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HOW TO (UN)MAKE A CHAKRAVARTI KING: KINGSHIP IN U HPO HLAING’S *RAJADHAMMASANGAHA* AND BAGIS SARMA’S *NITILATANKUR*

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This paper offers a comparative analysis of two 19th century texts of political advice, ethics and kingship composed at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, respectively in the Buddhist court of Konbaung Burma and the Hinduized milieu of the Tai-Ahom kingdom of Assam. The first text, *Rajadhammasangaha*, a treatise on kingship and polity in Burmese, was penned in 1878 by U Hpo Hlaing, a prominent courtier, minister and intellectual in King Mindon’s entourage, purportedly as a guide for the potential reforms and “righteous” kingly conduct in the government of the Kingdom of Burma as a young Thibaw-min, the last Burmese monarch, was just installed on the throne as Mindon’s successor. The second text, *Nitilatankur* was composed sometime in the first decade of the 19th century by a court poet named Bagis Sarma under the patronage of an Ahom military general. The two texts were embedded and encoded in two interrelated but divergent frameworks of kingship: one, the Buddhist *dharmaraja*, righteous kingship, and the other, the Brahmanical *devaraja*, divinised kingship. This study argues that while the Burmese text outlined a revolutionary proposal for devolution of *chakravarti* kingship into a form of constitutional monarchy and abolition of kingly absolutism drawing on the contractual nature of Buddhist kingship and global constitutionalist ideas, the Assamese text was a classic advice manual for ensuring the sustenance of *chakravarti* kingship in a Brahmanical polity.

Keywords: kingship; *Rajadhammasangaha*; *Nitilatankur*; Buddhism; Hinduism; Konbaung; Ahom; Southern Asia

Introduction

The cross-cultural fecundity of the “Indianized states of Southeast Asia” is well known, especially in the arena of kingship and government [Cœdès 1968]. The historical interconnections with the Indic world incorporated these pre-modern Theravāda polities of Southeast Asia into what Sheldon Pollock terms the “Sanskrit cosmopolis”, an enormous geographic sweep of Indic culture stretching from Afghanistan through Vietnam and East Indies characterized by a recognizably homogenous political language and continual instances of cross-pollination [Pollock 2006]. Tilman Frasch, however, critiques Pollock’s framework of Sanskrit cosmopolis as an updated version of the old theory of “Indianization” or “Hinduization” of Southeast Asia that does not adequately take into account the dynamic nature of the interactions between Indic and Southeast Asian ideas and forms [Frasch 2017]. A more fruitful approach to understand the cultural systems of Theravāda Southeast Asia, Frasch suggests, is the analytical lens of “Pāli cosmopolis” [Frasch 2017]. Nonetheless, we use Pollock’s framework of Sanskrit cosmopolis because the texts under discussion here are extra-canonical, arthashastric literature, i.e. manuals of statecraft and political administration that primarily draw from the repertoire of Indic

political thought originally expressed in Sanskrit, albeit with strong cross-cultural elements[1]. Nowhere else is the cross-pollination of Indic and Southeast Asian ideas more evident than in the institutions of kingship and the pre-modern political literature produced in the region [Strathern 2019a; Sternbach 1974].

This article examines and compares two 19th century political advice texts, namely *Rajadhammasangaha* and *Nitilatankur*, composed respectively in the courts of Konbaung Burma and the Ahom kingdom of Assam, two neighbouring polities at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia[2]. The two texts were composed in vernaculars – Burmese and Assamese – albeit interwoven with passages in Pali and Sanskrit, the respective liturgical languages of the two kingdoms, Burma and Assam. The Burmese text was composed in 1878 by U Hpo Hlaing[3] (1830–1883), an intellectual and minister in the late Konbaung Burmese court. The Assamese text, on the other hand, is attributed to Bagis Sarma, the late 18th century to early 19th century court poet. What appear to be two identically themed texts at the first glance had different – in fact, diametrically opposite – ideas of kingship in them. They were embedded and encoded in two interrelated but divergent frameworks of kingship: one, the Buddhist *dharmaraja* (righteous kingship), and the other, the Brahmanical *devaraja* (divinised kingship)[4] [Tambiah 1976, *19–53*]. This study argues that while the Burmese text outlined a revolutionary proposal for devolution of *chakravarti*[5] (wheel-turning king) kingship into a form of constitutional monarchy and abolition of kingly absolutism leveraging on the "contractual-transcendentalist" nature of Buddhist kingship, the Assamese text is a classic advice manual for ensuring the sustenance of *chakravarti* kingship in a Brahmanical "divinised-immanentist" polity[6].

