoners (phrai) and slaves (thaat). “Commoners” was a category with sakdina points ranging from 10 to 350 points, but it was possible for a commoner to ascend into the “nobility” through appointment to high office. A sakdina rank over 400 elevated one to the status of “administrative elite,” a position that included participation in royal rituals and a government allowance. In the Bangkok period, it is estimated that only about 2,000 people ranked this high, out of a total population of two million. It was possible in certain circumstances for a commoner to be granted a sakdina rating of 10,000 (government office), so there was some permeability between the ranks of commoner and nobility.

As in Upper Burma, rankings were juridical categories with legal implications. As Terwiel points out, judges used tables based on sakdina rankings to issue penalties. Fines were higher for elite people for some crimes such as adultery. At the same time, low ranking victims of crime received much less compensation than did high ranking victims. For example, negligently breaking the bone of a commoner incurred a penalty of 50,000 to 70,000 cowrie shells, while the same infraction against a noble with a 10,000 sakdina ranking warranted a penalty of six to more than eight million cowrie.58

Most pertinent to this study was the ranking of artisans, commoners, and slaves. In the sakdina system, as in Upper Burma, skilled artisans in royal service were ranked above commoners (50 sakdina versus 10-15 sakdina). It was also possible for artisans to ascend to higher positions within the Department of the Ten Artisan Groups that organized royal projects within the kingdom (more on this Department below). We can also see from the table in Figure 3.2 that slaves, who had a sakdina ranking of only 5, were in the lowest segment of society. As in Upper Burma, the slave category included slaves with different statuses and legal standing. In the Thai case, there were debt slaves, whose slave status was impermanent, and absolute slaves, whose status was for life and was passed down to their descendants.

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58 Terwiel, Thailand’s Political History, 22–3.
Absolute slaves included war captives, temple slaves, people that had been sold to a master (rather than indebted to a master), and the children of absolute slaves. While there are records of absolute slaves being mistreated, they do not appear to have been treated as pariah as some categories of slaves were in Upper Burma. In addition, and again as in Burma, debt slaves had some legal protection against violence and sexual mistreatment. As Terwiel explains, debt slaves sold their labor to their masters but not their bodies, so they “retained their basic civil rights” vis-à-vis their masters. Absolute slaves, on the other hand, were understood as the “personal property” of their masters and their legal rights were more limited.59 Chatchai Panananon’s research elaborates this point further. Of the 104 legal articles dealing with slavery in traditional legal sources, only five directly address permanent slaves (a category that included war captives). Only one of these could be considered protective in that it instructs masters not to beat their slaves to death or they will be fined.60

In Ava we saw that court ministers organized artisans and oversaw the production of different products within the royal labor system. In Central Thailand we see a governmental department charged with overseeing ten specific artistic practices. The Department of the Ten Artisan Groups (Krom Chang Sip Mu) organized artisans into the following ten groupings (mu):

15. chang khian (drawing): painters of temple walls, wood, and paper; painters using gold leaf; and painters using lacquer;
16. chang pan (sculpting): sculptors using clay, stucco, beeswax (for lost wax techniques), and moldable lacquer putty;
17. chang keh (carving): shaping objects with knives, including wood and ivory carvers and decorative fruit carvers;
18. chang salak (engraving): shaping objects with chisels, including making objects from wood, stone, animal hides, and paper;
19. chang hlo (molding): artwork that involves pouring molten metal into molds;
20. chang klung (wood turning): shaping wood on a lathe;
21. chang hun (modeling): creating miniature puppets and mythical animals from wood or clay;

59 Ibid., 26–7.
60 Chatchai Panananon, “Siamese ‘Slavery’: The Institution and Its Abolition” (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1982), 60–2.
22. *chang rak* (lacquering): making and decorating lacquerware objects, including glass mosaic and mother-of-pearl inlay;  
23. *chang bu* (metal beating): shaping metal objects through repeating beating with a hammer, including royal urns, monk’s bowls, and swords;  
24. *chang pun* (plastering): constructing buildings using bricks and shaped decorative stucco, common in royal buildings and temples.\(^{61}\)

Ministerial records show that captured artisans were incorporated into the royal service under the category of “war captive artisans” (*chang chaloei*). The existence of a government department overseeing these ten arts gives an impression that artisans were systematically organized, but this was far from the case. Every government department that had cause to fabricate art works or other objects maintained their own sub-division of skilled workers. The military maintained artisans for the production of guns, swords, and other objects. Princes kept artisans in their personal entourage and within the palace there was a Department of Royal Page Artisans (*Krom Chang Mahatlek*) that worked directly for the king.\(^{62}\) This gives us a sense of the wide variety of social positions into which captured artisans could be placed.

I end this section with a discussion of the religious ceremonies conducted by artisans in Central Thailand. This important aspect of artistic practice in Thailand has been little considered in English language histories. These ceremonies were called “*way khru.*” In Thai, “*wai*” means “pay respect or give homage” and “*khru*” means “teacher,” but the ceremonies meant more than the name suggests. Different artistic groups conducted quite varied *way khru* ceremonies, but I think it is useful to think of them collectively as “guild cults.” In the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods, artisans used these rituals to summon supernatural beings to bless and improve their artwork and to pay respect to the history of the tradition as it was passed down by master teachers and sages over many generations. In the past, guild cults held three types of ceremonies: ceremonies in which students paid respect to their living teachers through prayer and offerings; ceremonies of initiation in which

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., 133–5.
journeyman were initiated into their artisan groups; and ceremonies in which the spirits of departed teachers and supernatural beings were called to bless and assist artisans in their projects. In the past these were separate ceremonies, but in present day Thailand they are frequently compressed into a single multi-faceted ritual. The ceremonies usually call Vishnu and Ganeshon, the Hindu gods most associated with creativity, along with the spirits of potent teachers, to assist the artisans. Like many of Thailand's most ancient ceremonies, way khru rituals are thus syncretic blendings of Buddhist blessings with Hindu rituals and ancient animist beliefs. (I return to these ritual practices in more detail in the next chapter.)

Guild cults helped establish a shared identity and purpose among different groups of artisans. Initiation ceremonies and patron-client relations bound students and teachers into lifelong relationships that paralleled familial ones. These collective guild identities had the power to retain fragmented histories of movement and displacement and other historical events that may have affected the artisan community. In Bangkok for example, the artisans in Baan Bu (discussed in Chapter Two) remember their origins as refugees from the Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767. Across the Chao Phraya River, nestled under the Temple of the Golden Mount (Wat Phu Khao Thong) is a community of bronze monk's bowl makers called Baan Batr (Begging Bowl Village). Their regular way khru ceremonies are a constant reminder of their history as refugees. An ancient teakwood bellows is placed on one of the community shrines where artisans stop to ask for blessings for their work. As everyone in the community, knows it was smuggled out of Ayutthaya by their ancestors, who had narrowly avoided capture by the Burmese. The teak bellows have a triple symbolic function: they are a stand-in for the ancient Teacher that first taught the art of bronze bowl making and is now worshiped as a spirit; it symbolizes the community's heritage as gifted artisans practicing an ancient art form; and it reminds the community of their connection to the fallen capital of Ayutthaya and

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64 Ibid., 34.
their brush with enslavement. In at least two cases, captives taken to Upper Burma preserved these guild cults. Gold pounders and classical dancers continued to worship teacher spirits and the belief in teacher spirits gained popularity among non-Thai practitioners of these artistic practices. This topic is also taken up in detail in the next chapter.

In this section, I have outlined the state’s labor structure and status system. While the management of artisans between Thailand and Burma was different in terms of bureaucratic organization, both kingdoms put a great deal of administrative effort into promoting and sustaining artistic practices that were considered essential to the functioning of a healthy state. Curiously, both bureaucracies listed ten classical arts that deserved special treatment. I have described the many and varied status positions that captive people could be assigned to in mainland Southeast Asia. While the status systems of Upper Burma and Central Thailand were different in some ways, they shared the common feature that after the crucible of capture and transport, captive people were placed in a variety of occupations at different levels of social status and with various legal protections.

2.3 Captives and the Royal Service System in Manipur

In 1910, the British Officer J. Shakespear published notes on a ritual honoring the god Khumlangba, the spirit of iron ore deposits. Ironworkers from three Manipuri villages gathered to propitiate this spirit before they began their annual work of unearthing and smelting iron ore. Manipuri rituals involved singing gods’ biographies and dancing mythological tales. Such rituals may have been partially responsible for preserving each community’s story of its foreign origins.

Ironworkers told the story of their ancient origins in neighboring Cachar and their journey into the Manipur valley in search of iron ore. On their way home, loaded with bundles of ore, they encountered the Manipuri king. He commanded them to test the ore for iron content. When the tests were positive, he had the

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Cachari people resettle on the land where they had discovered the iron ore, in the villages of K[a]kching, K[a]kching Khuno, and Wairi, and assigned them the full time task of supplying the palace with finished iron bars. They were expected to make two iron bars, each six inches long and two inches wide, for the king each month.66 The story receives confirmation in the group name, “Mayang-lambam,” that was assigned to many of the ironworkers by the king. “Mayang” is the Manipuri ethnonym for people that hale from the area around Cachar. Shakespear believed these Cachari artisans were relocated to Manipur in the early 17th century. His observations point us to important correspondences between the labor systems of Manipur, Central Thailand, and Upper Burma. The story told in the ironworkers’ rituals demonstrates another instance of incorporation of (possibly captured) foreign people into a complex labor system. It also demonstrates that important linkages could form between skilled labor and religious ritual and that such rituals could have complicated effects on group identity and memory.

The Manipuri royal labor system was called the “lallup.” Manipuri scholars credit this system with successfully integrating outsiders, including war captives, religious minorities, and voluntary migrants, into Manipuri society. Manipur’s lallup labor system appears to have developed as an early strategy by Manipuri kings to assert control over the valley’s unruly clan system. The political history of Manipur is covered in Chapter Five, but it is important to establish here that the Manipur valley was home to several small clan-based kingdoms called yek-salai that were slowly conquered and incorporated into a single political unit by the most powerful of these clans, the Ningthouja. The Ningthouja clan dominated the valley for many centuries, but the autonomy of some clans was not totally eliminated until the end of the 15th century. Ningthouja kings instituted lallup as a corvée labor system as a way of asserting political power over populations external to the clan system. Every population was divided into four labor groups called pana, each overseen by a

different palace department. Each *pana* was responsible for supplying a fixed number of laborers to state corvée projects. Labor cycles were measured in repeating forty-day increments of which each *pana* was responsible for ten days. This relatively simple corvée system was expanded in the early 12th century, when the state organized the seven larger clans (*yek-salai*) into smaller sub-clans (*sagei*) and assigned them to specific forms of labor for the palace. To further facilitate labor organization, each labor group was assigned surnames or family names called *yumnak*. Each *yumnak* became responsible for delivering a different product or service to the palace. The *lallup* has been interpreted as the systematic organization of tax-in-kind payments in which “[t]he inhabitants, instead of taxes, give labour…”

The system grew more complex over time. British colonial officer Major W. McCulloch, observing the system in operation in the middle of the 19th century, wrote:

> Of the families [outside of the four *pana*] some are... artificers, as gold-smiths, black-smiths, carpenters, workers in brass and bell metal, &c. &c., who all have their *lalup* in which they perform any work in their respective lines they may be called upon to do; some again attend to the Raja’s elephants, some to the ponies, &c. The Brahmans even have their *lalup*, during which they cook for the Raja and their idol Govindajee.

Manipur scholar N. Bassanta has researched the history of 432 *yumnak* names assigned by the Manipuri palace. Some of the names were drawn from the geographical location of the family holding the name, others after some feature of the *yumnak* patriarch (e.g., a *yumnak* meaning “Big Ears”). A man recorded in court documents as having introduced the pumpkin to Manipur was awarded the last name “Pumpkin” by the court. Many of the names were based on the labor

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67 The four *pana* were called Kapham, Laipham, Ahallup, and Niharup.
70 W. McCulloch, *Account of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes with a Comparative Vocabulary of the Munnipore and Other Languages* (Calcutta: Bengal Printing Company Limited, 1859), 12. Govindaji is the most sacred Hindu temple in Manipur; it is primarily devoted to the worship of Krishna and Radha.
assignments given to different family groups. Some Manipuri surnames can be translated to “Beekeeper,” “Palanquin [Builder],” “Bamboo Chip [Maker],” and “Goose [Raiser].”71 In this respect, traditional surnames in Manipur are like European surnames that derived from pre-industrial skills and guild occupations: Farmer, Thatcher, Cooper (bucket maker), Smith, Cheeseman, Fletcher (arrow maker), and Weaver, to name a few.

Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing that labor organization is a somewhat invisible force that nevertheless can have an important effect on identity formation. In Manipur, this force was more visible because labor assignments were instituted at the family level. Skilled artisans in Manipur did not gather into faux family groupings as was the case in Thailand because they were already a family in the biological sense. Moreover, a family of blacksmiths would have been called the Blacksmith family because of the lallup practice of assigning family names based on labor assignments.

Court records combined with last names present us with a sense of the artistic and ritual preferences of the Manipuri palace. For example, the palace had thirty yumnak devoted to weaving. Each family group was devoted to weaving a specific design or pattern. An additional eight yumnak were assigned to dye fabrics and each family specialized in a different color of dye.72

The lallup system provided a means for integrating outsiders into Manipuri society. In the 15th century, for example, large numbers of Hindu-Brahmans began migrating into the Manipur valley. The process of settlement included receiving assignments within the lallup system.73 Similarly, in 1606, warfare resulted in the capture of several thousand Bengali Muslim soldiers. Like the Brahmans, the Manipur king assigned them thirty-one different yumnak.74 Muslim laborers were

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71 See the detailed history of family names in N. Basanta, Meitei Family in Flux: An Empirical Study (New Delhi: Akansha Pub. House, 2010), Chap. 1.
73 Bachaspatimayum Devdutta Sharma, “A Historical Study of the Origin and Growth of the Meitei Bamon (Brahmans) of Manipur (1467-1947 A.D.)” (Ph.D., Manipur University, 2002), chap. 2.
overseen by a special governmental department, the Pangal Loishang (Department of Muslims). It kept track of special agricultural products produced by Muslims (e.g., beans, flower seeds, coriander, aniseed, mustard, molasses) and the artisanal objects they were assigned to make (e.g., lathed wood, hookahs, umbrellas, tobacco pipes). The Cachari ironworkers discussed at the beginning of this section were another example of people who were captured or invited to settle in Manipur, then assigned a position in the lallup system.

As in other states in mainland Southeast Asia, Manipur had slave categories of people. These categories existed outside of the larger unfree labor system that provisioned the palace with food and products and the state with laborers. Historical records describe several categories of slavery, though most appear to have vanished by the time Manipur’s slave system was documented by British colonial observers in the first half of the 19th century. The older categories included:

25. Ningthou Manai: slaves belonging to the king
26. Lei Manai: slaves belonging to queens and princesses
27. Aun Nai: slaves given as dowry in elite marriages
28. Lai Manai: slaves given for the maintenance of indigenous gods and spirits (lai)
29. Ayokpa: slaves devoted to cleaning and maintaining the palace
30. Minai Chanpa: slaves perpetually owned by their masters
31. Aselba: temporary slaves, usually due to debt
32. Langpul: temporary slaves due to hardship
33. Kei: low-status slaves charged with processing rice for the palace and guarding the king’s royal grain storehouses.
34. Territorial slaves

There is evidence of war captives being put to work as slaves, but the majority of these captives appear to be from within Manipur or its immediate neighbors. Both upland and lowland peoples could become slaves. The tribal Naga in the Manipur uplands were endemic slave raiders and ritual headhunters. This more-or-less constant intra-tribal warfare provided a steady market for slaves as Naga disposed of captive rivals by selling them into lowland slavery. Records show Manipuri King Gharib Nawaz (r. 1709-1748) purchasing Naga people to give as dowry gifts at the

75 Singh, The Manipur Administration (1709-1907), 112–3.
76 Table drawn from information in Singh. Ibid., 217.
marriage of his daughter, while other Naga were assigned to care for religious shrines in the kingdom. Similar activities were recorded during other reigns.\textsuperscript{77}

Manipur also had a category of outcastes called Loi who performed skilled jobs within the \textit{lallup} system. It is a Manipuri word drawn from two terms, “Lanngam Loi,” meaning “conquered one,” and “Lanpha Loi,” meaning “captured in war and rehabilitated by the king.”\textsuperscript{78} The Loi formed a degraded population in Manipur. Similar to the social restrictions placed on temple slaves in Burma, the Loi were not allowed to enter the homes of non-Loi people or marry outside of the Loi group.

The history of the Loi is difficult to discern, as they were not recorded in any detail in surviving court records. Their origins exist only in the oral histories of the remaining Loi who live in valley today. These vague histories present a diverse picture of their origins. Some villages declare themselves to be valley autochthons conquered and subordinated by the migrant peoples who eventually became the Meitei, ethnic Manipuri. Others record themselves as captured from elsewhere and relocated into these villages. In the reign of King Khagemba (r. 1597-1652) criminals were penalized by being socially degraded to Loi status. Sometimes this was a permanent, multigenerational punishment, but in other cases the convicted person was forced to live in a Loi village for a fixed number of years before regaining their former status.\textsuperscript{79} The labor assignments of the Loi are surprising because they do not appear to have been ritually polluting or dangerous jobs. Many were technically sophisticated artisanal skills. The Cachari ironworkers described above were incorporated into Manipur as Loi. Also among Loi labor assignments were alcohol production, silkworm rearing, pottery production, salt production from salt wells, boat making, fishing, and cutting grass for palace animals. These industries were limited to Loi workers. Anyone else engaged in these occupations

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 216–234.
risked being socially degraded and forced to become a Loi.\textsuperscript{80} The Loi themselves were forced to marry within their labor categories, so salt producers were discouraged from marrying silk producers, and so on.\textsuperscript{81}

Early colonial officials in Manipur were impressed with the industriousness of Loi people and bemused that some of the most profitable industries (especially silk production) were considered outcaste occupations by the Manipuri. Colonial officials felt that such designations stunted economic development in the valley.\textsuperscript{82}

Two historical events transformed the situation of Loi people. The first was a series of sweeping conversions to Hinduism that began in the reign of King Gharib Nawaz (r. 1709-1748). Hinduization of the region restructured notions of status and pollution within Manipur’s royal labor system. Some Loi skills such as alcohol production, silkworm rearing, and fishing were still considered polluting, but others were raised in social estimation. Some Loi found that converting to Hinduism enabled them to escape their pariah status. The ironworkers of Kakching were among those that converted.\textsuperscript{83}

The second transformative event was Manipur’s incorporation into the Indian state. In 1956, the Indian government amended its officially designated list of “scheduled” castes and tribes to include the Loi of Manipur as one of India’s scheduled castes. This brought a mixed blessing, since the Loi were administratively joined to upland minorities and “untouchables” as low status and economically backwards people, but gained access to state programs designed to rectify past historical caste-based injustice.\textsuperscript{84}

An ironic counterpoint to the low social status of Loi people is the high regard other Manipuri have for their religious practices. As I noted earlier, some Loi are believed to be autochthons, that is, descended from the original inhabitants of the valley. These Loi are thought to worship the oldest gods and possess the oldest and most potent rituals. I visited one of the most sacred religious sites in Manipur

\textsuperscript{80} Singh, \textit{Recent Researches in Oriental and Indological Studies: Including Meiteilogy}, 127.

\textsuperscript{81} Hodson, \textit{The Meitheis}, 74.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 30–1.

\textsuperscript{83} Singh, \textit{Recent Researches in Oriental and Indological Studies: Including Meiteilogy}, 130–1.

\textsuperscript{84} Singh describes the benefits of these state programs for the Loi, especially artisans in Ibid., 136–7.
located in the Loi village of Andro about twenty miles southeast of Imphal. A village temple building houses fire believed to have been a gift from a god to the Manipur valley. According to Manipuri mythology the original flame was used to kindle a log fire two thousand years ago; it has been guarded and fed by Loi watchmen ever since. If one walks through Andro, one may be ushered into a Loi family's yard, invited to sit, and sold one, two, or possibly three bottles of yu, a kind of alcohol that Loi used to make for the Manipur palace. The colonial official Hodson described the flavor of yu as a combination of “candle grease and methylated spirit.” In the modern period Hinduism has inspired a ban on alcohol sales and consumption and Manipur is overfull with teetotalers. This has not stopped the Loi of Andro from making their traditional beverage and the ancientness of the traditions protects them from state interference. It is still possible to sit in a Loi village as I did and drink an ancient beverage that seems to deliver the hangover headache well before the buzz.

3. Conclusion

In Chapter One, I suggested that cultural exchange occurs within a matrix that shapes and affects the nature of the exchange. The goal of this chapter has been to elucidate the matrices of cultural exchange that existed in Upper Burma, Central Thailand, and Manipur. It is not possible to present a full accounting of any of these matrices, so I have focused fairly strictly on labor systems in each of these states. Slave gathering warfare was an activity designed to increase and enhance the labor pool of the state. Slave gathering warfare was also one of the most important vectors for transcultural exchange in Southeast Asia. It was also the vector that interacted most intensely with state labor systems. All three states considered in this chapter developed complex, multi-tiered, organized economic provisioning systems designed to produce goods important to state function and daily life in the palace. These products ranged from howdahs to hookahs, noodles to palanquins, and throw pillows to gold and ruby crowns.

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85 Hodson, The Meitheis, 32.
Surviving court records are vague about the exact placement of captive people within these state provisioning systems. In the absence of source material about captive interactions, reconstructing how these systems were organized is beneficial because it allows us to model how transcultural interactions could have occurred. The next two chapters discuss creolizing exchanges between Upper Burma, Central Thailand, and Manipur with this model in mind.
Chapter 4
Captives from Ayutthaya in Upper Burma after 1767

The theatre was the open court, splendidly illuminated by lamps and torches; ...a crowd of spectators were seated in a circle round the stage. The performance began immediately on our arrival, and far excelled any Indian drama I had ever seen. The dialogue was spirited, ...the action animated, ...the dresses of the principal performers were showy and becoming. I was told that the best actors were natives of Siam, a nation which, though unable to contend with the Burmans... in war, have cultivated with more success the refined arts of peace.

- Michael Symes at a Ramayana performance in Pegu, 1795.¹

U Mya Gyi (1887-1957) was my grandfather who instilled and aroused the Thai instinct in my blood. I saw him quite often before he died and used to ask him about our Thai ancestry... He told me of his grandfather... U Tay [who] was a ballet dancer at the court, as his forefathers, the Thai dancers, had been before him... He served the role of Phra Lak [Laskshmana the brother of Rama]. Probably he was a young man when he was taken to Burma.

- Tin Maung Kyi, retired medical doctor, Mandalay²

1. Introduction

In 1795, Michael Symes, the British envoy from the East India Company to Burma, watched a performance of the Ramayana in Pegu, at that time a bustling river port city in Lower Burma. The Pegu governor had invited the British delegation to a night of entertainment on April 10th to celebrate the Burmese New Year (thingyan). They saw a selection from the Ramayana in which Rama’s forces are assaulted by a magical poisoned arrow. It threatens to destroy the army unless the trusted monkey general, Hanuman, can obtain an antidote from Sanjivani Mountain, where a rare medicinal plant was known to grow. Symes was impressed by the actors’ theatrical skills, particularly the abilities of the clowns. He wrote that one of them was a genius whose talent “rivaled that of any modern comedian of the English stage.” However, as quoted above, he was told

¹ Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 112.
by his Burmese hosts that the best performers were actually “natives of Siam,” that is, Thai. Similar admiration for Thai theater and performers was expressed to many other European visitors to the Burmese court.

Theatrical productions of the Ramayana and the dance and musical traditions that accompanied them were among the most important cultural contributions made by Thai captives to Burma. As was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, captured court dancers and musicians from Ayutthaya were highly valued by the Burmese court. Thai performance traditions had a transformative effect on Burmese performance styles, theatrical costume, narratives, and classical music (as was seen in the case study in Chapter One). Thai artistic culture rippled throughout Burma in palace-sponsored art forms such as woodcarving, lacquerware, temple paintings, and textile design that depicted motifs and scenes from the Ramayana. The Thai also stimulated changes in religious practice in Burma. Discussion of these changes form the body of this chapter.

A key assumption of Creolization Theory is that complex cultural interactions between slaves and non-slaves had the power to create new cultural forms. As I argued in Chapter One, the classical music tradition called Yodaya music grew out of interactions between captured court musicians from Ayutthaya and Burmese palace elites. They developed a novel musical form that knowledgeable listeners today describe as neither Burmese nor Thai. Creolization processes also affect cultural identities. Ayutthaya people in Upper Burma went through phases of cultural hybridization out of which emerged an altered identity different from the cultural identity of their origin and also distinct from the dominant Burmese identity of Upper Burma. To avoid confusion, I maintain a terminological distinction between Thai people who remained in Siam from Thai who were resettled in Burma. Since “Ayutthaya” is

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3 Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 112–3.
4 For example the American Missionary Howard Malcolm who toured Burma in 1835-36 wrote: “Among the chief amusements [of the Burmese are] drama, dancing, tumbling, music, athletic feats, and chess. The first four of these, as with other nations, are generally connected in one exhibition. The dramatic representations are rather respectable; the best performers are generally Siamese, who, in these matters, are said to excel all others in India. The performances are always open to the public, generally under a temporary canopy, extended over the street...” Howard Malcolm, *Travels in the Burman Empire* (Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1840), 199–200.
5 See “Snap Shot #3” in Chapter One for more on this discussion.
the Thai name for the former capital of Siam, while “Yodaya” is the Burmese word for Siam’s capital and for captives who originated from that city, I use the term “Ayutthaya people” to describe the denizens of the old capital, but “Yodaya people” for the captives who were relocated to Burma. This chapter concentrates on how Yodaya became involved in hybridizing processes of cultural exchange with many other cultures and peoples in Upper Burma and the new cultural forms that resulted.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first part presents some visual evidence of creole Yodaya culture. The second is a history of slave gathering warfare between Upper Burma and Central Thailand. In this section, I explain the temporal and spatial organization of my study of Thai-Burmese transcultural exchanges and review the history of warfare that led to the sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the subsequent enslavement and transfer of the Ayutthaya population. The third section is a history of religious exchange between the Yodaya and the Burmese, with a particular focus on cult practices that were introduced from Central Thailand to Burma. The final section examines artistic exchanges by examining the Ramayana dance-drama and its effect on artistic productions inside and outside of the performing arts.

2. Evidence of Creolization among the Yodaya of Burma

The creolization processes that turned Ayutthaya people into Yodaya people were ongoing and dialogical. Yodaya people adapted to many aspects of Burmese material life and cultural practices and learned Burmese language until they gradually stopped speaking Thai. At the same time, their Burmese neighbors absorbed aspects of Yodaya culture. Their cultural exchanges were certainly asymmetrical, but nevertheless drew Burmese and Yodaya cultures closer together.

Creolization theorists posit that processes of cultural exchange are always “unfinished” because the descendants of slaves continue interacting with outside cultures in inventive and transformative ways. In the mainland Southeast Asian context, however, it becomes clear that for many captives the processes of creolization could and did “finish.” As I have mentioned previously, full

assimilation was possible in many Southeast Asian settings since intermarriage was only sometimes policed, physiognomic differences were slight, and racial or ethnic notions of inferiority did not necessarily mark captives as socially undesirable European visitors to Upper Burma in the immediate post-1767 period mention that Ayutthaya captives made up a significant portion of the capital’s population.\(^7\) Mentions of this community of captive Thai declined over time in European writings as the community either shrunk due to assimilation or become less visually distinguishable from the Burmese.\(^8\)

Much of the creolization process is lost to the historian because it mostly affected the culture of slaves. The daily lives of slaves were rarely captured in historical documents. Creolization theorists have thus poetically described the cultural manifestations of the creolization process as a “flower unable to see its stem.”\(^9\) Edouard Glissant calls on scholars of slavery to come to terms with the “opacity” inherent to this historical subject matter. As Glissant writes, the opaque history of creolization is like a textile that must be appreciated for its “texture” without ever coming to a complete understanding of its construction or “the nature of its components.”\(^10\)

The paucity of historical documentation of the everyday experiences of enslaved peoples makes the paintings reproduced below all the more remarkable (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). They are from a bound collection of forty-eight gouache paintings (a watercolor-like method of painting with pigments ground in water and mixed with a glue-like substance) that the curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum assume was commissioned by a British official or businessperson stationed in Mandalay.\(^11\) The paintings form a visual guidebook

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\(^7\) In 1783, Sangermano noted that captured Thais constituted one of the four large minority populations living outside the palace walls in Amarapura. War captives from Manipur and foreign merchants hailing from Muslim countries and China comprised the remaining three groups. Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago*, 62.

\(^8\) I was only able to locate four or five families that described themselves as Yodaya living in Mandalay today. Oral histories report that the remainder of the Yodaya community in Mandalay was uprooted by fire and bombing in 1945, when Allied and Japanese forces clashed outside the Burmese royal palace. The Yodaya community never reformulated after the war. “Interview with Daw Myi Myint, Age 83, Yodaya descendent living near the Yodaya Nat Sin, 28th street, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 9/10/09.


\(^10\) Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–90.

\(^11\) Unknown Court Artist, *Drawings from the Burmese Court at Mandalay (Album of 48 drawings)*. Gouache on paper, Produced between 1853 and 1885. Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum no.
to the kinds of people that made up Mandalay’s population when it was the capital city between 1853 and 1885. Drawn in a slightly modified Burmese style, the paintings show details of clothing, hairstyle, and feudal objects of rank. A careful reading of the paintings reveals fascinating information about the processes of creolization in Upper Burma.

![Figure 4.1: From left to right: Burmese prince; wife of the king’s chief merchant; and dancing girl (Drawings from the Burmese Court at Mandalay, Victoria and Albert Museum).](image)

The paintings of people from different classes (e.g., prince, wife of a merchant, dancer) seem to have been designed to orient a Westerner to the visual features that distinguished social ranks. For example, the center painting in Figure 4.1 shows the wife of the king’s royal merchant seated on a blue-green carpet in a court setting. She wears a small circular golden crown over long hair wrapped and twisted into a pyramidal cone and a gold embroidered shoulder sash over a white jacket. Among her sumptuary objects (with which she would have been required to appear in public) is a golden betel-nut tray. In another painting (not shown in Figure 4.1), the wife of a lower-ranking sub-minister (nakhan) sits on a red carpet, wears her hair up in a simple bun, does not wear a sash, and her sumptuary objects are a red lacquer box with gold piping and a black spittoon. A court dancer representing a princess on the stage is dressed like a real princess, except that her silk tamein (a lower body wrap worn like a Western skirt) is more brightly colored and she wears a second thickly ruffled short skirt over her tamein to cover the area between her waist and upper thighs.

IS.136-2009. Other samples from the collection can be seen at: http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/drawings-from-the-burmese-court-at-mandalay.
This additional skirt likely enhanced the hip flicks and quick backwards kicks that were ubiquitous in traditional Burmese court dance. Similar paintings in the collections visually distinguish Manipuri from Arakanese court Brahmans and different ranks of military officials and court ministers.

The social positions of the individuals were painted in Burmese below each portrait; English translations were later penciled in, probably by the British owner of the text. The Burmese caption of one painting of a couple reads “Yodaya,” while the English translation reads “Siamese” (Figure 4.2).

The Yodaya couple in the portrait do not seem to follow the dress conventions of Upper Burma in the mid- to late-19th century. Their hairstyles, the coverings of their torsos, and the designs on the silk fabric they wear are all distinctive. One of the most remarkable features of this couple is their hair. Burmese men and
women usually grew their hair to waist length or longer. Men wore their long hair twisted up and wrapped in a turban. The quality of the turban fabric indicated the man’s wealth, while the way the turban was twisted and draped (there were more than one hundred ways to do this) reflected the personality of the wearer. Burmese women wore their long hair up in buns decorated with flowers, silk cloth, or jewelry such as combs and pins made of precious metals. In palace settings, women's hairstyles were constrained by sumptuary laws. By contrast, the Yodaya couple is portrayed wearing their hair short, following the fashion of Ayutthaya. Both sides of the man’s head have been shaved and the hair on top left about two inches long in a style frequently called an “Ayutthaya brush cut.” Ayutthaya-era temple paintings show urban dandies wearing their brush cuts oiled and parted, as does the Yodaya man in this portrait. Unlike most of the world, hair length or style did not signify gender difference in Siam. Men and women wore their hair in very similar fashions. In the late-Ayutthaya era, men and women often wore the same brush cut style. Some Ayutthaya women grew their hair into neck-length bobs like the Yodaya woman in this portrait. The exact length of her hair is not clear, but it is obviously short and not up in a decorated bun. Neither the man nor woman wear the large, tubular, earlobe-stretching earrings that were popular among the Burmese.

These hairstyles say something interesting about creolization and identity in Upper Burma. The exact dating of these paintings are unclear, but even if they date to the earliest part of the Mandalay period, say 1857, that would have been ninety years after the conquest of Ayutthaya. If we count a new generation every 25 years, it would mean that this couple was the third, almost fourth, generation of Yodaya people born in Upper Burma. Their continued favoring of Ayutthaya era fashions in hairstyle speaks to their “elective alterity.” As Creolization Theory suggests, their retention of Siamese aesthetics in self-presentation reflects the power of enslaved people to sustain aspects of their natal identities while reinventing themselves in a new homeland.

As noted just above, the burden for historians of slavery is finding sources that provide information about different phases of cultural development. This painting captures a moment in time for Yodaya people who have fashioned a non-Burmese identity through their hairstyles. In this rare instance, we can see
both the flower and stalk of creolization. Their clothing provides further evidence. Both have draped long narrow cloths, known as *pha hom* in Thai, around their necks and upper bodies. His is worn as a scarf across the front of his neck with the long ends trailing down his back like a cape. This again was a late-Ayutthaya fashion and not part of Burmese male dress. She wears her upper body cloth crossed in the front to cover her breasts; it was likely fixed together in the back. This fashion was common for women in Ayutthaya, but there were similar breast covering traditions in Upper Burma. However, by the Mandalay period, Burmese fashion had shifted significantly from what it was in 1767. After 1783, when Amarapura became the capital, temple paintings and European travel writings show that women had begun wrapping their upper body cloths tightly around their torsos several times, giving the appearance of a Western-style tube top. A gauzy, snug-fitting jacket was often worn over the wrapped cloth. In the painting, the Yodaya woman seems to be continuing an older mode of Burmese dress that aligns with Thai aesthetic tastes. Similarly, the man wears a waist wrapper (*pha kad eaw* in Thai) that was used as formal wear in the Ayutthaya period. It had a fashion equivalent in Upper Burma, but had fallen out of fashion by the 1850s. The flower embroidery on his waist wrapper is very typically Burmese and is not seen in the textiles of Central Thailand.\(^{12}\)

The most significant aesthetic choice made by this pair is the design of the textiles wrapped around their lower bodies. Both are wearing a distinctively Thai pattern of silk called *mudmee* or *matmi*, a diamond-patterned ikat weave that was ubiquitous in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. The design and color combinations are classically Thai. His is green and yellow with muted red contrasting highlights. Hers is in differing rust colored hues with muted green and bright red contrasts. Both these textile designs can be purchased today in any Bangkok silk shop specializing in traditional Thai textiles.\(^{13}\) Ikat textiles do not seem to have been produced or worn in Upper Burma by the elite. Moreover, by the 1850s, Burmese men and women almost exclusively wore *acheik*, a silk

\(^{12}\) Shwe Kein Tha, *Sinyin Toun Phweh Hmu [Dress and Hair Style]* (Mandalay: Ludu Press, 2008), Chaps. 5, 6, and 7. This book covers the micro-changes in Burmese fashions and includes useful illustrations of historical dress.

\(^{13}\) See the photo spread of classic Thai *mudmee* designs in Conway which show these same color combinations, one of which is an almost exact match for the Yodaya man’s green lower body wrap. Susan Conway, *Thai Textiles* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1992), 92–3.
textile with a bright, rainbow colored, waveform decoration achieved using a very labor intensive tapestry weaving technique introduced to Upper Burma by Manipuri captives (*acheik* was almost exclusively produced by Manipuri captive women; it is discussed further in Chapter Five).

Neither the man nor woman wrap their lower body cloths in the way common in late-Ayutthaya, however. In the Ayutthaya era, both men and women gathered excess fabric from their body wrap in front of them, twisted it, and passed it between their legs to be tucked into their waists at the small of the back or fastened with a belt. This draping style is called *chong kraben*. The *chong kraben* style gives the appearance of baggy trousers or jodhpurs when worn low; when worn high it looks like the Indian *dhoti*. The Yodaya man in this painting has instead tied and fastened his *mudmee* lower body wrap in the Burmese manner, gathering and knotting excess fabric and draping it forward to reveal a short contrasting textile sewn onto the border of the cloth.

Rather than follow the Burmese style, the Yodaya woman in Figure 4.2 wears her lower body garment following the popular Ayutthaya fashion of fastening it like a skirt (this method was and still is popular in Cambodia). The front is gathered into a decorative accordion and tucked beneath the belly button. Thai court dancers frequently wore their garments in this way rather than in the *chong kraben* style because it accentuated rather than disguised the subtle movements of hip and leg that characterized Thai classical dance. Her method of fastening the skirt is also distinct from the Burmese style of the Mandalay period in which excess cloth was wrapped completely across the front of the body and tucked at the hip. She has also eschewed the elite women’s fashion of wearing a long, light-colored, lower-body wrap under her skirt. This under-cloth typically emerged from beneath Burmese women’s sarongs (lower body wraps) and trailed behind them as they walked, similar to a short train on a Western wedding dress. It seems likely that the Yodaya woman in this painting fashioned her dress in the style of an Ayutthayan court dancer. Compare the way she has fastened her lower body garment and the cape-like draping of her breast

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cover with the style of dress worn by traditional Thai dancers (Figure 4.3) and different types of Burmese dress worn during the Konbaung period (Figure 4.4).


Figure 4.4: Burmese dress for elite women not of royal blood in the early-, middle-, and late-Konbaung periods. Composite drawings based on temple paintings from Shwe Kein Tha, Sinyin Toun Phweh Hmu [Dress and Hair Style], pp. 55, 65, and 69.15

15 The author classifies the three fashions by capital city rather than by time period: Inwa era (left), Amarapura era (center), and Ratanapon (Mandalay)(right) era. For further discussion of textile manufacture and fashion preferences see Sylvia Fraser-Lu, Burmese Crafts: Past and Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Chapter 8.
The fashions of the Yodaya man and woman can also be compared with depictions of the dress of commoners in Ayutthaya. Figure 4.5 shows a lacquer painting on the wall of the Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace in Bangkok. The Lacquer Pavilion is one of the few wooden temple buildings that have been preserved from the Ayutthaya period. It is commonly dated between 1650 and 1734. Note the brush cut hairstyles of both men and women in the painting. Also, note the accordion pleating of the skirt worn by the woman kneading food in a bowl (top left corner). The hairstyle and draping of the upper body cloth of the man squatting and drinking from a cup (lower right corner) matches the style of the Yodaya man in Figure 4.2

Figure 4.5: Commoners preparing food in Ayutthaya. From (Prince) Chumbhot, *The Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace* (Bangkok, Thailand: Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga, 1960), 36.

An interesting question is where the Yodaya couple acquired the Thai-style textiles that they so proudly wore during their presumed visit to the
Burmese palace. It seems unlikely that they are heritage textiles. Hand-woven silk is strong, but not sturdy, and suffers from regular wear. It is unlikely that their lower body garments were ninety or more years old. It may be the case that captured weavers from Ayutthaya were still producing textiles in Upper Burma for the descendants of captives who were still interested in purchasing them, but I have yet to uncover textual or oral records of Thai weaving communities existing during the Konbaung era. Could the Yodaya have purchased textiles from Central Thailand? Hostility dominated interstate relations between Ava and Bangkok in the 18th and 19th centuries, so direct trade was largely impossible. Indirect trade may have occurred, however. The Shan (an upland Tai minority group) populated mountains that divide Upper Burma from Northern Thailand and were crisscrossed by trade routes. It is possible Central Thai textiles were traded north to Chiang Mai and then resold by the northern Thai to Shan merchants who transported them by mule caravan along with their regular trade items over the mountains to Mandalay. If the demand for Central Thai textiles was regular and profitable, one can imagine this trade occurring. However, it seems more likely that our Yodaya couple purchased these textiles within the Burmese state from the Shan population that lived in the fertile uplands along Inle Lake, about two hundred miles southeast of Mandalay by road. The Inle Lake Shan were highly skilled silk weavers that admired the textile techniques, colors, and patterns of the Central and Northern Thai. They produced diamond-patterned ikat called Zinme cloth (zinme means Chiang Mai in Burmese) in shades of red, green, and yellow. Sylvia Fraser-Lu, who has researched these textiles, points out, “In design and layout, zin-me cloth bears a strong resemblance to certain Thai and Cambodian textiles.”

The Yodaya couple in the painting were likely descended from people who had settled in Upper Burma three or more generations previously. They were part of a community that fashioned a unique style of self-presentation.

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16 Fraser-Lu, *Burmese Crafts*, 268. Diamond-patterned ikat is widely popular in modern Burma. This is not a continuation of pre-colonial fashion, but a result of colonial era economic development programs that sought to modernize and expand silk production in the Inle Lake area, especially ikat weaving (Ibid., 270-1).
Thorton, like many scholars of African slaves in the Americas, argues that “aesthetics” shaped the cultural development of slave communities. Freshly arriving slaves had senses of beauty, style, decoration, food, music, and dance based on the African cultures from which they originated. These aesthetic sensibilities determined which aspects of their captors’ material culture slaves chose to adopt. In places where slaves had the freedom to express themselves through clothing, Western fashions were bent to African tastes in ways that demonstrated hybrid self-fashioning. Our Yodaya couple has done much the same thing. If the painting is accurate, which seems likely as it is part of a collection of paintings that attend to the smallest aspects of dress and decoration, then we can surmise that Yodaya people presented themselves in ways that visually distinguished them from other urban populations in Mandalay. This was not done by stubbornly maintaining the dress of mid-18th century Ayutthaya, but through a process of creolizing self-invention that created a fashion built from Burmese, Thai, and possibly Shan cultures, but did not entirely emulate any one of them. They were also not following the current fashions of Central Thailand, which by the 1850s were markedly different from the dress of the Yodaya couple. This archival gouache presents a compelling picture of captive life in Southeast Asia. Scholars have long assumed that captives assimilated quickly after being resettled. The dress of the Yodaya couple represents the opposite trend. Rather than assimilate, they are participating in the invention of a new, non-Burmese, identity: Yodaya.

Is it possible to guess at the occupation of this couple? Sources and oral histories show captured Ayutthaya people working in several positions that would have gained them continuing elite attention, including as silversmiths, elephant trainers and veterinarians, royal masseuses, and gold embroiderers. I would guess they this couple were court performers, likely dancers, however. This identity is hinted at by the way that the Yodaya woman wears her lower body garment. There are additional clues. Most forms of labor in Burma and in much of Southeast Asia were divided by gender, but this Yodaya man and woman appear in the painting as a “couple,” suggesting they worked in a similar

occupation. Both men and women were employed as dancers and musicians in Burma. Furthermore, Yodaya-style performances were a daily part of Burmese palace entertainment. Burmese court records indicate that as late as 1885, the year that the Konbaung dynasty fell to the British colonial powers, the court still maintained a Yodaya troupe of dancers and musicians. Ninety-one Yodaya, over twice as many performers as in the Burmese troupe, performed songs and dances (mostly from the Ramayana) every day. This couple may have been amongst the many Yodaya performers that regularly went in and out of the palace gates, which would have piqued the interest of Western residents of the royal capital.

The connection between dance theater and Yodaya identity continued long after the 1885 overthrow of the Burmese monarchy. That had interesting ramifications for Thailand’s most celebrated historian and statesman, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943). Burma was one focus of the Wembley British Empire Exhibition of 1924-25. The exhibition hosted a Burmese performing troupe that was interviewed for a pamphlet on the history of Burmese dance. The performers informed the British that many of their theater traditions came from Ayutthaya and that they did not know the remote history of their origins and development. The British followed up by asking the Thai for an official history of their drama, a request that fell upon Prince Damrong. The Prince was intrigued to learn of the Thai influence on Burmese theater, so he interviewed a high-level Burmese employee in the Thai forestry department. The employee, Saw Lieng, told Damrong that there was an urban quarter in Mandalay called the “Yodaya Village,” and that in the past the people there had no other occupation “except to train in theatrical arts and to play frequently before the king.” As a boy Saw Lieng had seen them perform the Ramayana and a second dance-drama called the Inao (Inaung in Burmese) many times.

This conversation about the descendants of Thai captives in Mandalay motivated the Prince’s visit to Burma in 1936, a trip dedicated, as Kennon Breazele describes, to “searching for and finding common historical and cultural

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18 There were only forty-one performers in the Burmese troupe. Maung Maung Tin, Shwe Wahara Nantaw Wahara Abhidan [The Golden Lexicon of Court Terminology], 219–20.
bonds.” Damrong interviewed deposed Burmese royals about the role of Thais in the court, visited monasteries and artisan communities, and arranged performances of Yodaya music and dance. At the end of his tour of the Burmese royal palace in Mandalay (where he saw artwork that was later destroyed during WWII), he made the following observations in a private letter to his brother:

Having seen the Burmese royal palace and their objects symbolizing ranks, the more I think about them, the more I marvel, since the customary practices in the royal residences of Burma seem very similar to their Thai counterparts in former times. It is true that both the Thai and the Burmese got their cultural models from India in the distant past. But this could have caused them to be alike only in structure. As for their substance, which came to be embellished or modified in the Thai and Burmese kingdoms, they can hardly have become alike through mere chance, by means of the convergence of independent lines of thought. Their similarities must derive from mutual borrowings.

Damrong believed that “Thai customary practices” were acquired by the Burmese after each of the two conquests over Ayutthaya, “and must later have been selectively embellished and adapted as Burmese practices.” This process of creolization accounted for the “strong resemblances” between certain artistic and cultural practices shared between the two states. “Even nowadays,” the Prince concluded, “the Burmese still have a widespread esteem for various Thai styles, which they call ‘Yo-dayan’ (that is, Ayutthayan). This was apparent to me in many ways while I was traveling in Burma.”

Damrong proposed that artistic similarities between Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma could be attributed to the capture and transfer of “government officials” and “officials of all ranks” from Cambodia to Thailand in 1431 (following the sack of Angkor), and from Ayutthaya to Burma in the 16th and mid-18th centuries (after the two conquests of Ayutthaya). The Thai Prince proposed a model of cultural development in Southeast Asia that was unlike the one that rose to prominence among Western scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. He suggested that the Indic styles of architecture and artistic practice found in

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20 Ibid., 15.
21 Ibid., 105–6.
22 Ibid., 106. Damrong’s comments on Yodaya arts and his discussions with Burmese elites, some claiming Thai heritage through intermarriage with captive Thai elites, can be found on pp. 129-31, 202-6, 225-6.
23 Ibid., 106.
Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma had been spread internally by the movement of captured populations rather than by elite-to-elite relationships between Indian sojourners and local rulers as dominant scholarly models have put forward. Damrong suggested that some of the obvious visual similarities in the arts of mainland Southeast Asian states were due to the capture and resettlement of populations and not from some sort of coincidental borrowing from the diverse cultures of India. However, Damrong betrayed his own elitist worldview when he suggested that captured “officials” must have been responsible for the transmission of cultural practices, rather than commoners. I share Damrong’s theory that slave gathering warfare was an important force for cultural cohesion within mainland Southeast Asia, but I locate the agency for this exchange more in the artisans themselves, arguing that their labor fueled complex processes of transculturation.

Damrong arranged to see and hear Yodaya style dance and song, but he never traveled into the Yodaya quarter or sought out the area where Yodaya dancers were settled in Mandalay. He was only a short walk away from the area where many Yodaya people lived along the Shwe Tachaung canal, which ran roughly north to south through the city suburbs that lay to the west of the palace walls, parallel to today’s 86th Street. The Yodaya area stretched from roughly 45th Street (not far from the famous Mahamuni Temple) north to around 22nd Street, an area only three or four blocks from the western wall of the royal palace. The Yodaya dancers’ quarter can still be found today in a small open area between 29th and 30th streets. The quarter is marked by a dancers’ shrine that was built by the Yodaya performers as a sacred space for initiating new members into their troupe and to insure good luck in their palace performances. People in the immediate area call it the “Yodaya nat sin (Yodaya spirit shrine)” though outside of the vicinity it is called the “Yama nat sin (Rama spirit shrine)” because of the Ramayana masks and theatrical props that are kept inside it. If Damrong had

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24 I comment on the larger implications of this shift in understanding in Beemer, “Southeast Asian Slavery and Slave Gathering Warfare as a Vector for Cultural Transmission: The Case of Burma and Thailand.”
25 Damrong wanted to see a public performance of the the Ramayana or Inao/Inaung but this goal was foiled due to the recent death of King George V which inspired a public order against performance during the period of official mourning. Damrong Rajanubhab, Journey through Burma in 1936, 27–8.
stumbled upon this place in 1936 he would likely have found many dancers living there. When I visited in 2003, one family descended from the Yodaya dancers still lived right next to the shrine and two others resided nearby. Damrong’s keen mind and insatiable curiosity would have generated valuable insight into the Yodaya community.

3. Slave Gathering Warfare between Ava and Ayutthaya

Ayutthaya was conquered and depopulated by Burmese forces twice: the first time in 1569, the second in 1767. In this section, I first describe the 1569 conquest briefly and address obstacles to scholarly inquiry into the processes of creolization in 16th century Burma. I also explain my focus on Central Thailand rather than Northern Thailand, a region with a long history of connection to the people and states of Upper and Lower Burma. I argue that this long history of connection makes it impossible to isolate the cultural exchanges that were due to slavery from those that occurred through other means. Next, I tell the history of the siege and fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. This history has been recounted many times, but I hope to add a new dimension by using a newly recovered Burmese language source, the Yodaya Naing Mawgun, a contemporary poem about the war that provides insight into the motivations, attitudes, and strategies employed by the Burmese during the siege.