The main reason behind choosing these two texts for this comparative study is that they best encapsulated the political theories underlying the governments of the two kingdoms at their fag ends. *Rajadhammasangaha* outlined a political theory of government drawing on European "monarchical constitutionalism" [Prutsch 2014] with the hope that it would potentially prevent the country from falling into the hands of the British, though the plan failed and the Kingdom of Burma was subsequently annexed by the British in 1885 [Huxley 2007]. Likewise, *Nitilatankur* was commissioned at a time when the Ahom state, shattered by a series of powerful rebellions, barely held together at the beginning of the 19th century, less than three decades into Burmese conquest and subsequent British annexation in 1826 [Bhuyan 1932]. A comparison of the two texts offers us a unique lens into political thought oriented towards protecting the institutions of kingship and monarchical polities in times of crises in late premodern Southern Asia.

The first section of the article will briefly examine the two models of kingship that underpinned political practice in the Buddhist kingdom of Konbaung Burma and the Hinduized Ahom kingdom of Assam in a contiguous geo-cultural space influenced by the political technologies of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. The second and the third sections will be devoted to historicizing and examining the two texts, especially the visions of kingship they espouse. The fourth and final section will outline how, in addition to the contents, semantic frames employed in the two texts also correspond to the two different visions of kingship, i.e. *dharmaraja* and *devaraja*.

A note on Konbaung and Ahom kingships: king as a "future Buddha" (phaya laung) and king as a "spirit" (phi)

In his influential work on kingship and its relationship to religion, Alan Strathern identifies two models of sacred kingship – *righteous kingship* and *divinised kingship* [Strathern 2019b, *50*] – largely aligned to *dharmaraja* and *devaraja* models of South and Southeast Asia [Kulke 1978; Tambiah 1976]. While the first is rooted in a contractual-transcendentalist ethos, the second is immanentist in nature. Transcendentalism is distinguished by an orientation towards salvation and closely associated with the imperative to live according to a set of universal ethical principles, which function as a guide to the

interior reconstruction of the self. Immanentism, on the other hand, is defined by the attempt to call upon a supernatural power to assist life in the here and now: to make the fields fertile, the sick healthy, to ensure victory in the next battle. This power is everywhere seen to be in the gift of ancestors, spirits, and deities [Strathern 2019b, *51*]. In the transcendentalist vision of kingship in Buddhist polities, the king's primary duty is to protect religion (*sasana*) and to facilitate his subjects with an environment where they can strive for salvation (*nibbāna*). All institutions of kingship exhibit immanentist elements – even the quintessentially transcendentalist Buddhist *dharmaraja* vision of kingship outlined by Tambiah. For example, while Ayutthaya was a devoutly Theravāda polity, it nonetheless incorporated a plethora of Brahmanical technologies of statecraft [Skilling 2007]. The crux of this hybridity lies here: in the *dharmaraja* vision of Theravāda kingship the king is an ethical figure who is obliged to carry out the contract of facilitating the people with the conducive environment to accumulate merit, and failing to do so jeopardized his right to rule [Tambiah 1976; Strathern 2019a]. And therefore, as Strathern aptly points out, all Southeast Asian Theravāda rulers supplemented this transcendentalist core of Buddhist kingship tradition with a Brahmanic courtly culture and its ritual paraphernalia that divinised the king in a more explicit and unqualified manner adding a cosmic immanentist dimension to the king's person and augmenting legitimacy. Strathern cites the specific example of Prasat Thong (r. 1629–1656), a usurper and predecessor of King Narai (r. 1656–1688) who pushed Ayutthayan kingship towards the divinised-immanentist model, drawing on Angkorian kingship, in a bid to address his legitimacy deficit [Strathern 2019b].

This case is particularly relevant for understanding the constitution of early Konbaung kingship as Prasat Thong had striking parallels with Alaungmintaya[7], the founder of the Konbaung dynasty. Like Prasat Thong of Ayutthaya, Alaungmintaya (r. 1752–60), too, was a peripheral upstart commoner seeking centrality in a Brahmanically influenced devoutly Theravāda galactic polity [Lieberman 1984]. In Alaungmintaya's self-representation of his bid for kingship, the core Buddhist element of merit was equally supplemented by his claims of divine investitures. In a meticulous study of letters and edicts of King Alaungmintaya, Leider finds that the founder of the Konbaung kingdom played masterfully with the two concepts of *phaya-laung*[8] (future Buddha) and *min-laung*[9] (future king) to supplement the logic of merit with divine endorsement [Leider 2011, *175–176*]. Of the numerous examples cited by Lieberman and Leider, suffice it to mention three that capture the logic of merit as well as the divine endorsement that defined early Konbaung kingship. First, all along his run-up to consolidation of power and kingship, Alaungmintaya emphasized *hpoun*[10] (merit) rather than descent while also attempting to construct a royal genealogy, and famously coined a saying, "When a man of *hpoun* emerges, those who lack *hpoun* must give way" [Lieberman 1984]. Second, all of Alaungmintaya's letters started with the formula "*hpoun daw alwan gyi myat taw mu hla thaw*", which translates as "king endowed with great merit" [Leider 2011, *171*]. The catchy statement attributed to Alaungmintaya noted by Lieberman gets a fuller expression in the formula of intitulation in his letters: he is a king endowed with great merit. Or, in other words, it is his unparalleled merit that has made him king[11]. Third, a letter dated 19 April, 1756, purportedly written by Thagya-min[12] addressing the Mon populace to submit to Alaungmintaya, not only referred to the latter as *min-laung* but also made indirect references to the concept *phaya-laung,* i.e. "future Buddha", condensing the two concepts through a parallelism in Alaungmintaya's persona [Lieberman 1984]. Leider suggests that beyond its propagandistic value, Alaungmintaya's communications with his chief queen about the contents of this letter show a serious belief and self-perception in the supernatural sanction of himself as the "protector of *sasana*" [Leider 2011, *181*], the Buddhist teaching and its institutions, the primary role of the king in a Theravāda polity. One would unfailingly note the crystallization of the two strands of kingship

visions, righteous-contractual-transcendentalist and divinised-immanentist, in Alaungmintaya's self-representation as the founder of a new line of kings. Over time, Konbaung kingship was pushed further towards the divinised-immanentist model, especially during the reign of King Bo-daw-phaya. Not only did Bo-daw-phaya and his court literati show a more universally aspired kingship model by emphasizing the Abhiraja-Dhajaraja myth[13], drawing the lineage of Konbaung kings to a Sakyan prince from Gotama Buddha's clan, as well as Mahāsaṃmata Min[14], the first Buddhist king, he also waged foreign wars and acquired supposedly ritually efficacious Brahmans and Brahmanical technologies known for their expertise in divinising the king [Charney 2002; Leider 2005; Watanabe 1987]. All these were marks of an Indic king who aspired for chakravarti status – at least the status of a *pradeshik* (regional) chakravarti – in the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

Although the Buddhist principle of merit remained the paramount element of kingship in Theravāda polities, it wasn't deemed sufficient to make the king secure from contenders. Because of the impossibility to verify who possessed greater merit, the principle of merit became a retrospective justificatory logic for upstarts and usurping kings. Strathern writes,

> "There was little option but to acclaim whoever seized power... the doctrine of merit not only reflected, but surely drove, the tumult of succession crises, and it meant that even *in situ* kings could not rest on their laurels, however much karmic progress they made by building new temples or conducting elaborate Buddhist rites... The logic of merit provided the cultural underpinning to the operation of the 'galactic' or 'solar' form of polity, in which subordinates in peripheral bases routinely make a bid for centrality" [Strathern 2019b, *54*].