3.1 Temporal and spatial limitations to the study of slave taking warfare between states located in Thailand and Burma

I begin with a discussion of my reasons for focusing on warfare between Ava and the rival kingdoms of Ayutthaya and Manipur. This chapter and the next consider the cultural consequences of the movement of war captives taken from Ayutthaya and Manipur and resettled in Upper Burma. Warfare, transcultural exchange, and the circulation of captives were important aspects of Upper Burma’s relations with other states and ethnic groups. An entire thesis could be dedicated just to the study of transcultural exchanges between Upper Burma and the Kingdom of Lanna (Chiang Mai) located in Northern Thailand. The Burmese word for Lanna is “Zinme” and many art forms, especially textiles and lacquer ware, in Upper Burma have designs or motifs called “Zinme,” suggesting that
these designs flowed to Upper Burma from Chiang Mai. Zinme soldiers served as palace guards, there was a Zinme cavalry unit, and Lanna Tai soldiers recruited into the Burmese military were important to both Burmese victories over Ayutthaya. Moreover, there is extant Burmese poetry about the beauty of Chiang Mai, its temples, and its Buddha images. Many Buddhist temples in Northern Thailand have as many features in common with Burmese temples as they do with temples in Central Thailand. The “Phayakosu,” a Hindu-Buddhist ceremony dedicated to the “nine planets,” was adopted from Northern Thailand and is still conducted today in Burmese households to protect the family from physical and material dangers. Religious literature was also exchanged. The Paññasa Jataka (Fifty Jatakas) is a collection of non-canonical life stories about Buddha’s past incarnations that were composed in Pali in Northern Thailand in the 15th century and where they remain a popular source of Buddhist sermons today. The Paññasa Jataka was likely brought to Burma after 1578, the year that the great warrior King Bayinnaung (r. 1551-1581) appointed his son to rule over the conquered city of Chiang Mai. Bayinnaung’s family continued ruling Chiang Mai for sixty-six years, until 1614. The Burmese title of the text captures the story of its origins. In Burmese it is called the Zinme Paññasa (Fifty Stories from Chiang Mai) or the Yun Paññasa (“Yun” is Burmese for Yuan, an ethnonym for Tai peoples of Northern Thailand, so this can be translated as “Fifty Stories of the Yuan People”). Khin Aye has shown that the arrival of non-canonical Jatakas in Burma excited a great deal of literary creativity, including prose retellings of Pali language stories (wuhtu), narrative poetry (pyo), satirical poems (yagan), theatrical plays (pya zat), and other artistic activities for the next 250 years. Cultural exchange between the kingdoms of Northern Thailand and Upper Burma form a rich vein for future study. Chiang Mai’s relationship to Burma

26 Saw Tun, “Chiangmai and Ayuddhya in Myanmar Literature (1548-1614): The Myanmar Attitude Toward Ancient Thai Cities.”
vacillated over several centuries between direct rule, indirect rule, and nominal autonomy. Populations passed back and forth due to trade, the circulation of religious elites, and marriage alliances between regional kings and princes. While captives moved from Northern Thailand (and Laos) into Upper Burma, and while their skill as artisans were heralded in the various Burmese chronicles, it is difficult to isolate their influence from other potent carriers of culture knowledge. Similar difficulties arise when we look at other neighbor states in mainland Southeast Asia that share cultural similarities. The relationships between Cambodia and Central Thailand or between Upper Burma and the Mon controlled southern states and the Shan controlled states in the eastern uplands vacillated between domination and subordination and warfare and peace.

Captive-taking among neighboring states mixed with other forms of cultural exchange that cannot easily be isolated from one another.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the cultural exchange that resulted from long distance slave gathering warfare, so it was important to select cases where I could be fairly sure transculturation stemmed from well-defined war captive communities. My decision to focus on Ayutthaya and Manipur was partially guided by geography. Both Ayutthaya and Manipur had buffer areas between themselves and the states that existed in Upper Burma. Until the early 18th century, the steep mountain range between Manipur and the plains of Upper Burma inhibited regular, large-scale exchange between these two cultures. Shan and tribal Chin people populated the space between these states. The Chin practiced ritualized headhunting, which likely added a significant disincentive to travel between the two areas. Nevertheless, archeological data suggest that Buddhist monks, likely from Burma, made missionizing trips to Manipur. Burmese merchants also traversed the mountains to buy raw silk from Manipuri silk producers. Only a few individuals at a time would have come into cultural contact, however, compared to the movement of tens of thousands of Manipuri captives.

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32 Pamaree describes the period between 1300–1530 as a time in which four politically fragmented zones—Upper Burma, Lower Burma, the Shan areas, and Arakan—“ignored, brutalized, and allied with one another in a bewildering fashion.” Pamaree Surakiat, “Thai-Burmese Warfare During the Sixteenth Century and the Growth of the First Toungoo Empire,” Journal of the Siam Society 93 (2005): 71.
people into Lower Burma beginning in the middle 18th century. (I return to this topic in the next chapter.)

Similarly, the Mon states of Lower Burma impeded direct contact between Burmese and Siamese people. Because of this, Thai artistic influences on Burma can be dated to the only two times in which large numbers of people from Central Thailand were taken to Central or Upper Burma, that is, following the 1569 and 1767 conquests of Ayutthaya. During those two periods, Burmese forces breached the walls of Ayutthaya and captured artisans, religious specialists, and royal elites. Unfortunately, several historical obstacles prevent us from obtaining more than a cursory understanding of 16th century events. King Bayinnaung (r. 1551-1581) led the first conquest. He was the third king of the First Taung-ngu Dynasty (1486-1599). Many skilled Thai captives were relocated to his capital city of Pegu.

In his recent book on the culture of the First Taung-ngu Dynasty, Maun Yin Hlein suggests that Thai influences on Pegu culture could have been significant. Maun Yin Hlein quotes the Glass Palace Chronicle’s list of artisans taken from Ayutthaya and resettled in Pegu:

Gold and silversmiths, blacksmiths, bronze workers, wood and ivory carvers, wood turners [lathe workers] painters, lacquerware makers, stucco shapers, stone sculptors, dancers, performers, elephant and horse veterinarians, carpenters, architects, traditional hair stylists, talented perfume makers, fabric dyers and dye mixers, and cooks specializing in frying, roasting and steaming food.33

Caesar Frederike, a Venetian traveller who was in Pegu in 1569 when Bayinnaung’s victorious armies returned from Ayutthaya, wrote that those who "were not slain... were all carried captives into Pegu, where I was at the coming home of the king with his triumphs and victory, which coming home and returning from the wars was a goodly sight to behold; to see the elephants come home in a square, laden with gold, silver, jewels, and with noble men and women that were taken prisoners in that city."34 According to historical records, the king

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34 M. C. Frederike, “Voyages and Travels of M. C. Frederike, into the East Indies, Translated from the Italian,” in *The Asiatick Miscellany Consisting of Original Productions, Translations,*
settled captured Thai artisans into separate urban quarters. Maun Yin Hlein believes that these artisans joined a flourishing artistic environment in which South Indian, Mon, and Burmese artistic and literary cultures blended together.35 Some scholars have described the decision to locate the Burmese capital in Pegu as an experiment in political consolidation by the Taung-ngu kings. Pegu was a coastal trade city located about fifty miles north of present day Rangoon. Moving the capital this close to the coast was an attempt to assert direct control over the fast-growing maritime trade that was then dominated by coastal Mon polities. The experiment ended in 1599, when political instability in Pegu encouraged a rival state in Upper Burma to join forces with Arakan’s navy and sack the capital. In 1600, Arakan’s military forces set fire to Pegu after they finished looting it and burnt it to the ground. The Burmese capital was then relocated to its more traditional location in the dry zone of Upper Burma.36 The destruction of Pegu erased most of the evidence that could have enabled historians to reconstruct transcultural influences in architecture, woodcarving, painting, or any of the other plastic arts.

A second impediment to analysis of Central Thai-Burmese exchanges during this period was the erasure of Ayutthaya’s early artworks. The tropical environment of the Chao Phraya basin joined Burmese invaders to ruin Ayutthaya’s ancient artistic heritage. Steamy heat and voracious termites took a toll on temple and palace architecture; most buildings only lasted a century or two before having to be rebuilt. Each time they were rebuilt, they were styled to suit contemporary aesthetic preferences. The oldest surviving unrestored temple paintings in Thailand, for example, date only to the mid- to late 1600s, nearly a hundred years after the first Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya.37 It is therefore

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35 Maung Yin Hlein, Bayinnaung Mintaya Kyi I? Hanthawaddy Khi Yinkyehmu [Culture in King Bayinnaung the Great’s Hanthawaddy Era], 228–31.
37 For example, among the oldest surviving temple paintings are the walls of Wat [Temple] Yai Suwannaram located in Petchaburi, Thailand. The paintings are old and date to between 1607 and 1657, but they were renovated during the early 1700s. It is not possible to accurately discern original artwork and design from the restoration work. See the discussion and photographs in Čhamnong Sinūan and Mira Prachabarn, *Wat Yai Suwannaram* (Bangkok: Mūang Bōrān, 1984).
difficult to gauge what, if any, impact captured Thai painters may have had in Pegu after 1569.\textsuperscript{38}

Later in this chapter I discuss influences on 18\textsuperscript{th} century Burmese painting by Yodaya people. However, it is possible that the “Burmese” paintings of the middle-18\textsuperscript{th} century were byproducts of earlier 16\textsuperscript{th} century encounters with Central Thai (and others’) painting styles that are now lost to us. Surviving Konbaung paintings may represent the end portion of a cultural conversation that had continued over hundreds of years. It is also a vexing possibility that 16\textsuperscript{th} century Thai painters made no impact at all on Burmese painting. Thai artisans only lived in Pegu for thirty-one years before the city was destroyed. They would have become refugees or been captured by the invading armies. Arakanese sources record that they relocated both Mon and Thai families to Arakan.\textsuperscript{39} Burmese sources report that the diverse population of Pegu was also forcibly resettled in Upper Burma.\textsuperscript{40} The cultural and artistic influences of Central Thailand may have been severely muted by these events.

Although one could assume that captive artisans played a transformative role in 16\textsuperscript{th} century cultural exchange just as they were to do later in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the destruction of Pegu makes it difficult to observe their material contributions to the society at the time. We can be more certain that captured soldiers from Ayutthaya had an impact on the military forces of the First Taung- ngu Dynasty. The eminent Burmese historian Than Tun tracks each mention of Ayutthaya captives in his article “Ayut’ia Men in the Service of Burmese Kings, 16th and 17th Centuries.” He describes diverse uses of captured soldiers from the middle to late 1500s. Several platoons of Ayutthaya soldiers were included in an invasion of Chiang Mai. In 1576, one hundred Ayutthaya soldiers were part of the two thousand men sent in a contingent to Sri Lanka. During the reign of King Nandabayin (r. 1581-1599), Ayutthaya people were appointed to trusted positions as elite guards within the palace and as high-level cavalry officials outside of the palace. Ayutthaya cavalrymen were settled to the far north of Pegu.

\textsuperscript{38}The recent opening of Myanmar may create space for new archeological and art historical research that could tell us more about 16\textsuperscript{th} century cultural exchanges.
in villages in the dry areas around present day Mandalay and Shwebo. In 1591, the *Glass Palace Chronicle* reports that Nandabayin had the turrets and gates of Pegu dismantled and rebuilt following the Ayutthaya style.\(^{41}\) This is a concrete example of Thai-Burmese cultural exchange as Pegu’s military elite came to view Ayutthaya’s military defenses as more strategically useful or propitious than their own.

### 3.2 The Fall of Ayutthaya in 1767

The destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 was rooted in the reformulation of power in Upper Burma following the chaotic events of 1752. After the destruction of Pegu in 1600, the Restored Taung-ngu Dynasty (also called the Nyaungyan Dynasty) ruled from the city of Ava (Inwa) located near present day Mandalay. It controlled Upper Burma for roughly 150 years. In his classic study of administrative development in Burma between 1580 and 1760, Victor Lieberman argues that the Taung-ngu Dynasty declined because of princely rivalries that disorganized state power and fractured elite control over laborers. Declining state power resulted in invasions by neighbor states and uprisings by previously subdued regions.\(^{42}\) Among the invaders was the freshly emerged Kingdom of Manipur. Manipur consolidated around a relatively powerful monarchy. United behind the warrior-king Garib Nawaz (a.k.a. Meidingu Pamheiba, r. 1709-1748), the Manipuri cavalry conducted numerous raids, some deep into Burmese territory. They looted towns and villages, then quickly returned to Manipur with captured wealth and numerous slaves. For example, a 1735 raid on the town of Myedu (ninety miles north of Mandalay between Manipur and Upper Burma) resulted in the capture of cattle and a thousand people who were taken over the mountains to Manipur. Two centuries earlier, King Bayinnaung had settled many Muslim war captives taken from coastal Burma in this town.\(^{43}\) This is another good example of large-scale, long-distance circulation of captives in mainland Southeast Asia.

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\(^{41}\) Than Tun, “Ayut’ia Men in the Service of Burmese Kings, 16th and 17th Centuries,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 21, no. 4 (March 1984): 400–8.

\(^{42}\) Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, 139–42.

Manipuri raids may have weakened power in Upper Burma, but the fall of the Taung-ngu Dynasty in 1752 came at the hands of what Lieberman calls “the tributary zone” of semi-autonomous states that pledged allegiance to the capital in Ava but aspired to full independence as the state weakened. As Lieberman argues, rebellion and internal strife pushed the Taung-ngu into an accelerating spiral of decline. Chiang Mai and other northern Thai states began rebelling against Burmese rule in the 1720s. Mon controlled polities in Lower Burma, some receiving assistance from Ayutthaya, rebelled after 1740. Chief among the rebellious polities was Pegu, which was encouraged to rebel in 1740 by news of a successful raid by Manipuri forces. The Manipuri reached Sagaing, a town just across the Irrawaddy River from Ava.

By the 18th century, Pegu had managed to recover from the demographic and economic consequences of its destruction in 1600. Moreover, as Lieberman points out, its location on the coast allowed it to acquire new military technologies that had not yet filtered northward to Upper Burma. An army sent by Pegu that was manned by Mon and Burmese soldiers captured the city of Ava in 1752. The population of the city, including the Burmese king and most of the royal family, was captured and relocated south to Pegu.44

Years of warfare depopulated and destroyed most of the agriculture in Upper Burma, except for towns and villages in the Mu and Chindwin valleys north of Ava. This region was relatively isolated from the chaos. Pegu’s armies travelled much farther north of Ava after the capital was conquered and Manipur’s cavalry mostly ignored this area. These valleys were demographically capable of resisting the expanding power of Pegu. Their resistance was sparked by a charismatic commoner named U Aung Zeya who styled himself “King Alaungphaya,” a title suggesting he thought of himself as a bodhisattva, someone becoming a Buddha. Alaungphaya defended these valleys from military incursions, drew refugees and fugitive court officials from the previous dynasty to his cause, and built a palace in his home village of Moksobo, renamed Shwebo, in 1753. His charisma and military cunning drew more followers, enabling him to organize an army large enough to conquer Pegu and the rest of the coastal trading cities of Lower Burma by 1757.

Many former tributaries of the Taung-ngu Dynasty began sending tribute to Shwebo in recognition of the new king’s right to rule as king of kings. In 1758, the emboldened Alaungphaya led his forces in a victorious assault on Manipur. From 1759 to 1760, he led his forces to war against Ayutthaya, but he was defeated and then died from disease. In the few years he was king, Alaungphaya efficiently consolidated state control and accrued so much power that his family became a powerful dynasty, the Konbaung, which ruled the region from Upper Burma until 1885.45

Alaungphaya’s successful and sometimes brutal subjugation of Mon-dominated coastal polities had the consequence of removing the cultural and political buffer that once separated Burma from Thailand. The result was almost seventy years of Thai-Burmese military conflict. Mon refugees steadily fled into Thai territory until the early 19th century.46 Pamaree Surakiat argues that Thai-Burmese conflict crystalized around two issues after 1752. The first was Burmese mistrust of Central Thailand, which their conquered foes could use as a base for mounting counter-attacks on Burma. They also suspected the Thai were supporting Mon rebellions in Lower Burma. The second issue was the expansion of trade in the Indian Ocean from port cities along the Tenasserim littoral (i.e., Tavoy, Mergui, and Tenasserim). Burmese kings devoted a great deal of energy to eliminating Thai footholds in this profitable seaborne trade.47 In fact, Alaungphaya justified his attack on Ayutthaya in 1759-60 as retribution for Ayutthaya’s interventions in the coastal city of Tavoy.48

By most accounts, Ayutthaya’s military defenses in 1759-60 were poorly organized.49 However, Ayutthaya’s natural defenses were formidable. The city was built on an island at the confluence of three rivers: the Chaophraya, Pa Sak, and Lopburi. The island was ringed by a thick, brick-lined wall mounted with

45 Similar assessments of Alaungphaya can be found in Ibid., 229–50, 264–70; Koenig, The Burmese Polity, 189–92.
46 See my discussion of Mon refugees in Chapter Two. For descriptions of the ill treatment received by the the Mon in Lower Burma, see Harvey, History of Burma, 234–36.
49 James, “Fall of Ayutthaya,” 85–88.
cannons. Invading the city involved the near impossible task of boating soldiers (along with whatever equipment they needed to scale thirty-foot walls) across open water into gunfire. Laying siege to Ayutthaya was the most plausible way to conquer the city, but this strategy was repeatedly undermined by annual monsoon rains and flooding. The monsoon rains that began in May and June would become deluges by September, transforming Ayutthaya from an island in a river to an island in a vast shallow sea. These floods were good for wet-rice agriculture and fresh water fisheries, but bad for invading armies, as their supply lines become impossible to maintain and soldiers succumbed to water-borne illnesses. Alaungphaya contracted an unknown illness and died in May 1760 as his army was retreating from Thai territory.

Recognizing these seasonal difficulties, King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763-1776), who had been a troop commander in the failed first assault, included preparations for dealing with the monsoon during the second Burmese assault on Ayutthaya. Hsinbyushin’s strategy including sending three separate armies to Ayutthaya in a pincer-like movement designed to sever trade routes and overwhelm Ayutthaya’s distant allies before the battle for the city began. The result was that sixteen of Ayutthaya’s nineteen provincial governors switched alliance to Ava and incorporated their people into the Burmese military effort. The armies that converged on the city in January 1766 were well provisioned and even prepared to farm their own rice if the siege outlasted their ample supplies. Steps were taken to create raised, dry barracks in and around the Buddhist temples outside Ayutthaya’s walls and in nearby towns. Ava’s forces weathered the monsoons and maintained the siege for sixteen months before the

50 A history edited from the records of Burmese Prince Nagabo from the late-Konbaung era recounts that the Thai king told his ministers that their city was as unconquerable as a “heavenly abode” and they need only wait out invading Burmese armies until seasonal rains and floods came “and make our city like an island in the ocean.” Hto Tin Htwe, Yatana Thikha Maha Yazawin [The Precious Thikha History] (Yangon: Sarpay Beikman, 1967), 225.

51 Some scholars argue that the last of Ayutthaya’s thirty-three monarchs, King Ekkathat (r. 1758-1767), who reigned during the first assault, instigated new techniques for defending his city under siege. This somewhat revisionist argument was first made by Helen James. She argues that Burmese sources which record the able defense of Ayutthaya are more accurate than post-1767 Thai sources, since the later Cakri dynasty was politically vested in histories that undermined the preceding Ban Phlu Luang Dynasty. See James, “Fall of Ayutthaya,” 100–2. The Yodaya Naing Mawgun supports James’ argument in its descriptions of Ayutthaya’s formidable strength and ingenious defensive measures.

city fell in April 1767. This was a remarkable accomplishment in the history of mainland Southeast Asian warfare.

Burmese chronicles recount many details of the siege and conquest of Ayutthaya. These accounts have been useful to several scholars who have recounted the history of Thai-Burmese military conflict. A Burmese graduate student, Yee Yee Khin, recently recovered the *Yodaya Naing Mawgun* [Praise Poem on the Conquest of Ayutthaya], a contemporary source written by court poet Letwe Nawrahta (b.1723-d.1791).\(^5\) This exciting discovery was the basis of her 2006 doctoral thesis written for Yangon University. She translated the poem from difficult 18th century court language into modern, vernacular Burmese alongside and analyzed the language and meaning of the poem.\(^6\) This recent publication invites us to review well-known events from a fresh perspective. One of the most interesting observations that can be drawn from the text is that the Burmese elite conceived of the siege of Ayutthaya as part of a grand five-year military plan that included attacking kingdoms in northern Thailand and Laos to prevent Ayutthaya from enlisting those states as allies as the siege wore on.\(^7\) The poem also provides interesting details about the treatment of Ayutthaya people as the siege continued. The poem reports that soldiers were sent into the countryside and hillsides to spread a promise from the Burmese generals that people returning to their villages to farm would be well treated.

We learn that as the siege wore on and hunger and disease wracked the city, Ayutthaya people began to sneak out of the city to surrender to the Burmese. Captured Thai soldiers were administered the water oath of allegiance and incorporated into a devious military stratagem. One thousand ethnically Thai war captives, chosen because they were “clever and able,” were put at the vanguard of a Burmese army. As the army approached one of Ayutthaya’s military positions located outside of the city, they were mistaken for a contingent

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55 Ibid., 81.
of Thai reinforcements and were able to draw very close before attacking. The poem reports that this battle ended in a rout and Ayutthaya’s army scattered apart in chaos “like a bamboo bundle that came untied.”

The poem, like other sources for this war, reports that as the floods swept into the region the Burmese stayed put and Ayutthaya’s worried elite set about strengthening the cities defenses. The poem describes the building of more and stronger towers and attempts to brick over the cities many wooden gates. A ministerial history gives more detail, stating that the Thai king had more food and seed smuggled into the city, ordered the moats improved, and mounted more cannons on the wall. During the rainy season, the battle site shifted to the river. The massive riverine boat battles were so bloody, they made a strong impression on both sides and engendered long descriptions in the chronicles of both courts. As the waters receded the Thai king ordered traps and pits constructed around military posts outside city walls to prevent cavalry and elephants from charging Thai positions.

Burmese countermeasures were equally energetic. They strung a chain across the river to prevent ships passing unnoticed into Ayutthaya. They constructed more than twenty forts around the city and its outer defenses. The poem states that building these forts was such an audacious military effort that it would “be known until the world disappears.” Their major garrison was built at Wat Phukhaothong, selected for its strategic position on raised dry land northwest of the city and because the temple had been restored by the Burmese King Bayinnaung to celebrate and make kammatic amends for his earlier conquest of the city. Ava may have garrisoned as many as 17,000 soldiers at the temple. Despite these efforts, the city remained unconquered.

The poet Lehtwe Nawrahta writes that the well-known story of one of Buddha’s past lives, the Mahosadha Jataka, became divine inspiration for Ava’s strategists. In this Jataka tale, the Buddha’s incarnation is a wise, eponymous

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56 Ibid., 68, 72–3. Descriptions of famished Ayutthaya people sneaking from the city to join the Burmese can also be found in Hto Tin Htwe, *Yatana Thikha Maha Yazawin [The Precious Thikha History]*, 230.
58 Hto Tin Htwe, *Yatana Thikha Maha Yazawin [The Precious Thikha History]*, 227–8; James, “Fall of Ayutthaya,” 97.
59 Hto Tin Htwe, *Yatana Thikha Maha Yazawin [The Precious Thikha History]*, 228.
sage, Mahosadha, who protects his lord, King Vedeha, from the invasion of 101 other kingdoms. To effect peace, Mahosadha secretly constructs a tunnel network that is used to defeat the king’s primary enemy and whisk the endangered Vedeha to safety.\textsuperscript{61} Using the text as a touchstone, Ava’s forces seized ground immediately across from the narrowest section of the river that encircled Ayutthaya, across from the Mahachai fort near the city’s northeastern corner. From this position, the Burmese dug five tunnels that stretched under the river. They kept their tunnel building hidden from Ayutthaya’s soldiers by blocking their line of sight and throwing the dirt excavated during the tunneling into the river at night. Three tunnels stretched under the wall for soldiers to use in the invasion, the other two tunnels were intended to undermine the city’s wall.

In March, King Ekkathat (r. 1758-1767) pledged a conditional surrender to the Burmese and offered to become a tributary state to Ava, but the Burmese demanded unconditional surrender. On April 7, the undermining tunnels, which had been filled with flammable materials, were set alight, bursting the wall. Some Burmese soldiers rushed through the breach as others entered the city through the other tunnels. The sounds of terror and elephants trumpeting filled the air. The city grew black from cannon fire. The fighting was fierce, but the city’s defenders were defeated. Burmese soldiers proceeded to burn and pillage the city. Ayutthaya’s people “were as destroyed as grass blown by storm winds.”\textsuperscript{62}

Letwe Nawrahta proudly compares the defeat of Ayutthaya to the mythical story of the capture of Thantwe (Sandaway), the ancient capital of Arakan. Thantwe city had the magical ability to fly up into the air when enemy armies approached. It was thought unconquerable until a stratagem was devised to secure the city to the ground quietly at night with great chains and spikes. When the army approached the next morning, the city remained earthbound to be conquered by its clever enemies. The poet ways that the Thai King Ekkathat of Ayutthaya was “proud” and thought he “governed the whole world,” but in the end he “was really just a sawbwa.”\textsuperscript{63} Sawbwa was the Burmese title granted to

\textsuperscript{61}This story is known to most Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia. It is summarized and illustrated in Elizabeth Wray, Clare Rosenfield, and Dorothy Bailey, \textit{Ten Lives of the Buddha: Siamese Temple Painting and Jataka Tales}, Rev Sub (Boston: Weatherhill, 1996).

\textsuperscript{62}Yee Yee Khin, “Yodaya Naing Mawkoun,” 74–8. Quote p. 78

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., 77–9. Quote p. 79
upland Shan princes that paid obeisance to the Burmese capital. Calling the Thai king a “sawbwa” implied he was little more than a petty prince or vassal to Ava.

3.3 Aftermath

Burmese forces remained only a few weeks in the conquered city, but while there took steps to permanently reduce the capital to ruin. They pulled down defensive walls, burned wooden structures, and filled in moats. Gold plated Buddha images that were too large to move were put to flame and the melted gold removed. Contemporary chronicles of the war described a great deal of bloodshed as the city was sacked. The Yodaya Naing Mawgun provides a harrowing description of rivers and city moats “rank” with dead bodies that rendered the waters “black and disgusting.” The people who were not killed were enslaved. The diverse population was divided amongst the Burmese soldiers like any other spoils of war. The poem reports army generals receiving 300 families, sergeants five families, and common soldiers two families each. Recently recovered accounts from Dutch archives verify that Ayutthaya people were divided amongst victorious soldiers as payment.

How many Ayutthaya people were enslaved following this war is unknown. Thai chronicles state that 30,000 people were captured from Ayutthaya. Burmese chronicles state that 106,100 families were divided among the soldiers. This higher number is repeated in several Burmese sources, but is much too large to be believed by most scholars. Even if family sizes were reduced by warfare to only three people each, then 318,300 people would have

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66 Ibid., 86.
68 The Chronicles of Ayutthaya state: “They took the collected [guns and cannons] down and loaded them onto their boats, together with somewhat over thirty thousand nobles and men and women of commoner families. Those who had fled to conceal themselves within the forests and had gone to the various municipalities, however, consisted of large numbers. Those who had removed their valuables and precious things and hidden them by burying them, the Burmese accordingly whipped, beat and roasted to recover their wealth...” Cushman, The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya: A Synoptic Translation, 521.
been captured from Ayutthaya, a number much too high for Southeast Asian population levels. Some scholars suggest that the word “family” should be substituted with the word “individual” in Burmese reports, which would give a more realistic number of people who were enslaved. Other scholars speculate that “family” was an abstract value in the post-war context, and that payment could have been collected either in people or in something equally valuable such as gold. This is all speculative, but suggests that fewer than 106,100 people were enslaved. The captives were marched to Burma, leaving the burned and looted Thai capital in May 1767 and arriving in Ava four months later in August.

The Sangkhitiyawong, a Pali language religious history composed in the Bangkok court in 1789, describes refugees from the destroyed capital wandering the countryside. The refugees suffered from the trauma of warfare, separation from their loved ones, and extreme deprivation:

The inhabitants of Ayutthaya were overwhelmed by many sorrows, lamentations, sufferings, sadness and troubles. They were weak from hunger and thirst, and they were separated from their parents, wives, children, friends, and relatives... They were without food, their bodies emaciated...and ugly, and they carried their clothes and shelter. Their food was trees, grass, creepers, roots, bark, leaves, flowers, fruit and seeds. Many were wretched...the violence that was everywhere causing suffering...They oppressed each other out of fear or hunger and they had no love for images of the Buddha, for Buddhist texts or for the monastic order... Those in the monastic order did not receive any alms from lay donors, and with their bodies weary, they stopped wearing monk’s robes...Even those monks who were able to find food were ugly and they had veins protruding all over the body from lack of flesh. They [could] not protect the images of the Buddha or the texts... Those with false views destroyed the images of the Buddha. The texts of the Dhamma and Vinaya were destroyed in various ways from negligence and lack of protection...[It] was like the worst time in the Kaliyuga.  

The emotional state of Ayutthaya’s refugees, whose city was destroyed by invading Burmese armies, cruelly parallels the emotional state of the Lao-Phuan, who would suffer similarly at the hands of Bangkok’s armies half a century later (as described in Chapter Two). Both groups thought the Kaliyuga, or Buddhist end times, had arrived. The practice of Buddhism is supposed to become

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impossible during the Kaliyuga and the world is expected to steadily decline into moral chaos. Saying their suffering is like the Kaliyuga is an expression of extreme emotion. To better understand this statement, reflect for a moment on the practice of Buddhism in pre-colonial mainland Southeast Asia. Buddhists required a stable urban environment to ensure individual and community “salvation.” Making merit by giving donations ensures a higher rebirth, but it also has an apotropaic function of protecting individuals, families, and communities from the malevolent or a-Dhammic forces that threaten the physical and spiritual safety of Buddhist practitioners. Monarchs fostered large-scale merit-making projects such as building temples, manufacturing Buddha images, and patronizing royal ceremonies. These projects contributed to the kingdom’s store of merit. Meanwhile, individuals relied on a stable wealth-generating economy to pursue their own small-scale merit-making activities such as feeding and clothing monks or conducting family ceremonies. Buddhist monks were mendicants who relied on the donations of the laity to afford to conduct the sacred rituals that protected and gave succor to their communities. When a community could not feed its monks, the monks had to disrobe to survive by working for themselves. This led to a corresponding decline in merit and merit-making possibilities. When a Buddhist population was uprooted by slavery or survived the immolation of their city, these psychologically necessary religious interactions were destroyed. Although requiring more investigation, it could be argued that individual salvation in the aftermath of a human disaster was less possible in Buddhist contexts than in either Christian or Muslim communities.

Secondly, the destruction of Ayutthaya and the Phuan kingdom created environments in which suffering and economic distress made sin and religious transgressions more common. Both the Phuan and Ayutthaya refugees illustrated their cultural duress with descriptions of religious desecrations such as the destruction of sacred texts or valuable Buddha images. From a Buddhist standpoint, the fall of Ayutthaya and later the Phuan kingdom were experienced as the end of the world.

With Ayutthaya shattered, power in Central Thailand split among five factions. The governors of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phitsanulok, relatively untouched by the war, declared themselves princes of independent realms. A
surviving prince of Ayutthaya claimed dominion over what is now northeast Thailand. In what was surely a disturbing byproduct of millenarian religious agitation, a Buddhist monk north of Phitsanulok declared himself a prince and appointed fellow monks to secular roles in his kingdom, some serving as generals in his military. Political unity later returned to Central Thailand under the aegis of King Taksin (r. 1767-1782), a cavalry commander who fled the war in Ayutthaya with his regiment when he realized that defense of the city was hopeless. King Taksin conquered his four rivals relatively quickly and established a new capital in Thonburi, across the river from present day Bangkok.

Of the people captured from Ayutthaya and taken back to Ava, artisans and royalty received special attention in The Royal Chronicle. The passage below lists the skills and professions of enslaved Ayutthaya people that were probably most interesting to the Burmese elite:

...musicians and dancers, carpenters, carvers, turners, blacksmiths, gold and silver smiths, copper-smiths and braziers, masons [stucco molders], decorators with natural and artificial flowers, painters both in ordinary colors and illuminated with gold and bright material, workers of marquetry [applying intricate designs to the surface of an object using small pieces of inlay and veneer], lapidaries, barbers, persons skilled in incantations, charms, and magic, persons skilled in curing the diseases of elephants and ponies, breakers and trainers of ponies, weavers and embroiderers of gold and silver threads, and persons skilled in the culinary arts.71

Of these skills, several are recognized as having had a lasting influence on Burmese artistic culture and will be part of the discussion in the next section. They include musicians and dancers, wood carvers, painters (especially those that illuminate their work with gold leaf), embroiderers of gold and silver thread, and culinary artisans (especially dessert makers).

The list of captured royalty is equally impressive. The Burmese chronicle reports that they seized King Ekkathat’s four primary queens. Their names are given in awkwardly transliterated Burmese as Min Mok, Man Min, Mun The (Si), and Mun The (Si)lar. They also seized 864 minor wives, twelve of the king’s brothers, fourteen of his sisters, three sons, four daughters, fourteen grandsons

and fourteen granddaughters, and a handful of high-level ministers of royal rank. They also seized all of the regalia and royal dress of the court (described as especially grand). The Burmese chronicles report that King Ekkathat disguised himself as a commoner and was attempting to flee through the city gate when Burmese forces fired. The King died alongside many other Ayutthaya people. Singled out for particular mention was the peculiar circumstances connected to the seizure of one of King Ekkathat’s brothers, Uthumphon. That Uthumphon was alive at all when the Burmese seized the city is a fascinating story in itself. Uthumphon had originally been selected by their father, King Borommakot (r. 1732-1758), to succeed him. However, Uthumphon wore the crown for only about two months before his brother seized power through a palace coup. In most cases this would have spelled death, but Uthumphon professed a love of monastic life and was allowed by his otherwise ruthless brother to enter monkhood. This earned Uthumphon the nickname “Khun Luang Ha Wat,” meaning the prince that sought the monastery. He remained a monk until the first siege of Ayutthaya, when Ekkathat called upon him to leave the monastery and help defend the city. Uthumphon is reported to have ably defended the city, which suggests to many scholars that even as a monk he was able to maintain a patronage network typical of an ex-king. He returned to the monkhood at the end of that war. The second siege of Ayutthaya played out differently. As the months wore on, Ekkathat appears to have turned on his internal rivals in fear he would be deposed. Burmese sources report that Uthumphon was found in fetters, locked away in the palace.

The Burmese chronicles report that Ayutthaya’s captured royalty were settled by gender. Captive princesses were settled inside the palace walls while captured princes were settled in a quarter outside the walls. Uthumphon was allowed to live as a monk in Upper Burma. His activities after the war became part of the oral histories of areas where the Yodaya people were settled. His Burmese name has an interesting etymology. The royal title “Uthumphon” means “fig-flower” in Sanskrit. His less formal Thai language name was “Dok Dua,”

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74 Ibid., 55.
which also means “fig-flower.” The Burmese chronicles refer to him by the transliterated name of “Chao Bwa Dawk” or less frequently as “Chao Bwa Dawk To,” the closest Burmese equivalent to the Thai words “Chaofa Dawk Dua” or Prince Fig-Flower. Chao Bwa Dawk To (Uthumphon) lived as a monk in Upper Burma until 1796. When he died, his ashes were interred in an impressive funeral monument that still stands today near the banks of Taungthaman Lake in Amarapura.75

Captured Yodaya elite played a role in the cultural exchanges between captive Yodaya people and the Burmese, as is discussed further in the next section of this chapter. For now, let me point out that the treatment of captured royals and their impact on creolization processes in mainland Southeast Asian contexts were significantly different from what happened to high-status individuals from Africa who were enslaved and moved to the Americas. African statuses and hierarchies were not appreciated or respected by slaveholders in the Americas, but royalty were sometimes respected in mainland Southeast Asia even after they were enslaved. Royal Ayutthaya captives in Upper Burma appear to have been very well treated. The British envoy R. B. Pemberton, who visited the court in 1830, saw captured foreign royalty seated in court next to the king:

We... entered a circular area, round which numerous troops were standing with musquets and bayonets... The seats, a little raised from the ground, extended all the way round this circular area, and at the western side it was bounded by an elevated platform, the ascent of which was by a flight of three or four steps. On this platform was seated the King on a gilt chair, and on his right hand, seated on the ground, were all the Princes of the blood, and the princes of Assam, of Arracan [Arakan] and Siam.76

We have an interesting visual representation of captured Yodaya royalty among the bound collection of forty-eight gouache paintings painted sometime after 1853 that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Figure 4.6 depicts a Yodaya prince.

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76 R. B. Pemberton, “Journey from Munipoor to Ava, and from Thence Across the Yooma Mountain to Arracan,” Journal of the Burma Research Society XLII, no. 2 (December 1960): 42.
Unlike the distinctive dress of the Yodaya couple described above, almost nothing distinguishes this Yodaya prince from other princes in the palace. His robe-like jacket, lower body garment, jewelry, and the golden salwe chains that he wears like a sash across his right shoulder were all traditional to the Burmese palace. The salwe indicates high status within the court, the equivalent to a Burmese prince not of royal blood. It may be significant that the Yodaya prince is without sumptuary objects, however. Only the flame-like kanok motif on his crown possibly suggests Thai origins (the kanok design is discussed further below).

Although Thai royalty were captured and lived in exile, describing their social position as "slave" threatens to bend the term too far outside the
boundaries of meaning, even if it meets some of the more open definitions proposed by scholars of comparative slave systems. Thai royalty had their “freedom” highly constrained, so they may be called “unfree,” but they retained their elite positions even within Burmese society and sometimes married Burmese royalty. While not documented, they appear to have had access to enough wealth to patronize various cultural activities (also discussed later in this chapter).

There are currently no known records that detail where captured Ayutthaya commoners were settled in Upper Burma. Many were sent to rural agricultural areas. Towns with oral histories of Thai settlement include Monywa, Minbu, Pakhan, Shwebo, and Thayet. Military records show captured Thai soldiers serving as mounted riflemen in rural towns to the north of Mandalay and elsewhere. William Hunter, who visited coastal Burma soon after 1767, saw many captives from Ayutthaya working as shipbuilders in Rangoon. In the capital area, princesses were settled in the palace and skilled artisans and performers were settled outside the palace walls. The artisans were frequently resettled in new places as the Burmese capital moved six times during the Konbaung era. Palace artisans who were first settled in Ava in 1767 moved to Amarapura in 1783, back to Ava in 1821, back again to Amarapura in 1842, and finally to Mandalay in 1859. Most urban settlement of Ayutthaya people was more stable than this, however. Many captives were settled along the Shwe Tachaung canal, where they maintained a stable community while the capital shifted from place to place. Today the canal is centrally located in Mandalay, near the Royal Palace, but this is a coincidence. Originally it was a distant suburb of both Ava and Amarapura. Its current centrality is because the capital came to the Yodaya people and not vice-versa. After 1859, Yodaya palace dancers and other artisans were settled in this vicinity, too. They were in a sense reunited with the

77 I rely here on decades-long research conducted by Yodaya descendant and lifelong resident of Mandalay, Dr. Tin Maung Kyi, who generously shared his research files with me. Tin Maung Kyi, “Thai Descendants in Burma (Now Myanmar),” Manuscript (Mandalay, July 2010), 5.


Yodaya people. The next section examines the cultural and religious practices that developed among Yodaya people in the Shwe Tachaung area.

4. Religious Creolization in Upper Burma: Yodaya People

This section focuses on the surprising religious exchanges stimulated by Yodaya captives and their descendant in Upper Burma. Many of these cult practices continue to be practiced in Upper Burma today. This section combines interviews with textual research to paint a picture of a complicated but fascinating story of transculturation.

4.1 Sand Pagoda Traditions in Mandalay

In Mandalay, a series of Buddhist temples known for their unusual sand pagoda building traditions stretch along the Shwe Tachaung canal on 86th Street from 45th Street to around 22nd Street. At these temples Buddhist lay practitioners gather once a year in the temple compound to construct large, temporary pagodas (or ceti) from sand. The building of sand pagodas is not unknown in Burma, though it has become a relatively rare religious practice in modern times. Both Shan and Mon ethnic groups in Myanmar have sand pagoda making traditions and similar practices can be found in the neighboring states of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. In these more typical ceremonies, families or other groups gather along a riverbank and mold sand piles into the shape of a pagoda as a humble memorial to the Buddha. Each grain of sand represents one of the countless incarnations of the Buddha who have spread wisdom to humankind. The pagodas are constructed in one day. The sand may be sifted for fineness so that the structures will be more stable or binders may be added to the sand, but the structures do not last long. As wind and rain dissolve them, they become a rich metaphor for the Buddha’s teaching of impermanence.

What is unusual about the sand pagodas along Shwe Tachaung is that they are built in an urban setting rather than along a rural riverbank, elaborate communal ceremonies accompany them, and they are connected through oral history and ritual practice to the histories of captive Yodaya people and the Thai
monk-king Chao Bwa Dawk To (Uthumphon). The unusualness of the sand pagoda ceremonies and history has attracted the interest of Burmese scholars. There is enough scholarship on Mandalay’s sand pagoda tradition to have generated a small debate about their origins. In 1982, Professor Maung Maung Tin of Mandalay University wrote a prominent essay in which he asserted that captives from Ayutthaya had introduced the tradition to Upper Burma. Historian Ni Ni Myint, among others, countered with inscriptive evidence showing the practice went as far back as the Pagan era. Ni Ni Myint also pointed out its continued practice among non-Burmese ethnic groups such as the Shan and Mon.

Technically, Ni Ni Myint is correct, but the sand pagoda tradition appeared to have died out in Upper Burma for perhaps a century or more before the Thai captives arrived, so Maung Maung Tin’s argument remains valid. His assertion is supported by the fact that in Mandalay the only temples in which sand pagodas are built are confined to the area where Ayutthaya captives were settled. It was a practice unique to that community, though one best understood as having been a reintroduction of a previous tradition.

There are at least four sand pagoda-making temples along the Shwe Tachaung canal. The southern most, located near the intersection of 42nd and 86th, not far from the Mahamuni Temple, is called the Konawin Sand Pagoda Temple. The Konawin Sand Pagoda is about 25 feet tall and can be distinguished from the other pagodas by the elegant, attenuated shape of its spire, which is bound in rattan. Several blocks north between 38th and 39th, is the Mahavaluka Sand Pagoda Temple. The pagoda at this temple is about the same size, but without exterior reinforcement. Instead, a pre-made golden umbrella crown and umbrella (hti) are gingerly balanced on the top of the pagoda. Further north near the western wall of the royal palace are the Pyilon Chantha Sand Pagoda on 24th Street and the Aungtawmu Sand Pagoda on 21st Street. Both these sand pagodas are small, perhaps eight or less feet tall, and both have been re-built out of brick though they are still called “sand pagoda.”

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81 For Ni Ni Myint’s summary of the debate, see ibid., 240. I thank Bo Bo Lansin for sending me a digital copy of Maung Maung Tin’s article: (Professor) Maung Maung Tin, “Thehpoun Seti Pweh [The Sand Pagoda Festival],” Ngetayi Magazine (1982).
82 I must thank Dr. Tin Maung Kyi for first taking me on a tour of the sand pagodas in 2003.
Sixty-seven year old Daw Cho worships at the Konawin Sand Pagoda Temple and has devoted herself to maintaining the temple since her retirement. She is not descended from Yodaya, but like many worshippers in this area, can readily explain the differences in size and construction techniques among the different sand pagoda temples. The Konawin Temple is located in a neighborhood called Mintha Su, which means the “Princes' Quarter” in English. This is the place where King Hsinbyushin settled Yodaya princes and other royalty. When I met Daw Cho, she had just finished paying homage to a small Buddha image seated directly before a much larger image. The smaller Buddha was very sacred, according to Daw Cho, because a royal Thai prince gave it to the temple more than a hundred years ago. Daw Cho said the Yodaya people in the Princes' Quarter were allowed to build the most elaborate sand pagoda. North of this area, the Yodaya people around the Mahavaluka Sand Pagoda Temple descended from people of middle rank in the old hierarchy (e.g., ministers); they were only allowed to build less elaborate pagodas. According to Daw Cho, the people around 22nd Street were slaves (kyun), so they were only allowed to build small pagodas. This understanding of a ranked sand pagoda tradition was widespread among worshippers in the Mintha Su (Princes' Quarter).

Although Daw Cho was not descended from Yodaya people, she said that when she was a little girl there were still many people in the neighborhood who claimed “Thai blood.” Eighty-three year old Daw Saw Tin, who lives next to the Konawin Sand Pagoda Temple, is one of these people. She is proud of a royal heritage that connects her to Ayutthaya on both her mother's and father's sides of the family. She told me that where she lived as a child on 85th street was entirely populated by people with royal blood. Her mother was a weaver and her father a carpenter and there were no Thai words spoken in the house, but they cooked dishes they considered to “Thai” food, including papaya salad, “Yodaya” noodles, and “Yodaya” tealeaf salad. Unfortunately, her family fell on hard times. The large house she once lived in has become a rental hall for wedding parties. Now she lives with her son and his family in an open, two-story house with a

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84 Ibid.
wooden frame and rattan walls. It is humble even by Burmese standards, but the view from her window is of the sand pagoda that means so much to her.85

Just down the road is the small house of Daw Kyin Kyin, 68. She was born on 85th Street to a mother who also claimed Thai royal blood. She told me that in 2010, the Konawin Temple celebrated its 225th anniversary of their annual sand pagoda building tradition, which dates the initial building of a sand pagoda to 1775, only six years after Yodaya people were settled there. She described sand pagoda construction as a form of “reverse magic” (yadaya in Burmese) that was employed by the Ayutthaya people to reverse the bad luck of captivity and improve the karmic position of their descendants.86

Scholar Nat Mauk Tun Shein writes that in the past all the Yodaya people were expected to each bring one cup of water and one handful of sand to the pagoda building ceremony held on the first day of the Burmese New Year.87 Daw Kyin Kyin mentioned that Thai foods were also prepared for festival days, but this tradition has died out. Her family has an added tradition of making a small sand pagoda inside their house. They put it on a raised altar where other families might put a Buddha image.

Daw Kyin Kyin, like Daw Saw Tin, noted a steep decline in the number of people living in the quarter that claimed Yodaya heritage. When she was young, Daw Kyin Kyin said, there were no “pure Yodaya” since everyone had a mixed heritage. Since then, many new people have moved in, outnumbering the original inhabitants. The sand pagoda tradition was originally restricted to people with royal blood, but was later expanded so that everyone in the quarter could participate. Part of the commitment to the practice is due to a well-known event recounted by both Daw Saw Tin and Daw Kyin Kyin. During the Japanese occupation of WWII, warfare interrupted the construction of the sand pagoda for one year and many troubles fell upon the community. An illness swept through the area; several people grew sick and some died. Since that time no one has questioned the effectiveness of the ceremony for the health and well being of the

85 “Interview with Daw Saw Tin, Age 87, Mintha Su, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 9/10/09 and 12/14/10.
86 “Interview with Daw Kyin Kyin, Age 68, Mintha Su, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/14/10.
87 Nat Mauk Tun Shein, Win Twe Neh Thekheh Thi Min Ne Pyi [A Royal City Made of Many Quarters], 282.
community. It is not surprising that the few remaining Yodaya descendants who live around the Konawin Sand Pagoda Temple know its history and the story of how Mintha Su got its name, but the temple’s history is common knowledge among older people in the area. This points to the unexpected ways that cultural knowledge passed from the captive community to their non-captive neighbors.

A bit to the north, worshippers at the Mahavaluka Sand Pagoda in Monti Su (Noodle Making Quarter) date the first construction of their sand pagoda to 1784, when Chao Bwa Dawk To led a group of Thai captives to petition the Burmese King Bodawphaya (r. 1782-1819) for permission to build a sand pagoda every year. In 1984, the community raised money to construct a stone inscription marking the 200th anniversary of the first sand pagoda ceremony. The inscription recounts how relatives of the king and their servants were taken from Ayutthaya and settled in Monti Su and Mintha Su. It continues:

Along with them was the Yodaya King who abdicated the throne. He being a monk, lived in Paung Le Tike Monastery... On request by the Thai descendants to build a sand pagoda... King Badon granted permission. From 1784 on the Monk King, taking [the] lead every year without a break,... started [this tradition] of worshipping.  

Oral history also dates the sand pagoda tradition to the initial settlement of Thai captives. One of the temple elders, seventy-one year old Daw San Shwe, told me the Ayutthaya captives brought soil from their homeland and started using it to make small pagodas as soon as they were resettled in Ava in order to counter their fear of death. A temple pamphlet that is sometimes handed out at the sand pagoda festival tells a similar story about smuggled soil from Ayutthaya being mixed with sand to make the pagodas. It may be that 1784 marks the

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88 Bryce Beemer, “Interview with Daw Saw Tin” and “Interview with Daw Kyin Kyin.”
90 “Interview with Daw San Shwe, Age 71, Monti Su, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 9/12/09. U Aung Myint Htun, who was told the history of Monti Su by his grandfather told this story to me in a different context. “Interview with Aung Myint Htun, Age 56, Monti Su, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/13/10.
91 I thank Dr. Tin Maung Kyi for sharing a summary of this pamphlet with me. Tin Maung Kyi, “Thai Descendants in Burma,” 19.
date on which Yadoya were granted permission to hold the ceremony, rather than the year they actually began making sand pagodas.

Monti Su is named for the noodle-making specialists that live in the area. This quarter was formerly called Rahein Su, which also means Noodle Making Quarter. People living there today say that Rahein is the Burmese pronunciation of the Thai word “rahang.” Muang Rahang is the name of a Thai town located midway between Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya in what is now Tak Province. It was conquered by Burmese troops as they marched south toward Ayutthaya. People living in Monti Su today assume that some of them are descended from people who originally lived in Muang Rahang. The nearby market was called Rahein Ze (Rahang Market) until the government started banning foreign place-names in 1988. Today the market is officially called Man Myo Ze, but local people continue to call it Rahein Ze.