This not only explains the frequent royal assassinations and perennial rebellions in Buddhist galactic polities of Southeast Asia, but also the general trend of strengthening the institution of Buddhist kingship with unqualified divinisation of the king by importing Brahmanical ritual technologies as a strategy to stave off contenders to the throne. The seriousness of the threats to Konbaung kingship from upstarts and pretenders can be perceived in the following observation made by Lieberman:

> "The self-made character of the Alaungpaya dynasty may have encouraged a rash of imitative efforts by men of modest birth who, like Alaungpaya, trusted their good karma. Thus, the early part of Naung-daw-gyi's reign, the last year of Hsin-byu-shin's reign, much of the period between Hsin-byu-shin and Bo-daw-phaya, and the later years of Bo-daw-phaya's rule all saw factional disputes and coup attempts of varying degrees of severity" [Lieberman 1996, *168*].

Therefore, continued attempts of divinisation of the Konbaung king could be read as a ritual strategy to safeguard the institution of kingship itself. As we shall see later, *Rajadhammasangaha* paid a great deal of attention in critiquing and rejecting the Brahmanical elements of divinisation and emphasizing the Buddhist contractual-transcendentalist core in Konbaung kingship. Stripping the king of his divine elements and emphasizing the contractual nature of his relationship with the people, as Buddhist kingship was originally conceived in the relationship between Mahāsaṃmata and his subjects, was certainly the most logical way to propose devolution of kingship and curb kingly absolutism.

The kingship institution in practice in the Ahom kingdom of Assam fits well into the divinised-immanentist model described by Strathern [Strathern 2019b]. More specifically, Ahom kingship evinces many of the characteristics identified by Hermann Kulke in the classic *devaraja* kingship of Angkor and Orissa [Kulke 1978]. Like the kings of Angkor and Orissa, the Ahom kings, too, claimed to rule under celestial order (*swargiya ādeśa*) as descendants of Lengdon, a sky-god of Ahom cosmology later commensurated with the Vedic god Lord Indra by the Hindu Assamese literati who also crafted an *Indra-vamsiya*

genealogy for the Ahom kings. The Ahom king was addressed as *swarga-deo* in Assamese and *phi chao pha* in Tai-Ahom, meaning "heavenly spirit" and "spirit lord of the sky", respectively. It is worth noting that the Assamese word *deo* has two meanings. *Deo* is a local form of the mother goddess Kali, but it also refers to a person possessed by Kali, in which case the person is imbued with high enthusiasm and extraordinary power including that of presaging future events [Rajkhowa 1905]. The Tai-Ahom term *phi* denotes spirit, benevolent, malevolent or neutral, but predominantly malevolent if used without qualifications [Hengsuwan & Prasithrathsint 2014]. The two titles *deo* and *phi* were in fact rather apt metaphors for the king as they could encapsulate the paradox and ambiguity of kingship: both the paternalistic and filial powers as well as the hideous and polluting aspects of the sovereign[15]. In later Assamese chronicles, the king was also referred to as *devamsa*, best translated as "a portion of the divine." From these titles, it can be inferred that the Ahom king was divinised as a celestial spirit, a metaperson[16]. However, these titles do not indicate that the Tai-Ahom king was perceived as an actual divinity. Chronicles written in Ahom and Assamese rarely use the standard words for the divinity/God, *phra* in Tai-Ahom and *Isvar* in Assamese*,* to refer to the king. If the latter term appeared on rare occasions, it was nothing more than a metaphor of flattery. The dedicatory preamble to one of the earliest Ahom language chronicles translated into English states:

> "Thou art a monarch, but a Monarch like the canopy of the skies, surrounding the Globe... Thou art resplendent above the princes of the earth like the moon among the stars and admired like that Deb – thine understanding is unfathomable as the ocean, a mountain of greatness among men... thou art intimate with the Gods and *equal to* Him Who rules above Seven Heavens" [Wade 1800, *1*] (emphasis mine).

The king was considered metaphorically *equal to* God, but *not as* God; he was divinised but far from deified. Thus, the Ahom king was a cosmically invested junior participant in the divine rule of Lengdon over Assam, much akin to the Angkorian Devaraja, who was the earthly participant in the divine rule of Lord Shiva over Angkor [Kulke 1978].

A closer look at the particulars of the Ahom mytho-historical accounts of the origin of Ahom kingship offers us more clues as to the underlying divine elements in the institution of *swarga-deo.* Nearly all Ahom language chronicles, as well as many later chronicles written in Assamese, by and large present the same story. In a nutshell, the story goes like this:

> The cosmos had a stable political order under the rule of gods Lengdon and his nephew Thenkham, but the earth was reeling under anarchy and was in a state of *matsa-nyaya* (the logic of the fish)[17]. Concerned, Lengdon sent Thenkham's grandsons Khunlung and Khunlai to rule over the earth and establish order. As a mark of the divine sanction of their rule on earth, Lengdon handed them a statue called *Chumphārungshengmung* – also called *Chumsheng* – that would become their protector and tutelary deity. Khunlung and Khunlai descended to earth through golden ladders with a mandate to rule, and their descendants established several Tai mueangs. The first Ahom king Shukāphā descended from the line of Khunlung. When Shukāphā arrived in Assam in the 13th century to found his kingdom, he brought with him the idol of *Chumsheng,* with the blessing (*jahat*) of which Shukāphā and the following Ahom kings ruled[18].

The origin story of Ahom kingship reflects Marshall Sahlins' famous argument: "The state came from heaven to earth", that is, "the human state was the realization of a political order already prefigured in the cosmos" [Graeber & Sahlins 2017, *64*]. Khunlung and Khunlai were sent to replicate on earth the political order that prevailed in heaven under the rule of Lengdon. In that sense the Ahom king was the earthly counterpart of Lengdon. The cult of *Chumsheng* indexed to this special relationship the king shared with the divinity Lengdon, as a consanguinary representative of the latter. In this divinised dynastic

kingship of the Ahom the importance of royal blood was paramount. Even plotters and rebels preferred to have a royal scion at their disposal to replace the incumbent king. For instance, Burha Gossain Astabhujdev – the spiritual leader of the Moamaria Rebellion, the greatest revolt faced by the Ahom monarchy in its history – famously advised his followers against occupying the throne and suggested to install a favourable prince, presumably not to usurp a dynasty with divine sanction to rule. He reportedly said, "*Rāja habalai man nemeli Indravamsiya Tungkhungiar nitistha bhal ejana lai ei kam karibi*" (Do not vie for kingship, take a good Indravamsiya Tungkhungia scion along with you for that) [Neog 1986, *163*].

Similarly, Ahom chronicles record that Atan Burhagohain, an influential minister in the 17th century, declined an offer made to him to ascend the throne so that the kingdom could be saved from anarchy, citing that "only one of royal blood is entitled to become a rightful king" (*Rājar vamsa he rāja haba pare*) [Bhuyan 1932, *45*]. By and large, there was rarely any serious attempt at devolution of the institution of Ahom kingship itself; nearly all attempts of coup were primarily directed towards either installing a favourable prince or to capture power within the monarchical system.

Nitilatankur was composed sometime in the first decade of the 19th century presumably to help strengthen a weakening Ahom state that was seeing perennial rebellion by this time. Unlike *Rajadhammasangaha* that laid out an alternative to absolute monarchy and its chakravarti associations in a desperate bid to stave off the increasingly hostile British colonial power at the doorsteps [Huxley 2007], *Nitilatankur* contained little that diverged from traditional political thought. The text was commissioned to Bagis Sarma, a court poet, by a senior military general from the Duara Phukan family, who hereditarily held high offices in the Ahom state apparatus. *Nitilatankur* bore similarities with the Mirrors for Princes genre of advice literature and was the latest addition to this flourishing genre in the Ahom court prior to the kingdom's annexation to British India in 1826. In addition to discoursing on pragmatics of governance and warfare, drawn from classical Indic political thought, the text also reinforced instruments of occult power and the king's occult associations, which shows that it favoured the status-quo vis-à-vis the divinised institution of Ahom kingship.