The sand pagoda tradition in Monti Su differs from that in Mintha Su. Instead of at the Burmese New Year, the pagoda is rebuilt during the hottest part of the year in May (Kason). Kyi Sein, sixty-two, head trustee of the Mahavaluka temple, described other differences. The sand pagoda is reinforced with a special mixture of cooked lime, sugar, peanut oil, and white coloring. The mixture is poured over the sand pagoda in small cupfuls. It hardens to support the structure. Monti Su’s pagodas can last for many months before they begin to crumble. The second difference is that the temple celebrates special occasions with a Thai dish called “Yodaya monti” (Ayutthaya noodles). This dish was once sold by noodle vendors up and down the street, but these days only a few older people know how to make it. Kyi Sein told me that if I wanted to try this dish, I would have to lure an elderly cook out of retirement. We hit upon the idea of hosting a free lunch for everyone in the neighborhood at the temple for a cost of about US$30.00). Two days later, seventy-one year old Daw Ohn Kyin commanded a team of cooks to prepare Yodaya monti. She told me that a quarter century ago everyone in the community could make this dish, but that it had fallen out of favor because it takes a long time to prepare and does not have

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92 The ban on foreign words happened during the upsurge in nationalist sentiment that occurred in anti-democratic reaction to the events of 1988.
93 “Interview with Kyi Sein, Head Trustee, Age 62, Monti Su, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 9/10/09.
much meat in it. She walked me through the process of preparing Yodaya monti as she cooked. The dish is a lightly spiced fish curry served over vermicelli rice noodles with two kinds of fritters put on top for crunch and texture. Visually the dish looks very Burmese. It resembles mohinga, sometimes called the national dish of Burma, which is made with a fish broth of onions, garlic, and ginger served over vermicelli and topped with fritters and other ingredients. Although the two dishes look the same, they taste different. My Burmese friends declared that Yodaya monti tastes very exotic. The curry was thickened with bean powder until it was as dense and gelatinous as whipped potatoes. The curry was too dense to mix in to the noodles. The onion fritters, a common item in Burmese cuisine, included dried shrimp powder, a Thai ingredient, in the batter, producing a distinctive taste. Even the bean fritters were different. They were much denser and richer than is typical of Burmese cuisine.

My friends insisted that Yodaya monti is not a Burmese dish. I lived in Thailand for over five years and sat through many cooking classes and demonstrations, so I can say that no dish like Yodaya monti is served in Thailand. The dominant flavor of Yodaya monti comes from dry bean flour and bean paste, ingredients that, to my knowledge, have never been used in Thai cuisine. Beans are not used in Thai cooking as thickening agents or as a dough base for fried snacks. These are popular ingredients in Burma, however, likely because of its proximity to India. The preparation of Yodaya monti exaggerates differences between Burmese and Thai cuisines. The flavor of bean flour dominates the fish curry and fritters, but just before the dish is served, it is garnished with a few greens, a splash of fish sauce, and a large spoonful of dry bean flour. The common Thai spice, dried shrimp powder, was also used peculiarly in Burma in mixing it into the fritter batter. It is not used as a topping in Thailand.

Like the sand pagoda building festival, Yodaya monti is understood by the communities along Shwe Tachaung as a tradition preserved from Ayutthaya. It is more likely that both traditions were invented in-situ. In old Bangkok, sand pagodas were built during Songkran, the Thai New Year celebration held mid-April. Families built small stupas along the riverbanks or brought sand in bowls

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to temple fields to build them.\textsuperscript{95} Ayutthaya likely had a similar tradition. There is no evidence of a popular, organized tradition of building large sand stupas in urban areas in Bangkok. The sand pagoda tradition is more widespread and organized in northern Thailand. Whole villages participate in constructing sand pagodas, so the ceremony more closely resembles what is done in Mandalay. However, it is still a rural, not urban, tradition around Chiang Mai and other parts of Lanna.\textsuperscript{96} The sand pagoda traditions along the Shwe Tachaung canal do not correspond to any known urban religious practices from Ayutthaya.

It is impossible for me to guess at the forces that led to the invention of Yodaya \textit{monti}, but the creolizing forces that gave birth to the Shwe Tachaung area’s sand pagoda tradition are possible to imagine. Ni Ni Myint compares ceremonial traditions within Burma with those in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos and notes that sand pagoda traditions are strongest in places populated by poor farmers. Sand pagoda building is a “free” merit building activity for a family, so can be differentiated from other Buddhist activities that require donations of money or food. Since the pagoda must be built in one day, the tradition allows impoverished families to quickly return to the labors that materially sustain them.\textsuperscript{97} The captives from Ayutthaya, shattered by their experiences and the loss of their loved ones, must have felt a psychological need to conduct religious activities that would help them rebuild personal and familial merit. Their food security must have been tenuous and they probably were unable to carry anything of financial value with them. In this situation of spiritual and material poverty, building sand pagodas must have been appealing. As noted earlier, oral histories recount that families and individuals began building small pagodas using soil from their homeland soon after their arrival in Upper Burma.

In organizing large scale, community projects of building twenty-five foot tall sand pagodas in 1775 and 1784, ex-king Uthumphon, turned Buddhist monk named Chao Bwa Dawk To, seems to have been attempting to revive the

\textsuperscript{95} Anuman Rajadhon (Phrayā), \textit{Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies} (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1986), 179–83.


\textsuperscript{97} Ni Ni Myint, “The Tradition of Sand Pagodas in Myanmar,” 245.
community. A simple family ritual was re-made into a complex, community-wide project that called on every individual from Ayutthaya to haul sand and water, cook food, create a hardening mixture, and shape and decorate the pagoda. Such ceremonies may have facilitated the transformation of Ayutthaya people into Yodaya people. The collectivization of this ritual allowed the community as a whole to make merit, activating apotropaic aspects of Buddhist ritual. It allowed the captives to forge themselves into a new community as Yodaya.

I mentioned in the previous section that both Ayutthaya refugees and Phuan war captives were so overwhelmed by trauma that they interpreted their experiences as indicators that the apocalyptic era known as the Kaliyuga had begun. Such feelings must also have been experienced by the traumatized community of captives from Ayutthaya. They must have started their ritual activities to gain and establish merit, even prevent the Kaliyuga. Framing the sand pagoda tradition in this way allows us to compare it with religious activities among African slaves brought to the New World. Their ceremonies were important steps toward creating an African-American identity, just as building sand pagodas was a step in the creation of Yodaya identity amongst enslaved war captives from Ayutthaya. Numerous cultural and historical differences distinguish the experiences of Southeast Asian war slaves from their African counterparts in the New World, but both groups went through similar processes of reinventing religious practices in order to recover from the compounding traumas of forced relocation.

The sand pagoda tradition of the Shwe Tachaung canal area is remarkable because it is an example of a religious practice created by captives that has since moved into the Burmese community. This is one of many similar examples of the transculturation process that are described in this and the next chapter. By their own description, none of the people holding high-level or voluntary positions at the Mahavaluka Sand Pagoda Temple are descendants of Yodaya people, nor are any of the people living in the Monti Su community. The Burmese who live in Monti Su moved there sometime in the past, began worshiping at the local temple, and then absorbed the apotropaic ritual of building sand pagodas as a

98 See the collected essays on this subject in Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo (New York: NYU Press, 2003).
means of accumulating merit. In adopting this ceremony, local Burmese people learned about and embraced the non-Burmese history of their local temple and sand pagoda ritual.

A similar condition is emerging in Mintha Su. My interviews revealed that five to seven families in the area acknowledge their Yodaya heritage. An elderly Yodaya man heads the temple committee in charge of organizing the sand pagoda ritual. The surrounding non-Yodaya members of the community also embrace the sand pagoda tradition, however. I began this section with extracts from an interview with Daw Cho, who I met while she was praying at the Konawin Sand Pagoda Temple. Daw Cho is not a Yodaya descendant, but she is devoted to the temple and its sand pagoda tradition and can recite the history of the temple and the community with the confidence and authority of a scholar. She is an example of the human-scale cultural exchanges that develop when different cultural communities settle next to one another. The non-Yodaya people in Mintha Su and Monti Su are not biological descendants of the original Yodaya inhabitants, but they describe an empathetic connection to the plight of the Yodaya captives and maintain a commitment to the ritual practices started by Yodaya people. These practices have become part of their own neighborhood identities. In building sand pagodas, they are reenacting an episode from the Yodaya people’s past. They may not be biological descendants of the Yodaya people, but they are their spiritual descendants.

4.2 The Yodaya Spirit Shrine

In Chapter Three, I discussed the ways that artisanal ceremonies and the spirit cults associated with different artistic practices in Central Thailand created strong pseudo-familial linkages between artisans, preserved the histories of communities, and shaped new identities out of the traumas of enslavement and captivity. In this subsection I present an example of an artisanal ritual that developed in a Yodaya quarter in Burma. Eight or nine blocks north of Monti Su is the quarter where Yodaya performers were settled. A shrine is at the center of this once large community. Local people who live near the shrine used to call it the Yodaya Spirit Shrine (Yodaya nat sin). Outside the immediate vicinity, it was more commonly know as the Rama Spirit Shrine (Yama nat sin). When I last
visited the area in 2009, “Rama Spirit Shrine” had begun supplanting the local title.

When I first visited this shrine in 2003, it was a humble structure (Figure 4.7). The building was roughly 8 by 12 feet at the base, with a wooden frame and wicker walls. It was elevated on stilts two or three feet high. The front wall was made of chicken wire; a few creaky steps led up to a chicken wire front door. Inside the shrine on a large altar sat two sets of four Ramayana masks depicting Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Old Rishi. One set is raised above the other. It is said to date to when Thai dancers moved to Mandalay in 1859. The other four masks are well-made copies. A mask that sat on a smaller table to the right of the main altar demonstrated why copies were made. This child’s toy mask of Hanuman was purchased from India after the original Hanuman mask was destroyed in a fire. On the table and up in the rafters were props used by performers who played the Ramayana characters. Offerings of bananas and coconuts, water cups, and pots of flowers surrounded the masks (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.7: Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine, 2003. Author photo.
By 2009, the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine had been transformed. It was now the size of a small house. Stilts elevated a nicely painted building two stories up which had to be reached by a flight of stairs. The building shrine was made of concrete with a wooden roof and the stilts were shaped like Greek columns decorated with Burmese-style vegetal scrollwork decorated in gold paint. The same Ramayana masks were still there, but they were behind protective glass. The walls of the shrine were hung with expensive offerings, including a miniature reproduction of a revered tooth relic, a framed photograph of the Mahamuni Buddha, and a clock. Outside, on the wall facing the courtyard, were raised golden letters that stated the new building had been donated in 2007 by U Aung Kyaw and his wife, Dr. Hla Hla Win (Figure 4.9).

I asked the family that serves as shrine guardians about the impressive changes. They explained that economic changes had brought families of jade merchants into the neighborhood. Since Burma reopened overland trade with China, the last two decades have transformed Myanmar’s jade mining industry into the country’s preeminent get-rich-quick scheme. The mining is conducted in an area still under threat from ethnic rebels and the trade is mostly conducted
through dangerous black market channels. It is a trade with the possibility of making quick fortunes and then losing them. I was told U Aung Kyaw had had a vivid dream in which Hanuman appeared and reassured him about an impending business deal. The deal resulted in a windfall, so out of gratitude he and his wife funded the building of an impressive new shrine to house the Ramayana masks. Other jade merchants have followed suit, so the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine has become the patron spirit shrine for the area’s jade entrepreneurs.

![Figure 4.9: Outside wall of Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine, 2009. Author photo.](image)

The transformation of the Yodaya/Rama spirit shrine is a second important example of a cult practice introduced by captives and taken up by neighboring non-captive people. Unlike for the sand pagodas, we can reasonably establish the original intent of the spirit shrine. It started out as a wai khru altar, used by Yodaya palace dancers and performers. The Thai word “wai” means “pay respect or give homage” and ”khru” means “teacher.” Khru derives from the Sanskrit word “guru,” meaning teacher. The ritual performed at wai khru altars is frequently translated as the “rite of paying [respect] to teachers.” When artists

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99 The title of Dhanit Yupho’s brief study of the ceremony draws on this translation. Dhanit Yupho, *The Custom and Rite of Paying Homage to Teachers of Khon, Lakon and Piphat* (Bangkok, Thailand: Fine Arts Department, 1961), 5–6. A description of the ceremony with pictures and a summary
and crafts people perform a wai khru ritual, they are celebrating the transfer of sacred knowledge and secret skills from their human teachers and the supernatural beings that enable artistic greatness.

Four masks of Hindu gods depicted in the Ramayana were on display on the main altar in the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine in 2009. Seen in Figure 4.10, the second mask from the left is green-faced Rama, the third is his wife, Sita, and the fourth is his gold-faced brother, Lakshmana. Most Burmese visitors to the shrine do not know the identity of the first mask on the far left, however. This is a character known to Thai performers as “Old Father.” Burmese worship focuses on the mask of Rama, but Thai people worship Old Father. As Deborah Wong writes in a fascinating anthropological study of the wai khru ceremony, Old Father was an ascetic spiritual teacher who was preserved by supernatural means just as Shiva, the divine force for creation and destruction, destroyed the universe. Shiva is the divine root of all music and dance. Through sound and movement, Shiva enacts moments of destruction and recreation of the universe. After Old Father survived one such cataclysm, he took note of Shiva’s repertoire of dance and song and passed the mystical knowledge onto the beings that arose after the cycle of destruction was complete. This knowledge is the basis of Thai classical song and dance.\(^{100}\) In the Thai context, wai khru altars are where lineages of dance teachers going back to Old Father are celebrated by their students, students are initiated into dance or music troupes, and performers ask for luck and blessings before their performances.\(^{101}\)

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\(^{101}\) Dhanit Yupho, *Custom and Rite of Paying Homage to Teachers*, 5–15.
The wai khru ritual is typical of Thailand’s ancient court ceremonies in being a complex blend of Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, and ancestor worship. At present, schools for training musicians and dancers conduct these ceremonies every year. Before the ceremony is held, the troupe’s khru (guru, teacher) spends several days undergoing purification rituals typical of Hindu ritual practices. On the day of the ceremony, the teacher officiates in Brahmanical white robes to ensure the purity of the ceremony. The teacher becomes possessed by the Old Father and sometimes by the spirit of a Brahman. Special music is played, sacred songs and dances are performed, and respect is paid to past human teachers and the Old Father who has made himself present in the body of the living teacher. Hindu gods may be summoned to the performance, along with other gods and spirits represented by masks arrayed on wai khru altars (see Figure 4.11). When the teacher is possessed he may place the mask of the Old Father on his head. Students who are being initiated are called forward and the mask is dipped over their heads to signify their passage into the next level of performance. Although there is great variation in wai khru ceremonies in Thailand, we can see that these
ritual actions give respect and instantiate trans-generational, historical, and supernatural lineages of teachers and students, artists and performers. The mixing of Indian derived Brahmanical practices with local practices and beliefs about spirits led Thailand’s eminent scholar of Thai cultural practices, Suchit Wongthet, to conclude that the roots of the ceremony were quite ancient. He surmised that they dated to the earliest part of the Ayutthaya era in the mid-14th and 15th centuries.

Figure 4.11: A wai khru altar in the theater school attached to Patravadi Theater in Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand. Author photo (2010).

102 Wong suggests that no two schools follow the same pattern in their ritual performances. Wong, *Sounding the Center*, 9–61.
The other important action that takes place at wai khru altars involves paying respect to the masks before a performance. Ramayana masks contain portions of the supernatural power of the divine characters they represent, so must be treated with respect. Before a performance, performers ask the divine forces that live in the masks to take spiritual possession of the performer and grant them a good performance. This ritual is paired with another act of obeisance toward past teachers of the artistic tradition. Srisurang Poolthupya writes:

The masters or teachers of old must be worshipped properly and asked for blessings. There are special verses for invocation, special offerings and dances for the masters. Neither performers nor students dare perform or learn without taking part in the Wai Khru ceremony first. This shows the ancient Thai tradition of obedience and gratitude to their art teachers.

Paying respect to the teachers and masks and holding initiation ceremonies must have been just as important a part of Yodaya performers’ identities as in Thailand. They felt it necessary to maintain these traditions even though Burmese performance culture has no corresponding beliefs in teacher spirits or Old Father cults. Burma was also without a masked dance tradition before the arrival of the captives from Ayutthaya, so it did not have complicated ideas about the ways spirits inhabit masks or about how to propitiate performance masks.

Daw Mi Mi Le was born in the Yodaya dancers quarter in Mandalay. When I interviewed her in 2003, she was eighty-three years old and lived in a house directly behind the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine. Her grandfather had been a dancer in the royal palace and her deceased brother had also danced

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104 Performing scenes from the Ramayana while wearing masks of divine gods is akin to participating in the wai khru ceremony in that performers become the vehicles or avatars for the spirits of the characters they are playing. Certain types of performances in Southeast Asia are thus only a few degrees removed from spirit possession.


106 (U) Ye Htut, Myanmar Dances (Rangoon: Royal (Printing), 1997). Based on inscriptional and textual evidence and foreign accounts, U Ye Htut describes different dance forms that have been practiced in Burma since the Pyu period. The only Burmese tradition of dancing with a mask on is the “page boy dance.” The performer dons the mask of a palace page (the son of a distant lord sent to the palace for training) and engages in a comically boyish and over-exuberant dance. The mask does not represent a mythical figure, but rather creates the illusion of youth for an older dancer.
professionally in the role of Hanuman, the loyal monkey servant of Prince Rama. According to Mi Mi Le, the shrine exists today because of her family’s efforts and divine intervention. During WWII, fighting between the Allies and the Japanese sparked fires throughout Mandalay. The fires approached her neighborhood. Her grandfather went to the shrine to rescue the masks and other sacred objects, planning to move them to Sagaing for safety. He did not have a vehicle to transport them in, however. He prayed until a stranger on a motorcycle with a sidecar offered him a ride. According to her family lore, if not for this selfless act, there would no longer be a Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine.

Daw Mi Mi Le told me her grandfather worshipped at the shrine before performances to ensure good luck with his dancing. This aspect of Yodaya performers’ religious practice has since spread throughout Burma. Virtually all Ramayana troupes, whether amateur, professional, or state-sponsored, maintain shrines for their masks. U Aung Thwin, a retired choreographer and performer of the Ramayana who specialized in dancing the part of Lakshmana, described to me the ceremony that his troupe always conducted before performances. The ceremony is called the “lamain tai-te” (also pronounced “lamain tin-te”), which can be translated as “homage to the spirits.” U Aung Thwin describes it as the only ceremony of its sort in the Burmese performing arts. The ceremony can be conducted in a room, but sometimes a temporary bamboo pavilion (manda) is constructed for the purpose. Ramayana masks (and optionally the costumes and props) are placed on a tiered table according to their spiritual rank. On the first tier is a statue of the Buddha, on the second lower tier are all of the masks with the Rama and his allies on the right side of the table and the ogre king Ravana and his allies to the left. If props and costumes are included, they are put on a third tier. The ceremony is designed to call the spirits into the masks. Offerings of bananas, coconuts, and betel are given to the masks. A glass of milk is placed before each mask. According to U Aung Thwin, the performers pray silently, “Please reincarnate in our body and bless the performance with success.” On completion of the ceremony, when the masks are believed charged with sacred

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107 If her story is accurate, her grandfather must have been in his eighties or older at the time. “Interview with Daw Mi Mi Le, Age 83, Yodaya Spirit Shrine between 29th and 30th streets, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/7/03.
energy, the performers drink the milk offerings to obtain strength for their performance.\textsuperscript{108}

The Old Father spirit so central to Thai spirit practices is also present in the Burmese ceremony, but in a slightly transformed way.\textsuperscript{109} In Myanmar, the mask and the attached spirit are called “Bodaw” meaning “Grandfather Spirit.” He is believed to be the supreme teacher of all the theatrical arts and the spirit of theater. U Aung Thwin described Bodaw as having many identities. He is seen as a stand-in for Valmiki (author of the Ramayana 2,400 years ago) and as a master of ancient forms of learning. Bodaw is also the name of one of Myanmar’s thirty-seven nat (spirits), so the history of the identity of the mask-Bodaw is often conflated with the many histories of the nat-Bodaw. As in Thailand, the teacher mask is used within the play for the character of a forest dwelling rishi [a sage who has gained universal wisdom] that raises and educates Rama and Lakshmana and accompanies them to a bow-lifting contest. Performers understand Bodaw’s role in the arts to be universal since he is the patron of all performing arts, not just the Ramayana dance-drama. He is only given homage before Ramayana performances, however. Every character in the Ramayana has a musical theme that is played when they occupy the stage. In some pre-

\textsuperscript{108} “Interview with U Aung Thwin, retired dancer and choreographer, Yangon, Burma,” Research Notebook, 2/19/10 and 3/28/10. U Aung Thwin danced with the Fine Arts Association connected with Yangon University from 1954 to 1960 and informally thereafter.

\textsuperscript{109} In Cambodia, ceremonies in praise of a teacher spirit are also an important part of the Ramayana tradition. Scholars have long assumed that Brahmanical court culture and artistic practices such as dance and architectural design flowed into Ayutthaya because of the various 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} century wars between the upstart Kingdom of Ayutthaya and the Hinduized Khmer Empire, located in present day Cambodia. These wars resulted in a flow of artisans and court officials into Ayutthaya, but Thai court chronicles do not record their influence or the types of work they did after their capture. Nevertheless, there is a broadly accepted consensus that Ayutthaya’s rich Hindu traditions sprang from interactions with these captives. The Ramayana dance tradition and the Teacher cult associated with it are thought to have originated in Cambodia. Scholars have begun to challenge these assumptions. Sasagawa Hideo shows that the Khmer King Ang Duong (r. 1847-1859) had Thai dancers in his court and that the Khmer elite enjoyed watching the Ramayana presented in the Thai language. French colonials devoted to resuscitating Cambodia’s classical arts interpreted similarities between Cambodian and Thai dance as signs of shared “continuity” with the ancient Angkor tradition (rather than as a 19\textsuperscript{th} century Thai influence on Cambodia). Post-colonial Cambodian nationalists continued this interpretation of shared artistic traditions between states, preferring to view similarities as continuations of an ancient Cambodian influence on Thailand than more modern Thai influence on Cambodia. The argument in terms of dance is presented in Sasagawa Hideo, “Post/colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance,” \textit{Southeast Asian Studies} 42, no. 4 (March 2005): 418–41. For other artistic practices see Penny Edwards, \textit{Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860 - 1945} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). The Cambodian version of the \textit{wai khru} is described in Toni Shapiro, “Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia” (Ph.D., Cornell University, 1994), 43–57.
performance ceremonies in Myanmar, Bodaw’s theme is incorporated into the lamain tai-te ceremony. The language used when addressing the mask in ceremony, U Aung Thwin told me, was the same as that used when addressing a Buddhist monk.110

Given the cultural specificity of the Thai wai khru ceremony, it is remarkable how much of its elements have been preserved in the rituals conducted by Burmese performing artists. By contrast, present day use of the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine seems to be completely different from the original purpose of the shrine. Two forces probably accelerated changes in the way people understood and interacted with the shrine. The first was the gradual decline and eventual disappearance of Yodaya dancers. As previously noted, Burmese court records show that in 1885, the court maintained a troupe of ninety-one Yodaya dancers and musicians who danced the Ramayana and other dramas at the palace.111 The troupe continued to work after the British removed the Burmese monarchy. They were hired to perform at functions for the colonial administration and the emerging Burmese business community as its wealth and power expanded on the eve of British rule. By the turn of the century, the Ramayana was only rarely being produced, however. The Yodaya musicians and dancers gradually shifted into other professions or moved out of town. Yodaya descendant Daw Myi Myint said that before WWII, many of the people around the shrine called themselves Yodaya people, but they were all “mixed” from intermarriage. A few made a living dancing, but most had moved into other trades, working as tailors and sellers of clothing. In her youth, all the Yodaya people regularly visited the shrine, which they called the “Yodaya nat sin.” The community was in decline, however. Intermarriage combined with people moving away eroded the number of Yodaya people in the neighborhood. The fires that swept the city as a result of WWII warfare (and almost claimed the shrine itself) spelled the end of the Yodaya community in that area. Daw Myi

110 Ibid.
Myint said that when the city was rebuilt, hers was the only Yodaya family to move back to the quarter.\textsuperscript{112}

The second force that transformed worship at the Yodaya/Rama Spirit Shrine was the movement of new people into the quarter who adopted the dancers’ masks as their patron spirits. To understand this transformation, it is helpful to consider the old Burmese name for the shrine: \textit{Yodaya nat sin}. “Nat” means “spirit.” The most important \textit{nats} are the spirits of people who had violent deaths. Thirty-seven especially potent \textit{nats} form a pantheon that is worshiped across Burma. Countless region-specific \textit{nats} exist outside of the nation-wide cult.

Ramayana masks are not \textit{nats} in the Burmese sense of the word, but local people have called the Yodaya/Rama shrine a “\textit{nat}” shrine for as long as anyone can remember. Daw Myi Myint’s family called the shrine a “\textit{nat}” shrine even though her grandfather and grandmother explained that the masks were not \textit{nats}, but important objects that represented their Yodaya heritage. Even though they knew the masks were not spirits, the family prayed in the shrine for success in business, long life, and protection from bad luck. During our interview, Daw Myi Myint strongly asserted that the masks were not \textit{nats}. When I asked her what force was responsible for granting wishes if the masks were not \textit{nat} spirits, she admitted that she did not know.\textsuperscript{113}

In Myanmar, \textit{nat}/spirit worship is interwoven with Buddhist practices in ways that are distinct from neighboring Buddhist states, which has been of great interest to scholars. Burmese turn to \textit{nats} for assistance in life problems that cannot be addressed through Buddhist rituals or beliefs in non-desire and the removal of the self from want and selfishness. For example, Burmese go to \textit{nats} for assistance on business decisions, to pray for good outcomes in their college entrance exams, to thwart the will of a romantic rival, to win the lottery, and so on.\textsuperscript{114} In the Thai cultural context, daily interactions of ordinary people with a \textit{wai khru} shrine would be extremely unlikely. The spirits of the masks have

\textsuperscript{112} “Interview with Daw Myi Myint, Age 83, Yodaya descendent living near the Yodaya Nat Sin, 28\textsuperscript{th} street, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 9/10/09.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

powers that are mostly limited to the theatrical stage and the training of theatrical performers. The relocation of this ritual tradition to Burma thus resulted in a creolizing transformation of its meaning.

It is impossible to know when and how the *wai khru* altar became a *nat* shrine, but two possibilities stand out for consideration. The first is that the meaning and ritual of the shrine was altered from the beginning, soon after the captive performers arrived in Upper Burma. Relocated Yodaya dancers and musicians needed the kind of supernatural succor that Burmese-style spirit worship offered. Perhaps they expanded the ritual meaning of their theatrical shrines and came to believe that the mask spirits could intercede in all their many terrestrial problems.

It is also possible that the dancers and musicians preserved the sacred meaning of the *wai khru* altar throughout the period that dancing and music making dominated the economic life of the Yodaya performers quarter. When descendants of these dancers and musicians continued to go to the shrine out of habit, as Daw Myi Myint’s family did, they developed new ways to interact with the spirits that lived there and began to conceive of them in different ways. For Yodaya descendants, the shrine became a place to memorialize or celebrate their non-Burmese Yodaya identity. For this fast dwindling population, the Yodaya Spirit Shrine (as they still call it) sustains their elective alterity.

Interactions with the shrine by new people in the community who are not performers and other non-Yodaya people greatly transformed its spiritual and ritual meanings. Daw Mi Mi Lay described some of the kinds of people that come to the shrine. As noted above, ordinary people come who are having practical problems in their daily lives, as described above. In 2003, Daw Mi Mi Lay noted that people involved in two occupations also frequented the shrine: owners of gold leaf businesses and farmers.\(^{115}\) Gold pounders refer to the shrine as the Rama Spirit Shrine, not the Yodaya Spirit Shrine. Daw Tin Tin Nwe, the owner of the nearby Gold Rose shop on 36th Street, explained that she always visits the Rama Spirit Shrine before starting the tricky process of placing tiny pieces of gold ribbon between pieces of carefully hand-made sheets of bamboo paper. This process requires luck and precision because if the gold is impure or the paper

\(^{115}\) “Interview with Daw Mi Mi Le.” Research Notebook, 12/7/03.
improperly made, the gold leaf and paper will fuse as the pounders strike them with mallets. Days of labor will be wasted. According to Daw Tin Tin Nwe, visiting the Rama Shrine before this process is crucial to its success. She also visits the shrine if trouble develops in any of the many steps required to make gold leaf. Other gold leaf making businesses principally use the shrine to bless newly purchased gold lumps. A grateful gold leaf seller paid for the glass box that currently protects the Ramayana masks in the refurbished shrine. (I describe the gold leaf art in greater detail in the next section.)

Hay farmers from a village called Zi Kyo Koun, located an hour’s drive east of Mandalay, are also devoted to the shrine. Daw Than Sein, seventy-seven, has been travelling from this village to pray at the Rama shrine since she was ten years old. For as long as anyone can remember, she and other residents of Zi Kyo Koun have been praying at this shrine for assistance with their crops and luck in sales of hay and vegetables. On a propitious day every year, a delegation of Zi Kyo Koun volunteers travels to Mandalay to pay homage to the shrine on behalf of the whole village. They present offerings of fruit and flowers and donate money to pay for upkeep of the shrine. When a village couple is married or a young boy becomes a monk, families sometimes pay special respect at the Rama shrine. These villagers are not Yodaya descendants and know almost nothing about the shrine’s history, the Ramayana, or even what the masks were originally for. For example, Daw Than Sein long thought that Rama and his brother died by having their heads cut off and this was the reason why only the heads of these spirits were represented in the shrine. As improbable as it seems, these Ramayana masks have become patron nats for a remote farming village. We can only speculate how or why this happened. The shrine is located on a road that leads to river docks. Perhaps bad luck struck a hay farmer on his way to the market at the docks, so he stopped to pray at the nearest shrine. When things worked out, he believed the Rama (Yodaya) spirits had intervened on his behalf. The story could have spread to other villagers in Zi Kyo Koun, but

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116 “Interview with Daw Tin Tin Nwe, Age 47, Proprietor of The Gold Rose gold leaf shop, 36th Street, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 1/18/11.
117 “Interview with Daw Mya Na, 58, Yodaya/Rama Nat Sin guardian, 28th street, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 1/16/11.
118 “Interview with Daw Than Sein, 77 and Daw Myint Myint Than, 54, Zi Kyo Koun Village, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 1/18/11.
in the absence of evidence, it is impossible to know what really happened. What we can surmise that through some elliptical means, a transcultural exchange occurred between Yodaya and Burmese that affected this remote farming village. The existence of this cult is one of the beautiful flowers that has sprung up from creolizing interactions, but how it developed remains at the level of conjecture.

Wealthy jade merchants constitute a third group of people that frequent the shrine today but are neither Yodaya nor performers. After they moved into the neighborhood, they adopted the shrine as a source of spiritual patronage for their burgeoning (and dangerous) jade trade with China. As described above, they upgraded the spirit shrine from tottering wood and wicker to an impressive cement structure and the wai khru altar was transformed into a Burmese nat shrine. This is surely not the end of such transformations. Religious beliefs are shaped by the circumstances of the communities that comprise the believers. The rapid social and political developments affecting life in Upper Burma bring yet more change to the Yodaya/Rama spirit shrine.

4.3 Worshiping “Teacher Mon” among Mandalay’s Gold Pounders

As discussed in Chapter Three, almost every artistic practice or skill that requires bodily mastery or intense study has an associated “teacher” or “guru” cult in Central Thailand. Artists and crafts people recognize an inventor or propagator of their art form. The first teacher is often a supernatural being that divined this skill through mystical practice or sacred knowledge and then passed it on to mortal teachers, who transmitted the skill down the generations. Different types of artisans pay respect to such foundational figures with widely varying cult practices. Such practices are ubiquitous in Thailand, but in Myanmar are attached to only two arts Ramayana dancing (discussed above) and gold leaf making. Both forms are related to Yodaya identity, though the oral history that links gold leaf making to Yodaya origins has declined partly because of the unwitting intervention of Burmese academics, as discussed below.

Successful gold leaf manufacture relies upon a certain amount of luck, which is why gold leaf makers seek supernatural blessings from the Rama shrine for their endeavors. Sixty-year-old U Ohn Maung, owner of King Galon Gold Leaf
on 36th Street in Mandalay, impressed upon me the difficulty of making gold leaf. Although made by hand, it is only 3.5 millionths of an inch thick, approximately five hundred times thinner than an average sheet of aluminum foil. When the king organized the gold leaf quarter, U Ohn Maung said, he settled eight kinds of specialists in the area: makers of bamboo paper designed especially to resist impregnation from gold; straw paper makers; gold purifiers; makers of gold ribbon; two types of hammerers, initial pounders and finish pounders; specialized tool makers; and makers of the stone powder that keeps gold from sticking to paper. U Ohn Maung says that young girls adept at handling and packaging the extremely delicate gold leaf represented a ninth skill.

The process begins by pressing twenty-four karat gold into a twenty-foot long ribbon three-quarters of an inch wide. The ribbon is cut into four sections that are each five feet long. One five foot section is then cut into 200 pieces, placed between sheets of bamboo paper, wrapped in deer hide, and hammered with a six-pound hammer for thirty minutes. The flattened gold is then removed, cut into six pieces, and put back into the bamboo paper, where it is pounded for another thirty minutes. This results in 1200 gold sheets. These sheets are recombined to form 720 new gold sheets that receive a further five hours of hammering before they are finished. This last stage is especially crucial. Three kinds of hammer strokes are required to expand the gold: strokes that heat the paper, strokes that expand the gold leaf, and strokes that prevent the gold from adhering to the paper. Timing is crucial, so gold pounders use a special coconut water clock to regulate their labor. The coconut floats in water with a small hole drilled in the bottom. Gold beaters know they must hit the gold packet 120 times before the coconut cup fills and sinks, which it does in about three minutes. The gold leaf is packaged and sold to religious pilgrims to use as offerings or to artisans in other fields. Pilgrims press gold leaf onto sacred objects such as Buddha images or pagodas as a sign of reverence, while artisans gild anything from sacred objects to housewares and tourist baubles with the leaf.\textsuperscript{119}

While many of the traditional arts of Myanmar have faded or disappeared, gold pounding has continued to grow because gold leaf remains an important

\textsuperscript{119} “Interview with U Ohn Maung, Age 60, Owner King Galon Gold Leaf on 36th Street, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/21/10. Information was also drawn from an English language pamphlet on gold leaf manufacture produced by King Galon Gold Leaf.
temple offering for Buddhist pilgrims. It is also because the exotic skills required to produce gold leaf are not replicated elsewhere. Gold leaf manufacture requires many integrated skills and forms of labor that can easily go awry. If a gold leaf bundle is ruined, artisans must melt the leaf back down and begin again. The successful completion of a bundle therefore requires luck. It is little wonder that artisans call on supernatural powers to assist them. Mandalay’s gold pounders call on the Saya Mon (Teacher Mon) spirit. He is worshipped as the ancient inventor and first teacher of the gold leaf pounding method. U Ohn Maung said Teacher Mon must have been “very scientific” to discover how to make bamboo paper that would not absorb gold particles.\textsuperscript{120}

The gold pounding area is considered a shrine to Teacher Mon, so there are specific ritual prohibitions in this area. Shoes cannot be worn where gold is pounded, nor are women allowed to enter the room.\textsuperscript{121} King Galon Gold Leaf enjoys a steady tourist trade, so the gold pounding area is separated from the sales room by a low wooden wall that allows shoe wearing female tourists to observe the process without upsetting Teacher Mon. A small wooden table just in front of the gold pounding area is used as an altar to Teacher Mon. A ritual is conducted there at the beginning of every workday and workers respectfully acknowledge Teacher Mon each time they enter and exit the work area.

Until sometime before the 1970s, the oral history of the gold pounding quarter stated that the skills and knowledge of gold leaf manufacture came from Thailand. Scholarly interest in traditional Burmese arts appears to have changed this belief. For example, Maung Ko U confronted the Thai-origin theory in a 1972 book on gold leaf manufacture. He stated (correctly) that gold leaf was manufactured in the Pagan period, centuries before Thai captives were brought to Burma. He argued that if the gold pounding tradition came from outside of the Burman ethnic group, it must have been introduced by Burma’s immediate

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. The paper is made by cutting the shiny exterior from a particular variety of bamboo, splitting the fibrous interior into long thin strips, soaking the strips in lime-water for three years, then pulping them to make the paper. The final step involves beating each six-inch sheet of bamboo for half an hour on a brass plate with a specially shaped wooden clubs until the paper achieves a transparent orange luster.

neighbors, the Shan or the Mon. Maung Ko U pointed out that the patron spirit of gold manufacturers is named “Saya Mon,” which suggests Mon origins.\textsuperscript{122}

I found that the owners of gold leaf businesses had read academic works on gold leaf making and absorbed their arguments about the origins of the tradition. U Ohn Maung told me explicitly that scholars had shown that gold leaf making was an 800-year-old tradition that could not have come from the Thai. Large photographs on the wall of his business made an ironic statement about this belief, since they showed the King Galon shop being visited by Thai Princess Sirindhorn many years ago. The princess has a scholarly interest in Thailand’s artistic heritage, so she had visited U Ohn Maung to discuss the discredited oral tradition of Thai origins of gold leaf manufacture in Burma.\textsuperscript{123}

Other gold leaf makers and sellers in the area held a range of beliefs about the ethnic origins of gold leaf artisans in Burma. Some believed the skill came from Thailand, others from the Mon or the Shan. They were all committed to the ethnic alterity of their skill, however. It is as if the gold leaf artisans reacted to seeming disproof of their Thai origins by saying to themselves, “Okay, we are not Thai, but we know we are not Burmese, so perhaps we are Mon or Shan.” My interview with Tin Tin Nwe the owner of Gold Rose Gold Leaf reflected this. She believed that Saya Mon must have been Mon because of the name, but also believed that the business of gold leaf making came from Thailand because her grandparents, who initiated her into the business, had taught her to visit the Yodaya/Rama shrine to reverse bad luck in the production process.

Another possibility is that gold leaf manufacture is simultaneously Yodaya and Mon or Shan. Maung Ko U was technically correct when he dismissed the community’s oral tradition that the method for making gold leaf was introduced by Yodaya people, since it clearly predates the wars that brought them to Upper Burma. However, this does not mean that the Burmese royalty did not assign Yodaya captives to already existing gold pounding work groups. As we will see in the next chapter, Manipuri female captives dominated the work groups assigned to make acheik patterned silk for the palace, but that does not imply that the Burmese did not know how to weave silk. Rather, it shows that the Manipuri

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 32–4.
\textsuperscript{123} Bryce Beemer, “Interview with U Ohn Maung.”
knew certain weaving techniques that the royal court admired and these weavers were integrated into or replaced preexisting workgroups. The existence of the Teacher Mon cult among the gold pounders constitutes overwhelming evidence of Yodaya peoples' involvement in the art form since it mirrors the artisanal cults that continue to exist in Thailand but are found in no other artisanal communities in Upper Burma.

It is impossible to know what techniques Yodaya captives introduced into Burma's gold leaf making tradition.\textsuperscript{124} Perhaps they introduced some innovative processes such as using coconut water clocks or making special bamboo paper. It is possible to imagine that some Yodaya people were added to the gold leaf work group, but the only innovation they contributed was a belief in a sacred guru from ancient Thailand that had invented gold pounding. In an occupation so rife with frustration and potential for ruin, adopting the cult practice of worshiping a luck-granting spirit teacher might have met an important psychological need for the often-downhearted artisans. The connection between some of the gold leaf businesses with the Yodaya/Rama shrine further suggests that Yodaya people were once involved in gold pounding. Kindred connections to the Yodaya dancers may have brought the two occupational groups together in worship at the shrine.

Other highly circumstantial evidence that at least some of Burma's gold leaf pounders came from Thailand can be found in Bangkok's gold leaf making quarter. Maps of Bangkok include a Gold Beaters Street (\textit{Lan ti thong}). The street runs through what was formerly called Gold Beaters Village (\textit{Baan ti thong}) located in the center of the old city near Wat Suthat. Lao war captives used to make gold leaf for the temples and pilgrims of Bangkok in this quarter. Interestingly, Edward Van Roy's research shows that while the Lao ethnicity of the workers is clear in the historical records, the people living on Gold Beaters

\textsuperscript{124} Gold leaf used to be manufactured all over the world. A tomb in Egypt shows workers pounding gold leaf in 2500 B.C.E. A 12\textsuperscript{th} century European manual describes gold leaf making that is almost identical to the practices I observed in Mandalay in 2010. The 12\textsuperscript{th} century method involved putting specks of gold pieces on Byzantine parchment coated with red ochre to prevent friction, bundling it in cow leather, and beating lightly and then heavily with a specially made hammer. Eric D. Nicholson, "The Ancient Craft of Gold Beating," \textit{Gold Bulletin} 12, no. 4 (December 1, 1979): 161–3.
Street have not preserved a memory of this heritage. This suggests another small example of the broad phenomenon of artisanal war captives being integrated into the labor groups of the states to which they have been relocated. Upper Burma’s highly skilled gold leaf makers were dispersed by war and famine in the mid-18th century. This population could have been replaced or at least replenished by war captives brought over from Ayutthaya. The elite in Central Thailand, suffering from the same labor deprivations seen in Upper Burma a few decades earlier, then replenished their population of gold leaf makers by capturing skilled people from Laos.

5. The Consequences of Yodaya Ramayana Dance-Drama

_The Burma[n]s have dramatic entertainments, used at all festivals... The performers indeed, which we saw, were all Siamese. The subject is generally taken from some of the legends of their heroes, especially of RAMA... If, from the effects on the audience we might judge of the merit of the performance, it must be very considerable; as some of the performers had the art of keeping the multitude in a roar._

-Dr. Francis [Hamilton] Buchanan, 1798

_Burma wins in military affairs, but they [the captives from Ayutthaya] win in culture. They conquered us culturally._

-Maung Myat Hnine, owner of Lamintaya theatrical troupe

5.1 Introduction

With its fancifully embroidered and bejeweled costumes, colorful masks, and exotic gestures, the Ramayana dance-drama from Ayutthaya introduced a potent and compelling visual language into Upper Burma. The Burmese knew the Ramayana story, since it already existed in prose form and as a poetic ballad. The earliest surviving version of the Ramayana written in Burmese prose is the _Rama Vathu_, dated to the 17th century. The second oldest copy, the _Rama Thagyin_, is written in poetic verse and is dated to 1775, just a few years after Yodaya people were relocated to Upper Burma. Both texts suggest there was a tradition of travelling balladeers or long form poets who spread the story through oral

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127 “Interview with Maung Myat Hnine and Htay Htay Myint, owners of Lamintaya theatrical troupe, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 11/8/03.
recitation. Inscriptions and poems from the 16th century and after occasionally alluded to characters and events in the Ramayana. The Ramayana was apparently known in Upper Burma, but until the arrival of the Yodaya people in the 18th century only appeared in Burmese visual arts a few times. This changed significantly after Thai-style Ramayana dance-drama gained popularity in Burma. The Ramayana story and individual characters from the play became an important influence on almost all the fine arts in Upper Burma, palace sponsored and otherwise. By the end of the Konbaung era, the Ramayana story had become visually ubiquitous, the inspiration for many of the decorations of Buddhist temples, royal palaces, and elite objects.

In Chapter One I discussed the development of Yodaya music as a creole art form that developed from the cultural fusions and inventions inspired by the intersection of Burmese and Thai musical traditions. I have discussed the Ramayana in this chapter in relation to the cult practices introduced to Upper Burma by Yodaya dancers and musicians. In this section, I further discuss the history of the Ramayana dance-drama in Burma, focusing on the important role of Yodaya dancers in the display of royal power by Burmese kings and how the dance-drama was creolized in the Burmese cultural setting.

5.2 Dancers as Symbols of Power

"Musician" and "dancer" were the first two specialized occupations recorded in the Glass Palace Chronicle’s list of artisans captured from Ayutthaya. Fortunately for the survival of Thailand’s dance tradition, Ava’s armies did not capture all of Ayutthaya’s dancers. Some escaped to Nakhon Si Thammarat, an important trade city on Thailand’s southern peninsula that remained outside of the Thai-Burmese war zone. These dancers were incorporated into the Thai governor’s retinue. In 1769, as King Taksin expanded Bangkok’s power southward, these dancers were given to him as part of a negotiated peace settlement between Bangkok and the governor of Nakhon Si

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128 For dating and comparison of Burma’s various Ramayana traditions, see (U) Thaw Kaung, “Ramayana Narratives in Myanmar,” in Aspects of Myanmar History and Culture (Yangon: Gant-gaw Myaing Sarpay, 2010), 192–6; and Thein Han (U) and Khin Zaw (U), “Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Art.”

Thammarat. The former refugees became important teachers of the Ayutthaya
dance tradition in the new capital.\textsuperscript{130}

Based on this history, anthropologist Mary Grow makes several important
observations about theatrical performance and the projection of royal power in
the Thai cultural setting and in the larger Southeast Asian context. Grow draws
on the well-known works of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz who has written
cogently on the role of pageantry and theater in Southeast Asian statecraft.
Geertz, taking Bali as his example, famously called statecraft “a thespian art.” He
noted that traditional Southeast Asian states typically had little bureaucratic
structure and a marked blurring of religious and political power. Kings were
corporeal representations of divine power and their palaces were sacred
temples. The city-states themselves represented heavenly abodes and state
ceremonies were signs of the king’s power to manifest heavenly delights in the
earthly realm. Metaphorical and real powers were conjoined through artistic
practices that worked to effectively reinforce social domination by the royal elite.
Each individual’s participation in state ceremonies was circumscribed by his or
her social status, which simultaneously represented and instantiated the
kingdom’s official social order.\textsuperscript{131} Anthony Reid argues that Geertz’s
observations about pageantry and state power could be expanded throughout
Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{132}

Mary Grow analyzes Thai dance-drama from within Reid’s and Geertz’s
analytical perspective. In the courts of Ayutthaya and early Bangkok, the highest
level of dance-drama was performed by female dance troupes (lakhon chatri)
that resided in the palace with the Thai king. The troupes included a combination
of minor wives and concubines of the king as well as some of his female relatives
such as daughters, granddaughters, and nieces. The dancers were therefore
symbolically linked to royal power. As many in the troupe were the king’s sexual
partners, they represented the monarch’s masculine potency. As performers,
they represented his power to summon heavenly spectacles to the earthly realm.
These all-female performances of the Ramayana and other dramas were called

\textsuperscript{130} Mary Louise Grow, “Laughter for Spirits, A Vow Fulfilled: The Comic Performance of
Thailand’s Lakhon Chatri Dance-Drama” (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991), 96–7.
\textsuperscript{131} Geertz, \textit{Negara: The Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali}, Chapter 4. Quote p. 120.
\textsuperscript{132} Reid, \textit{Age of Commerce}, 173–183.
“inside the palace dance-drama” (*lakhon nai*). Theater that was not sponsored by the king was called “outside the palace dance-drama” (*lakhon nok*) and was performed by troupes of men. The control and display of female dancers was the monopoly of the king, although he could make dispensations to award this privilege to other elites. Royal theatrics were highly mediated by sumptuary laws that regulated actors’ clothing and the literature used as the basis for their performances. One unusual aspect of “inside the palace dance-drama” was that the dancer-actors conducted it in pantomime. Dancers acted out scenes in coded gestures, while a separate chorus sang and recited dialogue. Such regulations prevented royal theatrics from being imitated by rival elites. Grow argues furthermore that Thai monarchs controlled the aesthetics of theater so well that the image of the female court dancer became a potent symbol for kingship itself.¹³³

The intertwining of court dance with Thai royal power and the special place of Ramayana literature in Thai dance help us understand King Taksin’s (r. 1767-82) devotion to reviving Ramayana literature after the sack of Ayutthaya in 1767. King Taksin was engaged in the fraught project of solidifying a new kingdom in Thonburi and defending it from future Burmese attack. This involved resettling refugees and capturing and transferring war-slaves to the new capital. People were settled into labor groups. Their forearms were tattooed with the names of their occupations partly to keep them organized and partly to prevent them from slipping away from undesirable tasks.

In rebuilding the state, Taksin did not limit himself to concerns for military defense and food security. Among his most important tasks was improving the provincial temples of the once remote trade port of Bangkok so they would be worthy of a royal capital. Foremost among these was the humble riverside temple of Wat Makok on the Thonburi side of the Chaophraya River. Taksin enclosed this temple within the walls of his new palace and renamed it Wat Chaeng. It became his royal temple. After 1779, it housed the Emerald Buddha after it was captured in war with Vientiane (in modern Laos). The temple was later renamed Wat Arun (short for Ratchawararam Ratchawaramahawihan) and restored by King Rama II (r. 1809-24). Numerous

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of his successors have continued presenting their power through artistic display in temples.

Another obvious statement of power by King Taksin was his restoration of the Ramayana dance-drama. All the Ramayana texts had perished in the fires that swept Ayutthaya. After recovering his refugee dancers from Nakhon Si Thammarat, in 1770, King Taksin himself attempted to write down the Ayutthaya Ramayana from memory. This passion for the Ramayana dance-drama and its symbolic position as a signifier of royal power eventually transferred from Thailand to Burma along with the movement of captive artisans from one society to the other.

5.3 The Development of Yodaya Dance-Drama in Ava

In the years between 1767 and 1789 Yodaya style dance-drama, particularly the Ramayana, gained so much popularity within and apparently outside the palace that a royal committee was assigned the task of translating the plays and theatrical music of Central Thailand and Northern Thailand. The resulting Burmese poetry had to be beautiful enough to be “appropriate” for royal ears. Educated Burmese people still know about several of the eight members of the committee: U Sa (later Minister of Mingyi) was a poet, musician, composer, and all round artistic polymath; the widowed queen Thakin Min Mi was a gifted poet; and the Prince of Pyinsi was a cavalry commander who composed many musical works that are still played. In Chapter One, I discussed how the work of this committee led to the creation of a creole musical form called yodaya thachin (Yodaya music). Their translation project also resulted in introducing new theatrical and literary works into the Burmese language, including the Ayutthaya play Inao, which was originally based on Malay Panji tales (more on this below), the Jataka stories from Ayutthaya and Northern Thailand; and the Ramayana. Based on Jataka tales gathered from the Chiang

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135 Pe Maung Tin, “Yodaya hma yashi thaw yinkyehmu mya [The Culture received from Thailand (Ayutthaya)],” 29–32. The other five members included 1) U Kyi Soe, a Privy Councilor; 2) Prince Minye Nanda Meit; 3) Kyaw Swa, an Assistant Minister; 4) U Toe, a palace official who had already penned a poetic version of the Ramayana; and 5) Prince Thado Dhamaraza, who was also the new husband of ex-Queen Thakin Min Mi. Also see U Thaw Kaung’s English language discussion of these projects in Thaw Kaung, ”Ramayana Narratives in Myanmar,” 199–203.
Mai area, Queen Thakin Min Mi wrote a play called *Kaytha Thiri Nadwin Zat Tawkyi*, which can be translated as the “Royal Inside the Palace Play *Katha Thiri*,” was labeled “Royal Yodaya Zat” within literary texts of the period. The great poet U Sa’s translation of *Inao* still exists (more on it below). Both have been printed many times. The committee’s translation of the Ramayana was long thought lost, but a well-known scholar of Myanmar literature, U Thaw Kaung, suggests that the first six chapters of the oldest surviving theatrical version of the Ramayana, Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Kaung’s *Rama Pya-zat Tawkyi* [Royal Rama Play] dating to the late-18th or early 19th century, may actually be the original text produced by the translation committee. This is because the name Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Kaung does not appear on the text until the first page of chapter seven. The rest of the text could also be a revised version of the original translation. The archived version of *Rama Pya-zat Tawkyi* was published in 2001 and 2002; printed in three volumes, it runs over a thousand pages long.

The formation of this translation committee in 1789 raises an intriguing question about the role of Yodaya people as agents in the popularization of Yodaya dance-drama. I have noted earlier that a prominent difference between creolization processes in the Americas compared to Southeast Asia is that Southeast Asian elites were willing to absorb the cultural and artistic practices of the people they had taken captive. The translation committee is certainly an example of Burmese elite selecting those aspects of Thai culture that intrigued them, transforming them to suit their tastes, and then spreading hybridized art forms as symbols of their power. Does this mean that their captives had little agency in hybridizing and transmitting their cultural practices? I argue that there is also evidence of the agency of Yodaya people in the popularization and spread of Thai-style dance-drama. One bit of evidence is found in a royal order promulgated in 1777, ten years after the sack of Ayutthaya and twelve years before the translation committee was formed. The Royal Order began by stating that public performances of music, dance, and drama affected public opinion on subjects such as religion and the king, so it was necessary to regulate theatrical events. The regulations covered street and stage theatrics, music, and singing

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136 Ibid., 259–64.
and many kinds of dramatic presentations of the Ramayana, Jataka tales, and Jataka-like stories. Performers must be religious people of good character and the subject matter of the stories they related must not be detrimental to the Buddhist faith. Regulations instructed actors portraying a king not to model themselves on the real monarch. There were also strict regulations about the proper propitiation of natural spirits in the performance area.

More ominously, the law empowered the court’s Officer of Entertainments (Thabin Wun) to punish artists who transgressed these rules by having them whipped or banished or their limbs amputated.\textsuperscript{138} John Crawfurd, former Resident of Singapore, met this minister during his 1826 mission to Burma following the First Anglo-Burmese War. Crawfurd reported that the ministerial position was held by a former Siamese war captive:

The chiefs who brought our refreshments were two persons of some note, from being much in the King’s favour. The first was an elderly person, by birth a Siamese: his offices are named Rok-the-wun and Zat-wun, which mean, Chief of the Puppet-shows and Manager of Theatricals. This gentleman is represented as a first-rate buffoon [clown actor], and, in consideration of his drollery, the King indulges him in such freedoms as would cost the rest of the courtiers the stocks or the bamboo, if not worse.\textsuperscript{139}

In his classic history, \textit{Burmese Drama}, Maung Htin Aung argues that Burma’s golden age of court drama, the period between c. 1780 and c. 1870, was indebted to the arrival of captive performers from Ayutthaya. If we define a “play” as a complicated story told with narration, song, and dance, then plays only began to appear in Upper Burma around the same period as the palace committee began translating Thai language plays and literature into Burmese.

\textsuperscript{138} Than Tun has reservations about the authenticity of this royal order because it is one of only two connected royal orders that mention the existence of an Officer of Entertainments; it also seems to include an anachronistic system for paying this officer. See Than Tun, \textit{The Royal Orders of Burma, A.D. 1598-1885: Part Eight, A.D. 1819-1853} (Kyoto: The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1988), 58–61. Than Tun does not provide any rationale for why someone would forge an 18\textsuperscript{th} century Burmese royal order and other scholars do share these reservations. Whether the royal order is authentic or not, Europeans clearly encountered this office holder in Burmese court. A Burmese doctoral student has uncovered other mentions of ministerial oversight of theater in Upper Burma. See Pyone Mar Kyi, “History of Myanmar Drama” (Ph.D., University of Mandalay, 2009), 55–60.

\textsuperscript{139} The second person mentioned by Crawfurd was an actor renowned for his skill who had lost favor with the king and been stripped of his position and court awards, then won his way back into the graces of King Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1838) and was performing again, to the chagrin of other court members. Crawfurd, \textit{Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava}, 1:280-81.
Maung Htin Aung argues that performances of the Ramayana by captured Yodaya performers both inspired and challenged court poets to invent plays that would be even more entertaining to audiences in the Burmese cultural milieu. These new Burmese plays did not follow the mask, costume, and gestural conventions found in Yodaya influenced Ramayana performances. One Burmese play, *Manikhet*, which some scholars have dated to 1733 or a bit earlier, is considered to be the first Burmese play. *Manikhet* follows the conventions of a play as it has been defined here and appears to be an outlier that ruffles Maung Htin Aung’s linear outline of the development of theater in Burma. However, as U Thaw Kaung points out, the dating of *Manikhet* has been controversial among theater scholars. The surviving original is undated, authorship is not listed, and it has been attributed to a noted poet and minister from the late-Nyaunngyan period. The play is based on a Jataka story from the *Paññasa Jataka* (The 50 Jatakas) about a supernatural horse with eyes made of precious stone. *Manikhet* is so similar to the plays produced by the translation committee in 1789 that several Burmese scholars suggest that it has been misattributed and misdated.

Even if the c. 1733 date for this play is correct, the existence of a one-off theatrical experiment does not undermine arguments about the important role of Yodaya artisans in the development of Burmese theatrical traditions. Dating the *Manikhet* to c. 1733 still conforms to the broad argument of this thesis because it suggests that cultural interactions between Burmese and Northern Thai literary culture inspired an early experiment in play writing that would bear riper fruit fifty years later.

Maung Htin Aung considers U Sa’s translation of the Thai play *Inao* (*Eenaung* in Burmese) an important turning point in the development of Burmese theater. While this section is focused on the cultural interactions inspired by the Ramayana, a brief discussion of the *Eenaung* sheds light on the process of creolization under consideration in this chapter. The editor’s introduction to U Sa’s *Eenaung* describes how he went about translating the play.

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142 Minister Padetha-yarzar (c. 1683-1754)
He was told by royal Yodaya captives that the play was only intended for presentation inside the palace and that it had never been seen by Ayutthaya’s commoners. U Sa had Thai performers read the dialogue aloud and then he and Thai-Burmese translators worked to put it into Burmese verse. Unnamed Yodaya princes and a Yodaya princess named Hnin Nu (a Burmese name meaning “Tender Snow”) assisted in the translation process. The first translation of the play was unsatisfactory to U Sa. He continued to revise its poetry and structure over many years.\textsuperscript{145} Maung Htin Aung writes that \textit{Eenaung} was not a faithful translation of \textit{Inao} perhaps because of U Sa’s continual tinkering with the text. The original story was reworked to focus on a romance between the male and female leads; their characters are threaded with the strengths and failings that made them appealing to a Burmese audience. Thematically and musically, U Sa focused on the pathos of the lead characters, still an audience-pleasing feature of Burmese entertainment. Maung Htin Aung believes U Sa’s creative reinterpretation of the \textit{Eenaung} “paved the way” for fully original Burmese playwrights to emerge over the next several decades.\textsuperscript{146}

The other notable feature about this play is its development in Ayutthaya. The oral history of the \textit{Inao} in Central Thailand has a similar history of being transplanted by slave gathering warfare. The Thai \textit{Inao} is a reworking of the pre-Islamic \textit{Panji} literature of Java. The stories spread from there forming an important story telling tradition in the Malay world, appearing as inspiration for stone carvings by the early-15\textsuperscript{th} century and spreading outside of Java by at least the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. In Ayutthaya, the text was translated in the middle of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century into Thai using \textit{klon} verse, the standard form of poetry for recitation at a dance-drama performance. A contemporary source from late Ayutthaya describes the \textit{Inao} being performed before a monument to the Buddha’s footprint.\textsuperscript{147} The \textit{Inao}, like the Ramayana, was rewritten from memory by in the Bangkok court period. As Davisakd Puaksom shows in her research into the history of \textit{Panji} story translation, the version of the \textit{Inao} composed in Rama II’s


\textsuperscript{146} Maung Htin Aung, \textit{Burmese Drama}, 40.

\textsuperscript{147} Davisakd Puaksom, “The Pursuit of Java: Thai \textit{Panji} Stories, Melayu Lingue Franca and the Question of Translation” (Ph.D., National University of Singapore, 2007), 23–43.
reign (r. 1809-1824) reports that "chao sattri," or "palace princesses" composed
the original Ayutthaya era version. Prince Damrong researched the history of the
translation in preparation for its re-publication in 1921. He wrote that the Inao
translation was composed by Princess Kunthon and Princess Mongkut, two
daughters of King Borommakot (r. 1733-1758). They had heard the story from a
Malay servant, a descendant of captives from Pattani.148 The Panji/Inao history is
an unexpected counterpoint to the Ramayana. As Davisakd points out, these
related stories are part of the national identities and educational systems of both
Indonesia and Thailand, where they are recited by school children.149 To this we
may add the Burmese Eenaung, which is also seen as a key poetic text in Burma’s
national literature.

In Burmese, the word for “play” is “pya zat.” The term is derived from the
word Jataka (zat for short), or life story of the Buddha, combined with the verb
“to exhibit” (pya). Maung Htin Aung suggests that because so much of Burma’s
literature derived from didactic Buddhist literature, zat became synonymous
with “story.” The Burmese word for a theatrical event, “zat pwe” (pwe is a noun
meaning “festival” or “celebration”), can be seen as deriving from the idea of
presenting and celebrating Buddhist literature.

With the introduction of Yodaya dance-drama into Upper Burma, as
Maung Htin Aung points out, we see the coinage of a new word “nan-dwin zat,”
which literally means “inside the palace plays.” This coinage suggests that
Burmese palace dwellers had adopted Thai notions of a two-part division of
theatrical performance via sumptuary laws: theater for within the palace and
theater for outside the palace.150 A royal order dated to 1822 forbids orchestral
instruments from being gilded or ornamented with cut glass, except for the
official palace orchestra.151 This suggests there was policing of an inside versus
outside sumptuary code; palace officials may have been compelled to crack

148 Ibid., 70–4. It is important to note that Davisakd himself is dubious about the story of
translation via Thai princesses and a Malay captive. He prefers to point to the position of Malay
language in Ayutthaya as a lingua franca, or important trading language. He believes that because
of the large Malay trading community in Ayutthaya, the stories could have come to the
knowledge of the palace by any number of means (pp. 82–4).
149 Ibid., 22–3.
150 Maung Htin Aung, Burmese Drama, 35–6. I follow the author’s argument, but with some
modification to his translations.
down on “fake” royal orchestras that were presumably touring the countryside and garnering higher compensations than ordinary orchestras based on a false pedigree.

According to scholars, the first record of a large theatrical event in the Konbaung chronicles is the “zat kyi” (literally “big theatrical”) performed in 1783 to celebrate the relocation of the Burmese capital from Inwa to Amarapura. The first mention of a Yodaya play specifically being presented within in a palace-sponsored “zat pwe” is 1828.152 These dates are misleading concerning the beginnings of Yodaya performances within and without the palace since both Inwa (capital from 1765 to 1783 and again from 1821 to 1842) and Amarapura (capital from 1783 to 1821 and 1842 to 1859) have Yodaya/Rama spirit shrines that are still standing and being used by local people.

I visited Amarapura’s Rama spirit shrine in 2003. It stood about a hundred feet inland from the shore of Taungthaman Lake. Unfortunately, a flood about five years before my visit had swept into the shrine and destroyed the Ramayana masks once housed there. They had since been replaced with wooden carvings of Ramayana characters’ heads because skilled mask makers could not be found. The shrine was little used, but marked the courtyard of the Yodaya dance troupe that once plied its trade within the Amarapura palace.153

Dr. Tin Maung Kyi, an amateur historian of Yodaya people and public intellectual in Mandalay, located the remains of the Yodaya/Rama shrine in the Tada-U area of Inwa in what he described as “a shabby little hut.” His interviews with people in the area indicated that the shrine had been fully incorporated into local spirit practices and that no aspect of its former role as wai khru shrine remained. However, we still have evidence of a Yodaya dance troupe in Inwa.154 The Burmese capital hopscotched back and forth along a twenty-mile stretch of the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River, which makes it difficult to date the formation of the palace troupe. The remains of the shrine in Inwa may indicate that a troupe was formed sometime between 1767 and 1783 when Inwa was the capital or between 1821 and 1842, the second time it was the capital. This dating

153 Research Notebook, Amarapura, 12/8/03.
difficulty is mitigated if we take into consideration the lavish Ramayana performance with Yodaya actors and dancers presented to the British envoys Michael Symes and Francis (Hamilton) Buchanan in 1795. It seems safe to assume that by 1795 Yodaya performers had been formerly organized by the state and would presumably have been settled into a quarter within the capital city.

We can glean information about the creolizing transformations inspired by Yodaya dance-drama from the 1795 descriptions by Michael Symes and Francis Buchanan and other European visitors. One of the first things we see is a transformation in the gender regime of Thai theatrical performances. In Ayutthaya, kingly power was symbolically connected to the presence of female dance-drama performers, as mentioned earlier. Both Symes and Hamilton mention the presence of male performers, but none of men performing as women, which we might expect if they had seen it. Henry Yule, who visited in 1855 and witnessed Burmese theater on many occasions, made a point of noting that actors and actresses shared the stage and that although young men often took the part of female characters, they did not always do so. If there was ever royal interest in all-female dance-drama in Upper Burma, it did not last long. The fact that male Yodaya actors performed for the court and that Yodaya performers resided in a quarter outside the palace walls also points to alterations in the gender regime. Female dancers and singers were not expected to remain inside the palace, as we saw in Ayutthaya and early Bangkok.

Maung Htin Aung argues that Burmese performers had a very low social status, which inhibited the development of a theatrical tradition in which princesses and other high-status women danced and sang in a public setting. Yodaya-style performance in the Burmese palace may have begun with elite Yodaya women taking the stage as they did in Central Thailand. However, if it

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155 In fact, male and female dancers were not legally allowed to perform together until 1861 when King Mongkut (Rama IV: r. 1851-1868) modernized and revised numerous theatrical laws. See Grow, “Laughter for Spirits,” 102–4, 138–40.
157 Henry Yule, A Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855, with Notices of the Country, Government, and People (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858), 16.
began this way, the performing roles quickly transitioned to groups of professional (non-royal) actors, dancers and musicians.\textsuperscript{158}

Another difference from “inside the palace dance-drama” in Central Thailand was that Yodaya actors recited their lines. Buchanan writes that tasks were divided among the performers and while the singing was done by one set of performers, “the recitative part or dialogue is left to each actor’s ingenuity.”\textsuperscript{159} A theatrical convention in which actors lifted their Ramayana masks to recite their lines quickly developed in Upper Burma, though the chorus was retained to sing songs while the actors danced.\textsuperscript{160} Finally, we should note that our British visitors were in Pegu, the old capital of Lower Burma and not in Amarapura in Upper Burma where the translation committee met and did its work. This points to a rapid spread in the popularity and influence of the Ramayana dance-drama and Yodaya performance traditions among the Burmese elite.

5.4 Images of Yodaya Performers in Burmese Painting

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the importance of pageantry and theatrical spectacle for both presenting and generating state power in Southeast Asia. This is a well-understood and well-studied phenomenon famously crystalized in the work of Clifford Geertz. In the Konbaung era, perhaps unsurprisingly, there developed a court tradition of painted books that recorded the events of elite parades, sporting events, rituals, and pageants. The books are called “white parabaik” (white books); they are long accordion-folded books made of thick, locally produced paper treated so that the pages have a white surface appropriate for painting.\textsuperscript{161} A painting of a parade, for example, will be painted continually across each fold of the accordion; the book is meant to be opened all the way so that the entire parade is represented from start to finish. One parabaik may be eighteen or so inches wide and stretch for twenty-five or more feet. Some parabaik represent several royal events, each stretching across two or more folds, such as puppet shows, polo matches, presentations of the Ramayana, the capture of a wild elephant, and so on.

\textsuperscript{158} Maung Htin Aung, \textit{Burmese Drama}, 35.
\textsuperscript{160} I agree with Catherine Diamond who described this convention as appearing clumsy to fans of Thai masked theater. See Catherine Diamond, “Ramayana,” \textit{Theatre Journal} 55, no. 3 (2003): 527.
\textsuperscript{161} Black parabaik are treated to become black, then written on with a white, chalk-like material.
Royally commissioned white *parabaik* have been underutilized as sources for understanding the culture of pageantry in the Konbaung era. They are often devoid of text or only briefly labeled, which creates interpretive challenges for the scholar. Charles Duroiselle encountered an unusually descriptive white *parabaik* in the possession of a presumably European collector and had the text translated and published as the *Pageant of King Mindon, 1865*. The text represents and describes a grand royal procession from the palace to a temple at the foot of Mandalay Hill, where the king went to inspect the progress being made on the carving of a particularly large marble Buddha image. The text describes the foreign origins of important people in the parade whose dress makes them otherwise indistinguishable from the people they are standing with. At the head of the parade we learn that the lancer corps is composed of Lao, Manipuri, Assamese, Shan, and Burmese soldiers. Next to them ride Manipuri cavalry who can be visually distinguished by their distinctive war turbans. Following close behind is a troupe of Yodaya dancers and musicians; troupes of Burmese and Mon orchestras and dancers follow them. Behind a row of elephants is yet another Yodaya orchestra with actors in dance-drama costumes. A little further along in the parade, Assamese elephanteers ride alongside lower level Burmese royalty. Soon after follow a group of foreign princes (Yodaya, Arakanese, and Shan). The princes immediately precede the Burmese king in the parade. They are only recognizable because of the textual description, since their dress is identical to that of the non-foreign princes marching alongside them. Duroiselle’s simple translation of an intriguing text points to the rich possibilities of studying *parabaik* paintings and other artistic representations. The text and images from *Pageant of King Mindon, 1865* afford us an interesting insight into the complicated social position of captured elite people. They are simultaneously parading as important persons in the Burmese king’s entourage and being paraded as captives and exotic artisans to represent the king’s power and his state’s foreign conquests.

Several white *parabaik* from British collections have recently been digitized. They provide insight into the importance of Yodaya performers in the palace. One of the most interesting is from the Bodleian Library. The large manuscript, fanning out across sixty-six folds, represents a royal procession. The
Bodleian Library unfortunately misdates the manuscript as coming from the 18th century, which is stylistically impossible. A series of articles on Burmese temple art by Jane Terry Bailey elegantly delineate the changes in painting styles between the late-18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Bailey demonstrates that Burmese paintings from roughly 1750 to 1800 were painted from a somewhat awkward bird’s eye perspective; scenes were densely crowded with images. Artists felt compelled to fill empty space with plants, animals, and abstract design elements meant to represent and celebrate (and also to supernaturally create) the fecundity of Buddhist belief. In these rich, visually dense canvases, the importance of individuals and buildings was symbolically represented by relative size. A representation of a Buddha walking past the home of village family might show the Buddha towering above the roof of the house.\textsuperscript{162}

Bailey considers the temple paintings commissioned by King Pagan Min (r. 1846-1853) for the (Taunghaman Lake) Kyauktawkyi Temple in 1849 as marking a distinct break from the painting traditions of the early Konbaung period. At the Kyauktawkyi Temple, figures and buildings are represented in airy, open spaces with broad lawns and fields represented with variegated colors to create a sense of depth. Human figures are represented more realistically, so that their size in relation to each other and to the buildings and plant life around them is more naturalistic. In these paintings, the people and objects cast shadows that ground them within space.\textsuperscript{163} Bailey’s description of the Kyauktawkyi paintings may as well be a description of the painting techniques used by the artists of the Bodleian \textit{parabaik}. The Bodleian \textit{parabaik}, then, is much better re-dated to a period between 1800 and 1850 or even a bit later.

The images of the Yodaya performers in the Bodleian \textit{parabaik} are packed with interesting information (Figure 4.12). The text is helpfully labeled so that immediately below the Ramayana performers we see the neatly penned words “\textit{Yodaya aka}” (Yodaya dancers). These dancers walk in front of a marching band


similarly labeled "Yodaya athi" (Yodaya musicians). The Yodaya performers' costumes follow the conventions of Ayutthaya-era Thai dancer's dress, but this is hardly the only evidence of Thai origins. Throughout the Konbaung era, we see that the dress of performers playing male heroes, monkeys, and ogres followed the conventions of Thai dance costumes. The costume for Sita changes over time, however, reflecting changing Burmese ideals of womanly modesty and fashion. The earliest changes appear to be that the embroidered upper portion of Thai costumes are exchanged for the softer jackets and silk wraps of a court lady. Later the stiffly brocaded and embroidered lower portion of Sita's costume is replaced by a silk acheik-patterned body wrap worn in the style of a htemein [a lower body wrap](see discussion of the Yodaya dancers' costumes in section one).

The instruments of the Yodaya band resemble a pared down Thai piphat ensemble. Piphat bands typically accompanied Ramayana dancing. They included two circles of gong chimes (khong wong), an oboe (pi), barrel drums (klong), and two xylophones (ranat). In the painting the instruments have been adapted for marching. The large, heavy drums are hung across a shoulder pole and the seemingly immobile gong chimes can be seen carried by four assistants. It may be impossible to play a moving wooden xylophone (bouncing keys would certainly disrupt the sound), which likely explains that instruments absence in the Burmese painting. As a side note, Yodaya people were also organized into a Pyin Sa Yu Pa troupe in which players enacted mythological animals, primarily creatures made up of the component parts of two or more animals, such as lions, bullocks, elephants, horses, carp, or brahminy ducks.\(^\text{164}\) In the parabaik, the feet of these performers humorously peek out from under their costumes (Figures 4.12 and 4.13).

An important feature of this painting is that the performers are led by two actors dressed in a khru/rishi/bodaw (teacher) mask and costume (Figure 4.13). One of these performers wears the mask on top of his head like the other marching actors, but the other wears it over his face. Is he in a trance or under possession by the teacher spirit? Does the act of marching and performing in

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\(^{164}\) Khin Htay, "History of Myanmar-Thai Relations (1752-1885)" (Ph.D., Mandalay University, 2009), 107.
royal procession somehow require the presence of the teacher spirit? This is a fascinating question, but cannot be answered by comparison with the Thai case. In Ayutthaya and early Bangkok, the power of palace performances of the Ramayana was due partly to its invisibility to commoners. As far as I know, there is no equivalent artwork in Thailand depicting royal actors marching or processing in public. The presence of the Yodaya performers in the Burmese royal procession signifies both a borrowing from and transformation of Ayutthaya’s court culture.

Figure 4.12: A white parabaik depicting “Yodaya musicians” and “Yodaya dancers” along with an unlabeled troupe of Pyin Sa Yu Pa performers. Source: Bodleian Library archive.165

A second parabaik in the Bodleian collection, titled a “Parab[a]jik Illustrating Royal Pastimes,” shows a variety of palace rituals and entertainments overseen by the king and queen, including a royal plowing ceremony, a game of takraw (like hacky-sack but played with a wicker ball), a cavalry lance competition, and (important to our purposes) a performance of the Ramayana. This painted parabaik is so similar in style to the one we discussed above, it appears to have been drawn by the same team of artists. This parabaik is properly dated to the 19th century, but we may be even more precise than that because the performance of the Ramayana is conducted in the shade of an umbrella stage, a theatrical innovation that only appeared during the reign of King Mindon (r. 1853-1878). The scene of the performance is set in the palace (Figure 4.14). We see the king and queen enjoying a scene from the Ramayana in which Rama appears to be performing a solo dance in the company of his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. Most of the Rama costumes follow Ayutthaya conventions, but Sita wears the dress of a Burmese court lady without any discernible Thai elements (Figure 4.14 and Figure 4.15 detail right). A royal orchestra sits below the performers. The band appears to be an integration of Yodaya and Burmese orchestras. Surviving Ramayana scripts show that both Yodaya and Burmese orchestras were necessary to the play’s presentation, and
instructions cued orchestras which tunes they should play.\footnote{Thein Han (U) and Khin Zaw (U), “Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Art,” 257–8.} (Some parabaik manuscripts show the Yodaya and Burmese bands seated separately.) In the orchestra, seated closest to the dancers, we can see a chorus composed of two women (with their backs to the viewer) likely singing in the voice of Rama as the prince dances, though possibly narrating the story of the play (Figure 4.14 and 4.15 detail left). Beside them are two an unusual cone-shaped structures apparently designed to display important masks. Beside them sits a man in dancer's costume without a mask, perhaps an actor waiting for his chance to perform.
Figure 4.14: A 19th century performance of the Ramayana in the Mandalay palace.\textsuperscript{167}

Another painting in the same *parabaik* records the march of actors, dancers, musicians, and other performers to the palace for a performance (Figure 4.16). The next folds of the *parabaik* show several marching elephants. Perhaps this celebration marked the capture or completed training of a particularly propitious elephant. As we might expect, among this group of performers are Yodaya dancers in costume bearing the masks of the characters they perform on their heads or shoulders (Figure 4.16 and Figure 4.17 detail left).

Leading the performers are two men, one atop an elephant, the other on horseback. These two men are followed by servants bearing the sumptuary objects that mark their rank. These two men are worth noting given the brief discussion above of Thabin Wun or Officer of Entertainment. Such officers were charged with organizing, policing, and punishing performing artists in Upper Burma. Their major policing task was to ensure that performers followed proper performance rituals and that performances did not insult or denigrate the position of kingship or the person of the king himself. The Officer of Entertainment was empowered to cut out the tongue of any performer that insulted the king upon the stage. As noted earlier, historian Than Tun was of the opinion that this royal order was dubious because he could not find another
mention of a Thabin Wun in other royal orders. This *parabaik* painting appears to depict such an officer and his assistant (Figure 4.16 and Figure 4.17 detail right). The royal order awarded several sumptuary objects to the Thabin Wun to mark his station within the royal hierarchy, including a jacket made of fine European cloth, two red umbrellas, a gold forehead band with his title written on it, and a sword in a silver sheath. The two officers in our painting are both presented under red umbrellas and behind the elephant is a servant bearing a sword. The dress of the chief officer is not a definitive indicator, since we cannot tell if his white robe is made of European cloth. Most ministerial robes were red, however, so his white robe at least indicated that he had an unusual position within the court. The scene of two elite men leading performers to the palace suggests that there were palace officers directly in charge of royal entertainment.

Figure 4.16: Performers processing to the palace.

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169 Unknown Court Artist(s), *Parabeik Illustrating Royal Pastimes*. 
The painting also suggests that moving performers about the capital, either to the palace or to royal sponsored festivals, was an important public spectacle. Such parades were exciting venues in which the exotic music, dance, and costumes of Yodaya performers drew the attention of Burmese commoners and artisans.

By the end of the 18th century, in the last half of King Bodawphaya’s reign (r. 1782-1819), two forces spread Yodaya performances throughout Burma. First, governors such as the Governor of Pegu, who hosted Michael Symes’ diplomatic mission in 1795, began to imitate palace entertainments in the cities and towns they governed. Second, performers from the capital formed itinerant troupes of dancers and musicians that traveled the countryside performing the Ramayana and other plays for farmers and townspeople. As Maung Htin Aung writes, these actors:

...would style themselves “the King’s actors” or “those who had acted before such-and-such on such-and-such occasion.” For their ability many actors were given rewards of money and some sort of decoration... [that they] would wear during their performances with great pride...[Thus the] Rama play alone reached the remotest corners of the country.

The Ramayana story performed for commoners was embellished with more action and romance than the palace version. Transformed as the story may have been, these troupes carried the Yodaya theatrical visuality, its costumes, masks, exotic dance maneuvers, and creolized musical forms, all over Burma. Thant Myint-U, in his now standard history of Konbaung Burma, sees the development

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of popular theater in the 19th century as a fundamental moment in the development of Burma’s artistic culture. With itinerant artists serving as a medium, the “Ramayana became a vehicle through which elite culture from the capital was directly displayed for a huge audience of common people, providing an image of royal life which remains largely unchanged to this day.” Yodaya performers and artisans thus became located at the center of Burmese state formation in the 19th century.

5.5 The Ramayana in other Arts

The translation project of 1789 and the development of traveling theatrical troupes together popularized Ramayana imagery all over Upper and Lower Burma. This seems to explain the sudden appearance of many artworks in different mediums that draw inspiration from scenes from the Ramayana and depict the gestural vocabulary of the Ramayana dances or the masks and costumes of its actors. This cultural interaction was a creative explosion. As Noel Singer points out in his seminal article on the Ramayana in Burmese art, the famous temple paintings at the Ananda Monastery in Pagan, completed in 1775, are rich with visual depictions of court life and ceremony. They were completed not long after the Yodaya captives arrived, yet include no representations of Ramayana performances and characters. Fifty years later, such representations had become ubiquitous.

As I described in Chapter Three, the courts of both Thailand and Burma organized their arts into ten classical skills. The health of these artisanal communities and the quality of their craftsmanship were considered integral to state power. In Burma, these skill groups were collectively called the “Ten Flowering Arts” (pan seh myo). They encompassed people who labored as: 1) iron workers; 2) masons; 3) carvers of wood and ivory; 4) metal smiths; 5) painters; 6) wood turners; 7) lacquerware makers; 8) brass workers; 9) stucco molders; and 10) stone carvers. In a 2002 conference publication, U Sein Myint showed that as the 19th century progressed, Ramayana dance-drama visuality

\[172\] Singer, “Ramayana at the Burmese Court,” 91.
spread through all of the relevant “flourishing” arts as well as other artistic traditions. Examples are seen in Figure 4.18 below.

Figure 4.18: Ramayana characters in 19th century Burmese art. The art forms represented here include: 1) (top left) masonry; 2) (top center) glass mosaic; 3) (top right) kalaga cloth embroidery; 4) (middle left) ivory carving of a sword handle in the image of Hanuman; 5) (middle center) wood carving; 6) (middle right) masonry; 7) (bottom left) silver work; 8) (bottom center) lacquerware; and 9) (bottom right) stone carving.

Sources: Images 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8 from U Sein Myint. All other photographs are from the author’s collection.

Burmese woodcarving provides an interesting example of the influence of the visuality of Yodaya dance and theater on a seeming unrelated Burmese art form. Thai and Yodaya presentations of masked Ramayana dance-drama are filled with stylized representations of domination and subordination in conflict.

174 Ibid.
represented by acrobatic feats of balance as one dancer perches upon the legs and shoulders of another dancer. These maneuvers are very difficult to accomplish; Thai dancers trained in theatrical combat learned to coordinate their breathing in order to accomplish these balancing acts. One audience-pleasing aspect of such combat scenes was that once the combatants achieved the desired acrobatic position, they would freeze for several seconds in a tableau that invited the audience to gawk at their skill (Figure 4.19). Burmese wood carvers and other artisans apparently thrilled to the challenge of representing these scenes. The well-known Shwe Inbin Kyaung (Buddhist Temple), finished in 1895, included dozens of such representations on its carved wooden walls, doors, and eaves. The walls and eaves of the Mandalay Palace, destroyed in World War II, is also said to have been covered in carvings depicting scenes and characters from the Ramayana. Fortunately, digitized colonial photographs combined with image sharpening software grant us a glimpse of these long-vanished carvings (Figure 4.20).

Figure 4.19: (Left) Stylized Ramayana combat as represented on the modern Thai stage; (Right) c. 1880 silk painting of the Ramayana being performed in the Mandalay palace garden. Source: Singer, “Ramayana at the Burmese Court,” 98.
Prince Damrong was repeatedly told of the existence of something Burmese people called “Yodaya woodcarving.” He organized a tour of the Burmese palace to learn what distinguished the Yodaya style from the Burmese style of carving. He was pointed to a carving with “climbing plant designs,” but his guide had insufficient knowledge of woodcarving to explain anything more. Perhaps woodcarvings of Ramayana scenes were once considered “Yodaya.” Unfortunately, the term is no longer used to describe any style or theme of wood carving that I know of.

Ramayana imagery also moved into non-Ramayana subject matter, particularly in Buddhist paintings. The visuality of the Ramayana dance-drama made such an impression on artists that they began incorporating it into illustrations of sacred Buddhist stories, including several Jataka tales. One of the

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175 Unknown photographer, *Carvings in Gable of Queen’s Monastery*, Photograph (digitized), 1903, British Library Online Gallery, formerly in the Archaeological Survey of India Collections: Burma Circle, 1903-07, http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/c/019pho0001004s1u00042000.html. Within the same site also search for “Specimen of the Wood Carving inside the Atoo-ma-shee or Incomparable Pagoda, [Mandalay].”

most striking examples of this is way artists reimagined the look and behavior of ogres. The traditional Burmese conception of ogres or ogre-like figures was gradually displaced by the imagery of Ramayana ogre masks.

Ogres appear in several Jataka stories about the past lives of the Buddha and other Buddhist literature, including the Alavaka Sutra and the Vidhura Jataka. In the Alavaka Sutra, an ogre cannibal plagues a village, eating one person each day until the Buddha arrives in the village. The ogre tries to frighten the Buddha away, but unable to do so, listens to the Buddha’s sermon and is transformed. At the end he begs to be allowed into the Buddhist order. In the Vidhura Jataka, a great sage named Vidhura (a past life incarnation of the Buddha) is seized through trickery by an ogre general called Punnaka. Punnaka was mistakenly ordered to kill the sage, which he attempts to do by forcing the sage to hang from the tail of a magical flying horse as it soars through the sky. The sage survives this and other attempts on his life, uninjured and unperturbed. Impressed by his power, Punnaka allows the sage to preach the Buddhist gospel and Punnaka adopts Buddhism on the spot. Finally, one of the most famous stories from the life of the Buddha is the “Assault of Mara” in which Mara, the Evil One, leads a supernatural army against the meditating Buddha Gautama. Mara’s goal is to terrify the Buddha and prevent him from discovering and promoting the tenets of Buddhist faith. Ogres serve among the many kinds of monsters that make up Mara’s army.

Painted images from the Powindaung Cave complex give us a good understanding of ogre imagery before Yodaya influence (Figure 4.21). The Powindaung Caves are located outside of Monywa town, which is approximately ninety miles northwest of Mandalay. Due to its long use as a religious site, these caves provide some of the best-preserved temple paintings from the 14th to the 18th centuries. Pre-Ramayana ogres can be discerned in these paintings. Two distinguishing features mark the ogres as base and bestial characters. The first is their hairiness, often represented by hatch-like markings on their skin. The second is the absence of a neck. This may seem peculiar, but refined characters in Nyaunghan era art had extremely long necks that marked their refined position. Base characters were almost always drawn without any necks, with
their heads frequently positioned below the line their shoulders. Pre-Ramayana ogres looked something like orangutans.

As the 19th century progressed, the hairy, neck-less, simian ogres gave way to green- or white-skinned, alligator-eyed ogres typical of Thai and later Burmese Ramayana ogre masks. The costume of the Burmese ogre also changed. The monkey-like ogres were naked but for a loincloth, but the Ramayana-inspired ogres wore a dancer’s costume and crown. They were also pictured in the dance position typical of ogre characters performed in the Ramayana dance-drama, their knees bent outwards and arms held upward at right angles. Below, I have included a picture of a Thai Ramayana mask c. 1876 and illustrations of the Vidhura Jataka from the late Ayutthaya period (Figure 4.22). Compare these with examples of ogres in 19th century Burmese temple art (Figure 4.23).
Figure 4.22: Ogres in Thai art from Ayutthaya and Bangkok. (Left) Ramayana mask of Ravana (Thotsakan), the ogre king of Lanka;177 (Right) Illustration of the Vidhura Jataka, dated to late-Ayutthaya, with an image of Punnaka expanded for detail (upper far right).178

Burmese artisans were seduced by the images from Ramayana dance-drama. The spread of this Yodaya art form into other arts synchronized some aspects of Burmese and Thai states’ artistic cultures. Ramayana imagery had been part of the visual and imaginary landscape of artisans in Central Thailand since at least the 17th century. The most striking examples of this synchronization are in representations of Mara (the Evil One) and Ravana (“Thotsakan” in Thai; “Dasagiri” in Burmese), the Ogre King of Lanka. In the Buddha’s life story, Mara is the supernatural representation of evil and a-Dhammic forces that seek to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment.

As far as I have ascertained, in all surviving Ayutthaya period art, depictions of Mara parallel depictions of Ravana. Buddhist literature describes Mara as having manifested ten fearsome heads and ten fearsome arms for his assault on the Buddha Gautama. Thai convention paints Mara’s heads in exactly the same manner as the Ramayana mask, as two tiers of three heads stacked within a pyramidal crown. Like ogres, Mara is green and wears dancer’s clothing. In Burmese art, the conventions for drawing Mara are highly varied. He is beast-like, hairy and usually without a neck, but otherwise does not resemble his ogre soldiers. His skin color is variable, as is the girth of his body and ornamentation. It appears that in the Nyaungyan period, conventions for drawing Mara had not yet been fixed. As the 19th century progressed, the conventions for drawing Mara developed to become more like those in Thailand, until Mara became indistinguishable from representations of Ravana the Ogre King (Figure 4.24).
In this section, I have shown how Ramayana dance-drama visuality raced through the arts of Upper Burma. The exciting sounds and exotic sights of the Ramayana played by Yodaya performers stimulated artistic creativity among Burmese artisans. Ayutthaya’s performing arts traditions thus transformed the Burmese artistic imagination. Perhaps the most creative of these transcultural exchanges is the way the Yodaya masked dance tradition influenced depictions of ogres. In Thailand, the ogre mask is a papier-mâché, lacquer, and paint representation of the Thai collective imagination of ogres. In other words, the ogre came first and the mask came second. In Upper Burma, the Yodaya mask-making tradition transformed the cultural perception of what ogres looked like: the mask came first and the ogre second. This connection between ogre and mask was retained in representations of ogres in Burmese art. In Figure 4.23 above, you can see that some ogre figures were drawn to resemble humans wearing masks. This is not a drawing convention, it represents a cultural re-understanding of ogres. Ogres were believed to have the power to transform into people through using magic, others when they adopted Buddhism and gained a humanity that transformed their appearance. As the Yodaya-style ogre took hold

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179 Nŏ. Na Pâknam, Wat Chaiyathit (Wat Chaiyathid) (Bangkok: Mûrang Bôrân, 2534), 45.
in Upper Burma, its “mask-ness” was retained as a way of representing transformations of ogres to and from humans. In Burmese art, the face of an ogre is sometimes depicted as magically rising to reveal the human face beneath. This ogre-human transformation can be seen in woodcarvings from the 1895 Buddhist temple in Mandalay, Shwe Inbin Kyaung (Figure 4.24). The images are from the Vidhura Jataka (described above). From left to right, they represent Punnaka’s attempt to kill Vidhura, his reception of the Buddhist sermon, and his conversion to Buddhism. The third image in the series shows the ogre’s former demeanor being worn like a mask on the head of a smiling human. To my knowledge, this representation of ogre-human transformation was never depicted in Central Thai art. For the Thai, the only thing that hid beneath the face of an ogre was its skull.

Figure 4.24: Three woodcarvings of scenes from the Vidhura Jataka, from Shwe Inbin Kyaung, 1895. Note in image on right, the Ramayana-style ogre mask lifted to reveal a human face, symbolizing the ogre’s conversion to Buddhism. Source: Author’s photographs, 2010.

6. The Effect of Yodaya Painters in Upper Burma

Not only did Ramayana imagery and the artistry of Yodaya performers make their way into Burmese painting, Yodaya painters and gilders were incorporated into pre-existing groups of Burmese painters. Some of the skills of captured artisans from Ayutthaya were listed as “painters both in ordinary colors and illuminated with gold and bright material.” Tracking their influence on the culture of Upper Burma is challenging to the historian because the

Burmese elite did not create a separate Yodaya painters’ work group or settle Yodaya painters into their own quarter, which would have helped preserve a history of their influence on Burmese society. Their skills were not added to Burmese artistic culture as were the images from Ramayana dance-drama. Rather, they were mixed into a pre-existing painting tradition.

The existence of Yodaya painters is hinted at in comments by European visitors to Upper Burma (Europeans referred to them as “Siamese”). In 1795, the envoy Dr. Francis (Hamilton) Buchanan was befriended by a man he described as “an intelligent Siamese painter at Amarapura” whose name he rendered confusingly as Meu-Daung Seitagio, which is equally unpronounceable in Thai and Burmese. Unfortunately, (Hamilton) Buchanan had little interest in art, so only discussed Buddhism with Meu-Daung Seitagio.182 The same year, the envoy Michael Symes was sent artwork by a Yodaya painter in the employ of King Bodawphaya. Symes wrote:

The reputation [of] my Bengal draughtsman had… come to the knowledge of his Birman Majesty... the King was pleased to desire a specimen of his skill, and sent over a painting on glass, executed by a Siamese artist in his own service, signifying his royal will that it should be copied upon paper. This picture, which was a tolerable performance, represented the mode of catching wild elephants in the forests.183

The most interesting discussion of the work of Yodaya painters is found in John Crawfurd’s report of the 1826 envoy mission to Burma. He toured a recently completed temple in Amarapura considered the pride of King Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1837), which he described as decorated with “Siamese paintings.” Crawfurd wrote:

His Majesty is delighted with the temple, and considers it a chef-d’œuvre of art. About the central building there is a quadrangular area [surrounded by] a covered gallery opening inwards, and having the outer wall covered with drawings as rude as possible. These, which are called "Siamese paintings" by the Burmans, represent the Buddhist Hell and all its punishments; the Heaven of the Nats; but, above all, the birth, education, adventures, and death of Gautama.184

183 Symes, "Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795," 163.
184 Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, 1:280.
What might Crawfurd’s Burmese interlocutors have meant by describing some of the drawings in the king’s temple as "Siamese paintings"? For someone with a background in the study of Thai art and painting, touring a Konbaung-era temple in Upper Burma presents the opportunity to hunt for Thai things hidden in the paintings. Thai influences can be seen in the way squirrels or birds were painted, the style of a moustache on a face, or in certain techniques of painting foliage. Such details pop out to the eye of a scholar accustomed to Thai art. However, these are incidental instances of Thai-ness incorporated into a broad painting style that is very different from the painting style of Ayutthaya. What, then, was “Siamese painting”? The answer is that Burmese painters did not imitate Ayutthaya style, they incorporated some aspects of it into a broad transformation in Burmese painting by the Konbaung era. This transformation resulted from the incorporation of Yodaya painters into painting communities. The Yodaya painters set processes of creolization in motion that resulted in novel painting styles different from the pre-existing Nyaungyan and Ayutthaya styles. The result was then called “Yodaya,” which Crawford translated to “Siamese.”

Thus, the development of “Yodaya painting” followed the same historical patterns I have outlined for “Yodaya music” and “Yodaya woodcarving.” When Prince Damrong toured the Mandalay royal palace and saw examples of “Yodaya woodcarving,” he was unable to recognize much that was obviously Thai style. This is because the carvings were not “Ayutthayan,” they were “Yodaya,” examples of a new artistic development set in motion by the capture and settlement of Ayutthaya’s artisans.

Examining changes in Burmese painting in the post-1767 era enables us to unpack the meaning of “Yodaya/Siamese painting.” Alexandra Green’s recent article on the affect of Thai artistic practices on the painting style of Upper Burma suggests several changes. The most significant was the introduction of perspective. Burmese paintings in the Nyaungyan and early-Konbaung periods were largely without perspective. The artist’s view is at eye-level with the subjects of the painting. As a result, scenes were painted in panels that were

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rather small, many between only twelve to eighteen inches tall and less than two feet wide. Scenes were joined to narrate stories and that usually ran right to left (sometimes left to right) horizontally across temple walls. The visual effect was something like a comic book, with separated box-like panels extending from floor to ceiling, each with a narrative of the story running beneath.

Paintings in the late-Ayutthaya era were quite different. Scenes were painted from an extreme bird’s eye view and with a modified perspective that allowed the viewer to gaze across fields and seascapes and look over walls into palace courtyards. There was almost no sense of register within this narrative convention as the paintings could run from floor to ceiling with each individual painting containing many scenes from the story, rather than presented as a linear narrative.

Alexandra Green charts a steady expansion in the height and width of Burmese panels after 1767. As panel sizes increased, Burmese painters began experimenting with depth and perspective. Eventually, they developed the bird’s-eye perspective similar to that found in Thai temple art. Green writes:

In depictions using the bird’s eye perspective, buildings appear at an angle to the horizon line and are viewed from a position above the roof-line; city walls surround wooden palaces and structures in such a way that the viewer is able to see inside the compound; and the horizon line is not necessarily contiguous with the floor of the register. People and buildings appear naturally within the settings because they are no longer viewed solely from the front. These stylistic changes appeared after contact with the Thai artists relocated after the sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, making central Thailand the likely source of these alterations in Burmese murals.186

Examples of Thai and Burmese temple paintings demonstrating the changing perspective are shown in Figure 4.25.

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186 Ibid., 345–6.
Green also points out that Thai art seems to have influenced Burmese painters to adopt gilding techniques. Gilding only appears in Burmese paintings after 1767. Ayutthaya’s painters employed an interesting technique for painting with gold. It involved painting the depiction of an object such as a king’s crown or Buddha image with a glue-like substance, then gently applying gold leaf to it. After the glue dried, excess gold was brushed away. What remained was a representation of a gold object that has actually been “painted” with 24-carat gold. The gold was then sealed with a clear lacquer that adhered it to the wall. As I stated earlier, captive artisans taken from Ayutthaya were listed as having this

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skill. The technique became a regular feature of Burmese art, though it was never employed to the extent that it was (and still is) in Thai art.

Finally, Green notes the appearance of Thai court costume in Burmese art as Thai royal dress and crowns were gradually incorporated into the fashions of Burmese royalty. On the last page of the *parabaik* painting of the royal procession that I discussed at length above, a Burmese king and queen are depicted walking away from the procession to return to their palace (Figure 4.26). I used this *parabaik* above to discuss the overt ways that Yodaya arts were utilized by the palace. The *parabaik* records a covert history of Yodaya artisans as well. The scene is drawn from a bird’s eye perspective, the artist has gilded representations of golden jewelry and embroidery worn by the king and queen, and the king’s clothing includes elements of Ayutthayan royal dress. The king wears Ayutthaya-style epaulets decorated with a floral motif of Thai origin fastened to his Burmese-style jacket. The epaulets have been gilded by the painter.

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188 Ibid., 346–8.
7. Conclusion

In 1911, Luang Phraison Salarak (U Aung Thein), an ethnically Burmese official working for the Siamese government, began publishing in the *Journal of the Siam Society* a long translation of the parts of the Burmese *Glass Palace Chronicle* that addressed the historic relationship between Burma and Siam. In his introduction, he discussed the fate of the captives taken away from Ayutthaya. He wrote:

To the best of my knowledge there is not, at the present day, a single descendant of the Siamese who were then compelled to make a home in Burma, who retains any trace of his ancestry in speech, manners, customs, or traditional beliefs. It is strange that so large a community as the Siamese... should have entirely lost

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190 Unknown Court Artist(s), *Parabeik Illustrating Royal Scenes*, Folds 60–63.
their national characteristics within a space of about 14 decades.  

Phraison Salarak explained that this situation was different from the “Manipuri prisoners of war” as well as Burma’s Muslim and Portuguese communities, all three of which “retain a few characteristic beliefs and traditions of their ancestors.” The author attributed the supposed disappearance of Thai cultural characteristics to Burma and Siam sharing the Theravada Buddhist faith, “the similarity of beliefs and notions outside the teaching of religion,” Burma’s relatively benevolent treatment of war captives, and especially to intermarriage because it “is a great factor in the effacement of racial and national character.”

Phraison Salarak was both right and wrong in his analysis. In the early 1900s, it would not have been possible to find people in Burma who spoke Thai or displayed the manners, customs, or traditional beliefs of Ayutthaya people. The forces that Phraison Salarak wrote of—toleration, cultural similarities, and intermarriage—certainly facilitated complete assimilation of many captives and their descendants into Burmese society. However, Phraison Salarak’s definition of what constituted cultural survival was so narrow as to render Yodaya people invisible. My research shows that there were still many people living in Mandalay and the capital zone that retained an identity associated with origins in Ayutthaya in the early 1900s. The forces of creolization had transformed Ayutthaya people into Yodaya Creoles.

Notions of what constitutes a community of captive descendants are too narrow if we take an etic (outsider) approach that asks: Do they speak the language of their homeland? Do they retain religious beliefs or forms of material culture that correlate to their country of origin? If too many answers come back as “no,” then the descendants are seen as having been assimilated. They then are of little interest for future study. Examining such communities through an emic (“insider”) framework broadens our understanding, however. If people in these communities have retained a sense of their own alterity from the larger

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191 Nai Thien, “Intercourse Between Burma and Siam as Recorded in the Hmanan Yazawindawgyi,” 53.
192 Ibid.
population, then we can accept them as indeed "different." From this vantage point, if becomes possible to ask more rewarding research questions that will help us understand what constitutes alterity and how it is maintained.

This topic is further addressed in the next chapter on Manipuri war captives taken to Upper Burma. As Phraison Salarak pointed out in the first decade of the 20th century, the descendants of Manipuri prisoners of war had continued to “retain a few characteristic beliefs and traditions of their ancestors.” This retention remains true to the present day. In the next chapter, I use interviews and observations of these descendant communities to more fully address notions of elective alterity.
Chapter 5
Captives from Manipur in Upper Burma after 1758

Lei-hsa-byi [the Manipuri maiden] who lives in Sintein,
give word to the poor girl as she ties hay into bundles
on her old dugout boat at the mooring.
“If the sun is setting, don’t head out.”
Try to convince her once more.

From near the mountain, Kyeh-nyi-naun,
just over to the jetty at Mi-thwe-taiq,
she takes the elephant fodder each and every day

In the crossing,
when her dugout is in the middle of the river,
surely no one would know she was drowning
when a big wave pushes her under.

- Folk poem from Amarapura, Burma, 19th century

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I turn from focusing on the creolization processes and
cultural exchanges of the Yodaya in Burma to examining those of the Kathe.
Following the pattern established in the last chapter, in this chapter I use the
word “Manipuri” to describe the identity and culture of people who lived in the
Manipur valley before they were taken captive. The Burmese word “Kathe”
(pronounced ka-they) is used to describe the community of ex-Manipuri people,
that is, captives who were forcibly resettled into Upper Burma. The origin of the
word “Kathe” is vague, though there is consensus that it filtered to the Burmese
language through the Shan, a Tai speaking upland ethnic group that inhabited
territory adjacent to both Manipur and Upper Burma. The Manipuri themselves
use the ethnonym “Meitei,” which nearby Shan pronounced “Cassay.” This
pronunciation probably travelled into the Burmese lowlands, where it became

“Kathe.” Hundreds of Manipuri descendants living in Burma today refer to themselves as Kathe.