U Hpo Hlaing's Rajadhammasangaha: A manual for terminating a chakravarti king

Written in 1879, U Hpo Hlaing's *Rajadhammasangaha* was a work of revolutionary political theory addressed to Thibaw Min, the last king of Konbaung Burma, on his taking the throne. An influential minister and intellectual in the late Konbaung court, U Hpo Hlaing was a political activist as well as a political theorist. Huxley suggests that *Rajadhammasangaha* was, in fact, an instruction manual for the new king to make "cabinet arrangements that would bind him" paving the way for a constitutional monarchy that U Hpo Hlaing hoped would save the country from being lost to the British colonizers [Huxley 2007]. U Hpo Hlaing's coup d'état for constitutional monarchy was eventually defeated and he was sacked from the court [Huxley 2007]. U Htin Fatt, Bagshawe and Huxley have extensively discussed about the context and the purposes of the composition of *Rajadhammasangaha* including the necessity felt by a section of the late Konbaung courtiers to "modernize" governance incorporating elements of western statecraft [Fatt 1979; Bagshawe 2004; Huxley 2007]. This was a response to the increasing threat of British annexation of Upper Burma, and *Rajadhammasangaha,* which according to Huxley was a text written "in order to prevent the country being lost", was an expression of this response [Huxley 2007]. Concomitantly, a global constitutionalist movement was sweeping Eurasia, modelled largely on the experience of Meiji Japan in the 1880s, as has been shown by Egas Moniz Bandeira [Bandeira 2018]. Late Qing Chinese intellectuals, for instance, creatively adapted constitutionalist political ideas in their efforts to create a

"constitutional absolute monarchy" centred on the figure of the emperor [Bandeira 2022]. U Hpo Hlaing's ideas could be safely plotted in the wider constitutionalist discourse of imperial transformation being witnessed in the region. Much akin to Qing intellectuals Li Jiaju (李家駒) and Dashuo's (達壽) creative use of global constitutionalist ideas for their own political needs, U Hpo Hlaing too ingeniously adapted European constitutionalist ideas into a pre-existing Buddhist model of rulership based on social contract. The "native democracy" of Burma, as U Hpo Hlaing's revolutionary political theory is sometimes termed, has triggered a plethora of inquiries vis-à-vis non-Eurocentric, indigenous forms of democracy [Fatt 2007; Bagshawe 2004]. Milinda Banerjee, for instance, has traced a non-Eurocentric genealogy of democratic political thought and practice in Tripura, another kingdom in the region [Banerjee 2022]. Here I will rather focus on how the text holds a coherent plan for the devolution of kingship: beginning with stripping the divinized-immanentist elements of the king to asserting the righteous-contractual-transcendentalist core of Buddhist kingship to reminding that kingship emerged out of a contract which could be reimagined and reconfigured.

U Hpo Hlaing begins by disentangling the overlapping Buddhist and Brahmanical meanings in certain key terms and rejecting the latter. In section 7, Part-I of *Rajadhammasangaha,* he offers a critique of what he terms "corruption" of the four rules of *sangaha* into "Five Great Sacrifices", a Brahmanical practice incorporated by Southeast Asian Theravāda courts. The following table shows U Hpo Hlaing's interpretation of these terms, their "original Buddhist meanings" and "Brahmanical corrupted meanings".