Thant Myint-U writes that the Kathe “were Ava's underclass and nearly all domestic servants and many ordinary workers were from this displaced community.” This chapter differs slightly from the last because we have more information about the low status work of the Kathe than we do of Yodaya people. Yodaya people must have had low status urban jobs similar to those of the Kathe, but they went largely unrecorded. Yodaya history is mostly recorded through the surviving artistic material that they left behind, which is naturally biased toward the work of highly skilled artisans. The low-status work of Kathe is recorded in many different sources, including folk poetry such as that quoted in full above. U Pinnya, a monk and public intellectual, recalled that when he was young, Amarapura people often recited this popular poem about a Manipuri descendant working to collect food for palace elephants.

The first line of the poem is enigmatic. The word “lei-hsa-byi” appears in the poem as if it were a strange sounding name, but U Pinnya discovered it was the Manipuri word for a “young woman or maiden.” In the years when Upper Burma’s population swelled with captives from Manipur, the word seems to have temporarily slipped into Burmese to mean something like “young woman from Manipur.” U Pinnya located another poem from the Konbaung era that included the line: “Lei-hsa-byi you are so beautiful / do you fancy me?”

Even more relevant to this chapter on Manipuri captives in Burma are the details in the poem about the kind of work the young lei-hsa-byi has been assigned. Rowing boats and gathering fodder for royal animals were both low status jobs within the royal service system. The unfortunate Manipuri maiden has a job that involves both activities. She gathers fodder from across the river for the elephants in the king’s palace, then stacks her shallow draft dugout boat high with bundled grasses. The poem pictures a stormy day, when the wind has...
caught at the grass bundles and pushed the small dugout around the river like a sailboat without a rudder. The poem is melancholy, written in the voice of someone who cares about and pities the doomed maiden. The death of the lei-hsa-byi is presented as the inevitable result of her job. If she must cross the river day after day, eventually a wave will push her under.

This poem so interested U Pinnya, that he devoted a short article to it for an event to celebrate the retirement of Professor Than Tun, Myanmar’s preeminent historian and another popular public intellectual. U Pinnya’s goal in the article was to describe the social world of the young lei-hsa-byi and other captives from Manipur that had settled in and around Amarapura. From his research he found that the lei-hsa-byi might have been from a village such as Shwe Keh, a Kathe settlement outside of Amarapura that was charged with supplying animal feed to the palace. The Kathe were involved in more work than gathering grasses, however. U Pinnya describes the importance of the Kathe to the silk weaving industry and development of new textile patterns, particularly the colorful, wavy design known as lun-taya acheik that is still the national fashion in women’s dress in Myanmar. The Kathe so dominated silk production that at major silk trading markets like Ze Kyo in Mandalay, Manipuri language terms were used to describe different qualities of silk. U Pinnya uses the example of the non-Burmese word “pyisa-bho-daa” that he says was used to describe high-quality fabric. Negotiating the price of silk products was conducted using Manipuri numbers.

U Pinnya also brings up Kathe cult practices, particularly the worship of a “Kathe spirit” (Kathe nat) at harvest time. He writes that Kathe villages used to collect money so they could present a feast to the spirit. Unlike in Burmese ritual practices, food was offered raw to the Kathe spirit on banana leaves, then gathered back up and cooked, and then distributed to everyone in the village to eat. The dishes cooked at this feast were strange to Burmese cuisine. U Pinnya is under the impression that these spirit-worshiping traditions have since disappeared. However, one of the foods introduced by the Kathe, a kasali leaf salad, is still popular in Amarapura, though few know about its exotic origins.\^5

\^5 Ibid.
Cult practices of the Manipuri captives, including worshipping a Kathe spirit, have been retained in several villages on the outskirts of Amarapura and across the river in Sagaing. Furthermore, Kathe religious practices are more complex than U Pinnya's example suggests. Many Hindus and Muslims were captured from Manipur, so in addition to heterodox spirit-worshiping traditions, several creolized rituals developed and were handed down amongst Kathe Muslims and Hindus. This chapter follows the path established in U Pinnya's short article as I look at the cultural contributions of the Kathe people, including silk production and religious practices, in some depth.

This chapter can be read as an attempt to better understand the life and contributions of the lei-hsa-byi along with the countless other captives from Manipur who settled in Upper Burma. As I argued in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, people who were seized in warfare and forcibly resettled in the country of their captors should be understood as “enslaved.” The horrors of their experience, the dislocation and the violence that they endured, are in keeping with even the most conservative, narrow definitions of the word. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, war slaves were assigned widely varying jobs within the royal service system. Some ended up in high-status positions, while others were extremely low status or even outcastes. The work of the doomed lei-hsa-byi in the poem above typifies that of a “slave.” Captives assigned to mining rubies in the mountains north of Mandalay should probably also be called “slaves,” along with the lowest-status galley rowers in the Burmese navy. These were all laborious, unpleasant, and dangerous or even deadly jobs. However, as I have argued, the social status of forcibly resettled people was highly differentiated, so the blanket use of the word “slave” is problematic. I more often use the collective term “captive” as it adequately captures the state of unfreedom that was inherent across nearly every job within the royal service system, whether high or low status. The king owned these laborers. Once workers were assigned a position in the royal service system, that form of labor was theirs for life and was inherited by their children. The only way to escape these labor positions was through flight, which had dire consequences for those who were caught.
We have extensive records of the social and economic positions of Kathe people in Upper Burma because of a special political relationship between Manipur and the British colonial forces. Deposed Manipuri princes and the English East India Company formed an alliance during the First Anglo Burmese War (1824-6) that led to the liberation of Manipur valley after seven years of being occupied by Burmese troops. For decades after the war, British policy makers considered negotiating for the return of Kathe captives to Manipur. They asked diplomats to gather information about the living conditions of Manipuri captives and their descendants in Upper Burma. Moreover, several of the British diplomatic missions to Upper Burma originated in Manipur and had Manipuri soldiers and interpreters or British officers who had served for some time in Manipur attached to the mission. Some of these individuals could recognize Manipuri faces in a crowd of Burmese and even speak to them directly in the Manipuri language. Such sources present a more developed picture of Kathe life in the capital area.

Henry Yule, for example, wandered the city and suburbs of Amarapura during his mission in 1855. He described a city organized around different labor groups in ways similar to what he knew of India, but not as strict. He reported, “Artisans and traders in the same article cluster together in groups and give their names to wards... You find perhaps a dozen ironmongers together and a dozen dealers in gongs and other articles of bellmetal and copper...” Of all the work being done in and around the capital, Yule described the production by women and sale of brightly colored silk as the most important segment of the local economy, writing that it “gives employment to a large body of the population in the suburbs and villages round the capital, especially to the Munnipoorians [Manipuri], or Kathe as they are called by the Burmese.” Concerning the important role of captive women in this economy, he writes:

In such circumstances the women contribute to the household maintenance by their silk-weaving; those who are better off working on their own account and disposing of their work to the mercers in the bazar; the poorer working on advances from the goungs, or headmen of the wards, to whom they remain always in debt. Many Burmese families also are employed at the silk-looms, but among the Munnipooris the work seems to be almost universal.
Yule continued with broader observations about the role of these captives in the productive economy of Upper Burma: “They [the Kathe] are greatly valued as subjects, being both more industrious and more expert in handicrafts than the Burmese.” He writes:

These people, the descendants of unfortunates who were carried off in droves from their country by the Burmans in the time of King Mentaragyi [Alaungphaya], and his predecessors, form a very great proportion, some say a majority, of the metropolitan population, and they are largely diffused in nearly all the districts of central Burma... But near the capital they in a manner occupy the place of Israel in Egypt, and bear the burden of all the demands for forced and gratuitous labour in a far greater proportion than the Burmans.

Yule was not describing the royal service system, but the regular conscription of laborers into state projects that required more laborers than were already retained by the palace. These included projects such as digging canals and moats, building defensive walls, dams, or weirs, and moving building materials across great distances. A Kathe captive interviewed by Yule told him that the burden of these projects fell largely on his community. He explained to Yule:

...if a Burman has five sons one of them is taken for the King's service; if a Kathe has five sons they are all taken. Whatever work is in hand for the King or for any of the chief men near the capital, these people supply the labouring hands; if boats have to be manned they furnish the rowers; and whilst engaged on such tasks any remuneration that they may receive is very scanty and uncertain.6

Again, while similar service burdens were probably put on Yodaya captives, the differences in the primary documents available to draw upon prevent me from comparing their low-status occupations to those of the Kathe.

Another advantage of doing research on the Kathe was the greater numbers of people in Burma who describe themselves as Kathe, compared to the few descendants of captives taken from Ayutthaya. During my (admittedly not exhaustive) research, I uncovered only a few families who had kept alive memories of a Yodaya heritage. However, during the same eighteen months I conducted research in Myanmar, I located more than a dozen whole villages in

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6 All the quoted text in this paragraph from Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 153–54.
which the majority of the villagers described themselves as Kathe. I have therefore been able to draw upon more numerous interviews and observations of living Kathe than was possible for the Yodaya. These interviews were especially useful in uncovering the complex religious history of Kathe people in Burma.

By way of introduction to the topic of religious creolization among the Kathe, I’d like to mention the interviews I conducted in May 2010 with seventy-five-year-old Daw La Tin and her neighbor, U Nyo Lein, age fifty-seven. Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein both live in Ta Ta Le, a Kathe village just south of Amarapura. I was directed to this village by the owners of a Kathe silk business in Amarapura who suggested that villagers there had retained cultural practices that had been lost elsewhere. Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein confirmed in tones of deep melancholy that theirs was the last village they knew of that included non-Brahmin “Hindus.” To explain the source of their melancholy and why I put the word “Hindus” in scare quotes, I need to present a brief overview of Manipur’s religious history. This capsule history should orient the reader to the more complex religious discussions that follow in sections 2 and 4 below.

Manipur people adopted a world religion centuries later than people did in other mainland Southeast Asian states. Manipur maintained a local pantheon of gods in a set of religious practices and beliefs collectively known as “Senamahism.” The household god, Senamahi, was commonly worshiped by Manipuri valley dwellers. Manipuri chronicles record Hindu mystics and Brahmins migrating into the region in the second half of the 15th century. Brahmins were brought into Manipur’s animist court as ritual specialists and advisors, but did not convert a Manipuri king to Hinduism until the first years of the 18th century. During the reign of King Garib Nawaz (r. 1709-1748), the palace forced many Manipuri to convert, funded construction of Hindu temples, banned worship of some animist deities and destroyed their temples, and raised the positions of Brahmin teachers in the court hierarchy. Records indicate that these heavy-handed religious policies were resisted in many quarters. By the time of the Burmese invasion of Manipur in 1758, the Manipur valley was an agitated

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agglomeration of Brahmin migrants that were moving in increasing numbers to the valley, recent though enthusiastic converts, reluctant converts who still worshipped the old gods, and animist resisters. The shock of the Burmese invasion heightened religious tensions in Manipur; state policies swung between accommodating or purging one or the other two faiths.8

The Burmese seized cross sections of the Manipuri population from this turbulent religious environment. Brahmins, animists, and Hindu converts at varying stages who were taken captive and relocated to Burma engaged in creolization processes in different and surprising ways. Brahmins mostly retained their faith, while converts and animists embraced Buddhism. (Their different religious and cultural adaptations are explored in depth in this chapter.) Ta Ta Le was one of the villages where Kathe people were reluctant to adopt to Buddhism. Nevertheless, Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein describe themselves as the last of the their faith. Most young Kathe have intermarried with Burmese, so only the older generation continues worshipping Krishna and Radha and maintaining the difficult food restrictions that mark Hinduism. However, Daw La Tin does not call herself “Hindu.” Hinduism is an Indian religion, she insists, and she is not Indian. When asked to describe her faith, she answered, “I worship the Ponna religion, but I am not Ponna.” “Ponna” is the Burmese word for Hindu ritual specialists that were employed within the royal service system. Her reply makes more sense if we translate “Ponna” as “Brahmin”: “I worship Brahmanism, but am not a Brahmin.” (Problems with translating “Ponna” as “Brahmin” are discussed below in the section on the culture of Kathe Ponna.)

Daw La Tin is convinced that her Ponna religion is different from Hindu religion, even though they both worship Radha and Krishna. The localization of Hinduism to the Manipur valley in combination with creolizing transformations to the faith as it was reestablished in Upper Burma has altered religious practices to the extent that Daw La Tin believes that her faith has little in common with the Hindu-Indian migrants that moved into the country during the British colonial period. The most prominent difference is that “Hindu” caste distinctions have

almost totally vanished amongst the Kathe “Ponno.” Furthermore, many Kathe “Hindus” participate in some Buddhist practices. Daw La Tin admits that because she lives in Myanmar, she feels compelled to buy gold leaf and apply it to the Mahamuni, the nation’s palladium Buddha image located on the road between Amarapura and Mandalay. It is her personal decision to accommodate her faith to life in mostly-Buddhist Myanmar. For the remainder of this section I will render the faith of Ta Ta Le villagers as “Hindu” in scare quotes, rather than using Daw La Tin’s complex description of herself as “Brahman/not Brahmin.”

Both Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein have narrow notions of what constitutes Kathe identity. This contributes to their melancholy view that they are the last members of a dying culture. Daw La Tin said that when she was young, no one in Ta Ta Le would marry a non-Kathe or non-“Hindu” and everyone could speak Manipuri. Today, only people over fifty years old speak the language and the younger generation has intermarried, abandoned the faith, and become “Burmese.” U Nyo Lein shared her perspective. He was born in the village of Yei Kyi Pauk on the banks of the Myit Nge Stream (described in Chapter One). People in Yei Kyi Pauk conduct an impressive spirit ceremony to honor the Kathe Spirit, a maternal spirit with the power to transform into a naga (snake). She corresponds to the Manipuri goddess Leimaren. U Nyo Lein said that before he was born, many Kathe “Hindus” lived in the village, but by the time he was a child, most had adopted Buddhism. His was the last “Hindu” family remaining in the village, so his parents decided to relocate to Ta Ta Le, where Kathe “Hinduism” was still practiced. Like Daw La Tin, he equated adopting Buddhism with becoming Burmese. He said that if his family had stayed in Yei Kyi Pauk, “I would be a Burmese [Myanma] now.” U Nyo Lein considers himself a historian of this area and Kathe settlement. He listed for me more than a dozen villages that lay between Ta Ta Le and Yei Kyi Pauk that were settled by Kathe people. He admitted that they were “are all Burmese” now, although they continued to worship the Kathe Spirit.

The interviews with Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein captured some of the complexity of Kathe religious identities and the different forms of creolization in different villages. Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein readily equated adopting Buddhism with adopting a Burmese identity. Not everyone I talked with made
the same equation or reported the same religious heritage. In some Kathe areas, people had no memory of adopting Buddhism, but said their ancestors had already been Buddhist when they arrived from Manipur. Some Yei Kyi Pauk people proudly proclaimed themselves “Kathe” and pointed to festivals in praise of the Kathe Spirit as evidence of their continuing non-Burmese identity. The Kathe creolization process has generated multiple area-specific notions of elective alterity in which adopters of Buddhism, a dwindling population of Kathe “Hindus,” and the Kathe Ponna/Brahmin population all point to different Kathe identities and cultural activities that distinguish them from their Burmese neighbors.

I would like to close the introduction to this chapter with another poem. Daw La Tin told me that she was a fluent speaker of Manipuri and that “Hindu” ceremonies in Ta Ta Le were conducted in that language. She allowed me to record her singing one of the sacred songs that she recites at the “Hindu” temple located across the road from her house. She sang quietly in notes that were high and sweet and with a vibrato that betrayed her advanced age. She told me that I could take the recording to Manipur and they would understand every word. A few months later I was in Imphal conducting research at Manipur University. I played the song at several lectures I gave there. The song visibly moved some people. They said that the accent was odd and many of the words were archaic, but that Daw La Tin’s song could still be understood 185 or more years after Manipuri captives were taken to Upper Burma.9 Daw La Tin’s song:

Part 1:

Phajeida phajeida ningthijeida
It is beautiful, it is beautiful, it is attractive

Mamang leikai thambal shatle
The lotus blooms in the front

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9 Populations were seized from Manipur many times between 1750 and 1820. The estimation of 185 years assumes that Ta Ta Le village was settled after the final waves of slave-gathering warfare, but it is possible that Daw La Tin’s family has been in Burma for more than 250 years.
Khoimuna inle khoileiba (khoiraba)
The black bees (male) are flying after

Shabi lao lao chatsi lao
Come darling, let us go

Katlakpa yammi kanjaoba yammi
Many are jealous of them

Mangda tharu lao
Come and walk in front (of me)

Phajeida phajeida ningthijeida
It is beautiful, it is beautiful, it is attractive

Part 2:
Hao machana hekpa lei
The flower plucked by the tribes

Ningthem nubina lemba (lengba) lei (x2)
The flower that a princess makes into a garland (x2)

Luka Devina (Durga Devi) shemba lei
The flower made by Luka Devi

Mirgalata urilei
M. C. Arun, an anthropologist at Manipur University, kindly transcribed and translated Daw La Tin’s song. He explained to me that the song was actually a hybrid. The lyrics merge two Manipuri musical traditions that are usually never combined. The first half of the song, which I marked as Part 1, is an “erotic metaphor song” in which observations of natural phenomena code a narrative of romantic union or courting and marriage. Such songs often begin with the image of a male animal in pursuit of a female (courtship) and then a closing image of the female following after the male (marriage). Part 2 of the song represents a musical tradition that could be described as an “ode to flowers” in which the beauty of a flower is extolled by the singer. More interesting still, both these song traditions are sung at annual Manipuri Lai Haraoba ceremonies, day-long celebrations in honor of Manipur’s pre-Hindu, indigenous religion, Senamahism (more on this below). Daw La Tin’s favorite “Hindu” worship song thus cobbles together two musical genres rooted in Manipur’s pre-Hindu religious tradition. It is worth reflecting here on two joined metaphors from creolization theory: shattering and rebuilding. Reconstructing Hindu traditions in Ta Ta Le led Kathe captives to include Manipur’s non-Hindu musical traditions into their corpus of “Hindu” sacred song. Daw La Tin and U Nyo Lein have little respect for their neighbors who worship the Kathe spirits at the expense of Kathe “Hinduism,” but the forces of creolization have infused their own religious practices with Manipuri spirit beliefs and traditions.

At one level, Daw La Tin’s song registers the survival and continued presence of the culture and identity of a captive people even after two centuries have passed. Played to an audience in Manipur, her song sounds like a voice coming through the door of a time machine. It implies a strong, unbroken

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10 I am grateful to anthropologist M. C. Arun at Manipur University for translating this song and explaining its context and meaning to me.
connection between the Kathe in Myanmar and modern day Manipuri. At another level, the song provides evidence of the hybridizing transformation that transpired after the two peoples were parted.

2. A Brief History of Manipur

2.1 Human Diversity and Ethnogenesis

The mountainous state of Manipur covers some 8,600 square miles, with a large, fertile valley approximately 700 square miles at the center. The Manipur valley is about eighty miles long from north to south and about twenty miles across at its widest. The elevation of the valley floor is 2,600 feet above sea level. At the center of the valley is Loktak Lake, recognized for its otherworldly beauty and incredible biodiversity.\(^\text{11}\) Geological research shows that until relatively recently, Loktak Lake filled the entire valley floor. It receded gradually starting in the north part of the valley. Valley drainage was spurred by either a gradual buildup of river sediment or shifts in the floor of the valley caused by earthquakes. Since Manipur is crossed by four river basins and is part of the earthquake belt that stretches through the Burma hills to the Malay Peninsula, both may have been contributing factors. The receding of the lake opened up flat, fertile, unsettled land in a region where little such land was available. Upland people from all over the region migrated to this new, exploitable, ecological niche.\(^\text{12}\) Exploitation of the marshlands ringing the lake may have begun by the first century B.C. It intensified around the fifth century A.D. or perhaps as late as the eighth century A.D.\(^\text{13}\)

One of the most interesting features of Manipur’s richly textual and highly varied indigenous historical traditions are that they do not record a history of indigeneity. The histories of Manipur are almost universally histories of clan

\(^{11}\) Manipuri who worship Senamahism believe that gods and goddesses dwell in the lake; important ceremonies begin with ritual specialists luring gods up from its depths.

\(^{12}\) W. I. Singh’s reconstruction of the probable ethnic groups that migrated into the valley runs an impressive 120 pages. Wahengbam Ibohol Singh, *The History of Manipur (An Early Period)* (Imphal, Manipur: Manipur Commercial Co., 1986), 58–220.

\(^{13}\) The earlier date is suggested in Laishram Vijaykumar Singh, “Historical Geography of Manipur through the Ages” (Ph.D., Manipur University, 2007), 14–5, 80–5; the later date in Singh, *The History of Manipur (An Early Period)*, 18–23, 58–60.
migrations into the Manipur valley and the subsequent conflict and cooperation of diverse peoples within the context of a place under active settlement. The mythological/historical text Poireiton Khunthok [The Migration of Poireiton] describes the hero Poireiton leading his people on a magical quest that ends up with finding Manipur valley. Conflict with rival settlers led by a hero named Pakhangba results in the defeat of Poireiton and his people, but peace is achieved through a marriage between Poireiton’s sister and Pakhangba. This event marked the ascension of Pakhangba to become the first king of Manipur in 33 A.D. Gleaned from semi-mythological history, this date is commonly used as the starting point of Manipur history. The accuracy of the date is questionable, but no matter when this event actually occurred, Manipuri people still remember and celebrate the settlement of the valley.

Scholars generally agree on the process of state formation in early Manipur, since descriptions of different states recorded in royal chronicles align with anthropological research on the clan systems of Manipur. As diverse groups of people migrated into the valley, seven clans emerged on the valley floor. Each clan had its own leadership, polity, and region of control. These clan polities, called “yek-salai” or either “yek” or “salai” alone, operated as small kingdoms or principalities. Manipuri scholars call this political arrangement the “heptarchy,” since seven rival powers conducted a long struggle for supremacy. Manipur developed a textual tradition on par with that of Upper Burma or Java. The continued existence of clan identities and leadership is one reason for the bewilderingly diverse historical traditions of Manipur. Each clan wrote its own creation myths, religious histories, clan genealogies, and dynastic accounts of noble houses. Although many of these historical texts contradict each other, they represent a rich ore yet to be mined by most Southeast Asianists.

By 1471, the Ningthouja clan polity had established dominance over the valley through both conquest and alliance. The center of Ningthouja power,
Imphal, became the capital of this unified kingdom. Some of the clan-states seem to have come under direct control of Ningthouja, but other states maintained some autonomy as vassal principalities until the late 17th century. After 1471, the power of Ningthouja was never seriously challenged and the Ningthouja clan remained the ultimate royal power in the valley until the 20th century.18

The history of state formation in Manipur provides a fascinating example of ethnic formation. Distinct clan identities remained among the six subordinated polities while the clan identity of the dominant Ningthouja, who called themselves “Meitei” (sometimes spelled Meetei), expanded to become the term for the collective identity of all the valley-dwelling people. That is, Meitei became the ethnonym for the valley-dwelling subjects of the new state, while clan affiliations remained ancillary identities. State formation triggered ethnic amalgamation and the gradual acquisition of a unified identity.19 In short, the history of Manipur is a history of compounding identity changes in which first upland people became lowland agriculturalists, then dozens of tribal identities fused into seven clans, and finally the clans developed an understanding of a common ethnic identity.

2.2 Religious Practices and the Manipuri Pantheon

Paul Mus argued that in Southeast Asia (as in other world regions) the emergence of political power and the creation of large political units had repercussions for religious practices and beliefs. Political elites built power by developing potent associations between themselves and the spirits of the territories over which they held sway, including gods of the soil, spirits connected to particular rocks, trees, or hills, and ancestor and founder spirits. Mus observed that changes in the political structure of the terrestrial realm necessitated similar reorganization of the spiritual realm. The expansion of

19 In fact the state at that time would have been called “Kangleipak.” The state was renamed Manipur only in the 18th century. This will be further addressed below.
political power to neighboring territories necessitated a religious centralization that mirrored the political one experienced on the ground.\textsuperscript{20}

The history of Manipur supports Mus’ observations. State formation drove the unification of Manipur’s wildly diverse pre-Hindu religious systems. The religious systems of each of the clans merged together to form a layered, complex, heterogeneous pantheon containing hundreds of deities and spirits called \textit{lai}.\textsuperscript{21} At the top of the pantheon were the gods of the Ningthouja (Meitei) that reigned over the spiritual kingdom. Saroj Nalini Parratt usefully breaks these many gods into four categories:

1) Ancestor deities revered throughout Manipur, these are human heroes and heroines from the ancient past who have become gods;

2) Ancestor deities particular to a single clan or \textit{yek-salai};

3) Domestic deities worshiped in individual households; three (Senamahi, Leimaren and Phungga) are common to every household in Manipur, but several hundred other household \textit{lai} are unique to different families, villages, or regions;

4) Tutelary spirits connected to particular places and landmarks.\textsuperscript{22}

One scholar estimates that compounding all the clan gods into a single pantheon resulted in a religion with 364 gods distributed amongst 400 or more shrines dotted throughout the mountain valley.\textsuperscript{23}

Pakhangba was both the founding father and ancestor spirit of the Ningthouja clan. He became the chief god in the Manipur pantheon and was worshiped throughout Manipur. In the past, some of his special ceremonies were reserved for members of the Ningthouja clan. The god Pakhangba has three identities. The first is the historical figure that migrated to the valley and rose to become the first king of Manipur in 33 C.E. after defeating and then making

\textsuperscript{20} Paul Mus, \textit{India Seen from the East}, trans. Ian Mabbett and David Chandler (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975).

\textsuperscript{21} For descriptions of the important gods and the myths associated with them, see Rena Laisram, \textit{Early Meitei History: Religion, Society, and the Manipur Puyas} (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2009), 66–123.

\textsuperscript{22} Parratt, \textit{The Religion of Manipur}, 9–18, 27–31.

peace with Poireiton. All subsequent kings of Manipur are considered the biological and spiritual descendants of Pakhangba.

The second is one of three gods in a holy trinity that includes his brother Senamahi and mother Leimaren. This aspect of Pakhangba seems unconnected to the “historical” Pakhangba.” The central mythological story about this trinity tells about a competition staged by the father of Pakhangba and Senamahi. There are many variations, but in essence the brothers are challenged to race around the world. The victor will take the place of his father as the king of the spiritual realm. Senamahi races away, while their mother pulls Pakhangba aside. She whispers to him that his father’s throne represents the earth in its entirety. Pakhangba circles his father’s throne and is declared the winner. When Senamahi returns from his much more exhausting circumambulation, he understandably protests the decision. To make peace, their father divides the power of godly kingship and makes Pakhangba the chief deity of the kingdom and Senamahi the chief deity of the household with his mother Leimaren by his side.²⁴ I have recounted this story in some detail because it is still known by Kathe descendants in Upper Burma, was discussed in Chapter One, and will be addressed again later in this chapter.

Pakhangba’s third identity is a snake. Pakhangba has the divine power to appear before mortals as either a man or serpent. A strain of pre-Hindu worship in Manipur valley involves interpreting omens divined from encounters with snakes.²⁵ Major W. McCulloch, who lived in Manipur for more than two decades between 1844 and 1867, wrote one of the earliest European accounts of this belief:

The Raja’s peculiar god is a species of snake called Pa-kung-ba, from which the Royal family claims descent. When it appears, it is coaxed on a cushion by the priestess in attendance, who then performs certain ceremonies to please it. This snake appears, they say, sometimes of great size, and when he does so it is indicative of his being displeased with something. But as long as he remains of diminutive form, it is a sign he is in good humour.²⁶

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²⁴ In some versions, Senamahi marries his mother Leimaren.
²⁶ McCulloch, Account of Munnipore, 17.
This passage from McCulloch tells us that whenever a snake found its way into the central palace in Kangla, it necessitated the intervention a priestess-leader of the Senamahi faith and a ceremony of propitiation.

Serpent worship is a striking feature of Manipuri belief. Vijaylakshmi Brara explains that Pakhangba is a model for kingship because of his ability to balance the supernatural power symbolized by his ability to manifest as a snake with his “human attributes” represented by leadership qualities attributed to historical figure. One of the key representations of kingship is the image of Pakhangba the serpent biting his own tail, an image that Brara reads as representing the balancing of human and divine power. This symbol is depicted on the flag of Manipur and in other royal imagery (Figure 5.1).

![Figure 5.1: Images of Pakhangba as a serpent. 1) (Top left) 1948 flag of Manipur displayed at Manipur State Museum; 2) (Top right) Royal thrones of Manipur with statue of Pakhangba in front, displayed in the royal palace; 3) (Bottom) Images of Pakhangba displayed in the palace.](image-url)
Sources: Flag top left from 27; all other photographs taken by author.

Those that worship Pakhangba believe that he manifests himself differently each day. Sacred manuals contain 365 images of Pakhangba as a serpent; each image has a different meaning and ritual power. For example, a seven-colored serpent represents the unification of the clans by his divine leadership. Pakhangba’s spiritual home is directly below the throne room in the Kangla palace compound and in the sacred water tanks that dot the royal grounds. From this vantage, Pakhangba oversees the kingdom with the assistance of the gods of the four directions that also dwell inside the palace walls. Pakhangba’s divine powers generate heat that can be felt rising up through the seat of the throne. Crowning ceremonies reiterate the idea that an unfit king will be roasted alive if he tries to sit upon the throne.28

In the early 1900s, the Raja of Manipur gave an interesting explanation for Pakhangba’s placement on the royal crest. The British political agent J. Shakespear quoted him as follows:

Pakhangba was an incarnation of God… He reigned for many years, and during the Burmese invasion, when Manipur was almost depopulated, he appeared once in [the] Nunjing tank in the form of a snake, and thus destroyed the Burmese by some miraculous power. So the form of Pakhangba is given in the crest to show that he is the sole protector of this land.29

As I will show below, Pakhangba may once have devoured Burmese soldiers who dared invade his palace compound, but he later traveled over the mountains to the homeland of those soldiers. Today, the descendants of Manipuri captives in Upper Burma continue to worship Pakhangba, though their manner of worship has changed greatly.

Two additional features of Manipur’s pre-Hindu religious tradition require our attention because of their continuing resonance in the religious practices of modern day Mandalay. The first is the dominant role of women

within Senamahism and the second is the Lai Haraoba, the most important religious ceremony of Manipur. Female ritual specialists in Manipur are called Maibi. McCulloch wrote of them in 1859:

Their Maibees, that is priestesses, for before the introduction of Hinduism there were no priests, are still in great request more especially in cases of sickness or adversity, and what they give out as the oracle of [a] particular deity... is reveredly listened to and acted upon.

Male ritual specialists (called Maiba) are also found in Senamahism, but their role is limited in scope. They are mainly assistants to Maibi. Spirit possession is limited to women. If a male priest displays a propensity to become possessed by the gods, he can be incorporated into the ceremony but is expected to dress as a priestess and is referred to as “Mother” during the ritual, the title of respect for female ritual specialists. McCulloch described the dominant role of women in rituals:

This worship consists in a number of married women and unmarried girls led by priestesses, accompanied by a party of men and boys all in dresses of a former time, dancing and singing, and performing various evolutions [patterned movements around the performance area].

Women continue to dominate the performance of large rituals in Manipur today. The largest and most important ritual in Senamahism is the Lai Haraoba, a ceremony that can last from one to thirty days. Spirit possession is combined with a theatrical performance designed to propitiate the various gods of Manipur. As Parratt and Parratt explain, the Lai Haraoba involves a vast oral literature,

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31 McCulloch, Account of Munnipore, 17.
32 Ibid.
ceremonials and rituals, dance, and music, so it is an ideal subject for studying the religious and performative cultures of Manipur and Hindu influences on the religious practices of Manipur.33 This annual ritual is performed throughout the valley in the weeks preceding the rainy season. It is intended to insure that the gods will protect the Manipuri from ill luck and assist with the fecundity of the coming harvest.

Lai Haraoba has been variously translated as “merry making of the gods” and “entertaining the gods,” but Saroj Nalini Parratt makes a convincing argument that “Pleasing the Gods” best captures its meaning.34 All of these translations point to the fantastic theatricality of the ritual. The Lai Haraoba ritual space I visited in Moirang on the southern shore of Loktak was shaped like a theater. A large, open-air stage, covered like a gazebo, faced a shrine that held images of the gods summoned to the ceremony. Raised seating surrounded the stage on the other three sides. The ceremony itself was like a theatrical show, as songs, dances, processions, and re-enactments were presented to the gods for their amusement. The gods were the main audience, while the mortal audience occupied cheap seats, since their view of the show was from the eaves and from behind the stage. Nongthombam Premchand writes that once the gods are made spiritually present for the performance, the stage transforms into a liminal space between two worlds, a place where gods and mortals can productively interact.35

By tradition, only senior female ritual specialists are allowed to organize and officiate the Lai Haraoba. Senior maibi exhibit remarkable skills. Besides channeling the old gods of Manipur, these women sing, chant prayers, dance, and participate in historical/mythical reenactments of many types of entertainment performed for the gods.36

Several other features of the Lai Haraoba bear mentioning because they have analogues in the religious practice of Kathe people in modern Myanmar. These include the relationship between gods and water, the use of processions in ritual, and the aniconic representations of spirits in the spirit shrines. On the first day of the Lai Haraoba, the chief maibi summons the gods to the festival space

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34 Parratt, The Religion of Manipur, 53.
35 Premchand, Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur, 71.
36 Ibid., 45–6.
called the Lai Ikoouba. Manipur’s primary gods dwell in sacred bodies of water such as Loktak Lake, rivers, or water tanks built for godly resting places. The chief *maibi* leads a procession formed into two lines, one each for the king/male and queen/female clan gods that will be coaxed from the water. They bring with them gifts for the gods. Two women bear specially decorated water pots used to convey the gods to the theater/shrine. White string is often used to transfer the spirit energy of the gods into the water pots.

The elderly woman with the highest standing within the village (not a *maibi*) leads the procession. Behind her in the procession two unmarried young men carry clan swords and two others carry umbrellas. Young unmarried women carry ceremonial brass plates and married women carry reed mats and wooden pestles. Behind these two lines follows a musical ensemble and many observers. At the water’s edge, the *maibi* throws gifts into the water, usually flowers and fruit and other foods. The *maibi* then utters a prayer to summon the gods that represent the king and queen progenitors of whichever clan is performing the Lai Haraoba. There is great variety in the way this ritual is conducted, but at this point the *maibi* often rings a bell with one hand while dipping two white strings into the water.

The strings run back to water pots being held by the two female pot bearers. They are thought to work like electrical cables drawing the spiritual energy of the god from the water into the water pot. Musicians play a stringed instrument called the *pena* as the great Mother Goddess, Laimaren, possesses the maibi. Laimaren uses the *maibi* as a vehicle to deliver prophecy. By tradition only women are able to receive prophecy. This highly gendered aspect of Manipuri faith in which a female god speaks prophecy through a female spirit-medium leads Parratt and Parratt to argue for the “primacy of the feminine” in Manipur’s

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37 Parratt and Paratt recorded the following prayer: “Incarnate Lord, Python Diety Pakhangba, O golden one: / Goddess of the waters, Ruler of the Rivers: / Golden Goddess fair and beautiful one: / For you Lord and Lady, in order to call up your souls, / We have poured the rice and the finest banana leaves, / And on it have placed the fertile egg and langthrei buds.” See Parratt and Paratt, “Female Spirit-Possession Rituals Among the Meiteis of Manipur,” np.

pre-Hindu religion. When the prophecy is complete, the procession makes its way to the theater/shrine where the water is in turn used to charge objects symbolizing the clan gods.

Manipur’s pre-Hindu religion eschews the production of statues, since divine beings cannot be visually rendered. The Manipuri instead worship objects that symbolize the gods and their stations, such as their clothing, swords, or head ornaments. K. Indrani Devi calls this pre-Hindu system of devotion at shrines “symbol worship or totemism,” since the household goddess Leimaren is represented by a pot of water, swords are used to represent clan deities, and so on. Shrines are often aniconic, meaning there is a shelf or a pedestal for the god’s statue, but the statue is absent. Objects conceived of as the personal possessions of the god of that shrine are put in the space instead. However, it is also a tradition in some shrines to construct statue-like idols from these objects. For example a bamboo mat may be rolled tightly or a basket is used to create a frame that is dressed in the god’s possessions such as clothing, headgear, jewelry, and so on. In some areas, a bronze facemask may be fastened to this idol, thereby giving the appearance of a statue without challenging the aniconic traditions that resist their use.

The maibi may continue to reveal personal prophecies to individual believers on other days of the Lai Haraoba in the hours before the ceremony begins. Processions also continue as part of the Lai Haraoba, with lines of ritual specialists and audience members marching in sinuous shapes representing the movements of the snake god Pakhangba.

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39 Parratt and Parratt, “Female Spirit-Possession Rituals Among the Meiteis of Manipur.” This point is echoed in Devi who also argues for the high-status of women in many areas of Manipuri life, especially when compared to the dominant gender relations found in neighboring South Asia. See Devi, “Manipuri Women-A Study,” 165–66.
40 Creating anthropomorphic representations of the gods (i.e., statues) developed only after Hindu practices gained a foothold in the valley. The worship of statues within Hinduism inspired some in Manipur to construct them for local purposes. The first two bronze statues of gods, Panthoibi and Senamahi, were cast in 1699 and 1700 respectively. Despite these experiments, Senamahism is still largely aniconic or maybe semi-aniconic if we conclude that the construction of statue-like idols is not strictly within the definitional boundaries of “aniconic.” See K. Indrani Devi, The Bronzes of Manipur (A Historical Study) (Imphal, Manipur: Tribal Museum and Research Center, Imphal, 2006), 38–41. The shrines as visual representations of gods are described in Parratt and Parratt, The Pleasing of the Gods, 49–51.
41 The spirit summoning ceremony is described in Shakespeare, “The Religion of Manipur,” 428–9; Premchand, Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur, 66–72; and Parratt and Parratt, “Female Spirit-Possession Rituals Among the Meiteis of Manipur.”
2.3 Brahmin Migrations and the Rise of Hinduism in Manipur

The next important phase of religious transformation in Manipur occurred with the arrival of Hindu Brahmin migrants to the valley. King Charai Rongba (r. 1697-1709), was the first Manipuri king to “take the sacred thread” or formally convert to Hinduism. In 1704, the King and other palace followers were ushered into the practice of Vaishnavism, the branch of Hindu worship in which Lord Krishna and his teachings are the primary object of devotion.\(^{42}\) King Charai Rongba’s conversion was an individual act of devotion, however. He did not attempt to establish Hinduism as a state religion or seek to convert his subjects. Nevertheless, Saroj Nalini Parratt dubs the period 1697-1798, which began with the reign of King Charai Rongba, as “the rise of Vaishnavism.” During this era, the state’s valley-dwelling population steadily assimilated Hinduism, though also resisted it.\(^{43}\)

The start date of 1697 may be somewhat misleading. The earliest datable mention in the Manipuri chronicles of a Hindu-Brahmin traveling into the valley is 1516. Bachaspatimayum Sharma contributes needed detail to this early period using unpublished indigenous sources such as Migration of the Brahmans (Bamon Khunthok). This text is conserved by the Sri Govindaji temple board in Imphal. It includes oral histories of many of Manipur’s prominent families that show Hindus arriving during the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.), more than two centuries before the period suggested in royal chronicles. Events outside of Manipur resulted in an influx of Brahmin migrants into the valley. Sharma argues that the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) stimulated a push-pull effect in migration patterns in Northeast India. The spread of Islam via Bengal and Mughal military adventurism led to a failed invasion of the Ahom Kingdom in Assam in 1662 that pushed Hindus to seek safer corners of Northeast India. At the same time, the expansion of Islam stimulated Hindus to spread their own faith, which would have pulled Brahmins to the Manipur valley.\(^{44}\) Brahmins, yogis, and Hindu gurus were incorporated into the palace as advisors, teachers, and ritual specialists well before the conversion of King Charai Rongba in 1704.

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\(^{42}\) Kabui, History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period, 236–7.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 17–8.
Sharma points out that religious influences flowed in two directions. Oral histories of Brahmin families record the earliest progenitors taking local women as their wives. In some cases these were elite Manipuri women, though in others they were hill tribe women, outcastes and pariahs (loï) from within the Manipuri hierarchy, or royal slaves (keł). Whatever the social standing of these local women, they were neither Hindu nor Brahmin. In marrying them, Brahmin migrants to Manipur dispensed with notions of purity and pollution that were core components of Hindu practice. In northern India and Bengal, where many of these Hindu men emigrated from, marriage to a non-Hindu and non-Brahmin would result in the loss of a man’s spiritual purity, so that he could no longer perform Hindu rituals. In the Manipur setting, the wives of Brahmin migrants were elevated to Brahmin status, as were any children that resulted from the marriage. Sharma, along with many other Manipuri scholars, considers intermarriage to be the most potent catalyst for accommodating Hinduism to the Manipur valley. Sharma describes this phase of accommodation as “compulsive compromise” in which the Brahmin migrant “has to discard parts of their old culture, customs, life style, dress, [and] food habits... In other words, the Meitei Bamons [Manipur Brahmins]... were compelled to compromise in [all] sphere[s] of life.”

The next turning point in the history of Hinduism in Manipur came in the reign of King Charai Rongba’s successor, the famed warrior-king Garib Nawaz (r. 1709-c.1748). After being converted to Hinduism by Guru Gopal Das in 1717, King Garib Nawaz ordered the bodies of his ancestors (believed to date back to A.D. 33) to be disinterred from the royal burial ground and cremated in a Hindu ceremony. He had the name of his kingdom changed from Kangleipak (Kingdom of Kangla) to the Sanskrit name “Manipur,” taken from the Mahabharata, a Hindu epic. The king also aggressively pursued policies to convert the Manipur valley population to Hinduism. The king used his power within the clan system to push for mass conversion across clan networks, funded the construction of Hindu temples, banned worship of some Senamahist deities and destroyed their

temples, burned religious texts, raised the positions of Brahmin gurus in the
court hierarchy, and policed Hindu taboos amongst the non-Hindu population,
especially dietary restrictions.

Some traditional indigenous practices were Hinduized. Pre-existing
rituals were given a Hindu gloss or handed over to Brahmins to preside over. The
seven yek-salai came to be symbolically associated with particular Hindu gotra
(lines of descendants). It was more difficult to reconcile Hindu patriarchy with
the gender complementarity of Senamahism and Manipur society. For example,
the male god Senamahi was incorporated into the local Hindu pantheon, but
there was an attempt to have one of the most important goddesses of the
Manipuri (Panthoibi, a goddess representing love and fertility) declared unclean.
The Hinduism that emerged in the valley differed from Hinduism in India in that
it did not have a complex caste hierarchy. All valley converts were assigned more
or less equally to the Kshatriya caste, with the significant exception of the
“outcaste” Loi, who were discussed in Chapter Three. Loi and non-Hindu upland
populations became “untouchable” within the emerging Hindu religious
hierarchy.

By 1758, when Burmese forces first invaded and seized war captives from
the valley, Manipur was in a state of highly contested religious flux. Many forms
of resistance to King Garib Nawaz’s religious policies were recorded in royal
chronicles and other indigenous sources. King Chit Sai (1748-1752), the son,
murderer of, and successor to Garib Nawaz, attempted to moderate his father’s
stringent policies regarding the old religion. Repeated Burmese invasions had a
polarizing effect on the elite who variously interpreted the state’s loss of
sovereignty as a call to revive the old religion or bring forth the full conversion of
the valley. King Bhagyachandra (r. 1763-1798), for example, reversed King Chit
Sai’s moderation and returned to the goal of full Hindu conversion. His successor,
King Labanyachandra (r. 1798-1801), swung the other way. Before he was

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46 This turning point in Manipur’s history is well covered in the literature. See Parratt, *The
Religion of Manipur*, chapter 9; Kabui, *History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period*, 251–61; Singh, *A
Short History of Manipur (From A.D. 33 to the Present Time)*, chapter 14; Sharma, “A Historical
Study of the Origin and Growth of the Meitei Bamon (Brahmans) of Manipur (1467-1947 A.D.),”
98–104.
assassinated, he sought to reinstate the banned lai cults and rebuild their temples and images.

According to Parratt, the end of Labanyachandra’s short reign marked the end of “the uneasy coexistence of the two faiths which had characterized the preceding century...”47 A relatively stable syncretic religion combining elements of both faiths then emerged. Many local gods came to be seen as avatars of Hindu gods. For example, the female god Panthoibi came to be seen as an avatar of Durga. Meanwhile, Senamahists ceased including animal sacrifices that offended Hindu sensibilities in their rituals. The crucial point for this study is that this synthesis occurred decades after the last of Burma’s slave gathering forays.48 The religious practices of the captives who were taken to Upper Burma were unsynthesized. Manipuri captives were religious polyglots. Some were Brahmins, some were happily or unwillingly converted Hindus, and some were still stubbornly worshipping Senamahism. Some were even Muslims, as I discuss in the next section. Each of these different religious practices interacted in quite different ways with the cultural practices of Upper Burma.

3. Manipur, Ava and Slave Gathering Warfare

3.1 Slaves gathered by Manipur

Manipur followed the same pattern as other Southeast Asian states of capturing slaves in warfare and using their skills, exotic or otherwise, within the state’s labor system. Accounts of Manipur taking slaves from its immediate neighbors and from the considerable upland populations are frequent. Rebellious Naga people in the uplands were often conquered and portions of their elites were resettled in the valley, seemingly as pawns to insure the future compliance of their villages.49 A long history of cultural exchange between upland and lowland peoples is reflected in Manipur’s ritual practices. For example, as part of Manipur’s royal crowning ceremony, the Meitei king must don Naga ceremonial garb before sitting on the throne. Upland people’s

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48 Ibid., 167–79.
costumes and dances are also included in the Lai Haraoba. As I noted earlier, it is difficult to study the effects of slave gathering warfare on cultural exchange between immediate neighbors. For example, chronicles report that in the early 17th century Manipur fought with and took captives from a neighboring polity composed of ethnic Shan. Despite this history of conflict, Shan migrants moved into Manipur valley a few decades later. Slave gathering from neighboring polities and ethnic groups was probably significant to the development of the Manipur kingdom, but it cannot be isolated from other vectors of exchange between neighboring states and peoples such as religious pilgrimage, trade, migration, and intermarriage.

Manipur’s two earliest recorded incidents of capturing people that originated from distant states occurred during the reign of King Khagemba (r. 1597-1652). Manipuri chronicles and oral histories report that technical and artistic practices flowed into Manipuri culture as a result of capturing two groups of foreigners. Muslim soldiers from eastern Bengal were captured in one incident and an invading group of “Chinese” in another. I put “Chinese” in scare quotes because the invasion is so poorly documented that many scholars doubt this set of captives originated from China. Undated texts refer to the captives as “Khagi,” an ethnonym that means “Chinese” in modern Manipuri, but may not have meant that in the early 17th century. Many Manipuri historians assume that the Khagi in these accounts were an ethnic minority perhaps hailing from Yunnan. Tribal origins are also hinted in the textual accounts that describe the captured Khagi leader as a “chief.” The date and location of the battle between Manipuri and Khagi are unclear. The whole text could be dismissed as fictional if not for the oral history attached to these captives and the reign name of King Khagemba, which derives from “Khagi Ngamba” meaning “Conqueror of the Khagi (Chinese).”

In 1896, colonial official James Johnston wrote that captured “Chinese” had been settled in a village called Susa Rameng. There they introduced “silk

51 The King’s coronation name was “Ningthouhanba.” He was re-named Khagemba later in his reign, presumably due to his victory over the “Chinese” forces. See Kabui, History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period, 211–2.
culture” and ”the art of brick-making” to Manipur. Their descendants could still be found in that village. He also stated that several brick ruins in Manipur were popularly attributed to ”Chinese” captives. Manipuri sociologist Amal Sanasam visited the village, now called simply Rameng, and discovered a handful of its 250 residents were still making or manufacturing bricks. He found only a few people there knew they had descended from war captives and that no one in the younger generation was interested in preserving this history. Sanasam was certain that without a government program of heritage preservation, the interesting history of Kameng village would die out.

The capture of Bengali Muslims is much better documented than the capture of Chinese. The Muslim soldiers were led by a Manipuri prince and were captured following the failure of the prince to take over Manipur valley in 1606. In the early years of King Khagemba’s reign, his brother Sanongba sought political support from neighboring Cachar. The Cachari king agreed to fund Sanongba to grab power over Manipur. He provided a military force including Bengali Muslim mercenaries and Cachari soldiers. The 1606 assault ended in the scattered retreat of the invading force and the surrender of many enemy soldiers. The court chronicle (Cheitharon Kumpapa) reports:

1606 CE... it was reported that the Mayangs [foreigners originating from the east and south of Manipur, principally from Cachar or Shylhet in far northeast Bangladesh] were approaching [to attack the land]. Layingthou Khakempa [King Khagemba] was victorious over the Mayangs. They captured thirty elephants, 1,000 guns, and a colony of 1,000 Pangans [Muslims from Bengal], including swordsmiths, brass smiths and other skilled men, makers of trumpets and long drums, those who could make brackets, washermen, horse grooms, and grooms for elephants, all these were captured... Altogether 1,000 people were captured in battle.

The historian Gangmumei Kabui believes this list of one thousand guns and thirty elephants to be hyperbolic. Even if these numbers were inflated, the text

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52 Johnstone, My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills, 86.
55 From the Cheitharol Kumbaba cited in Kabui, History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period, 215.
shows Manipur chroniclers boasting of the skills possessed by captured artisans, a pattern repeated in court documents from other parts of mainland Southeast Asia.

The year 1606 often shows up in Manipur history as the moment the state's sizeable Muslim community was founded. The history of this event is recounted in several traditional texts aside from the royal chronicle, including histories of Manipuri Muslim clans. Farooque Ahmed provides interesting evidence of a small migrant group of Muslim traders pre-dating the early-17th century. If this is valid, then the 1606 war captives might best be seen as the first large-scale settlement of Muslims in the Manipur valley. Either way, the captured Muslim soldiers were reported as having been settled in the valley, incorporated into the royal labor system, and allowed to marry Meitei women.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, Manipur's royal labor system appears to have been more intricately organized than labor systems found in other parts of Southeast Asia. This is a boon to research on pre-colonial artisans in the area. The king sub-divided Manipur's seven yek-salai clans into smaller sub-clans called sagei. These were further broken down into labor groups that were assigned surnames called yumnak. King Khagemba assigned thirty-one yumnak names to his captured Bengali Muslims. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Manipuri surnames drew from a variety of sources, such as the names of places where the sub-clans resided or had been settled or the names of original clan ancestors. For example, Muslims given the name Nongjai Mayum were settled in the village of Nongjai and Muslims given the name Thoubal were settled along Thoubal River. The surname Kamal Mayum comes from the clan name of the Manipuri wife given to an elite Bengali soldier.

Yumnak names were usually based on the words for the occupations or products a particular group of Manipuri was assigned to manufacture. As a result, Manipuri surnames reflected the tasks each family group owed as corvée labor

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57 Ahmed, Manipuri Muslims, 123, 155. Later kings increased the number of yumnak. Ahmed lists the source words (places, occupations) for seventy-four Muslim sub-clans in Manipur (ibid., 123–141).
58 Ibid., 125, 129.
or service (in-kind) taxes to the palace. The clan social structure fostered clan histories that may have preserved the foundations of some artisanal communities, including those that originated in the relocation of war captives. Farooque Ahmed and Md. Riyazuddin Chaudhury used *yunnak* and *sagei* names along with clan and royal histories to reconstruct the artistic and cultural contributions of Muslims to Manipur society. Swordmakers (the verb for this activity is *thang saba*) were put into a sub-clan called Thangjam. Shaikh Nooriya, the clan ancestor of the Phusam sub-clan, was given a wife named Shri Beti because the king was so pleased by his skills as a potter. The surname Hawai Ingkhol (pulse grower) was given to a group of farmers. One member of this clan, Kaushar Muhammad, was recognized as a gifted healer (“*maiba*”) so he was awarded a new surname, Maibam Mayum. Butchers and military flute players were given the surnames Shakakpam and Singakhongbam, which mean “butcher” (*skakakpa*) and “piper” (*singakhonga*) respectively. Muslims given the last name “Tank” (Pukhri) were in charge of maintaining the king’s artificial fishponds and delivering fish to the palace. Those with the last name “Paper” (Chesum) crafted paper from bamboo, which was given to the palace for record keeping and history writing.

Ahmed argues that the settlement of defeated Muslim soldiers in Manipur resulted in Manipur becoming integrated into the cross-regional textile trade that linked Bengal to Northeast India, Arakan, Upper Burma, and beyond. A number of Muslims sub-clans were assigned names related to textile production, including embroidery, rearing silkworms, and weaving. For example, the family name Phisam translates as “Weaver.” Records show Muslim migrants moving into the valley in increasing numbers after 1606. Among these settlers were textile merchants. At present, it is impossible to know what textile techniques may have filtered into Manipur from Muslim captives or migrants, but it is clear that Manipur became a source of textiles and raw silk for intra-regional trade.

59 Sources show other Muslim farmers introducing or growing tobacco, mango, opium poppy, sugar cane, mustard seed, and garlic and onions. See Md. Riyazuddin Chaudhury, “Muslim Contribution to the Culture of Manipur,” in *Souvenir: Golden Jubilee Celebration, April 23-May 1, 1985* (Imphal, Manipur: Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 1985), 44–5.

By 1859, this labor diversity had diminished and Manipuri Muslims were observed working in four principal occupations, as soldiers, farmers, woodturners, and potters.61

Two Bengali Muslim cultural practices resonated with the Manipuri elite: riding on palanquins and smoking tobacco. The Cheitharon Kumpapa (Manipuri Royal Chronicle) reports the king ordering construction of a royal palanquin in 1605, a year before the capture of Muslim soldiers.62 Md. Riyazuddin Chaudhury argues that this was obviously the influence of Mughal-era Bengali aristocrats who were conveyed on ornate palanquins.63 The tradition spread to northeast India, was adopted by some of Manipur's neighbors who interacted with Bengal, and then spread to Manipur. The Phamlon, an undated Manipuri court document detailing the responsibilities and status of different court officials and workers, lists forty-three court officials and three upland tributary princes allotted palanquins for their transport.64 After 1606, Muslim captives dominated palanquin construction. The Phundrei sub-clan, which specialized in wood lathing and carpentry, built the palanquins, while the Khuleibam and Korimayum decorated the wooden structures with carved ivory, inlaid silver and gold, and brass plating. Muslim workers with the surname Dolai Pabam, meaning “Palanquin Workers” were assigned to a Department of Palanquins (Dolaipaba Loisang) within the palace.65

Mughal tobacco culture also influenced Manipur. The hookah, brought to Manipur by the captured Bengali Muslims, became a symbol of elite power. Many of the sumptuary objects central to court culture and public displays of hierarchy in mainland Southeast Asia were associated with the consumption of addictive substances. The hookah joined betel nut (popular throughout Southeast Asia) containers and fermented tealeaf (popular in Burma and the Shan States) salad
trays as a sumptuary object. In Manipuri the hookah was called either a mangalphu (Mughal pot) or hidakphu (tobacco pot). Hookahs decorated in gold or silver marked the differential status of palace people (Figure 5.2). The Phundrei sub-clan, the same group responsible for palanquin manufacture, were charged with turning and carving the hookah neck. Predictably, Muslim farmers who supplied the palace with tobacco were organized under the surname Hidak Ingkhol Mayum, which translates to “Tobacco Farmers.” The popularity of the hookah even led to the creation of a new kind of royal slave (kei) called a Hitakphalba. Sources do not mention whether these palace slaves were Muslim or not, but the Hitakphalba was in charge of refilling the king’s personal hookah as he smoked in court.

Figure 5.2: (Left) A gold plated hookah owned by Maharani Dhanamanjuri, late-19th century (Manipur State Museum); (Right) Maharani Dhanamanjuri and her husband Maharaja Churachand Singh (r. 1891-1941).

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67 Ahmed, Manipuri Muslims, 133.
68 Hodson, The Meitheis, 64.
69 Devi, “Rare Collections,” 1.
70 Royal Couple Maharaja Churachand Singh and Maharani Dhanamanjuri, Photograph (digitized), Early 20th century, Manipur Archives (online), http://somiroy.tripod.com/archival_manipur/index.album/royal-couple?i=5.
Muslim communities were also culturally transformed as a result of settling in Manipur valley. Manipuri called Muslims “Pangals,” the Manipuri word for “Bengal”, which was the original homeland of many Manipuri Muslims. Complex processes of transculturation transformed the word into an ethnonym, so that “Pangal” now describes Manipuri Muslims who are understood to be ethnically and culturally distinct from Bengali Muslims. As in their discussions of Brahmans who migrated into the valley, Manipuri scholars emphasize that intermarriage between Muslim captives and local women generated a distinctive Pangal culture. Even Manipuri women who converted to Islam must have influenced the gender dynamics of their families. Muslim women in Manipur were reported as having the same high level of female autonomy found in Manipur and the rest of Southeast Asia, as opposed to the more inequitable gender norms common in Bengal. Pangals also adopted the language, dress, diet, and house architecture of the Meitei. Some of their ceremonies also changed, particularly the marriage ceremony. Muslim brides, like their Hindu neighbors, dressed in a similar fashion to costume worn by classical dancers performing the role of the gopi, or the celestial female devotees to Krishna. Within Manipuri Hindu performance the gopi symbolize unconditional devotion within Vaishnava Hinduism. Adopting this form of dress indicates interesting processes of cultural accommodation amongst Manipuri Muslims. While Muslim women normally dressed in the Manipuri style, they made some alterations to distinguish themselves from the larger population. T. C. Hodson, writing in 1908, noted that Muslim women tucked their upper body scarves under their right breasts, while non-Muslim Manipuri fastened them under their left breasts. Muslim women wore textiles that had the same patterns as those of their neighbors, but the colors slightly more somber.

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71 The Muslim community was greatly diminished during the Seven-Year Devastation (1819-1826) that depopulated the valley. Pangal refugees settled throughout the region, so that today there are communities of Muslims who continue to speak Manipuri and call themselves Pangals living in Cachar and elsewhere. Irene, The Muslims Of Manipur, 38.
73 Hodson, The Meitheis, 18.
3.2 Manipur Raids and Political Relations with Upper Burma

Manipur conducted yearly raids into Upper Burma between 1736-1740 and carried many Burmese captives back to Manipur. The devastating success of these raids speaks in equal measure to the consolidation of political power in Manipur during the reign of the Hindu convert, King Gharib Nawaz (r. 1709-1748), and the declining power of the Nyaungyan Dynasty (also called the Restored Toungoo Empire) in Upper Burma. Manipur’s success signaled the weakness of political control in Upper Burma and inspired internal and external rivals to challenge the state, leading to the collapse of the kingdom in 1752. Numerous historians have assumed that the Konbaung Dynasty’s numerous military conquests of Manipur were done in revenge for the raids conducted by King Gharib Nawaz. Chronicle descriptions of this warfare do not support this assumption. Manipur and Upper Burma had a complex political relationship that vacillated between peace and warfare, as I describe below.

Burmese court documents claim that King Bayinnaung (r. 1551-1581) subdued Manipur in the mid-16th century to establish what Lieberman calls a “shadowy sovereignty” over Manipur. Lieberman points out that Manipuri court documents do not acknowledge this history. Burmese pretensions to control were upended in 1692 when Manipur’s King Meetingu Paikhompa (r. 1666-1697) invaded a neighboring Shan state that was under the protection of Burma. Burma’s subsequent military attempts to punish Manipur’s insubordination ended in embarrassing failure. The conflict between the two states was patched up during the reign of King Charai Rongba (r. 1697-1709), the first Manipuri king to convert to Hinduism. Manipuri chronicles report a Burmese diplomatic mission to their valley in 1704 and Burmese chronicles record the Manipuri king offering a daughter in marriage to the Burmese king in 1705.

Difficult relations between Manipur and Upper Burma began again after King Gharib Nawaz rose to the throne in 1709. Burmese chronicles report a perturbing double-cross between 1723 and 1724. King Gharib Nawaz offered to deliver a Manipuri princess to the Burmese king, but Manipuri forces attacked

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74 Lieberman, Burmese Administrative Cycles, 207–11.
75 Ibid., 31.
76 Ibid., 202; Parratt, Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur (Vol. 1), 101–2, 13–4.
the Burmese at the place where the two wedding parties were supposed to meet and took the Burmese officials as captives back to Manipur. The Burmese staged a revenge invasion the following year that ended in failure when Manipuri forces ambushed the army on swampy ground and routed the Burmese forces. Manipuri chronicles relate these events differently, describing the first 1723 conflict as a thwarted invasion in which “[t]hree elephants and 2,000 Aawas [Burmese] both alive and dead were taken, and the prisoners were detained.”

Relations between the two states remained quiet for the next several years, but peace was broken in 1736 when King Gharib Nawaz began to lead his fearsome cavalry on annual raids into Upper Burma, where they captured people and livestock and set villages and temples ablaze. The Burmese military was poorly equipped to defend against a fast moving cavalry, so the kingdom appeared defenseless against Manipuri horsemen. A 1739 raid extended all the way to Sagaing, a city located across the river from the capital city of Inwa. Many Burmese captives were taken, especially from the farming villages that were in the large dry zone north and west of the Burmese capital. Upper Burma received a reprieve from being raided in 1740 when dissension within King Gharib Nawaz’ military hobbled its fighting strength. By 1741, Manipur and Burma had resumed diplomatic relations. Manipur chronicles report the arrival of a diplomatic mission from Burma asking that a princess of Manipur be sent to their palace, which was done the next year. In 1743 King Gharib Nawaz sent his personal guru, the man who converted him to Hinduism, to the Burmese court as a peace offering. The guru, named Mahatharahpu, was accepted into the Burmese court, though he died within a year or so of arriving there. In 1748, King Gharib Nawaz abdicated the throne in favor of his son King Chit Sai (1748-1752). By that time relations with Burma were positive enough that in 1749 Gharib Nawaz himself escorted his niece to Burma to be married to the Burmese king. Political tensions between the Gharib Nawaz and his son came to a boil the next year. King Chit Sai banished his father, who elected to be exiled to the Burmese court, although he only stayed for a year before trying to return

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to Manipur. In 1751, forces loyal to King Chit Sai murdered the ex-king on his journey home.\textsuperscript{79}

The relationship between Manipur and Upper Burma is frequently simplified into a series of Manipuri invasions and Burmese retaliations. I have provided a more nuanced look at their complex relationship to illuminate the events that followed after 1752 and the rise of King Alaungphaya and the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma.

3.3 Slaves gathered from Manipur and the Seven-Year Devastation (1819-1826)

The history of political turmoil after the 1751 death of Gharib Nawaz and the 1752 collapse of the Nyaungyan Dynasty has been recorded in the life story of a single Manipuri princess. The \textit{Konbaung-zet Mahayazawin} records the story of the niece of the Manipuri ex-king who was given to the last king of the Nyaungyan dynasty, Mahadamayazadipati (r. 1733-1752). She was probably the princess delivered by Gharib Nawaz in 1749. Burmese chronicles refer to her as “Maha Devi” and report that she was made a queen by the Burmese king. In 1752, when troops from Lower Burma sacked and destroyed the capital in Upper Burma, Maha Devi and hundreds of other royal people were captured and relocated to Pegu.\textsuperscript{80} Maha Devi was made a queen of the Mon king, so fortunately survived the mass slaughter of Nyaungyan royals that was ordered in 1754.

A few years later in 1757, Alaungphaya’s forces attacked Pegu in a battle where it was reported that dead bodies were piled so high at the city gates that residents became trapped inside the walls.\textsuperscript{81} Maha Devi was captured yet again and made the wife of Alaungphaya that year.\textsuperscript{82} Meanwhile, the assassination of Gharib Nawaz had destabilized the monarchy in Manipur. King Chit Sai was forced from the throne in 1752. His brother took the throne but kept it for just a year before it was seized by Gour Shyam (r. 1753-59), a nephew of Gharib Nawaz. King Gour Shyam engaged in a bloody family feud to hold the throne, resulting in the death of one of his brothers and the flight to Upper Burma by the other,

\textsuperscript{79} Parratt, \textit{Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur (Vol. 1)}, 167–8.
\textsuperscript{80} Maung Maung Tin, \textit{Konbaung Set Maha Yazawin}, 1:211.
\textsuperscript{81} Lieberman, \textit{Burmese Administrative Cycles}, 242, 248.
\textsuperscript{82} Maung Maung Tin, \textit{Konbaung Set Maha Yazawin}, 1:212.
named Bharat Sain. Bharat Sain sought refuge from King Alaungphaya and assistance to overthrow his brother, but passed away before he could return to Manipur. In Konbaung-zet Mahayazawin, Alaungphaya is reported explaining that he decided to invade Manipur out of an obligation to his wife, Maha Devi. The Manipuri queen is “under my golden foot,” the King explained, meaning he is responsible for her protection and by extension the peace of her homeland. “Therefore, I will capture Manipur and put on the throne a righteous successor.”

King Alaungphaya’s claim of selflessness and compassion no doubt masked a self-serving decision, but what is important here is that he discursively framed pre-1757 attacks on Lower Burma as acts of righteous revenge and the decision to invade Manipur in 1758 as a family obligation. Whatever actually motivated his decision, he did not justify it as an act of revenge. His invasion of Manipur was a momentous event that resulted in a permanent shift in power relations between the two states, such that Manipur valley came to be dominated by Burmese forces.

In Chapter Two, I argued against a complacent understanding of Southeast Asian warfare that posits that the value of human labor in the under-populated region protected war captives from gross mistreatment. I provided evidence that violence against war captives was highly situational and sometimes resulted in wholesale slaughter of combatants and captured people alike. Multiple contingent forces were at play in intra-state slave gathering warfare that affected the treatment of captives in different ways. The moment of capture was horrifyingly violent or fraught with the specter of violence. That a captive might end up relatively well treated in their new home does not diminish the terrors of slave-gathering warfare. Alaungphaya’s invasion of Manipur exemplifies how these various contingent forces played out in a real battle.

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84 King Alaungphaya’s first invasion of Manipur as described in Konbaung-zet Mahayazawin has yet to receive scholarly attention in an English language publication.
85 Maung Maung Tin, Konbaung Set Maha Yazawin, 1:226–7.
To reinforce this point I’d like to look at the events of King Alaungphaya in some detail. The *Konbaung-zet* chronicle reports that soon after the king led his army across the Manipur border, they began defeating Manipuri forces in a large village called Kula on the outskirts of the Manipur valley. Village residents fled the battle and the empty village became a forward operating base for the Burmese army. From Kula, Alaungphaya sent forces to the Manipuri capital, Imphal, but found it abandoned. After the Manipur military scattered, the valley’s population fled into the mountains to avoid capture. Alaungphaya ordered a door-to-door search of the capital anyone who might still be hiding. Two regiments were sent into the upland forest to find the Manipuri king, but they reported that the forests were so massive, the task was impossible.86

A waiting game began. Alaungphaya’s forces only had to lay siege to the valley for nine or ten days, since Manipuri who had fled without adequate supplies soon started coming back to surrender. The first was the “prince” of Kula village, called the “Kula Raja” in the chronicle. He presented himself to Alaungphaya as a vassal, along with 2,000 of his followers. Following this, the chronicle reports the leader of a second community with 200 followers surrendering and another the next day with 4,000 followers. Other Manipuri elites send emissaries to Alaungphaya to negotiate conditions for their master’s surrender. New Manipuri allies to Alaungphaya cemented their loyalty by reporting on the whereabouts of other groups of hiding Manipuri. Seven daughters of Manipuri court ministers and their retinues were captured in this way, as were two to three thousand other Manipuri who had been hiding in the crook between two mountains. As the days dragged on, Manipur’s chief queen and a thousand of her followers submitted to Alaungphaya.

The dominating force need not adhere to the agreements forged in the moment of surrender. When the siege was over, Alaungphaya ordered the Kula Raja to join the returning Burmese army and lead four thousand Manipuri captives to Burma. They were ordered to resettle in a village in Burmese territory. The Kula Raja and group of refused to move. The believed that after swearing their allegiance to Alaungphaya and assisting his conquest of Manipur, they would be allowed to stay in their home village. Alaungphaya had all four

86 Hto Tin Htwe, *Yatana Thikha Maha Yazawin [The Precious Thikha History]*, 183–190.
thousand people killed, some of whom were women and children. This is an example of the threat of violence that hangs captive people to keep them compliant.

The next two Burmese kings, Hsinbyushin (r. 1763-1776) and Bodawphaya (r. 1782-1819) continued raiding Manipur. The Burmese elite saw Manipur as another of Ava’s numerous upland vassal states. Raids into Manipur were frequently justified as necessary to settle disputes over royal succession. Slave taking inevitably accompanied these military events. After King Bodawphaya died, King Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1837) ascended the throne. Princes from each of Burma’s vassal states were expected to attend his crowning ceremony in 1819. Manipur’s King Marjit (r. 1813-1820) did not attend and did not send an explanation. An envoy to Manipur reported that King Marjit was having trees cut down from within Burmese territory and selling them. The envoy also reported that the king had raised golden spires above his palace, a sure sign that he considered himself an autonomous monarch. King Bagyidaw sent troops to attack Manipur that same year, 1819. The Manipuri employed new, ingenious strategies for fighting the Burmese, including camouflaged military bases hidden in steeply walled valleys, but the Burmese prevailed. King Marjit and his surviving military forces fled to neighboring Cachar, where he joined many other Manipuri who had fled there before him as a result of continued Burmese assaults. Manipuri numbers swelled past the ability of the Cachari elite to maintain them, so 1819 marked the overthrow of the Manipur royal family by Burmese forces and the overthrow of the Cachar monarchy by the deposed Manipuri elite. Three Manipuri princes, King Marjit, Gambhir Singh, and Chaurajit, divided Cachar amongst themselves. Cachar became a satellite base from which the deposed Manipuri elite could return to Manipur to attack the Burmese occupying forces and attempt to depose any puppet rulers placed on the throne by Ava.

Seven years of warfare and raiding ensued. The Burmese forces were brutal toward any Manipuri who remained in the valley. Manipuri continued to be enslaved by Burmese forces or escaped as refugees to more peaceful neighboring states. The events of this period led to near total depopulation of the valley, still referred to by Manipuri as the “Chahi taret khuntakpa” or “Seven-
Year Devastation” (1819-1826).\textsuperscript{87} Finally, Gambhir Singh successfully petitioned the British for support in regaining control of the valley.\textsuperscript{88} The British agreed, since their relationship to Burma had soured in the early 19th century due to conflicts along the Arakan-Bengal border. With British assistance, the Manipuri swept the Burmese from the valley. As part of their political pact, the British insisted the Manipuri return control of Cachar to its indigenous leaders. The peace agreement then reached between England and Burma included provisions making the Manipuri border inviolable to the Burmese.

Gambhir Singh (r. 1825-1833) emerged as the dominant Manipur prince. He claimed kingship of the valley on the eve of the military assault and held it until 1833. Some returning refugees repopulated the Manipur valley, but many elected to remain in the regions of northeast India and Bengal where they had settled in exile. Today, descendants of the Manipuri live in Bangladesh, Assam, and other parts of northeast India. They, along with the war slaves taken to Burma, form the Manipuri diaspora, a population formed out of the violence of the Seven-Year Devastation.

4. Religious Creolization in Upper Burma: Kathe People

This section follows the pattern established in the last chapter by focusing on creolized religious practices that developed out of relocating Manipuri captives to Upper Burma. In section 2 above, I have already described the religious groups that would have been represented among these captives. In this section, I analyze the religious practices of their descendants living in Burma today to reconstruct a history of creolization.

4.1 The Kathe Lai Haraoba in Ye Kyi Pauk Village

The Myit Nge River feeds into the Irrawaddy River close to the old royal capitals of Ava and Amarapura in Upper Burma. Every year around the end of June, the whole village of Ye Kyi Pauk gathers on the banks of the Myit Nge to propitiate their local nats so as to ensure good harvests and prevent ill luck in

\textsuperscript{87} Manipuri historians and intellectuals sometimes refer to this period as a “holocaust” visited upon the Manipuri by the Burmese military. As I noted in Chapter Two, this is an inappropriate term for this conflict, though its use captures the emotional valence of the experience.

\textsuperscript{88} The First Anglo-Burmese War broke out in 1824 in Assam.
the coming year. Ye Kyi Pauk is a small farming village of average income by current Burmese standards, mostly quiet but for the clackety-clack of automated weaving machines vibrating the homes of richer families. The villagers are Buddhists, but like villagers throughout rural Burma, depend on nats to prevent floods and droughts, protect the health of their children, provide luck in the lottery, and so on. While the stages of Ye Kyi Pauk’s nat ceremony are similar to nat festivals elsewhere, the details are unlike any other nat festival in Upper Burma.

In late May 2010, I was invited by Ye Kyi Pauk villagers to observe their ceremony. I witnessed a unique spectacle. Roughly midway through the event, the spirit medium (eighty-two year old Daw Kyi) was accompanied to the riverside by a procession of village virgins, a group of musicians singing and playing rollicking spirit music, and other participants. Possessed by the spirit of the Mother Goddess (Meh-taw nat in Burmese), Daw Kyi entered the Myit Nge and then floated serenely on its surface in a way that her fellow villagers consider unnatural. The Mother Goddess is one of three tutelary nats in Ye Kyi Pauk. The other two are her sons, commonly called Older Son spirit and Younger Son spirit. This family of spirits and the methods for propitiating them are common to the small network of villages to which Ye Kyi Pauk belongs. The dip into the Myit Nge stream is a reward to the serpent-goddess for manifesting herself at the ceremony and committing herself once more to protecting the village. The audience believes that if the medium’s trance is deep and authentic, she will float against the current. Her legs and arms can extend up out of the water or assume a relaxed meditative pose. Either position, they believe, would sink an elderly woman or at least she would end up sputtering uncomfortably on the surface. As I witnessed, Daw Kyi floated as effortlessly as a cork on a line. Every few minutes an assistant helped her to the shore where she danced joyfully on the bank. Her hands, head, and upper body moved sinuously,

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89 Nat can also be translated as “spirit lord,” a definition that better recognizes their elite position in the spirit realm.

90 The best source for visualizing the stages of a Burmese nat ceremony is Rodrigues, Nat-Pwe.

91 The ritual is described using my field notes and interviews dated 5/22/2010. Another description of the ceremony can be found in Matua Bahadur, Art of the Textile: Manipuri Textiles from Bangladesh and Myanmar (Imphal: Matua Museum, 2009), 104–5.
suggestive of a contented serpent, while villagers crowded the river’s edge to receive blessings from the incarnated Mother Goddess spirit.

The Yei Kyi Pauk ceremony is a creole religious practice born from complicated interactions between the ubiquitous nat worshiping traditions of Upper Burma and the Lai Haraoba, the most important ceremonial tradition of Manipur’s indigenous religion, Senamahism. Daw Kyi and other village leaders readily explained that their ceremony is not like others in Burma. They said Ye Kyi Pauk was not a Burmese village and the people living there were Kathe whose ancestors came to Burma as captives from Manipur. The villagers referred to their local spirits as Kathe nats (Manipuri spirits). They believe the spirits traveled with their ancestors from Manipur to Burma. They attributed the heterodox features of their spirit ceremonies and ritual practices to twin foreign origins: that of both themselves and the spirits that followed them. Villagers said Kathe nats want to be worshipped in Kathe ways, so they have preserved the culture and ceremonies of their original homeland.

Many of the Ye Kyi Pauk people I spoke with believed that their ancestors had been living in that area since the time of King Alaungphaya. The Burmese historian Lwin Naing found textual sources that support their belief. The sources show that Alaungphaya used captured Manipuri to renovate the region’s dams and canals (much of which had been destroyed by decades of warfare) and settled many of them as farmers (lamaing) to boost the productive economy of his emerging state. Many of these farmers were settled along the Myit Nge River. Lwin Naing found Ye Kyi Pauk listed by name in one of the settlement records.92 Henry Yule, boating up the Myit Nge river in 1855, saw settlements for captured Manipuri: “The river banks were pretty thickly lined with villages, most of them inhabited by Munnipoorees, and the people gazed in crowds as we passed.”93

In the section below, I will describe features that connect the Ye Kyi Pauk nat ceremony to the religious practices and beliefs of Manipur. Among these are an emphasis on making the gods happy, mythology, music, ceremonial objects, and the dominance of women in the performance of these spirit rituals. Ye Kyi

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93 Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 70–1. One covert objective of Yule’s mission was to gather information on Manipuri war captives.
Pauk villagers point to the watery portion of the spirit ceremony as another feature that makes their nat festival different from others in Upper Burma.

As noted earlier, there is a pantheon of thirty-seven nationally known and respected nats in Burma. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, more nats, many unnamed, are only known to the people in their immediate locales. The most potent nats have tragic life stories. Almost all were once powerful people that were betrayed and then died violently. The horrible circumstances of their lives magnified their potency in death. These spirits must be appeased to prevent their malicious interventions in the living world. The most prominent nats have wives who are married to them in a wedding ceremony. Their wives are almost always transgendered women (born male), transvestite men, or middle-aged women who in addition to their formal marriage to a spirit are usually married to a human husband as well. Spirit ceremonies in Burma are commonly transgressive events in which the normal rules of society are flaunted or ignored. In a typical Burmese spirit ceremony, for example, spirit mediums and their audiences consume copious amounts of alcohol. Spirit mediums wear wildly colored theatrical costumes and many mediums become possessed by spirits of the opposite gender, so transvestism is common among them. Possessions are demonstrated through acrobatically impressive dancing accompanied by a deafening and hypnotically rhythmic orchestra. In the depths of their possession, mediums may guzzle rum, gorge on raw meat, or engage in sword battles with unseen enemies. Audience members may join in this wild dancing. Dancing and drinking frequently go into the early hours of the morning. Burmese spirit festivals (like those in many other parts of the world) are prescribed spaces in which the conservative social values of the predominantly Theravada Buddhist society can be broken. Few of these features are seen in the spirit worshiping practices of Yei Kyi Pauk villagers, however.

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94 The “gendered” structure of a more traditional Burmese nat festival is similarly complex and has long garnered academic interest. Throughout Burma, spirit mediums are known as nat gadaw, literally “Nat Wives,” because they enter into a special wedded relationship with one or more potent spirits and can be possessed by these spirits when the situation demands. The classic study of the nat pantheon is Richard Carnac Temple, The Thirty-seven Nats; A Phase of Spirit-worship Prevailing in Burma (London: W. Griggs, 1906).

The Yei Kyi Pauk ceremony focuses on pleasing or rewarding their local spirits, a feature that connects their nat ceremony to the Lai Haraoba ("pleasing the gods") ceremony described earlier in this chapter. U Nyoun Lein, a village elder, is knowledgeable about the ceremony since it is his responsibility to keep important ritual objects in his home between ceremonies. His ancestors were Manipuri Ponna, but his parents adopted Buddhism so he grew up a Buddhist. He explained to me that the ceremony was designed “to put spirits in a happy mood.” This is evident in the music played during the ceremony. In Burmese ceremonies, loud, percussive music is played to attract a nat to the ceremony and draw it into the medium, who dances ecstatically to mark becoming possessed. The spirit music in Yei Kyi Pauk is different. The orchestra is led by what the Burmese call an Indian clarinet instead of by percussive instruments. The orchestral music is meant to have an “Indian sound,” evidently signifying Kathe origins in northeast India. The instrumentation of the Kathe musical ensemble (Indian clarinet, two bamboo clappers, and a long drum) is not found in Manipur, however.

The lyrics to the Yei Kyi Pauk ensemble’s most prominent song obliquely narrate the processes of transculturation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ponna dto batha Ha! Ha! Ha! [repeated many times]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Ponna (Brahman) religion Ha! Ha! Ha!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mye nyi ya pheh ko khin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the ground, just right spread the banana wrapper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kala beh hin neh bweh taw the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Indian dal curry a royal feast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zawraw mawrah Hey! Hey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zawraw mawrah Hey! Hey!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U Nyoun Lein transcribed the song for me and told me that “zawraw mawrah” was a Manipuri phrase with an unclear meaning. I later asked scholars at Manipur University about the phrase and was told it is used in rituals to mean “done correctly” or “it’s all done right.” The song appears to be a fractured version of a song that was once longer and more narratively coherent. The

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remaining fragments evoke the Kathe past. The villagers in Yei Kyi Pauk are Buddhists, yet the song begins with a vibrant chant in celebration of “Our Ponna (Brahman) religion.” In Manipur the banana leaf is considered purifying. Banana leaf roofs are built over sacred spaces to sanctify them and ceremonial foods are served on banana leaf plates. The song captures this practice with the image of spreading banana leaves on the ground in preparation for a feast. Moreover, the band played the song under a tent-like banana leaf structure built for the ceremony.

Music is used differently in this ceremony than in Burmese traditions. The orchestra does not summon the spirit in Yei Kyi Pauk ceremonies, the spirit medium becomes possessed in silence. The band only begins playing music after she is possessed to celebrate the arrival of the Mother Goddess spirit and entertain her as she manifests in the physical world. Both playing music and taking the spirit for a swim are ways of pleasing spirits.

A second interesting feature of the Yei Kyi Pauk ceremony is that it has preserved fragments of the core mythology from the Manipuri cult of Pakhangba the snake god, his mother Leimaren, and brother Senamahi. The ceremonial focus is on the Mother Goddess, but the village has two other shrines for her sons. They are propitiated on different days. This parallels the mother and sons trinity of Manipur. Yei Kyi Pauk people refer to these spirits as “Mother,” “Older Brother” and “Younger Brother,” but several elderly villagers know the Manipuri names of these gods. U Nyoun Lein described the story to me as one in which the father of the family stages a competition between his two sons. They are to race around the world and the one who returned first would be declared the winner and become king of the gods. The older brother, whom U Nyoun Lein called “Pa Kham Ma” (i.e., Pakhangba), cheated and won the competition. These events had an effect on the sacred powers of the different gods. As Nyoun Lein explained, the soil in the shrine of the mother “Ima Lein Makhin” (i.e., Leimaren) and the younger son who did not cheat, “Sana Mahi” (i.e., Senamahi), is sacred and has curing powers for ill people. The soil under the cheating older brother’s shrine

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97 Phonological differences in the languages effect the pronunciation. Roughly rendered they are: Leimaren (in Burmese Ima Lein Makhin), Senamahi (Sana Mahi), and Pakhangba (Pa Kham Ma).
has no special properties. The story of these Kathe nats thus parallels core mythology of Manipur.\textsuperscript{98}

Ritual objects and the way they are used in the ceremony are important to understanding this ceremony fully. Soon after Daw Kyi is possessed by the Mother Goddess, she answers questions that believers have for the Mother Spirit and delivers her prophecies to them. When this has finished, all the participants and on-lookers form a procession that marches from the spirit shrine to the bank of the river a short walk away. Daw Kyi leads the procession with two male umbrella bearers and elderly female assistants, one of whom rings a small bell as the spirit medium walks. There are also people carrying water pots and pots with flowers and fruit offerings. Two young men are carrying strangely shaped swords. The “pure” women and girls of the village, most of them young women of reproductive age who are not yet sexually active, form into two lines. Their participation is important to the ceremony. These “pure” women march with one hand grasping a brass ceremonial object, the other holding a white string that will be dipped into the stream as part of the ceremonial offering to the spirit. The villagers insist that the brass objects (plates, bowls, serving trays, small platters) were smuggled to Ye Kyi Pauk by their ancestors when Burmese forces captured them from Manipur. This is also said of the two swords that are part of the ceremony.\textsuperscript{99} These swords are a puzzle because their fanciful construction renders them useless as war weapons. The handles are almost as long as the blade and the blade is wide and swooping with a triangular notch cut from its end. The Manipuri scholar Matua Bahadur visited Ye Kyi Pauk in 2007 and instantly recognized the swords. In the past, Manipuri identified their clan affiliations during collective rituals by carrying fantastically shaped swords. Yei Kyi Pauk’s long handled swords are called Chakthang in Manipuri and represent the Mangang clan.\textsuperscript{100} These swords may reveal the clan origins of at least some of the Kathe settled in Yei Kyi Pauk. In the rafters of the Pakhangba shrine, there is a three-bladed sword shaped somewhat like the tail of a cartoon rooster; this

\textsuperscript{98}“Interview with U Nyoun Lein,” 5/22/10.

\textsuperscript{99}“Interview with Daw Kyi, Age 82, Yei Kyi Pauk Village, Amarapura, Burma” and “Interview with U Nyoun Lein,” Research Notebook, 5/22/10.

\textsuperscript{100}Bahadur, Art of the Textile, 99, 104–5.
was identified as the Yentoksaba sword that represents the Moirang clan, so some of the villagers may be descended from a different Manipuri clan.

Ye Kyi Pauk villagers refrain from making statues for the three Kathe nats they worship. They believe these spirits to be beyond human representation. As I described above, this belief dominated the pre-Hindu religious system of Manipur. The absence of nat statues in their shrines is a striking contrast to Burmese nat ritual traditions in which spirit statues are at the devotional center of every spirit ceremony. Professional Burmese nat wives are expected to travel with more than a dozen spirit statues, which they position on the altars wherever ceremonies are being conducted.\(^{101}\) As in Manipur, the spirit shrines in Yei Kyi Pauk are aniconic. Each shrine contains a space for a statue, but the space is left empty. It is instead surrounded by accouterments such as clothing, regalia, or weaponry associated with the spirit or god.

Another visually apparent difference between Yei Kyi Pauk's ritual tradition and those seen elsewhere in Burma is the prominent role of women in the Ye Kyi Pauk ceremony. I have already described the “pure” young women who participate in the procession to the river. Only sexually “pure” women are allowed to be spirit mediums. Their power as mediums is thought to increase as they age past sixty-five years old. In contrast to other parts of Burma, Yei Kyi Pauk has never had a transvestite male or married female spirit medium. At eighty-two, Daw Kyi is both post-menopausal and a widow. She is neither reproductively capable nor sexually active, so considered especially “pure” and therefore powerful. In addition, elder women around Daw Kyi’s age oversee Ye Kyi Pauk’s annual spirit ceremony. They huddle close to the spirit medium throughout the ceremony, though it is not necessary that they be as “pure” as she is.

The central role of elderly women in the festival may contribute to its relative sobriety compared to nat festivals in other parts of Burma where drunkenness is common, spirit mediums dance wildly to percussive rhythms, and social norms are flouted.\(^{102}\) While Ye Kyi Pauk’s tradition cannot be described as tame, since it still involves a medium offering herself as a living

\(^{101}\) Rodrigues, *Nat-Pwe*, 54.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 48–52, 58–62.
bridge between terrestrial and supernatural planes of existence, it is certainly dignified. Cultural transgressions such as public drunkenness, cross-dressing, or lewd cavorting between men and women are almost totally absent. Even while under the possession of the Mother Goddess, the medium behaves with all the decorum of any elderly village matron. The relative sobriety of this Kathe nat festival may also be due to its origins in the highly controlled, hierarchically organized state religion of Manipur.

After Daw Kyi has alternated between dancing on the river bank and floating serenely on the water to reward the Mother Goddess for about half an hour, two pots with flower offerings are dipped in the stream and the two Chakthang swords are passed to the medium. She cuts the water with them to drive evil forces away from the village. Finally, Daw Kyi throws fruit into the river as gifts to the spirit. They are allowed to float for only a few moments before village boys swim out to gather them. Eating these fruit offerings is thought to bring good luck. The ceremony ends with the procession reforming and marching back to the shrine. Daw Kyi circles the shrine three times and the Mother Goddess exits her body.

As already noted, the prominence of women, the importance of water, and the absence of statuary all correspond to ritual practices in Manipur in the early 19th century. In many ways Ye Kyi Pauk’s ceremony resembles the first day of Manipur’s Lai Haraoba. In Manipur, the spirits come from the water. A procession travels to water to call the spirits out. Musicians accompany the procession. Young unmarried women travel in two rows carrying brass objects that are the personal possessions of the gods that will be summoned and young men carry two swords and two umbrellas. A female medium becomes possessed at the water’s edge and enters the water (though only to draw the spirit into the sacred water pots sometimes using white string). Fruit and other foods are cast into the river as an offering and a small bell is rung to signal that the medium is possessed.

The Ye Kyi Pauk ceremony includes all of these components, but the logic that guides the ceremony is different so many of these components occur at different times and for different reasons. First, Kathe spirits do not dwell in the water. They dwell in the lowest levels of heaven along with Burmese nats.
*nats* love the water and want to play there, so the ceremony ends at the water’s edge instead of beginning there. The objects used to draw spirits from the water (the water pots and string) in Manipur are included in the ceremony in Ye Kyi Pauk, but they are simply blessed and returned to the shrine. The brass plates, bowls, and cups that are carried to the water are more important in Ye Kyi Pauk than in Manipur because of their historical significance, rather than because they are trappings of gods. The swords have similarly been repurposed to drive away bad luck and malicious spirits. The Kathe *nat* ceremony in Ye Kyi Pauk village resembles neither Manipuri rituals nor the spirit ceremonies of their Burmese neighbors. Some of the beliefs and ritual behaviors correspond to the traditions in one or the other of those two cultures, but the Ye Kyi Pauk ceremony mixes them together and includes unique features with no resemblance to the other traditions.

The most obvious aspect of the ceremony that seems to have developed in Upper Burma by Kathe people is the mutability of the goddess. In Ye Kyi Pauk, the Mother Goddess has the power to transform from a human to a serpent (*naga*). In addition, the Older Son’s status vis-à-vis his mother seems to have declined in the Ye Kyi Pauk setting. Parratt and Parratt argue that the female elements of Manipur’s pre-Hindu faith had “primacy” over the male elements.\(^\text{103}\) This primacy seems to have increased somewhat as creolizing forces transformed the Lai Haraoba in Ye Kyi Pauk village. Sexual abstinence for women is emphasized in the ritual in the importance placed on the virginity of the village girls and the widowhood and post-menopausal status of the elderly spirit medium. Manipuri spirit mediums, like their Burmese *nat kadaw* counterparts, are commonly married women, while young Manipuri women who participate in the Lai Haraoba are not required to abstain from sexual activity. The gender dynamics around age, “purity,” and virginity apparently developed in Ye Kyi Pauk, possibly because of its history of capture and dislocation.

The brass housewares paraded to the river by the village maidens may have gained sacred value by their sympathetic relationship to the historical experience of Kathe people. The swords and brassware are what I call “natal

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objects” in that they provide mnemonic links to Kathe people’s historical origins in another land. Such objects recall the forced migration of Manipuri captives and the Kathe position as “Other” in Upper Burma. Capture, enslavement, and forced relocation sanctified these objects with new meaning and turned them into a distinctive feature of the village’s spirit ceremony different from the standard practices in either Manipur or Burma. This is another example of how Yei Kyi Pauk’s spirit ceremony is doubly heterodox, resembling neither the natal culture of their ancestors nor the culture of their current homeland.

4.2 Other Kathe Nat Traditions in Upper Burma

In the introduction to this chapter, I demonstrated that Burmese slave gathering between 1758 and 1824 occurred during a period of religious upheaval in Manipur. The Manipuri valley were being converted to Hinduism at the time, particularly a branch of Hinduism that reveres Krishna, but conversion was highly contested by proponents of the indigenous religion, Senamahism. Burmese invasions and political instability intensified and prolonged religious turmoil in the valley. The captives that were taken to Burma were a cross section of this agitated population, including Brahmins, non-Brahmin converts to Hinduism, reluctant converts to Hinduism, and Senamahists. I interviewed the descendants of these diverse captives living in many of the villages in the capital zone of Burma. My research shows that the descendants of those who had been converted to Hinduism in Manipur and entered the Ksatriya caste later adopted Buddhism in Burma, while captured Manipuri Brahmins, called Ponna in Burmese, retained their Hindu faith. Originally, Brahmin/Ponna captives and Ksatriya (non-Brahmin Hindus) were settled together. For example, according to Toun Ohn, a fifty-eight year old Ponna traditional healer, a small number of non-Brahmin Hindus lived with the Ponna in Minde Eken, a Kathe Ponna community located outside the western gate of the Mandalay palace. This community was responsible for royal rituals and consecrations. According to Toun Ohn, many of these non-Brahmins were weavers and moved away to the Kathe weaving
suburbs of Amarapura, where they gradually adopted the Buddhist faith of the other weavers.\textsuperscript{104}

A small number of Ponna usually lived in each of the non-Brahmin Hindu villages of farmers and artisans that dotted the suburbs and countryside around Mandalay. The Ponna were responsible for Hindu ritual activities in each village. Many Kathe Buddhists in their seventies and eighties can remember a day in their childhood when the Ponna moved out of their village. Daw Shin, eighty-one years old, now lives in Amarapura. Her family runs a famous silk weaving outlet not far from the town center. She considers the Ponna moving away to have been a good thing, since they enforced strict rules that she did not understand. She told me about a village well that had no rope and bucket attached to it because the Ponna would not drink from a bucket that had been used by a non-Brahmin. Each family had to have its own bucket that was carried to the well from home when the family needed water. Daw Shin told me how inconvenient this was for her as a child. She would be playing near the well, get hot and thirsty, then have to walk all the way home to get the family bucket and return to bring up water from the well before she could quench her thirst. The day after the Ponna moved to a Ponna quarter in Mandalay, the villagers hung a communal bucket from a rope above the well.\textsuperscript{105}

We might expect that the non-Brahman Hindus who adopted Buddhism would have assimilated completely to Burmese culture. We saw in the last chapter that most Yodaya people assimilated fully into Burmese culture, which some scholars have attributed Yodaya and Burmese sharing the Theravada Buddhist faith. However, many Kathe Buddhists have maintained a sense of alterity and think of themselves as different from Burmese despite sharing the same faith. I visited many of the Kathe Buddhist villages that dot the countryside around Mandalay. In each one, I invariably had a conversation similar to the one I had on January 17, 2011 in Paleba village on the road between Inwa and the bridge to Sagaing. I entered the village on a motor scooter and approached a

\textsuperscript{104} “Interview with Toun Ohn, Age 58, Minde Ekin, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/22/10. Another Ponna told me the same story: “Interview with U Aung Myint, Age 61, Thameedaw Ze, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/21/10.

group of middle-aged women congregating under the stilts of a house. “Hello,” I said, “I’ve heard from a friend this is a Kathe village. Is that right?” A friendly woman volunteered, “Of course, this is a Kathe village, we worship the Kathe nat.” In village after village Kathe people discussed their “Kathe-ness” through reference to their belief in Kathe spirits.

Scholars tend to expect that outsider identities will be maintained by people who adhere to a world religion different from that of the larger society they live in. Later in this chapter I discuss elective alterity among the Kathe Muslim and Ponna communities. It makes sense that intermarriage within the same faith tradition and holding a minority status would preserve a non-Burmese identity among Muslim and Hindu minorities in Burma. The elective alterity of Kathe Buddhists is somewhat unexpected, however. The worship of Kathe nats seems to have had a similar effect to adherence to a world religion. In many villages and families, the adoption of Buddhism resulted in a transformation of Senamahism, but not its complete disappearance. The gods of Manipur were reconfigured to become nats in the Burmese setting. This both parallels and differs from the historical processes that scholars assume produced nat worship in the Pagan period of Burmese history (11th to 13th centuries) when doctrinal Buddhist practices flowing in from the Indian sub-continent subordinated, transformed, and merged with pre-existing local religions. Burmese nat cults were the result of a localizing process in which a transnational religious faith was accommodated to the religious beliefs of the mainland Southeast Asian state. Kathe Buddhists have similarly transformed a pre-Buddhist faith into cult practices that can be accommodated within Buddhism in Burma. The social processes that gave birth to Kathe nat beliefs were more a process of “de-localization” than localization, however. Kathe nat belief developed because Senamahism was taken out of its “local” context in Manipur and relocated to Upper Burma. Kathe nat cults are not so much the result of transforming foreign beliefs to fit into a new cultural context so much as to provide comfort and spiritual sustenance in a new homeland. Though the genesis of both Burmese and Kathe nat beliefs are superficially similar, Kathe nat cults are better understood using the concepts suggested by Creolization Theory.

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106 Research Notebook, 1/17/11.
Kathe people in Yei Kyi Pauk and elsewhere in the capital zone generated a hybrid religious faith that, like the Hindu and Islamic faiths of other captives, assisted in preserving their alterity.

Benedicte Brac de la Perriere is the only Western anthropologist to have documented a Kathe nat ritual. She analyzed a ceremony held over several days in a network of Kathe villages settled along Taungthaman Lake. The villages are across the lake from Amarapura not far from the U Bein Bridge, famous throughout Burma and to visiting tourists as the world’s longest teak wood bridge. These villagers worship an “Old Man” spirit in ways that are in accordance with the worship of the national pantheon of thirty-seven nats, but with many intriguing heterodox additions. As de la Perriere notes, the Old Man spirit is worshipped both as a nat and as “the founder ancestor of the K[a]the community,” a historical figure who was the “first chief of the population” after it was forcibly transplanted to this site from Manipur. Several people in the village trace their ancestry to the Old Man and have ritual importance because of this connection.\(^\text{107}\) As is typical of Burmese nats, the Old Man had a violent death. He was mauled and killed by a tiger while performing his duties as village headman. The Old Man has a statue that is kept in a shrine with other nat statues from the traditional Burmese nat pantheon. A pillar has been raised in the lake to mark the place where the old man was eaten. During the festival, people boat out to it so they can make offerings to the Old Man. There are also boat races to and from the pillar to celebrate his spirit. De la Perriere believes that this may be due to this community having been occupationally involved with boats and rowing.

Much of the ceremony follows standard Burmese practices. The statue of the Old Man is moved on a palanquin and treated ritually as though he were human royalty. Spirit mediums travel to participate in the ceremony. They bring along their spirit statues and become possessed by and dance as most or all of the thirty-seven national nat spirits. Loud music, wild dancing, and drinking occur throughout the festival. On the last day of the ceremony, the chief spirit medium or nat kadaw (spirit wife) embodies the Old Man. In the ceremony that de la

\(^{107}\) Benedict Brac de la Perriere, “The Tauntheman Naq Festival: An Example of Ritual Burmanization through the Naq Cult,” in *Shamanic Cosmos: From India to the North Pole Star*, ed. Romano Mastromattei and Antonio Rigopoulos (Venice, Italy: Venetian Academy of Indian Studies, 1999), 51, 54.
Perriere witnessed, the chief medium was an elderly transvestite man. Possessed by the Old Man, the spirit medium smoked, trembled, danced with a cane, and menaced the audience with threats of death if they did not respect him before speaking to his followers and eating a feast made in his honor.\textsuperscript{108}

The Taungthaman community is no more than ten miles away from Yei Kyi Pauk, but their Kathe cult practices could not be further apart. Contingent historical factors created different cultural matrices for the two Kathe communities. In Taungthaman, the village suffered a tragedy that pushed the Kathe to adopt a Burmese-style nat ritual. The violent death of the community’s first headman led to the creation of a tutelary ancestor cult that readily hybridized with the Burmese national nat cult. The end result was a creolized religious practice that de la Perriere describes as appearing like a “Burmanized cult” that also “expresses the specific identity of the Taungthaman [Kathe] community.”\textsuperscript{109}

A third manifestation of Kathe nat worship is found in silk weaving areas in suburban Amarapura. As I will describe in more detail in the Creole Arts section below, the Kathe came to dominate the silk weaving industry in the Konbaung era, particularly because textiles preferred by palace people required a weaving technique introduced to Upper Burma by captives from Manipur. In the Mandalay area, silk shops that specialize in traditional weaving are invariably owned and operated by Kathe families. On May 4, 2010 I met with members of the Kathe family that runs one of Amarapura’s most successful silk shops. The Shwe Sin Tai Silk House is a frequent stop on the tourist circuit through the ancient capital. I talked to eighty-one year old Daw Shin, her fifty-three year old niece Daw Than Than Oo, and her grandniece and manager of the shop, twenty-eight year old Taik Thu Thu Aun.

Daw Shin was born in Shwe Keh.\textsuperscript{110} When she was young there were still people who spoke Manipuri there, though Daw Shin did not. She recalled stories about the early settlement of the area and how hard it was to find things to eat because the food in Burma was foreign to the relocated captives. She grew up

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 45–51.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 55.  
\textsuperscript{110} Coincidentally, this is the same village that U Pinnya suggested was the real life counterpart to the fictional village the \textit{lei-hsa-byi} might have lived in in the poem that began this chapter.
worshiping the “Mwe Lan” spirits, two Kathe nats that derived their name from the place in Manipur where her community originated. The spirits were not represented by statues in the village shrine, but the villagers knew that they were a brother and sister who could take the form of snakes. For this reason, the Kathe people from that village never ate snakes or snake-like fish (i.e., that were sinuous or did not have scales). Many would not eat the snake bean, which gets its name from the long “S” shaped curve of its pods.

The ceremony to honor the Mwe Lan spirits is conducted when the first rice of the season is harvested. Women offer raw food to the nats in the morning and then retrieve the offering at mid-day to cook it.\textsuperscript{111} I was told in many villages that Kathe nats prefer Kathe foods, so special dishes are prepared for them. The cooked dishes are collectively called “Kathe Hin” and follow recipes believed to come from Manipur.\textsuperscript{112} These foods are cooked at home and Kathe and Burmese friends of the family are invited to share the feast. My research in Manipur showed that some of the recipes that I gathered in Kathe areas corresponded to dishes that are still made in Manipur. Popcorn ball snacks are an example. Manipuri do not cook with oil, perhaps because there were no known indigenous plant oils in the Manipur valley. They dry-fry foods or use animal fat from cooking meat to coat the pan. Traditional Burmese food is almost the opposite; it is certainly one of the world’s oiliest cuisines. Nut oils form the basis of many dishes and are used as flavoring in the same way that yogurt or ghee are used in north Indian cuisine as the base liquid for curry. Thai cuisine uses coconut milk, but Burmese prefer peanut or sesame oils. Kathe people throughout Mandalay pointed to the relative absence of oil in their cuisine as a feature that distinguished them from the Burmese.

The Kathe in the Amarapura suburbs and many other places have a tradition of household spirit worship. In Amarapura it is typical for Kathe families to keep a table in the western side of their homes that can be constructed into a temporary shrine for the Mwe Lan spirits. Daw Shin told me it


\textsuperscript{112} Kathe Hin literally means “Kathe curry,” but the word “curry” refers to any prepared dish in Burmese. Dishes prepared from offerings to the nats include: seh sa leh (rice with beans and chili); ka sa li (a warm salad); and pe leh pya (Indian bean leaf mixed with fish paste and oil).
was important to keep the shrine in the west because that is the direction of Manipur. She also told me that true Kathe people worshipped only the Kathe nats, but 53-year-old Daw Than Than Oo quickly contradicted this statement. She admitted that she worshipped both Burmese and Kathe nats equally. And later, as I was leaving, the 28 year-old Taik Thu Thu Aun told me in reference to all the talk about identity and spirit ceremonies: “I am Burmese, not really Kathe.” She explained further that these Kathe rituals were time consuming and she was often too busy to participate. When feasts took place she asked that the food be delivered to her at work.\textsuperscript{113} If my interviews at the Shwe Sin Tai Silk House are an indication, we could expect major changes, or possibly even the disappearance of these creole religious practices over the next two generations.

Arambam Lokendra, Manipur’s leading authority on traditional Manipuri religious and performance traditions, suggested that “Mwe Lan,” the remembered home of the silk weaving captives settled in the Amarapura suburbs and the name of their spirit couple, is a Burmese corruption of the word “Moireng.” Moireng is the name of a Manipuri clan and a formerly powerful clan-state located just to the east of the capital Imphal. The words sound similar if one substitutes “r” in Moireng for an “l.” The Moireng clan worship brother and sister spirits named “Khamba and Thoibi.” Thoibi was a princess and a weaver of perfect garments. Phonological similarities, the brother-sister relationship, and the fact that weaving is the occupation of many of the women who worship the Mwe Lan Nat leads Arambam Lokendra to this conclusion.\textsuperscript{114} However, in Moireng mythology neither Khamba nor Thoibi are snakes or serpents. The practice of household worship in Kathe communities has strong correspondences to practice in Manipur where a specific corner of the house is dedicated to spirit worship and a temporary shrine is put up in that corner on days when spirit propitiation is necessary. Yet, in Manipur these spirits are frequently the mother and son spirits of Leimaren and Senamahi (described above), neither of whom are also magical serpents. Though I have no evidence for this supposition, I would suggest that the repeated conquests of Manipur


\textsuperscript{114} Bryce Beemer, “Interview with Arambam Lokendra, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur,” Research Notebook, September 5, 2010.
served to disgrace, or simply diminish the position of Pakhangba worship in Upper Burma. Pakhangba was the central god in Manipur’s royal cult, so he likely retained little relevance for Kathe captives. Other spirits such as Leimaren and the Mwe Lan (Moireng) spirits may have absorbed the snake-like qualities of Pakhangba as the potency of the Pakhangba cult diminished.

It is impossible to summarize all the Kathe spirit beliefs of Upper Burma. Despite loose commonalities such as the prominence of women and serpent worship, they vary greatly between the different village networks. The Kathe nats in Yei Kyi Pauk and the villages along the Myit Nge stream are very different from those practiced in Sagaing (discussed in Chapter One) or in the suburbs of Amarapura. Creolization Theory provides a helpful model for understanding such diversity. The great varieties of syncretic religious practice in the Caribbean are explained through the particulars of regional history and geography. The broad contours of cultural encounters in the Caribbean were similar in that they all involved African slaves, European slave owners, and native populations. However, each island was each ruled by a different European colonial regime and had different histories of interaction among the three groups. There was also diversity in terms of the ethnic make-up of the African slaves that were transported to the Caribbean and the national origins of the Europeans operating there. Each island had a different cultural matrix that affected the creolization process. Different creole religious practices emerged from these varied matrices of interaction. Upper Burma seems a little different. The disparate areas where Kathe culture developed each created unique forms of Kathe Nat worship. Each village network existed within a distinctive cultural matrix and unique Kathe religious practices resulted. They are spread out across the landscape like islands in an archipelago, but no water separates them.

4.3 The Kathe Muslim “Shin Phyu” in Amarapura

The villages of U Yin and Kyi Myin Tein are in a stretch of dry farmland that lies between Amarapura and the ruins of Inwa. A small streambed, dry except during the rainiest part of the year, marks a boundary between the two villages that would otherwise be mistaken for a single village. Both villages are inhabited by Kathe Muslims, descendants of “Pangal” Muslims captured from
Manipur by Burmese forces. Many Kathe Muslims are Sufi and this may explain the village boundaries, since most of the Sufis are congregated on the Kyi Myin Tein side of the streambed. U Yin and Kyi Myin Tein people say that theirs are the only two villages of Kathe Muslims in Burma, but the 1901 Census of India reported Muslims living in six villages in Upper Burma.\textsuperscript{115} Kathe Muslims have the interesting distinction of having descended from two incidents of capture and displacement, the very first being in 1606 when Bengali mercenaries in Manipur were defeated and captured. Dr. Win Myint, a veterinarian by training and the village’s local historian, told me that this area was settled by the two thousand Manipuri captives taken after King Alaungphaya’s initial conquest of Manipur in 1758, however.

People from both villages earn their livings making textiles. Sitting under their houses that are raised on stilts, men and women work at hand looms, wind and dye thread, and prepare looms for weaving. Deafening mechanical looms chug away in the richer households, churning out men’s \textit{longyi} [lower body wraps] in plaid and check patterns. Many are belt-driven contraptions that date to the 1950s or earlier. Henry Yule visited U Yin and Kyi Myin Tein in 1855 as part of his investigation of Ava’s textile industry. He wrote that Kathe Muslims were assigned to work on textiles. At that time, they produced inexpensive dyed and printed imitations of Burma’s famous rainbow hued, wave-patterned \textit{acheik} textiles. The region’s poor children commonly wore this affordable cloth. The production of these fabrics, along with other textile manufacturing techniques, was a “\textit{specialite of the Kathe Mahomedans [sic].}” He described their daily work at length:

\texttt{[T]}he Kathe Mahomedans [sic]... occupy rather an extensive quarter near the Sagyeen-wa creek. As we saw it, the cloth used was a paltry English cotton, thickly plastered with lime-starch. The stamp employed was a small board... The operator sat on the floor, having the web of cloth lying over a stool before him. The stamp was pressed on a colour pad, and then on the cloth, the result of each application being a band of wavy red stripes... Narrower stripes of green and purple were afterwards interpolated by a second and third series of operations...

\textsuperscript{115} C. C. Lowis, \textit{Census of India, 1901. Burma (Volume XII)} (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1902), 111. The Census also states that all of these Muslim captives were employed to work as tailors and weavers and were given the title “\textit{achok}.”
Another process followed by the same people is that of dyeing blue cotton, bandanas, or bird’s-eye handkerchiefs. In this case the web was stretched between supports. An implement, consisting of a small board stuck over with long pegs of bamboo in the pattern of the desired spots, was dipt [sic] in a vessel of melted wax and applied to the cloth. The wax penetrating, formed a spot on both sides as a protection against the action of the dye...

Both these processes are very rude; but as they are both new within the last twenty years, perhaps they show a tendency to improvement. Neither, however, is practiced by people of Burman race... Another trade extensively followed by Kathe Mahomedans is that of silk-spinning. The spinning-wheel is a very neat and effective implement, winding thread off four or five spindles at a time.\textsuperscript{116}

Yule’s observations nicely point to the longevity of certain artisanal skills in Burma. Today, 150 years after Yule’s visit, Kathe Muslims continue to produce textiles. Yule himself believed Kathe weavers would inevitably be swept from the market, arguing, “whatever demand there may be for the articles, will probably soon be met by the much cheaper vastly superior English prints.”\textsuperscript{117} He underestimated Burma’s impressive facility for resisting modernization.

Yule also walked through the Muslim ward in the suburb of Amarapura that was located just west of the Chinese market area. Members of this Muslim community reported to Yule that there were twenty thousand families in the city, but after walking around, he believed this number to be an exaggeration, and that their total population was probably closer to eight or nine thousand individuals. The Muslim population was ethnically complex, made up of families that reported having lived in Burma for five or six hundred years, Muslims from India and other parts of Western Asia that had recently migrated to pursue trade opportunities, and Burmese men and women who had converted to Islam.

\textsuperscript{116} Yule, \textit{A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855}, 156.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
“generally from the influence of a Moslem husband or wife.” 118 Finally, Yule reported that:

...others [descend] from Mahomedans of Aracan, of Munnipoor, and perhaps of Kachar, forcibly deported by the Burmans during their inroads into those countries. But all having intermarried with the natives [so that] they are undistinguishable at sight from other Burmans, except those whose family migration is of late date, and who possess, it struck me, a very peculiar and distinct physiognomy.119

Yule explored Amarapura’s Muslim areas in the company of the many Indian Muslim employees that accompanied his mission to Burma. Their reactions added depth to Yule’s description of Muslim acculturation to life in mainland Southeast Asia. He wrote of the Burmese Muslim community:

They wear the Burman dress, speak the Burman language, and are Burmese in nearly all their habits. Their women of all ranks go unveiled, and clothe as scantily as the rest of their countrywomen. For the sanctity of the purda, elsewhere so unfailing an accompaniment of Islam, is here entirely unknown.

Their marriages are generally regularly contracted... But the engagement, instead of being made... through parents or go-betweens, is arranged... between the parties principally concerned, and the lady’s parents are not consulted till the important question has been put and answered satisfactorily. This system of things seemed to the Hindustani Mahomedans of our escort grossly indecorous and heretical...

The Burmese practice of tattooing the thighs and loins is unusual among the Mahomedans, but some of them do give into this also. Most commonly too they pluck out the hairs of the beard, as the Burmans do, until they become old.

As might be expected they are very ignorant sons of the Faith, and in the indiscriminating character of their diet are said to be no

118 Yule reported that Burmese converts were “not being molested in any way by the Government.” Ibid.
119 This quote and the others above are from Ibid., 150–1.
better than their neighbours; so that our strict Mussulmans from India were not willing to partake of their hospitalities.

The Moguls and others, who at the present day settle in the country, intermarrying with these people, speedily sink into the same practical heterodoxies. But nothing in the life and conversation of their Burmese co-religionists seemed so offensive to the Mahomedans of our escort as the free dress and habits of the women, who are said to be even admitted to prayer in the same mosques with the men. These habits were such a gross violation of all Moslem propriety, that no man, they considered, was fit to lead the devotions of a congregation of believers who allowed such laxities in his family.120

Yule’s Muslim employees were principally offended by the accommodations that Burmese Muslims had made to Southeast Asia’s more equitable gender regime, especially in women’s fashions and public behavior. The reader should keep their reactions in mind as we turn towards the case study of U Yin and Kyi Myin Tein villages.

Sufi Muslims adhere to mystical and esoteric dimensions of Islamic religious practice. Sufi worship often centers on the practice of dhikr, a meditative repetition of divine words or passages of religious literature with the goal of bringing one’s consciousness closer to God’s divine presence. Different orders of Sufism were propagated in the past by Muslim ascetics who traveled, drew followers, and spread diverse methods of spiritual self-improvement through devotional activities such as dance, music, and chanting. For Sufis the most important holy sites are those dedicated to these great teachers, called Sufi Saints. Shrines and tombs of individual saints are sites of pilgrimage and Sufi ritual practice.

Kyi Myin Tein village has a shrine dedicated to its local Sufi Saint, Da Da Pu (Esteemed Pu). The Da Da Pu Shrine is just outside the village on a grassy piece of land that draws the occasional grazing buffalo. It is an open-air concrete building painted white with green accents and covered with a corrugated roof (Figure 5.3, left). Inside the shrine is an elegantly carved Burmese language

120 Ibid., 151–2.
inscription on a white marble slab (Figure 5.3, right). The space in front of the inscription is large enough to stage a ceremony. The Sufis of Kyi Myin Tein village meet here to chant the sacred names of Allah.

Figure 5.3: Da Da Pu shrine. Interior (left) and lineage inscription (right), 5/4/10. Author photographs.

The inscription, titled “Da Da Pu's Lineage,” lists the Sufi masters who have served as teachers and religious leaders in this community. This genealogy traps the history of the capture and relocation of the community’s forebears to Upper Burma. The first person was Master Sayid Anbyeya. The year 1720 is above his name and he is described as the “messenger” for his lineage. The second name is Kyin Ya Taw. No year appears above his name, but he is described as having married the daughter of a Brahmin minister. The dates above the names are supposed to be the dates when each person assumed leadership of the community, but this pattern does not seem to have been followed for these first two names. Respondents at the shrine told me that the inscription implies that in 1720, Master Sayid Anbyeya sent his student Kyin Ya Taw from Bengal to Manipur to spread the faith. That a stranger to the valley, Kyin Ya Taw, was able to marry the daughter of government official fits with Manipur history. Potent settlers (and captives in some cases) were given wives by the king and absorbed into the state’s clan and labor organization system by being awarded a yumnak (sub-clan) name.

In 1740, Sayid Mohamed, the son of Kyin Ya Taw and presumably the elite Manipuri woman who is mentioned as his wife, was chosen from among his
many brothers to take over leadership of the Sufi community in Manipur. Twenty years later in 1760, his son Sayid Hasan became the leader, but a one-sentence biography informs us that during his leadership (between 1760 and 1784), Sayid Hasan and sixty households of his followers were captured by Burmese forces and relocated to Upper Burma. If these dates are accurate, that means that the Kathe Muslim community of Kyi Myin Tein was captured during the reign of King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763-1776) who gathered slaves from Manipur in both 1765 and 1770. This also corresponds to Yule’s observation in 1855 (quoted above) that the textile dyeing and printing techniques he witnessed had only been practiced in Burma for a couple decades.

We can develop a thumbnail sketch of the spread of Sufi practice in Manipur among the presumably non-Sufi population of Muslims. If 1720 was their arrival date in Manipur and 1765 when the Sufis were captured, then the “message” of Master Sayid Anbyeya had spread to sixty households in forty-five years. Burma-Manipur warfare effectively erased Sufi Islam from Manipur valley. Today, there are no Sufi practitioners among Manipur’s Pangal Muslim population. Warfare crippled its spread or perhaps the Burmese succeeded in capturing the entire Sufi population. In either case, slave gathering erased this history of religious exchange. None of the scholars I spoke with at Manipur University were aware of there ever having been a Sufi influence in the valley.

The inscription also elliptically captures a history of the changing gender dynamics among the captured Muslims. In most parts of the Muslim world, a Sufi lineage is represented in a strictly patriarchal narrative. The history of inheritance maps the movement of mystical religious knowledge from one male religious leader to the next. Sometimes these inheritances are within a single family and the knowledge passes from father to son, but this is not always the case, since other students of a Sufi leader may assume religious leadership upon the death of their master. This is true of Da Da Pu himself, who is represented as outside of the family lineage that begins with Kyin Ya Taw (who married the Manipuri minister’s daughter). The strictly patriarchal orientation of the inscription is abruptly broken in 1844, when the inscription starts listing the wives of religious leaders (and by extension the mothers of the next leaders in
the lineage). 121 Sayid Mohammed (undated tenure) had a wife named Daw Amina; their son, Sayid Mohammed Narula Kalif Amu, had a wife named Daw Thaw, and so on. The mother and father of Da Da Pu, who were not religious leaders in the community, are also listed. This change in the narrative structure of the inscription brings it into alignment with Southeast Asian norms of gender complementarity. Throughout mainland Southeast Asia, monarchs legitimized their right to rule by describing the illustrious pedigrees of their mothers and fathers and making ritual observances to both lineages in state ceremonies. Gender regimes in East and South Asia are generally more patriarchal. 122 It is additionally worth noting that in the same period wives and mothers join the Sufi lineage, the Kathe Muslims also start listing Burmese names along with Arabic names. Yule wrote of Burmese Muslims, “Every indigenous Mussulman has two names... As a son of Islam he is probably Abdul Kureem; but as a native of Burma, and for all practical purposes, he is Moung-yo or Shwepo.” 123 The beginning of this cultural accommodation can be dated in the inscription. At some time in the mid-19th century, Sayid Mohammed started including his Burmese name, U Hlein (though his wife goes by the name Amina, which is a Muslim name). His son, who assumed leadership in 1865, had the Burmese name U Toun and his wife’s name is also Burmese, Daw Thaw. The many names listed for Da Da Pu hint at even more layers of code-switching: Abdulla Sakyu Shah Sheikul Ma Shai, Maun Pu, Kalifa U Pu, and Master Da Da Pu. The Burmese name “Pu” can be translated as “Shorty.” See my partial translation in Figure 5.4 below.

121 Or perhaps a little earlier because Sayid Mohammed’s tenure is undated and may predate Da Da Pu, who is dated to 1844.
123 Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 152.
One of the most striking features of Kathe Muslim culture is a creole religious ceremony called “Shin Pyu” or “Shin Pyu Ahlu.” It is a rite of passage for...
all Muslim boys and girls in these two villages, which are the only villages in Myanmar that perform the Muslim Shin Pyu ceremony. Part of my obligation as a Fulbright scholar was to deliver lectures on my research findings during my tenure in Myanmar. As a result I had the experience of discussing the Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu in front of a few Burmese audiences. Presenting photographs and videos of the ceremony always invoked titters and gasps amongst the audience because the Shin Pyu is a specifically Buddhist ceremony. In fact, the ceremony is an elaborate reenactment of an event in the life of the Buddha. It is performed whenever a little boy enters the monkhood as a novitiate. The ceremony typically occurs for boys between the ages of eight or nine, but there is great variation in age. The novitiate’s ceremony is paired with a coming of age ceremony for girls (usually the sisters of the novitiates) called “ear boring.” However, earring sizes have shrunk considerably since the early Konbaung period when they were the size and shape of a cow’s horn, so the modern ceremony is better described as “ear piercing.”

My research films of young Muslim boys and girls seeming to perform a Buddhist novitiate ritual and ear boring ceremony was visually bizarre to the Burmese Buddhist audience and non-Kathe Muslim audience as well. I heard the words “unbelievable” several times, so before continuing, I would like to stress that Kathe Muslims are a creolized people, but they are not practicing a creolized version of Islam. Whereas I have argued above that Kathe nat worship is a creole religion, there is nothing that could be called “Kathe Islam” in Burma. Kathe Muslims are orthodox practitioners of their faith. However, the Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu is a creolized ceremony conducted within an otherwise conventional practice of their faith.

The Burmese Buddhist Shin Pyu ceremony celebrates the temporary ordination of boys under the age of twenty. The ceremony reenacts the renunciation and ordination of Rahula, the historical Buddha’s son, who was the first boy to enter the monkhood. He approached his father on horseback with servants bearing umbrellas, and in the splendid raiment of a worldly prince. Rahula asked his father for his inheritance, meaning the wealth of the Buddha’s own princely past, but the Buddha instead chose to pass wisdom to his son. He asked the boy to renounce his princely dress and ornamentation and take the
robes of a monk. This story of renunciation is reenacted in the Buddhist Shin Pyu in the form of a grand parade in which novitiate boys dress as Konbaung-era princes and ride through their village on horseback. Family and community members dress as royalty and royal servants. They hold umbrellas over the heads of the boys as symbols of royalty. A band plays as they march to announce the boys’ entry into monkhood. The ceremony is paired with a feast in honor of the initiates held in an imitation royal palace, often a temporary bamboo structure decorated with painted paper and papier-mâché ornaments. The ceremony ends with the boys changing out of their princely clothes. Their heads are shaved and then they are led by a senior monk to don Buddhist robes. An ear-boring ceremony for the sisters of the young initiates is usually attached to the Shin Pyu ceremony. The girls have their ears pierced before the procession. The girls dress as Konbaung-era princesses and follow in the parade somewhere behind their brothers so that the parade announces their transition to womanhood at the same time that it announces their brothers’ upcoming novitiation. Figure 5.5 below shows colonial-era and contemporary photographs of boys dressed for the Shin Pyu ceremony.

The Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu celebrates boys coming of age on the day of their circumcision. Circumcision ceremonies among other Muslims in Burma are small affairs, usually only celebrated among family members with a nice dinner, but no fanfare. In U Yin and Kyi Myin Tein, however, Muslim boys and girls dress as princes and princesses and join a parade that travels through the town to the mosque. They do not ride on horses or have umbrellas held over them as in the Buddhist Shin Pyu parade, however. The mosque is decorated with painted construction paper and ornamented to look like a Burmese royal palace. Inside, the guests are feted with sugar cane and other snacks that would be found at a Buddhist celebration. The center of the mosque is taken up by a circle of men that recite from the Koran from start to finish. Each man is assigned a section and they all read aloud simultaneously, thereby completing the entire text in a few hours. U Thein Maung the headman of Kyi Myin Tein, kindly gave me a VCD

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copy of his son Than Maung’s Shin Pyu ceremony. The image of dozens of Burmese princes and princesses crowding just behind a row of learned men reciting from the Koran reinforced an image of two traditions blending into a new and unexpected ceremony. After the recitation of the Koran, the boys return home for their circumcision procedures. These coming of age rituals are celebrated the next day with feasting and music, though the boys are usually absent since it takes two or three days for them to recover. Figure 5.6 below shows scenes from the 2008 Muslim Shin Pyu ceremony in Kyi Myin Tein village.

Figure 5.5: Burmese Buddhist Shin Pyu ceremony. (Left) colonial era photograph;126 (right) Boys on horseback with umbrellas overhead, Sagaing, 2009, (author photograph).

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The Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu ceremony is obviously an example of ritual creolization, although how it developed cannot be discerned. Raquel Romberg describes processes of ritual mimesis by slaves and their descendants in the Atlantic world as an essential feature of the creolization process. She calls it “ritual piracy” and defines this term as the “unauthorized, strategic albeit imperfect copying of symbols of power” in such a way that they “become empowering within rituals against their initial purpose.” She laments that “ritual piracy” inevitably fails as an act or resistance because it really is a form of participation in the hegemonic culture that ultimately leads to the incorporation of the margins by the center.\textsuperscript{127} I would interpret the Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu more positively. I read it as a sign of participating with the dominant culture, but this participation is likely done to preserve or bolster the elective alterity of the Kathe Muslim community rather than incorporate them into the larger (i.e., Buddhist) society. The Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu is an announcement to the Muslim

community and to neighboring Buddhist villages that a Muslim boy has come of age. The Kathe Muslims think of it as a Muslim ceremony, not as stealing or imitating Buddhist cultural forms. The adoption of ritual signs and symbols from a Buddhist rite of passage is best seen as a statement of belonging to the diverse religious milieu of Upper Burma. This exemplifies the complicated relationship between assimilation and non-assimilation that can occur in any environment of multilateral cultural exchange.

The dress of the Muslim boys and their procession to the mosque made the most visual impact on the Burmese audiences who saw my films because princely arraignment and parading signified entry into the Buddhist monkhood in their eyes. However, the addition of the girls’ ear boring ritual to the boys’ circumcision ceremony is an equally important cultural change in Kathe ritual processes. The Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu transformed a humble boys’ coming of age ceremony into a public spectacle similar to that of Buddhist neighbors, but the ear boring ceremony had no ritual equivalent amongst Kathe Muslims. Its inclusion is not part of a merging of two ritual traditions. Rather, it was absorbed in whole from the Buddhist tradition. This adoption of the ear boring ceremony is another example of shifting gender roles amongst these captive descendants. Like the inclusion of wives and mothers in the shrine inscription, the ear boring ceremony suggests a shift toward greater gender complementarity. A public ceremony in honor of little boys was paired with a public ceremony in honor of little girls. Since no such girls’ ceremony existed in the Kathe Muslim religious repertoire, the Buddhist ear boring ceremony was incorporated more or less unchanged. The Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu it is thus a perfect illustration of complicated dialogical processes of cultural exchange embedded in the creolization process.

4.4 Kathe Brahmins/Ponna and Ritual Transformation in the Burmese Palace

As in this country [Burma] all is regulated by the opinions of the Brahmins, so that not even the king shall presume to take any step without their advice, therefore was counsel taken of them [the Brahmins], and thereupon a site selected for the new city, on an uneven spot three leagues from [Inwa]...
As soon as his Majesty was seated, a band of Brahmins, who are the soothsayers of the Burman Court, began to chant a hymn, which continued for two or three minutes... These persons stood behind the throne, a little to his Majesty's left... They wore white dresses, with caps of the same colour, trimmed with gold lace or tinsel.

- John Crawfurd, 1826-1827

At this ceremony, the ministers, princes, grandees, and men of wealth, assemble round the King, whilst the Court Brahmins, after prayers or chants, take Ganges water in a [conch] shell, and pour it in the palm of the King's hand and upon the knot of hair on his head. As this is being done the assembled courtiers cry aloud, "O Lord, protect and cherish us your slaves, the inhabitants of this country, and all living creatures."

- Henry Yule, 1855

In the Konbaung era, European visitors reported on the ubiquity of Brahmins in the court as ritual leaders, counselors to the Burmese king, astrologers, and controllers of the royal calendar. Many of the ritual specialists seen by the Europeans had originally been captured from Manipur. Leider notes that “Brahmanism and the history of court punna" were connected within a “social group uniquely linked to the Buddhist monarchy...” Calling these court officials “Brahmin” is highly problematic, however. As Jacques Leider explains in the only English language study on the subject, Ponna were incorporated into the court and organized into specific labor groups in unique ways that served the needs of the Burmese monarchy. This process transformed the so-called “Brahmins” until they no longer resembled the social category called “Brahmin” in India. The ritual tasks they performed in the palace differed greatly from those of Hindu Brahmins in Bengal. Leider points out that the category of ritual specialist called “Ponna” included many people that were not upper-caste Brahmins. I have found descriptions of Ponna being assigned to palace jobs such as washing hair, cutting toenails, and carrying royalty on palanquins. None of these tasks would have been performed by upper-caste Brahmin in India. I also

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128 Sangermano, The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago, 67.
129 Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, 1:232.
130 Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 232fn.
prefer the term “Ponna” because it acknowledges a historical transformation from “Manipuri Brahmin” to “Kathe Ponna.”

It is not always possible to distinguish Kathe Ponna from Ponna with different origins working within the royal labor system. Court documents about Ponna ritual specialists rarely described their ethnicity. Although what percentage of court Ponna originated in Manipur cannot be determined, we know that the Kathe Ponna population dwarfed all others outside the palace. A short history of Upper Burma’s court Brahmins makes this point. The destruction wrought in Upper Burma in the years leading up to 1752 resulted in the death of many court people and ritual specialists. As Leider demonstrates, it is difficult to determine the origins of the Ponna ritual specialists that served the court in the pre-Konbaung period. A small community of indigenous Ponna, described as “Sagaing Ponna” because of their ancient settlement in that city, served as ritual specialists in the Nyaungyan period. They traced their ancestry to the Indianized cities of ethnically Pyu people that were absorbed into the Pagan Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries and possibly to other settlers from India. The indigenous or Sagaing Ponna community did not last into the present; they either dissipated or were absorbed into the other Ponna captured in warfare.

As Lieder shows, during the Konbaung period, Brahmins from Benares were sometimes recruited into the palace or sought employment there. Their numbers were very small, but their direct connection to India may have magnified their influence in the palace. A rough timeline suggests that this small population of Ponna was supplemented by captives from Manipur after 1758. The largest numbers of Ponna were captured from Manipur beginning in 1758 during the reign of Alaungphaya and ending in 1824 with the liberation of Manipur valley. The descendants of these captives can be found in three fairly

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134 For example, Yule observed a benediction for the Burmese king, in which one song was in Sanskrit and a second in Burmese, in which the Ponna group of “8-10” was comprised of two Ponna from Benares and the remainder from Arakan. Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 87.
large neighborhoods in downtown Mandalay and in a few other villages in the capital zone.

These captives from Manipur probably came to dominate palace proceedings until 1784, when Ponna captured from the court in Arakan joined them. These constitute a second group of captive Ponna. They were called “Dhanyawaddy Ponna” by the Burmese after the name of the Arakan capital that was devastated by Burmese forces in December 1784.\textsuperscript{135} The Arakan/Dhanyawaddy Ponna live today in a single, four block community just outside a southern gate to the Mandalay palace.

All the important ritual functions of the Burmese court were under the control of Ponna, the vast majority of whom were war captives or their descendants. Having ritual control over the palace allowed these captives to assert an enormous amount of control over the daily lives of the royal elite. Than Tun summarizes their responsibilities:

At every important royal ceremony from the naming of a royal child, earboring, hair washing, marriage, coronation, building of royal mansions, thrones, drums, etc. in addition to [Buddhist] recitation... offerings were made to the Hindu deities... This was done with elaborate rituals which may be described as being grander than purely Buddhist ones. Whenever the king decides to have a ceremony he has to ask the Brahman astrologers which was the most auspicious moment. This too has to be done after due propitiation of spirits.\textsuperscript{136}

Jacques Leider separates the responsibilities of court Ponna into several categories. First is the “calculation of time and astrology,” which was important because of the belief that the microcosm of human activity succeeded best when aligned with the macrocosmic order of celestial bodies. Astrologers had to determine propitious starting timed for every important activity from military campaigns to house construction. Second, Ponna were in charge of “devotional functions,” worshiping the Hindu gods who protected he monarchy and kingdom.

\textsuperscript{135} The history of the Arakan captives is outside the scope of this thesis, but they form a third group of war captives that could be addressed in future research.
Third, they used “occult techniques...to conjure and influence the way that future events will happen, to prevent dangers, and to fend off the threat of enemies.” Such techniques included creating objects that provided magical protection, blessing city gates to make them impervious to attack, and casting spells on invading armies. Finally, they served as “royal counselors,” dispensing advice to the king along with other select members of the palace.\footnote{Leider, “Specialists for Ritual, Magic, and Devotion,” 169–78. Quote from p. 176.}

Theravada Buddhist rituals mostly are not concerned with worldly matters. Buddhist philosophy is an anemic source for developing ceremonies to substantiate or expand royal power. For this reason, Theravada Buddhist kings throughout Southeast Asia employed Brahmins to conduct royal ceremonies derived from Brahmanic practice. Michael Charney argues that there were additional reasons for the Konbaung court’s interest in Ponna-led ceremonies and Sanskrit texts. Two factors combined to spur royal reliance on captured ritual specialists. The first was the humble family origin of the Konbaung dynasty. Alaungphaya was a peasant who seized control of Upper Burma while the region’s power center was imploding. His lack of royal pedigree plagued his early reign. Alaungphaya had to rebuild the Burmese court. He used Manipuri Brahmins to construct a ceremonial structure for court culture. The reconstructed rituals had two useful political consequences: they mystified royal power for the peasant classes while at the same time justifying Alaungphaya’s lineage vis-à-vis other royal rivals.\footnote{Michael Charney, Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma’s Last Dynasty, 1752-1885 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 45, 70–6, 263.}

His descendants also became interested in Hindu texts. Beginning in the reign of Hsinbyushin (r. 1763-1776), the Konbaung palace began collecting Sanskrit language texts on rituals, religion, and secular matters. This interest came to an apex in the reign of King Bodawphaya (r. 1782-1819), who sent missions to India and Sri Lanka to acquire Sanskrit texts. His envoys brought back several hundred texts on ancient knowledge to Burma. Twenty-six Ponna were included in a mission to India between 1809 and 1810. They returned with texts on astrology, dream interpretation, medicine, and the attributes of
elephants. Than Tun found references to 253 Sanskrit texts that were incorporated into the court. Bodawphaya’s unprecedented interest in collecting sacred and secular texts from South Asia may have been connected to his troubled rise to power. Plots and attempted coups plagued the first years of his reign and may have driven his attempt to assert royal authority through imported ritual. The king’s first project was to conduct the Muddha Beiktheik, the most elaborate of the Brahminical consecration ceremonies for a king. Charney writes that the consecration ceremony “required specialized Sanskrit ritual texts and a literati that could translate and understand them.” Bodawphaya had the ceremony conducted twice, once in 1783 and again in 1784, apparently unsatisfied with the first attempt.

Translating Sanskrit texts provided the foundation for an intellectual transformation of elite Burmese society, according to Charney. Kathe Ponna were instrumental in bringing about this transformation because eventually they took over the task of translating the Sanskrit and old Bengali texts from Burmese Buddhist monks. This is one of the tasks that distinguished Kathe Ponna from Arakanese, Sagaing/indigenous, or sojourner Indian Ponna in Upper Burma. Translating drew on Manipuri Brahmin knowledge of ritual languages (Sanskrit and old Bengali). They also had been settled in Burma long enough to have gained facility in the difficult poetic structure of court Burmese language. James Brooks’ classic history of slavery in the American Southwest demonstrates the way that captive peoples can gain power in their captors’ communities as cultural mediators by utilizing language skills and cultural understanding of their natal culture to facilitate linkages between hostile groups. Manipuri Brahmins can be seen in a similar light. They used their translation skills to become potent cultural mediators, facilitating the transfer and localization of Indian knowledge in Upper Burma.

139 Than Tun, “The Influence of Occultism in Myanma History,” 90.
140 He was able to track down titles for 236 of them dated between 1786 and 1818. See appendix in Than Tun, “The Influence of Occultism in Myanma History,” 91, 97–102.
141 Charney, Powerful Learning, 83–7. Quote from p. 86. Bodawphaya’s interest in the acquisition and translation of Sanskrit texts is also discussed in Leider, “Specialists for Ritual, Magic, and Devotion”; and Than Tun, “The Influence of Occultism in Myanma History.”
142 Charney, Powerful Learning, 47. This is also discussed in Leider, “Specialists for Ritual, Magic, and Devotion,” 184.
143 See Chapter 8 “Closer and Closer Apart” in Brooks, Captives & Cousins.
Ponna were very important to royal displays of power. They could be seen marching with the king in processions, playing music and chanting at ceremonies, and many other very visible activities. Symes wrote about a Burmese royal procession in 1795:

The Prince [was] borne on men’s shoulders, in a very rich palanquin, but without any canopy,... he was screened from the sun by a large gilded fan, supported by a nobleman, and on each side of his palanquin walked six Cassay [Kathe] astrologers, of the Braminical sect, dressed in white gowns and white caps, studded with stars of gold.\(^{144}\)

In the last chapter, I discussed the *parabaik* paintings that demonstrated the importance of Yodaya artisans to the projection of royal power in Burma. The same *parabaik* can be used to make a similar point about the presence of Ponna in state processions. Konbaung-era court Ponna wore long white robes during ceremonies, so they stand out in temple paintings and other visual depictions of palace activities and royal processions. These paintings also demonstrate the transformation of the “Brahmin” community as their status was localized to serve court needs very different from those in Hindu/Indian states. In Figure 5.7, Ponna are depicted carrying a royal palanquin (top left) and umbrellas to shield princesses (bottom left). The status of some Ponna is represented by their sashes. For example, in the detail of the painting (right), one of the Ponna wears a multi-stranded golden sash called a *salwe*, which indicates that he is one of the leaders of the group of palanquin bearers. In Figure 5.8, we see Ponna playing drums and gongs in the procession (top) and pulling a royal carriage (bottom).\(^{145}\)

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\(^{144}\) Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 167.

\(^{145}\) This is probably one of the carriages presented to the Burmese monarchy by the British. This painting can be read as an example of the localization of European transportation in that instead of using horses, the king and queen are transported by sacred Ponna who might formerly have borne the royal palanquin.
Figure 5.7: Ponna in a royal procession. (Top left) Ponna carrying a royal palanquin; (Bottom left) Ponna holding umbrellas for princesses; (Right) Detail image of the chief Ponna wearing a golden sash, 19th century.146

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146 Unknown Court Artist(s), Parabeik Illustrating Royal Scenes. Bodleian Library.
Manipuri Ponna are also included in the gouache paintings from between 1853 and 1885 that I discussed in the previous chapter. The picture in Figure 5.9 may depict the everyday clothing worn by Ponna when they were not participating in court ceremonies. The description of this painting provided by the Victoria and Albert Museum reads "Watercolour drawing of a standing Brahmin priest annotated in top right corner 'Copae [Kathe] Brahmin.' The figure wears a pale blue scarf over a bare chest and a pink lungi. He carries a conch in his right hand and has a shaved head plus knot of hair."147

147 The word "Copae" is a mistaken transliteration of the word Kathe that appears in pencil.
Descriptions of Kathe Ponna in 20th century Mandalay can be found in the writings and observations of India’s Ambassador to Burma from 1972 to 1975. Ambassador Ralengnao Khathing was a native of Manipur. He was not ethnically Manipuri, but a Naga born in Ukhrul, the upland capital of the region. Ambassador Khathing was curious about the status and whereabouts of captured Manipuri in Burma. In Mandalay, he located a “sprawling community of over 500 houses” which he described as “little Manipur”:

Everything was as it should be and is in any of the numerous Meitei villages of Manipur. The thatched one-dimensional Yumjao [houses], the spacious courtyards with the inevitable tulsi plant in its center, the family looms in one corner of the verandah and, above all, the ubiquitous mand[a]ps [community halls], all these
conspired to bring memories of distant Manipur flooding back to Mr. Khathing.148

Two large Ponna suburbs still remain in downtown Mandalay. Minde Ekin is directly west of the palace walls. Ponna live there on large plots of land, but work for the palace. The second community, Thameedaw Ze (named after a market in the area), is ten blocks from the southwest corner of the palace. The Ambassador was probably describing one of these two areas, more likely Minde Ekin because it is very easy to find, but he might have considered both areas part of the same community.

Khathing was impressed by Ponna devotion to Hinduism in Burma. Though they had been cut off from Manipur since at least the 1820s, the elders in the community retained traditional dress and vegetarianism. Khathing also noticed that the community was in transition; he saw younger Ponna dressing and eating like the Burmese. Their sense of identity surprised the ambassador. Ponna expressed nostalgia and pride about their heritage, but demonstrated no interest in returning to Manipur. They also felt no connection to Indians that had migrated to Burma in the British period or did not share their political grievances. They told the ambassador: “We are not like these newcomers [Indians]. Our lands were given [to us] by the Ava kings.”149

Khathing observed the professions of this group of captive descendants. He pointed out that Ponna astrologers, healers, and drummers and other musicians were employed throughout Burmese society in the 1970s. “Interestingly,” he observed,” these professions have been integrated into the Burmese society and its practitioners make a comfortable living...”150 The value that the Burmese royalty put on the sacred knowledge of the Ponna influenced the culture of non-royal Burmese people. Today, many Burmese go to the Ponna quarter to meet with astrologers, palmists, and other diviners, prognosticators, or healers. Nearly every Burmese person consults with a Ponna before making

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149 Ibid., 111.

150 Ibid., 112.
big decisions or scheduling the best day for a wedding or to buy a house. Burmese commonly hire a Ponna to draw up a traditional horoscope for a newborn child. The child’s bad and good luck days are carved with a stylus onto a stiffened palm leaf board.

Ponna congregate to offer their services to Burmese customers at specific temples in Burma cities. The Ponna identity is still prestigious in modern Myanmar, which contributes to its continuation. The prestige attached to this ethnic identity dovetails with their religious practices in preserving their social alterity. Ponna marry amongst themselves to retain their caste and ritual purity. Those who intermarry with Burmese Buddhists are no longer allowed to eat with their families or participate in Hindu rituals. In the past, maintaining the ritual purity of the Ponna was a concern of the palace. Leider found several royal orders beginning in 1784 that forbid Ponna ritual practitioners from mixing with Ponna whose purity had not been ascertained by the palace.¹⁵¹

Ambassador Khamthing called the Ponna areas he saw “Little Manipur” and said they corresponded neatly to the valley towns of “big” Manipur. Minde Ekin and Thameedaw Ze look strikingly different from other neighborhoods in Mandalay. The only signs of Hinduism in people's dress are the occasional dhoti and the white strings across the chests of shirtless men. The strings signify the boyhood pledge to uphold the tenets of the Hindu faith. The architecture is more distinctive. The small plots of land and wooden houses on stilts typical of Burmese areas are replaced by large, walled, multifamily compounds in Ponna communities. Most compounds include a mandap (also spelled mandapa, but pronounced “manda” in Burmese). These are where the family meets for religious devotions and communal rituals. In Indian architecture, a mandap is an open-air pavilion with many pillars that abuts a sanctum where sacred images are kept. The pavilion area serves as a hall for public rituals including prayer, chanting, music, and dance. The family mandap in Manipur and Upper Burma is a simple wooden structure with a tin roof, while the sanctum is solidly built out of brick, stone, or cement. Figure 5.10 below is a photograph of a mandap in Manipur.

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Indian and Ponna mandap share a basic resemblance, but Kathe Ponna mandap have absorbed artistic imagery from Burmese Buddhist temple architecture. The most visually obvious change is the inclusion of Buddha images in the sanctum and outside on the roof. Figure 5.11 shows a mandap in Thameedaw Ze. The upper portion of the sanctum follows a conventional Hindu temple design, but it has been elaborated with an image of the Buddha on a lotus in the “turning the wheel of the law” pose (shown in detail on left).

Figure 5.10: The Anoubam Mandav (mandap) in Ningthoukhong, Manipur. (Image from http://www.panoramio.com/photo/56655005)

Figure 5.11: A Kathe Ponna mandap (right) with detail of statue of Buddha on upper half of sanctum (left), Thameedaw Ze, 1/21/2011. Source: Author photographs.
The roof designs of Kathe mandap also emulate the shape of Burmese Buddhist temples. Konbaung-era wooden temples had stacked roofs, somewhat like a Japanese pagoda, in which each successive roof was smaller than the one below it. This design has worked its way into many Kathe Ponna mandap roofs. For example, the old mandap shown on the left in Figure 5.12 is made of wood pillars and has a sheet metal roof shaped like a stacked pagoda. The architectural elaboration at the top of the brickwork and stucco sanctum structures resemble another striking feature of Burmese Buddhist architecture in that many are topped with a Burmese-style Buddhist stupa (or cedi). Stupa design shifted over time, but in the Konbaung era they often resembled golden church bells topped by a long spire and crowned with an umbrella made of precious metal. Kathe Ponna mandap sanctums are often topped with stupa-like features, seen in Figure 5.12 (center and right photographs).

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152 In Buddhist temples, these structures are one of the four “cetiya” or “reminders” of the Buddha’s sacred teachings. The bell shape at the base is meant to resemble the burial mound under which the Buddha’s remains were interred and subsequently venerated.
The Kathe Ponna *mandap* can be compared with the Kathe Muslim Shin Pyu ceremony in that both integrate elements of the dominant Buddhist ritual images and objects. Should we understand the reverence of the Kathe Ponna for the Buddha as a sign of assimilation? To answer this question requires again examining the interiority of their worship. Just as Kathe Muslims understand the Shin Pyu to be a Muslim ceremony, so do the Kathe Ponna see “Buddha” worship (in incorporating Buddha statues and *stupas* into their architecture) as acceptably Hindu. The Kathe Ponna follow a Hindu understanding of Buddhism that developed in India as far back as the 8th century. They believe that the Buddha was as an avatar of Vishnu. Family ceremonies conducted in front of Buddha images, his position of honor at the top of sanctum roofs, and the visits that some Ponna make to Buddhist temples are all integrated within this community's understanding of the Hindu faith.

As with the Kathe Muslims, the forces of assimilation and non-assimilation do not lend themselves to easy empirical analysis because the surfaces and interiors of ritual practices, beliefs, and identities are not always aligned. The Muslim Shin Pyu and the Kathe Ponna’s “Buddha” worship are examples of accommodation within a long process of dialogical cultural exchange between the descendants of captive people and the dominant Burmese society.

5. Kathe Captives and the Cultural Creolization of Upper Burma

In the impressively detailed *History of Burma*, first published in 1925 near the end of the British colonial era, G. E. Harvey closed several detailed passages about warfare and slave raiding between Upper Burma and Manipur with a single paragraph devoted to cultural exchange. He wrote that besides "depopulating the country" the result of Burmese incursions into Manipur was the relocation of a large population of Manipuri into Burma:

The people [Manipuri] were famous for their skill in handicraft, and the Burmese valued them highly, settling them in the capital, in the riverine villages of Sagaing district, and at Amarapura. They served as boatmen and silversmiths; as silkworkers they introduced the *acheik* pattern; they gave the Burmese army its best Cavalry (the Cassay [Kathe] Horse) and they supplied the bulk of
the court astrologers, who at levees stood robed in white intoning benedictions as the king took his seat on the throne.153

This section of this chapter attempts to devote as much academic interest to the history of cultural exchange as Harvey and others have devoted to the history of warfare. His sketch of the various occupations Kathe took up in Burma provides an outline of the discussion ahead. I first look at Kathe silk weavers and the development of the lun-taya acheik silk weaving style and technology, which today still constitutes a “national” fashion in lowland Myanmar. Next I examine Kathe contributions to Burma’s pre-colonial military in their work in the cavalry and as galley boatmen in the service of the Burmese palace. I also discuss a specialized method for bone setting practiced by descendants of Manipuri “doctors” that is still preferred by Burma’s rural farmers over going to the hospital. I end by discussing the Ponna Ramayana, an example of lateral movement between captive groups as the Kathe Ponna incorporated Yodaya dance and music into their performances of the Ramayana.

5.1 Acheik silk

_The Silk weaving industry... is very important. The demand [for textiles]... is supplied to a great extent by the silks woven in Mandalay District.... There are more silk weavers in Amarapura and surrounding places in the Mandalay District than the rest of the silk weavers in the whole province put together._

_Silk weaving in Mandalay District is a very old industry but impetus seems to have been given to it by the Manipurs who were brought from Manipur as war captives by the Burmese King about 150 years ago. They appear to have introduced some improvements such as beaming of warps, etc. Even now there is amongst weavers in Amarapura a large section of these Manipuri weavers or their descendants known as Kathès._

-H. F. Searle, 1928154

In 1928, colonial official H. F. Searle, writing for the _Mandalay Gazetteer_, observed that Manipuri captives and their descendants were the sole or near sole producers of high quality silk and innovators of new silk designs (quoted above). Such observations can be found repeated in diplomatic and colonial reports going back to the early 19th century. The Kathe silk weaving community

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153 Harvey, _History of Burma_, 239.
was settled around the palace suburbs when the capital was in Amarapura. When the capital was relocated several miles away to Mandalay after 1859, only a small number of weavers were taken along. Most royal weavers remained in Amarapura. Modern day Amarapura is sprinkled with silk shops whose famous textiles are a huge draw for local and foreign tourists. The owners of the four silk shops I visited in Amarapura all claimed to be Kathe people and worshipped Kathe nats.

Throughout pre-colonial Southeast Asia, every woman could weave and skill in weaving was considered a marriageable quality for young women. This was certainly true in Manipur and Burma. The weaving traditions in Manipur were somewhat more diverse than in Burma, however. Manipuri women continued the use of back strap (or loin) looms even after the introduction of sit down, square framed, throw shuttle looms, which are thought to have entered the valley in the 11th century. Elsewhere in lowland Southeast Asia, the back strap looms were abandoned, but it was expected that both types of looms would be part of a Manipuri woman’s dowry at marriage time. Today, many women in Manipur continue to wear traditional dress. It is believed that lower body garments can only be made properly on a back strap loom, while the lighter and more delicate upper body garments are best woven on the square framed, sit down loom. Additional diversity in weaving traditions resulted from Manipur’s clan structure, as each clan distinguished itself visually through wearing different textiles. Also, like the rest of Southeast Asia, court dress was shaped and guarded by sumptuary laws that stimulated the production of highly elaborate textiles that were limited in use to the valley elite. Court records state that one kind of woven silk cloth limited to use by the king, called the Ningthou Phi Shabane, took from seven to twelve months to produce. The king also awarded elaborately woven textiles to his subjects to mark their ranks and for special services. The fame of Manipuri textiles continues in modern day India. Manipuri weavers have adapted their weaving techniques to making the Indian

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sari, which is not worn in Manipur. These sari are highly regarded in India for their uniqueness; they sell for high prices and win national handicraft awards.\footnote{157 “Interview with Ibomcha Wongkheimayum, co-owner with his mother of the Rani [Queen] Silk Shop that specializes in royal designs, Age 30, Imphal, Manipur,” Research Notebook, 8/30/10.}

Captured Manipuri weavers were settled together principally in Amarapura. Weavers today know their foreign origin and take pride in the fact that their skills were once acknowledged by the palace. Lwin Naing collected oral histories in some of these Kathe weaving areas. He found that Yakkantaw village weavers reported that their ancestors wove cotton for the palace and Katipa villagers told him that shoes were not allowed in the village because they once made textiles specifically for the king.\footnote{158 Lwin Naing, “Cultural History of the Kathe Descendants in Myanmar (1783-1833),” 30.} If this is true, it fits with the royal practices seen in other parts of Southeast Asia in which the objects of the king are given reverence similar to the king himself. This can include bowing and behaving respectfully around the royal throne even when the king is not present or conveying royal correspondence on elephant back under the shade of a royal umbrella. In Katipa Village it appears that weavers and visitors had to behave as respectfully around the king’s cloth as it was being woven as if the king himself were there.

The most celebrated achievement of the Kathe weaving community is the innovative lun-taya acheik textile. Sylvia Fraser-Lu describes these textiles as “horizontal wave-patterned silk cloth woven in an interlocking tapestry weave.”\footnote{159 Fraser-Lu, Burmese Crafts, 258.} The lun-taya acheik pattern is sometimes compared to flowers floating on ocean waves, but this is only helpful if one imagines ocean waves as containing all the colors of the rainbow. The variety of lun-taya acheik styles is impressive. Colonial scholars estimated there were thirty design variations, though there were surely more than this.\footnote{160 J. G. Scott, Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States. Part I, Vol.2. (Rangoon: Government Printing, Burma, 1900), 373–4.} Figure 5.13 shows three designs.
However, what draws textile collectors to the *lun-taya acheik* is not so much the design as the intricate and labor-intensive technique with which it is made. “*Lun-taya*” means “one hundred shuttles.” Originally, one hundred tiny boat shuttles rested on the surface of the textile as it was woven (Figure 5.14 right). The weaving technique is called a tapestry weave, which means that there are no weft threads running horizontally across the length of the textile. Instead each “line” of the textile pattern is achieved by the laborious act of manipulating the tiny boat shuttles over and under the (over fifteen hundred) warp threads and locking each colored thread to the next by hand before bringing down the weft beater and repeating the process again. The name “lun-taya” does not even convey the scale of the work involved. During the King Mindon era (r. 1853-1878), the number of small boat shuttles required to create a royal *lun-taya*  

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161 These examples appear as Figure 50 and Figure 74 in Phanvasa Kunlabutr, *An Illustrated Book of Burmese Court Textiles: Luntaya-Acheiq*, trans. Steven Martin (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2004).  
acheik was increased to 120 and then to 200 shuttles.\textsuperscript{163} It takes two or sometimes three weavers working in tandem to weave this kind of textile (Figure 5.14 left). Completing one or two inches is considered a productive days work. The visual acuity required to do this work is intense, so the best weavers are usually less than thirty years old.\textsuperscript{164}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 5.14:} Weaving lun-taya acheik textiles. (Left) Three young women weaving high-quality lun-taya acheik silk, Mandalay, 2010; (Right) one hundred small boat shuttles rest on a loom. Two sheets of paper clipped above the loom give the numbered code for the textile pattern, Amarapura, 2010. (Author photographs)
\end{center}

According to Hardiman's 1901 study of silk production, Kathe people introduced the acheik design in the Letcheikdan quarter located in the southern suburbs of Amarapura near where the Patowdaw-gyi Temple stands today.\textsuperscript{165} Matua Bahadur writes that this happened in 1775, just after the two major raids into Manipur in 1765 and 1770, though cites no source for this claim.\textsuperscript{166} There is corroborating evidence in Burmese temple paintings. Art historian Jane Terry Bailey located a highly visible shift in Burmese court fashion in the Ananda temple paintings of Pagan completed in 1776. The textiles of the early Konbaung period, which Bailey describes as “roundel-based” patterns, were replaced by striped and acheik patterned textiles in the temple paintings. The paintings at the

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\textsuperscript{163} J. P. Hardiman, \textit{Silk in Burma} (Rangoon: Government Printing, Burma, 1901), 43.
\textsuperscript{164} Fraser-Lu, \textit{Burmese Crafts}, 260.
\textsuperscript{165} Hardiman, \textit{Silk in Burma}, 43.
\textsuperscript{166} Bahadur, \textit{Art of the Textile}, 112.
\end{flushright}
Kamma Kyaung-U, dated to the 1790s, are similarly replete with depictions of people wearing acheik textiles, as are many other temple paintings dated to late-18th century.167

There has always been some question about Manipuri influence on the creation of acheik designs because there is no precedence in Manipur textiles for weaving the rainbow hued waveforms of acheik, although a colorful waveform design was prevalent in Burmese paintings going back to the Pagan era.168 Creolization theory helps us understand the development of acheik textiles in Burma. Matua Bahadur noticed that within each acheik wave form there was a repeating pattern of joined hook shapes (called khoi-mayek in Manipuri), which was a staple design of Manipuri textiles.169 Manipuri weavers also used the tapestry weave technique achieved by the use of tiny boat shuttles and a supplementary weft weave that similarly involved tiny shuttles and locking threads.170 These combined techniques allowed Manipuri weavers to create colorful, sharply delineated curvilinear designs and other rounded or flower form shapes (Figure 5.15). The best way to interpret the lun-taya acheik textile is as a creolized art form in which a pre-existing Burmese aesthetic favoring colorful waveforms (in paintings) began to be produced in a new medium (textiles) following the introduction of new weaving techniques and technologies (lun-taya) by a captured people (Manipuri).

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168 Fraser-Lu, Burmese Crafts, 259–60.
170 Bahadur, Traditional Textiles of Manipur, 36–9, 43.
Figure 5.15: Manipuri textiles made using a tapestry weave, thread locking, and/or supplementary weft weaving. (Top left) Royal turban wrapper, Manipur, 18th or 19th century using all three techniques;\textsuperscript{171} (Top right and bottom row) Textiles made using the tapestry weave and locked thread techniques, from silk shops in Imphal, Manipur, 2010 (Author photographs).

The economic viability of acheik weaving in the colonial period and the connection between high quality weaving and Kathe identity helped sustain the alterity of Kathe weavers through the colonial period and into the present day. The hundred-shuttle tapestry weave technique spread from Amarapura to other regions of Burma. Acheik designs even sprang up among Mon and Arakanese weavers far from Amarapura. An economic report from 1899 reports that 9,258 men and women in the Amarapura area made their living from weaving. It was one of the few traditional sectors of the economy that expanded after the British overthrow of the Burmese monarchy. The end of sumptuary laws meant that merchants and other local people of means could purchase silk designs that were once forbidden to them. This resulted in high demand for these designs.\textsuperscript{172} As the colonial period continued, Western clothing began to displace court clothing as a signifier of success and status. The lun-taya acheik pattern nonetheless remains

\textsuperscript{171} Bahadur, \textit{Traditional Textiles of Manipur}, 58.  
\textsuperscript{172} Hardiman, \textit{Silk in Burma}, 7–8, 54–55.
the near universal textile design for weddings and formal occasions in Myanmar and is considered part of the national costume (Figure 5.16). In Thailand the revival of the silk weaving industry and the development of "Thai" silk was due in part to the ingenuity of Cham Muslim war captives and refugees. Similarly in Burma, a national fashion was born from slave gathering warfare and the processes of creolization.

Figure 5.16: Advertisements for Burmese wedding (left) and formal (right) fashions using textiles with the lun-taya acheik pattern. Sources: magazine advertisements collected by the author, 2012.

5.2 Kathe Soldiers in Ava’s Military: Cavalry, Boatmen, and Polo

The ponies of Muneepoor [Manipur] hold a very conspicuous rank in the estimation of the inhabitants of the country, to which their peculiarly blood appearance, their hardihood and vigour justly entitle them... Before the country was so repeatedly over-run by the Burmahs, they were so numerous, that almost every inhabitant of the country, however humble in his rank, possessed two or three. The national game of Hockey [polo], which is played by every male in the country capable of sitting a horse, renders them all expert equestrians; and it was by the men and horses so trained, that [Manipur could]... scour the whole country [of Upper Burma]... and plant their banners... in the heart of the capital of Ava. So deeply are the Burmese impressed with the superiority of the Muneepooree horse, that up to the present moment, the elite of their cavalry consists of
this description of trooper...
-Captain R. Boileau Pemberton, 1835 173

In the men who rowed the war-boats that accompanied the barge from Ummerapoora [Amarapura], I [saw] features differing much from the other boat-men, and a softness of countenance that resembled more the Bengal than the Birman character of face; on enquiry I learned that they were Cassayers [Kathe], or the sons of Cassayers, who had been brought away from their native country... [by] predatory incursions...
-Michael Symes, 1795174

Captured soldiers were frequently incorporated into the military of the lowland states of Southeast Asia that had captured them. Ava’s kings frequently employed two types of captive Manipuri soldiers. The first were captured Kathe cavalrymen, called by British sources the “Cassay (or Cassayer) horse.” From the first conquest of Manipur valley, Burmese kings coveted their skills. After the 1758 invasion was over, it is reported that AlaunghphaYa incorporated two thousand captured Manipuri as cavalrymen in his army. The captives were elevated to some of the most elite positions in Burmese society, though their status was still constrained by high levels of unfreedom that will be discussed below.

The second group consisted of boatmen who were employed as rowers on royal barges and war boats. The incorporation of people from a mountain valley into a navy may at first seem incongruous. However, Manipur had a long tradition of freshwater boating, fishing, and statewide boat racing. Loktak Lake is covers 110 square miles and four major rivers cross the valley. Many drainage and irrigation canals were dug that were large enough to accommodate watercraft. Boating was thus a common skill among the Manipuri.175 In Burma, royal boatmen were much lower in status than the cavalry, though they had higher status than the “free” farmers near the bottom of the social ladder.

These were not the only two military positions that Kathe people were placed into, but they were the most visible to European observers, so know more

174 Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 141.
175 Boatbuilding skills remained rudimentary, however. Even the most grandly decorated royal barges were dugouts made from single trees.
about their lives than the lives of other captured and resettled Manipuri. Two other factors combine to give us more information about cavalry servicemen in the employ of the Burmese king. The first is that military organization was crucial to state safety, so many more records were kept about the military than other categories of royal workers. The second is that Burmese scholars have already gathered and analyzed many of these unpublished court documents, likely because studying Burma’s military history was important to its military government. Much of the information in this section on the social status of the cavalry in Burma relies on an excellent doctoral thesis in History from the University of Mandalay by Moe Moe Oo. For example, Europeans frequently reported that the Manipuri dominated the cavalry. This may have been true, but Moe Moe Oo shows that many other foreign captive groups were incorporated into Ava’s military, each organized into ethnically distinct regiments. Separate cavalries were composed of Chiang Mai/Northern Thai, Lao, Shan, and Assamese. There were also units named after the villages or locales the cavalrymen lived in.176

Symes stated in 1795 that, “All the troopers in the king’s service are natives of Cassay [i.e., Kathe, Manipur], who are much better horsemen than the Birmans.” This over statement may have been due to the concentration of Kathe horsemen in the capital area. As Symes also wrote, “I was told that there were only three hundred [Kathe] cavalry in Ummerapoora [Amarapura], but that three thousand were scattered, in small detachments, throughout the neighbouring districts.”177 Kathe cavalrymen also made a strong visual impression that might have given Europeans the idea that they overwhelmingly dominated the cavalry. For reasons that remain unclear, unlike any other soldier recruited from amongst captured people, Kathe cavalry were allowed to wear their native uniform while in service to the Burmese king. Their uniform included a colorful knee-length jacket and striking naga turban in which the head wrap was twisted and stiffened to form a swooping crescent shape that emerged from the crown of the turban like a snake. Their appearance seems to have been irresistible to colonial writers and artists. European visitors almost always described them in

176 Moe Moe Oo, “Myanmar Cavalry (1752-1885)” (Ph.D., University of Mandalay, 2003), 8–9, 14.
177 Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 154.
their reports and letters home. Symes, for example, wrote: "Their dress is not unbecoming; they wear a tight coat, with skirts reaching down to the middle of the thigh, and on their head a turban of cloth, hard rolled and plaited, that forms a high cone, which bends backward in a graceful manner."178 Figure 5.17 shows colonial depictions of Kathe cavalrymen in 1795 and 1855.179

178 Ibid.
179 Their uniform seems to have changed over the sixty years between the times these images were painted.
Moe Moe Oo’s research provides a nuanced case study relevant to the discussion about unfree labor and identity in Chapter Three. Being assigned to the royal cavalry put a man in a fairly high status position, but it was a lifetime and hereditary assignment. Not every son was required to follow every father into military service, however. The palace required every sixteen households to send only two cavalrymen. The state oversaw this labor category very carefully, because of its importance to the strength of its military. The village headman, a cavalryman, was required to present the palace with household registries, a calculation of the number of cavalrymen he should be producing, and the names of all the trained horsemen in the village regiment. Cavalry were never allowed to leave their villages except when they were called to duty by the palace. Additionally, all cavalrymen in Burma were tattooed, typically with an image of a horse. Which part of the body (e.g., arm, thigh, hip, stomach, chest) was tattooed with a horse indicated the soldier’s regiment. The tattoos marked the high status of the soldiers when they were not in uniform, but, as Moe Moe Oo points out, they also kept cavalrymen from running away or shirking their duties during wartime. Certain benefits compensated for the constraints on the freedom of cavalrymen. Sumptuary laws restricted the size and style of peasant houses, but cavalrymen were allowed to build much grander houses. Cavalry were also allowed to fund large merit-making activities such as building pagodas and temple buildings, which was ordinarily forbidden to commoners. The leaders of cavalry villages were also allowed to ride on palanquins, a privilege normally restricted to royalty.

The cavalry villages, like other villages in the royal service system, had to report any cases of out-marriage between cavalrymen and people in other royal service positions. Legal disincentives kept workers in high-status occupations

180 Singey Bey, A Cassay Horseman, Engraved drawing, 1799.
181 Yule, A Narrative of the Mission... to the Court of Ava in 1855, 70.
182 Moe Moe Oo, “Myanmar Cavalry (1752-1885),” 13–16, 45.
183 Ibid., 41–46, 51.
such as cavalrymen from marrying lower status workers. As a rule, marriages between men and women in equal status positions resulted in daughters being assigned to their mother’s labor category and sons being assigned to their father’s category. However, when a high status person married downward, all the children were assigned to lower categories of occupation. Moe Moe Oo made brilliant use of marriage documents to analyze micro-differences in status in the pre-colonial labor system. From surviving court judgements, she found that cavalry workers were considered equal to the lowest ranking palace royalty, the highest-level palace servants, Ponna astrologers, and musketeers. She discovered that when cavalry workers married lower-status people such as gold miners, royal cultivators (lamaing), chanter of magical formulas, or “free” people (athi) who worked outside of the royal service system, all their offspring were assigned to work in the lower status category.\footnote{184} As Moe Moe Oo is quick to point out, this superficially resembled the Indian caste system, but the punishments for marrying lower status people were not as severe. A high-status Kathe cavalryman who married a Kathe elephant fodder collector (such as the lei-hsa-byi in this chapter’s opening poem) would not be shunned, expelled from his village, physically punished, or even demoted. It would only mean his sons and daughters would become elephant fodder gatherers. Thus marrying down was discouraged, not forbidden as in the caste system.

The depopulation of Manipur produced one surprisingly widespread cultural transfer that first expanded across the South and Southeast Asian region and then globally. As R. B. Pemberton described above: “The national game of Hockey [polo], which is played by every male in the country capable of sitting a horse, renders them all expert equestrians...”\footnote{185} The Seven-Year Devastation of Manipur (1819-1826) resulted in the permanent resettlement of many Manipuri outside of the valley, especially to the west in the part of Northeast India now called Assam. In the 1830s the British came to recognize the hilly regions of Assam as prime tea-growing land. Between 1840 and 1850, tea plantations claimed large tracts of land throughout Assam. This brought Manipuri refugees into close and sustained contact with the British for the first time. As P. B. Singh

\footnote{184} Ibid., 29–32.  
\footnote{185} Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, 33.
describes it, tea plantations climbed steep hillsides. Walking them on foot was impossible, so British plantation officials developed decent skills as horsemen by patrolling and surveying their land. Remnants of Manipur’s cavalry living in the region played a game called pulu. British plantation workers soon became taken by the sport. Manipuri were invited to play demonstration matches at the British club and the British soon took up the game. In 1859, the first polo club was formed in Silchar (the capital of Cachar, now part of Assam) and the game a set of rules were proposed. Tea plantation managers and soldiers promoted the game, including Lieutenant Robert Sherer, who has been called the “Father of Polo” (Figure 5.18 top left). In 1860, Manipuri players were invited to Calcutta to demonstrate the game, where it was then taken up by the Calcutta Light Cavalry and the British business community. This led to the formation of the Calcutta Polo Club in 1869. The game became popular throughout British India. The British military and colonial business elites spread the game still further. In 1869, it also gained a foothold in England. The first formal polo match was between the 10th Hussars and the 9th Lancers at Hounslow Heath. The first tournament was held in 1876. The game was taken up in Malta in 1869, in Ireland and Wales in 1872, in the United States in 1876, and in Argentina and Australia in 1879. It had been played in Burma earlier, but Manipuri cavalrymen re-popularized it during the reign of King Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1837) so that there developed a “vogue in polo-playing and other equestrian sports which…swept the court…” (Figure 5.18 bottom).

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186 The British evidently felt the Manipuri played the game without rules.
In Manipur the game had religious origins. Mythology records that the game *pulu*, formally called *sagon-khanjei* in Manipuri, was played between the founding patriarchs of each of Manipur’s seven clan groups. Clan leaders were worshiped in the indigenous religion of Manipur as founding spirits or gods (*lai*), so polo has the status of a divine pastime. Polo sticks are one of the offerings that can be given to a shrine or included among the god’s possessions before an altar.

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190 Unknown Court Artist(s), *Folding Manuscript About Court Activities, Lancers at Polo*, Painting digitized, c 1880, Victoria and Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/.
The Lai Haraoba frequently contains a section in which the priestess (maibi) takes a polo stick in hand and performs a dance that reenacts the polo game. However, Singh argues that the game probably has more prosaic origins. A game of ball and stick on horseback was popular amongst Asian nomads and was known in Persia and Tibet. It spread into the Muslim world and was played by the Moghuls in the 16th century, but died out before the British arrived in India. In all likelihood polo spread into Manipur during the Moghul era, so is not a two-thousand-year-old game of the gods.

Kathe boatmen were also highly visible to colonial officials, not because of their striking costumes, but because officials were frequently conveyed to ceremonies, entertainments, and meetings and they could not help but notice the rowers. Symes (quoted in full above) recognized a “softness of countenance” among many of the war-boat oarsmen and was told by his Burmese interlocutor that they looked different because they were Kathe people taken from Manipur. The colonial artist Colesworthy Grant, part of Phayre’s 1855 mission to Burma, sketched a trio of Kathe boatmen while he was being transported by boat (Figure 5.19). One aspect of the picture is worth pointing out as it shows a shift in presentations of masculinity among these captives. In Burma, men were expected to add tattoos to the area between their knees and hips. Almost all Burmese men were so densely tattooed that from a distance it looked to Europeans as though they were wearing indigo shorts. Not getting tattooed was a sign of effeminacy. Shwe Yoe (James Scott) wrote that “there is not a single upcountry man... who is not decorated with the dark blue tracery. They would as soon think of wearing a woman’s skirt as of omitting to be tattooed, and they are strengthened in the feeling by the opinion of the girls themselves.” The Kathe boatmen in Colesworthy Grant’s sketch are tattooed in the Burmese manner, although lowland Manipuri had no tattooing culture for men or soldiers. Manipuri captives assigned to military service had evidently absorbed new standards of masculinity in their new country. This is another interesting example of shifting cultural patterns among captive people.

193 Symes, “Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava 1795,” 141.
194 Scott, The Burman: His Life and Notions by Shway Yoe, 39.
In late August of 1830, Henry Burney and R. B. Pemberton attended royal boat rowing competition in Amarapura. These were quarter-mile races toward the king who was seated on a sailboat observing the race. Paper flowers were given to the winning team “and the different Boat’s crews shouted and danced like madmen after they passed.” Burney was told that “almost the whole of the boatmen in the numerous war boats which we saw this day, were either Cassayers (Kathe) or descendant of Cassayers.” Burney found them boring, and wanted to leave early. On his exit, boatmen in the employ of a high-ranking

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prince “disrespectfully” splashed his boat. He described the boatmen as having a “turbulent and insolent spirit and character” and took steps to have them punished. Pemberton was less bored by the events of the day. He reported that one boat was crewed by “Katchins” (Kachin, an upland minority group) and another by “Siamese” (Yodaya).

Pemberton later visited the home of a Kathe boatman. Pemberton had lived in Manipur a long time and spoke Manipuri, so he often conversed in that language with U Sa, his liaison at the palace. During a court visit on August 26, 1830, Pemberton wrote, “I happened to say something to Moung Za [U Sa] in Munipooree, when a fine-looking old man, who was sitting on the ground by his side, started and said: ‘Why, he speaks Munipooree!’ And then requested permission to address me, which was given.” In the exchange Pemberton learned that the old boatman had been born in Ava to a man who had been captured during King Alaungphaya’s 1758 raid on Manipur. The old boatman was present in court because he held the position of “head boatman to the king” and was married to a Burmese woman, with whom he had had many children. “The old Munipooree begged that we would honour his house with a visit,” Pemberton writes, “which we did...”

Pemberton’s notes about this meeting speak to the forces of assimilation within the Burmese labor system. My thesis, of course, concerns opposite forces, since I argue that the elective alterity of a creole population can ameliorate assimilation and sustain outsider identities. Creolization did not dominate the adaptations made by most captives to living in their new country, however. Most captives assimilated completely unless a stereotype of innate excellence in a certain field of labor became attached to their ethnic identity, as in the case of cavalry and weavers. Boatmen were different. There was no stereotype that connected Manipuri ethnicity with some inborn talent for galley rowing. This old

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197 Pemberton, “Journey from Munipoor to Ava,” 56.
198 U Sa was the Myawaddy Minister (Mingyi). Earlier in this thesis I noted that U Sa was a translator of Thai songs and plays and composed the first Yodaya songs. Aside from being a poet, musician, and translator, U Sa was also a soldier. He led troops during the 1813 invasion of Manipur. He learned to speak Manipuri and English and read Sanskrit. His genius and open-minded inquisitiveness made him an ideal intermediary between the palace and Western diplomats. Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 68–9.
boatman held a high status position that required him to be present in the court and he was “in high favour with His Majesty, who has been uniformly kind and liberal to him,” but it was not because he was Kathe. Captives and their descendants filled the ranks as boatmen in the royal labor system because it was hot, backbreaking work. Different rowers held different social status, as can be seen by the clothing of rowers in Figure 5.20 below.200 Rowers in the direct employ of the king might hold a little higher status in society, but it was not coupled to their Manipuri/Kathe identity. We would therefore expect them to assimilate into Burmese society within two or three generations. And so it was with the king’s head boatman.

Pemberton remarked that the boatman’s house was “the very best... in the neighbourhood.” It was large and elevated ten feet up on stilts. It was built entirely of wood and tile, which was surely a sign of the “King’s attachment” and “kindness” for the boatman. Pemberton wrote, “He told me that the King’s bounty had enabled him to buy numerous houses, dig a large pukka tank, that his slaves and cattle were numerous, and that he, in short, wanted nothing.” Pemberton concluded that it was “[n]o wonder” that the man’s “attachments are all concentrated here [in Burma].” Of the man’s seventeen children, all but three had moved out of the family home. His youngest son and two daughters were brought forward to meet Pemberton. Pemberton described one of the boys in a way that suggests a process of assimilation that is usually assumed by scholars, but mostly invisible in indigenous and colonial archives. He wrote: “He brought his youngest son to me... [who] did not understand a word of Munipooree, and had not any appearance of his descent being from that quarter [because his mother was Burmese].” We see in this family a process of integration that seems to follow the commonly accepted “three generation” rule in which the father arrives as a captured person, his son gains some success and marries a local woman, and the grandson, almost completely estranged from the culture of his grandfather, assumes the identity of the dominant culture (Burman) and participates as a full member of that society. Nevertheless, Pemberton surmised

200 Their ethnicity is not mentioned, but colonial reports would lead us to believe that they were Kathe or assimilated Kathe.
that his visit and his ability to speak Manipuri with the old boatman must have “touched some latent feeling of patriotism, which scarcely ever totally dies.”

Figure 5.20: Two royal boatmen wearing clothes indicating different social status. (Left) Gold jewelry and a gilded helmet suggest this rower worked on one of the king’s personal boats; (Right) The simpler uniform suggests this is a low status rower. Dated between 1853-1885.
Source: Unknown Court Artist, *Drawings from the Burmese Court at Mandalay (Album of 48 drawings)*, Victoria and Albert Museum.

5.3 Kathe Ponna Ramayana

According to the oral traditions of the Kathe Ponna communities in both Minde Ekin and Thameedaw Ze, during the reign of King Mindon (r. 1853-1878) the Ponna were invited to perform their version of the Ramayana at the palace. Unfortunately, the Kathe Ponna Ramayana is more an aural than visual performance. The Kathe Ponna, like the Manipuri Brahmins and Bengali Brahmins, perform the Ramayana by chanting and playing sacred music. The band is simple by comparison to a Burmese royal orchestra, since it is composed

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201 All quoted text about the boatman from ibid., 54.
only of drums, chimes, and clackers. These rhythmic instruments establish a slow, somewhat hypnotic, rhythm while the Ponna, seated in a large circle, chant long passages of Ramayana poetry in old Bengali and Sanskrit. The sound is florid and relaxing and participants chant for long hours, so it is difficult to imagine it holding the attention of an audience for very long. Mindon’s call to perform in the palace stimulated the development of a more visual Ponna Ramayana. The empty space in the center of the chanting circle was filled in with Yodaya-style masked dancers. Creolizing interactions transformed the chanting tradition into a wildly hybrid Ramayana performance tradition that today incorporates multiple languages and musical traditions, Yodaya, Kathe, hip-hop, and Bollywood dances, and dramatic and comedic theatrics.

The development of this new theatrical tradition is the subject of this section. This artistic tradition exemplifies lateral cultural exchange between two captive groups. The Kathe Ponna drew inspiration and ideas from Yodaya performers. These two captive communities were settled only about ten blocks away from one another, which facilitated their cultural exchange and development of the vibrant Kathe Ponna Ramayana theater tradition.

Daw Than Than Nyo, a sixty-six year old coffee shop owner in Mandalay, is somewhat estranged from the Ponna community because she married a Buddhist and so can no longer eat with her family. She was not comfortable talking about this estrangement, but was happy to discuss Ponna entertainment. She recalled the last time she saw an outdoor performance of the Kathe Ponna Ramayana about fifty years ago, when she was fourteen years old. Her father managed a Ponna theatrical troupe (zat pwe) that won a prize in the 1950s for their performance of the Ramayana at the Mandalay Centenary Celebrations. She said the performers wore masks like the Burmese, but their costumes were a little different. The Kathe Ponna Ramayana is no longer performed in public.203

Toun Ohn is fifty-eight years old and a practitioner of traditional Ponna medicine. He was also happy to recount the old tradition of performing the play in public. The last time he saw it done he was about twenty years old. His father used to dance as the Ravana (Dathagiri) character and his brother danced.

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Lakshmana. Toun Ohn showed me a remarkable family heirloom, a bi-lingual (English and Burmese) flyer dated December 1914 announcing the entertainment scheduled in celebration of the Fourth Anniversary of Durbar Day (Figure 5.21). The 1911 Delhi Durbar was an imperial celebration held in India to mark the coronation of King George V. The opening and closing days of the 4th anniversary celebration held in Upper Burma were dedicated to the “Grand Ramayana Sacred Play and Prayers.” The Burmese words state more clearly that the “Brahman Ponna Rama Royal Play [Byamaṇa ponna yama-zat tawkyi]” will be presented. The flyer promised that closing night would be a spectacle, since Kathe Ponna were going to employ an “aerial wiring arrangements” that would likely be used to send flying characters such as Hanuman soaring up over the stage (see enlarged insert at bottom of Figure 5.21).

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204 “Interview with Toun Ohn,” Research Notebook, 12/22/10.
Troupes of Kathe Ponna that travelled around the capital zone performing the “Brahman Ponna Rama Royal Play” gradually disappeared from public view. Their version of the play suffered the same fate as the palace version of the Ramayana and many other royal arts. The overthrow of the monarchy in 1885 led to a momentary surge in the popularity of royal arts and resulted in new employment for palace artisans. The day after the British forces led King Thibaw and Queen Sapayalat to a boat and sent them into exile in India, sumptuary laws became a thing of the past and there was a surge of demand for “royal” things, especially silk and jewelry, among the merchant communities of Mandalay and other wealthy people. At first, palace actors found employment in this
environment, but eventually left Mandalay to work in Rangoon’s bustling commercial theater.\textsuperscript{205}

After the turn of the century, demand for full performances of the Ramayana died out all over Burma. They were replaced in popularity by the much livelier nighttime \textit{zat pwe} theatrical tradition conducted outdoors during pagoda festivals and other public celebrations. To a Western viewer, this theatrical tradition looks like cabaret. Catherine Diamond describes the nighttime \textit{zat pwe} as an “extravagant variety show combining religious ritual, pop songs, traditional dances, modern plays, comic skits, and classical dramas that kept the performers on the stage from ten in the evening until seven the next morning.”\textsuperscript{206} With the rise of the nighttime \textit{zat pwe}, the Ramayana was gradually reduced to short performances of the most popular scenes within a larger collage of theatrical entertainments. Demand for night-long or multi-night performances of the Ramayana diminished until it had almost completely disappeared from public view by the 1970s. A couple of decades later, the Myanmar Ministry of Culture staged three nationwide Ramayana competitions (in 1998, 1999, and 2002) in an attempt to revive this theatrical tradition.\textsuperscript{207} They were popular but did not succeed in reviving the Burmese Ramayana.

Public performances of the Kathe Ponna Ramayana likewise declined once royal patronage was gone. However, unlike the Burmese Ramayana, the Ponna Ramayana continued to be performed privately in community rituals. Thus the Ponna Ramayana transformed from a fairly low-key “private” sacred ritual into a “public” spectacle and then back into a “private,” albeit much livelier, ritual. Kathe Ponna perform the Ramayana today wearing costumes and masks and accompanied by full orchestras. While both Thailand and Myanmar governments are attempting to preserve their fading Ramayana traditions, the Ramayana is being performed many times a year in two Mandalay neighborhoods. Kathe Ponna stay awake all night to watch and participate as

\textsuperscript{205} Thein Han (U) and Khin Zaw (U), “Ramayana in Myanmar Literature and Art,” 250.


\textsuperscript{207} Thaw Kaung, “Myanmar Dramatic Literature, Its Rise and Decline,” 268. Catherine Diamond attended 2002 competition and reviewed it in Diamond, “Ramayana.”
self-taught amateurs in a hybrid Ramayana tradition that combines performance styles from Burma, Thailand, and Manipur.

Interestingly, King Gharib Nawaz (r. 1709-1748), the first king to forcibly convert the valley population to Hinduism, initially favored the Ramanandi branch of Hinduism that believes Rama to be an incarnation of Vishnu and so strongly incorporates Rama worship into devotional practices. Gharib Nawaz had a Bengali language Ramayana translated into Manipuri. He invited Bengali chanters into the palace to perform the Ramayana and had statues made of Rama, his three brothers, and his wife Sita. The shrine that Gharib Nawaz built to Hanuman is still a significant place of worship in Manipur. However, after the death of Gharib Nawaz Ramanandi practice was abandoned in favor of devotional practices with more focus on the cult of Radha and Krishna. The evaporation of state-sponsored Ramanandi practice likely curbed the development of the Ramayana in the arts of Manipur, and as a result the story did not ascend to become an important part of Manipur’s theatrical tradition.

The Ramayana traditions that did develop in Manipur were largely non-theatrical, or with limited performative qualities. The story is conveyed almost entirely through storytellers, minstrels, and singers on various instruments. There are also traditions of recitation and interpretation into modern spoken Manipuri. In sharp contrast, Manipur is famous throughout India for its performance traditions, particularly that of the Ras Lila that reenacts the story of Krishna, in the guise of a cowherd, expressing his divine love to Radha through dance and gesture. According to E. Nilakanta Singh, in the past the “best possible composite expression” of the Ramayana was on the first day of the Durga Puja Festival when, in order to banish evil from the valley:

“The Manipuri King, as a representative of Rama, plays the role of going to the battlefield, being accompanied by his nobles on palanquins and horse back (the King rides the elephant) and the

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army all move in a procession. A 10-headed effigy of Ravana is [then] shot by arrows, replaced latter by gun shots...²¹¹

To summarize, story telling and presentational versions of the Ramayana were present in the Manipur valley after the early-18th century, but only in a limited way. The Manipuri Brahmins had a tradition of chanting in old Bengali with percussive musical accompaniment. However, the Brahmins of Manipur did not perform theatrically. As was explained to me many times in Manipur, the role of Brahmins is to conduct rituals, not to “perform” which would be seen as beneath their status as ritual practitioners. The idea of a Manipuri Brahmin donning a mask and dancing in a play is difficult to imagine in the Hindu cultural context of Manipur.

In December 2010, U Aung Myint, a Kathe Ponna who was knowledgeable about Ramayana traditions in his neighborhood, kindly led me through the Thameedaw Ze Kathe Ponna community. We went from one family mandap to another. Almost all of them stored sets of Ramayana dancing masks that strongly resembled masks from Thailand. The community’s wide spread devotion to Ramayana performance was impressive, but the masks seemed to be crudely made from papier-mâché, glue, and hobby paint. My disappointment over the quality of the masks vanished when I went to the family compound of Saya [Astrologer] U Khin Maung San. There I met Thameedaw Ze’s only professional mask maker, Ko Win Myin. He told me he had learned his skill from his father and grandfather; his masks were fantastically well made. He also owned two heirloom masks of Rama and his brother Lakshmana which he said were over one hundred years old (Figure 5.22 center). If this is true, they could have been worn on the head of an actor yanked skyward by “aerial wiring” on the 1914 Durbar Day performance.

Ko Win Myin explained his artistic process to me. It closely parallels how professional mask makers still work in Thailand. He puts layers of papier-mâché over a rough model of a human head. The paper is strengthened and decorated by coats of lacquer. The mask is further decorated with lacquer putty molded to look like filigree and other decorations, then inlaid with glass mosaic and fake

²¹¹ Ibid., 75.
gemstones. I asked Ko Win Myin how long he had been making Ramayana masks in the Thai-style (see photo on right in Figure 5.22). He was surprised by the question because he didn’t know what the “Thai-style” was. He told me his masks were a Manipuri tradition and he was sure they looked like the masks made in Manipur up to this day. It was shocking to me that he had labored for so long as a mask maker without knowing the cultural origins of the artisanal skill he had mastered. The colors and designs had evidently been passed down in his family without any discussion of Thailand.212

![Figure 5.22: Ramayana masks. (Left) Ravana mask held by mask-maker, Ko Win Myin; (Center) Antique masks of Rama and Lakshmana and a Hanuman mask made by Ko Win Myin; (Right) Lakshmana, Rama, and Hanuman on a wai khru altar in Bangkok.](image)

Source: Author photographs. Left and center photos taken 12/21/2010; right photo taken 2/4/2011.

Other members of the Kathe Ponna community were more aware that Yodaya traditions had influenced their performance of the Ramayana. Toun Ohn joked that the Kathe Ponna Ramayana was seventy percent Yodaya.213 Other performers I interviewed could tell me whenever a song or dance switched into Yodaya style. I sat one evening in December 2010 with the Kathe Ponna astrologer U Khin Maung San (fifty-nine years old) and his wife Hera Devi (sixty-three) and watched a VCD recording of an all night Ramayana performance they had hosted in his family’s mandap a year earlier in June. The performance was by

213 “Interview with Toun Ohn,” December 22, 2010
the Thameedaw Ze all-female amateur Ramayana troupe. Khin Maung San oversaw production of the play and his wife was the lead singer in the chorus. The performance focused on a single scene, the bow lifting contest in which Rama defeats his rival Ravana in a contest for the hand of Sita in marriage. The performance we watched on VCD had originally gone from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. The performers ranged in age from five to about twenty-five with some older women in their sixties performing comic roles.214

Before the play begins, actors must purify themselves and pay ritual respect to the masks. As there is no mask dancing tradition amongst Manipuri Brahmins, this is obviously an example of creolization. The Kathe Ponna absorbed the Thai wai khru ceremony as part of their adoption of Ramayana dance. The players travel down to the banks of the Irrawaddy river to clean themselves since regular water would not be pure enough. They then return to pay respect to the masks. They call this a kataw pwe (bowing ceremony). The masks are lined up in front of the family shrine, candles are lit, fruit and coconut offerings are made, and the performers garland each mask. Each mask has a spirit in it, Khin Maung San explained, so the players must pray to be safe. The masks require proper respect, especially the mask of Ravana, who is a powerful spirit that can endanger the mind of the actor if handled without proper care. Khin Maung San’s extended family also makes costumes that resemble the theatrical costumes of Yodaya palace performers. He explained that these were the clothes of gods, so it was not proper to rent them from a theatrical store. By tradition they make fifteen outfits: four for Rama and his three brothers, four for the most important ogres, three for monkeys, and four more for court ministers.

Khin Maung San explained that the Ponna always hire a Burmese orchestra to play Yodaya and Burmese songs in conjunction with the Ponna music. Ponna music is rhythmically very slow so it is inappropriate for the action and battle sequences that require the relatively quicker and more dramatic Yodaya-style music and dance. Different scenes required different combinations. There are songs in Bengali, Burmese, and Manipuri. The dialogue is mostly spoken in Manipuri, but can shift between languages as characters speak in

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214 This and the following paragraphs draw from my interviews with U Khin Maung San and Daw Hara Devi.
Burmese, Bengali, and other languages. For example, Khin Maung San told me that the performance has to start out loudly to wake up the audience, so it begins with a popular battle scene between Hanuman and Indrajit, a powerful ogre, with crashing music played by the Burmese orchestra. A musical interlude follows that is outside of the narrative as babies dressed as Hanuman are danced around the stage by older actors. It is believed that this will make the babies healthier and cleverer.

The next extended phase of dancing relies on a different mix of theatrical traditions. In this section, Rama and his three brothers dance with their four respective wives. The Ponna chorus starts this section by singing about the beauty of Sita in Bengali interspersed with poetic passages in Manipuri. The Ponna orchestra supplies rhythmic music. After awhile, the Burmese orchestra starts playing and the Bengali chorus adjusts the rhythm to match the orchestra. The dancing changes too, shifting from slow, gentle gestures that the audience would describe as “Kathe style” to jauntier movements said to be “Yodaya style.” When the part of the play depicting the bow-lifting contest begins, the Burmese orchestra adjusts its rhythm and tempo to match that of the Kathe Ponna music so that the chorus can accompany them. An interstitial scene of Ravana in Lanka enjoying his own court’s entertainment is comically leavened by a troupe of Ponna boys in drag, dancing to popular international disco music. It is a winking suggestion that things are peculiar in the ogre kingdom, but it also adds another layer to the wild transcultural world of the Ponna Ramayana. A few scenes later when Ravana tries in vain to win Sita’s hand at the bow-lifting contest, there is a moment when all the cultural elements synchronize for a moment. The lyrics, the instrumentation, and the dancing style of Ravana are all “Burmese” according to Khin Maung San. As soon as the dance ends the singers start up again in old Bengali and the wild mixing begins again.

To watch seven hours of the Kathe Ponna Ramayana is to watch creolization as a maddening kinetic entertainment. If cultural traditions were paint buckets, then watching this play is like watching Jackson Pollock attack a canvas. Colors fly in wild patterns, merging, layering, and blending. Every color available is put to use in the creation of this new and unexpected piece of art. U Aung Myint, a theater aficionado and my guide through the Thameedaw Ze
community, told me that every Kathe Ponna family performs the Ramayana in a different way.\textsuperscript{215} The Kathe Ponna Ramayana is a polyglot entertainment and as such it speaks elegantly to the gifts of a community that once served as the chief translators for the Burmese palace. But its polyglot qualities are as much literal as they are symbolic because as an entertainment the Kathe Ponna Ramayana also describes a historical process in which many disparate voices were corralled into a single chorus.

6. Conclusion

In the manifesto \textit{In Praise of Creoleness}, it is argued that the experience of slavery stripped Africans of their cultures, forcing them to rebuild their culture in the Americas. The rebuilding process was accomplished in cultural settings of great cultural diversity. The new cultures built under these circumstances represented a “transactional-aggregate” built from multiple languages, cultures, and religious beliefs that together forged a “new humanity.”\textsuperscript{216} The only way to tell the history of captive people is to understand their history as a braiding together of all the peoples and cultures that they encountered throughout their long process of cultural reconstruction. Identities and artistic worldviews are similar kinds of aggregate formations. The history of creole interactions can be seen in the art that they create and the cultural activities they participate in. The Kathe Ponna Ramayana is a near perfect manifestation of a creole art form with its two orchestras, songs and dialogs in three languages, and blending of three dance traditions. As an art form it can be read as pulling from all of the recent historical experiences and cultural interactions of the Kathe people.

\textsuperscript{215} “Interview with U Aung Myint, Thameedaw Ze, Mandalay, Burma,” Research Notebook, 12/20/10 and 12/21/10.
\textsuperscript{216} Barnabe et al., \textit{In Praise of Creoleness}, 891.
Conclusion.

The Creole City and Cultural Entanglements in Mainland Southeast Asia

*Our history is a braid of histories... Creoleness is the world diffracted but recomposed.*

-Bernabe, Chamoiseau, and Confiant

"...each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."

-Edouard Glissant

Creolization theorists understand culture and identity as unbound, mobile categories constantly being transformed and reformed by historical events and in interactions between cultures. Cultures and identities are forever unfinished. Relationships between cultures are dialogical. Each transforms the other through interaction and exchange. Taken seriously, this notion has profound implications for historians. If cultural identities can shift, extend, or change through transcultural interactions, then the history of any people must be written as a “braid” of human connection, to paraphrase the Creole manifesto. The cultural interactions with “Others” that shape the identities of historical subjects must be wound into the historical narratives of any group of people.

Creolization theorists believe that there has been a long scholarly bias toward “pure” or “classical” cultures. Bernabe, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, the authors of *In Praise of Creoleness* passionately challenge what they perceive as Western historical and intellectual frameworks that marginalize the study of hybrid cultural places and peoples. They argue that scholars have focused wrongly on places of putative cultural purity (i.e., Europe, China, India) while places and people known for their dynamic cultural mixing (e.g., the Caribbean, Southeast Asia) exist in an academic no man’s land. Culturally chaotic places have remained on the fringes of scholarly interest. Flipping this bias is a political

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1 *In Praise of Creoleness*, 892.
2 *Poetics of Relation* 11.
and ethical project among Creole scholars. First, they believe there is no such thing as “pure” culture and that all world cultures have undergone processes of hybridization and transcultural exchange. Second, they argue that accelerating globalization has transformed all the cities in the world into something very similar to the Caribbean islands of the past, in that increasingly diverse kinds of people are brought into dense conditions where they cannot avoid rubbing against other cultural shoulders. Bold proponents of creolization theory promote the Caribbean as a “master symbol” or root metaphor that all of us can use to comprehend modern processes of globalization. Relevant histories of transcultural exchange should be written from the locations of intersection rather than from the fringes. The complex transcultural history of Southeast Asia can be approached in the same way.

Creolization theorists extend their ethical project even further. Edouard Glissant, for example, believes that false notions of religious, cultural, and racial purity are at the root of many 20th century outbreaks of communal violence and warfare and that these notions continue to drive violence in the present. In history classes, school children are taught that religious and cultural identities have fixed boundaries that conform to the nation-state. Heated nationalistic rhetoric convinces us that these imagined boundaries must be defended with blood. Glissant and the authors of In Praise of Creoleness believe that learning about histories of places where cross-cultural toleration developed and writing histories grounded in cultural exchange and accommodation could dispel the toxic historical “imaginary” of purity and fixed cultural and religious boundaries.

At their most optimistic, advocates of creolization theory believe that this research agenda produces both a “model of” and a “model for” our troubled world system. These authors believe that studying transcultural, hybridized world regions has the redemptive potential for naturalizing cultural exchange in a world where interacting with the Other has become fraught with danger.

The ethical drive of creolization theory compelled the study presented in these pages. The core idea in this thesis is simple: cultural exchanges between captives and their captors were dialogical. Older models of interaction assumed that captives assimilated to the cultures of their captors. Within two or three generations, captured populations adopted the language, dress, and religion of
the societies that had captured them. My argument eschews this unilinear model of cultural transmission from dominant to subordinate peoples in favor of examining a more complex process of exchange. I show how captives and captor societies were transformed by transcultural exchange. Dominant societies absorbed desirable aspects of captives' cultures, while simultaneously the captives and their descendants were transformed by living amongst their captors. Many captives eventually assimilated, but others creolized and maintained a sense of alterity from the dominant society in which they were kept captive. Those who became creoles retained histories of themselves as originating from a foreign land.

Nationalist sentiments in mainland Southeast Asian states have kept alive the histories of 18th and 19th century warfare. Interstate tensions between Laos and Thailand, Thailand and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam, or Burma and Thailand inevitably lead to repetitious recounting of slave gathering warfare and historical victimization. This research has sought to sidestep these state-centered histories of warfare for one that centers more on the human experience. I have focused my research on the experiences and agency of captives taken in warfare: their individual suffering as they were enslaved and their creation of Creole identities, cultures, and arts in the lands of their captivity.

Creolization is only a small part of a larger history of transculturation. In Chapter One, I described the complexity of transcultural exchange as involving an interaction between “vectors” of exchange (the forces that bring different cultural groups into contact) and the cultural “matrix” or milieu in which these exchanges take place. The potential for transculturation can be promoted, shaped, or constrained by the contexts in which it takes place, the parties involved, the political and social relations between the groups exchanging culture, and so on. My research is limited to transcultural exchanges between captives from distant places (mostly Ayutthaya and Manipur) and the society (Upper Burma) in which they were held captive. A much fuller understanding of creolization in Southeast Asia would extend to examining the vector of upland-lowland slavery. Upper Burma and many other states in mainland Southeast Asia took advantage of warfare between upland peoples to purchase war captives from the victorious tribes. This meant there was a slow but steady movement of
people from mountainous areas into lowland states. This vector likely interacted
with a different matrix of exchange than the one I discuss in this thesis, as
lowlanders held the cultures of many upland peoples in low regard. Any
transcultural exchanges that took place must have been very different from the
ones I have described.

Creolization exchanges occur within the context of enslavement, but they
cannot be isolated from other forms of transcultural exchange. This is
particularly the case between neighboring states. For example, Upper Burma
(predominantly ethnic Burman) and Lower Burma (predominantly ethnic Mon)
engaged in regular warfare that resulted in captives being circulated between
these different polities. Traders and religious pilgrims also moved between the
states, which combined with the movement of captives to create another matrix
of cultural exchange. A similar history of interaction occurred between Upper
Burma and the Shan kingdoms in the mountain valleys of Upland Burma. This
transcultural mix was further leavened by the addition of communities of foreign
merchants, religious missionaries, pilgrims, war refugees, and colonizers.

Some of the transcultural forces at play in Upper Burma are hinted at in a
late 19th century British colonial report about village life in Sagaing, a former
royal capital located just across the Irrawaddy river from Mandalay. The report
began by presenting the demographic data for villages around Sagaing.³ The
report described the town of Sagaing as containing “several quarters inhabited
by Manipuri (Kathes), descendants of war captives” brought to the area by
Burmese kings. In the past, the report stated, they “rendered service as cavalry
and boatmen, some too by weaving and embroidering silk clothes for the Royal
Family.” Living among these workers “were a number of Brahmins who... still
preserve their religion and customs and white Manipuri dress; among
themselves they talk Manipuri.” The non-Brahmin “Kathes, however, have
adopted Buddhism in addition to their native belief in nats. These Kathe have
also adopted Burmese dress, and only wear Manipuri-style clothing on holy days,
the men have adopted the Burmese traditions of tattooing their thighs, and

³ I discussed one of Sagaing’s villages, Linzin Su, in Chapter One. In this village, Kathe
descendants worshipped a matriarchal pantheon of eight local spirits. The most potent, Kitani,
could control poisonous snakes.
among them only the elders speak Manipuri.” The discussion of the Kathe closes with a fascinating supposition: “So numerous were these Kathe captives that it is even asserted that the majority of the riverine population in these parts were originally Manipuris who have now become indistinguishable from the Burmese.”

The transcultural diversity of the Sagaing area runs even deeper. In the 17th century, the area was settled by colonies of war captives from Chiang Mai and the Shan states who worked as royal bodyguards, military men, and slaves of the Kaunghmudaw temple. Most of these people have “entirely merged in the larger Burmese community,” according to the report, but in the village of Kyawmin, “its people have preserved the tradition of their origin intact.” The other group that had not blended in consisted of temple slaves, because “the stigma of temple service has prevented nearly all admixture with the other inhabitants of the Kaunghmudaw villages.” Historical records show that Mon war captives employed in the dangerous but high status work of catching and training elephants also occupied many villages in the area. Only one remained by 1900, the island village of Pyinka where “[m]any of them even now will not wear black coats or scarlet handkerchiefs because they form part of the dress of their most dreaded nat.” There were also clusters of Muslim villages, some comprised of descendants from war captives taken in 1602 from Syriam in Lower Burma. Others Muslims had more obscure histories but “it is probable that they came over voluntarily for purposes of trade.” These Muslims all wore Burmese clothing and spoke Burmese and only a few were able to read the Koran in Arabic. They made their living as itinerant herbalists, petty traders, and herders of cows, sheep, and goats. Two villages near Amyin were settled by war captives taken from Arakan in 1784. They were assigned to bring spring water from the village to the palace. Few intermarried with Burmese and the elders could still speak Arakanese. Near the Arakanese in Amyin were the descendants of Portuguese war captives taken to central Burma in 1613. They had fair complexions and still practiced Roman Catholicism. There were also growing

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4 All the quoted text in this paragraph is from L. M. Parlett, Report of the Settlement Operations in the Sagaing District, Season 1893-1900 (Rangoon: Government Printing, Burma, 1903), 4.
5 Ibid., 3.
populations of Chinese and Indians living in the larger towns and villages in the Sagaing area.6

The demographic diversity of mainland Southeast Asian states was and is remarkable, but studies that attempt to map the transcultural exchanges that resulted from so much diversity are daunting. My research represents only the smallest slice of the creolization pie in mainland Southeast Asia. A fuller vision would have to include all of the people described in the colonial report cited above. Future cultural historians of Southeast Asia could also embark upon a history of transculturation that combines cultural exchanges within the context of slavery with other forms of exchange.

Creolization has been poetically described as “encounter and entanglement in uneven terrains.”7 The innocuously titled Report of the Settlement Operations in the Sagaing District, Season 1893-1900 describes entanglements upon entanglements spreading over varied cultural terrains. The future of Burmese (and Southeast Asian) historiography is in grappling with this challenge.

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6 Ibid., 4.
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