Table 1

Original Buddhist meanings and corrupted Brahmanical meanings of *sangaha* terms

Terms	Original Buddhist meanings	Brahmanical corrupted meanings
Sassamedha	A form of tax for protection	Horse sacrifice
Purisamedha	Budgetary outflow/expenses of running the state	Human sacrifice
Sammapasa	Encouragement of economic productivity of the state	A ritual involving sacrifices
Vacapeyya	Pleasant speech/rhetorical devices of politics	A ritual involving drinking of butter

U Hpo Hlaing's interpretation of these terms – *sassamamedha*, *purisamedha*, *sammapasa* and *vacapeyya* – put them at the core of a state's functioning in a "just" Buddhist state. The same terms were supposedly the core of the ritual paraphernalia that promised to divinise the king. Essentially, it was through the performance of these Brahmanical rituals that the king was believed to gain access to cosmic powers [Bagshawe 2004]. Thus, *Rajadhammasangaha* not only categorically refuted the efficacy of the Brahmanical rituals of divinisation of the king but turned them on their head by calling them "corrupted" interpretations. These arguments are further developed in section 10, titled "How the Ponnas Corrupted the Meaning of the Four Rules of Sangaha into the Five Great Sacrifices". But before that, in section 9 titled "The Formative Idea of the Burmese Kingdom", U Hpo Hlaing reminds the audience of the origin of Buddhist kingship as a contract based on an agreement between the first Buddhist king Mahāsaṃmata, a future Buddha (*phaya laung*), and his subjects, and the fact that Konbaung kingship is essentially a continuation of this Buddhist kingship, albeit "corrupted" by Brahmanical influences[19]. Then in section 10 U Hpo Hlaing returns his attention to the transformation of the four *sangaha* rules into Brahmanical ritual technologies of royal divinisation, i.e. the five great sacrifices, which were at the core of the change in kingship from Mahāsaṃmata's contractual-transcendentalist model to King Ukkakaraja's divinised-immanentist vision.

Alluding to the brahmins' promise of divinisation to King Ukkakaraja and his assent to their proposal, U Hpo Hlaing writes:

> "[The ponnas] presented a false idea to King Ukkakaraja that, if he wished, by following their system he would be able to enter the world of the spirits as a living man without undergoing the dissolution of death[20]. King Ukkakaraja believed them and did as they told him. From this the four rules of *sangaha* that had been handed down to him were nullified and became the Five Great Sacrifices" [Bagshawe 2004, *102*].

In other words, U Hpo Hlaing's understanding of the emergence of the king and the state can be summed up as this: following the Mahāsaṃmata min model, kings are chosen on the basis of their righteousness and merit (*hpoun*), which is a karmic fruit, and the state evolved and was run on the basis of the *sangaha* rules: *sassamamedha, purisamedha, sammapasa* and *vacapeyya*. Thus, U Hpo Hlaing reasserts the Mahāsaṃmata myth and denounces the immanentist ventures of King Ukkakaraja of incorporating Brahmanical elements. The former model posits the king as an elected ethical subject as Buddhist kingship had originally conceived the king to be and hence aligned well with western ideas of government, and the latter corresponds to chakravarti kingship aspirations.

In order to curb kingly absolutism, U Hpo Hlaing's revolutionary theory proposed to change and restrict the role of the ponnas – to undo "the corruption of the ponnas" – in Konbaung court because ritual divinisation of the king (by the ponnas) paved the way for absolutism. It needs to be underscored that the ponnas were the ritual specialists who mediated between kings and gods in acts of royal divinisation even in what Tambiah calls *dhammaraja* model of Buddhist kingship. The point that bears emphasis here is that U Hpo Hlaing's comments on the ponnas is not as random as Huxley seemed to have suggested; rather it is a critique of a central element of chakravarti kingship.

In Part-II, section 15 "The ways of breaking up an alliance (*bheda*)", *Rajadhammasangaha* recognises the practical usefulness of *bheda* as an instrument of politics but also warns its practitioners, drawing on Buddhaghosa's *Atthasalini*, that the instruments of *bheda upaya* involve evil speech (*pisunavaca*) and as such practice of *bheda* may be an obstacle to the realization of the Buddhist soteriological goal, *nibbāna*. This dilemma of Buddhist kingship signals to the practical necessity felt by the Theravāda polities in Southeast Asia to incorporate arthashastric "science" of conducting politics by importing ponnas.

Most importantly, U Hpo Hlaing introduced an intermediary group between the king and the people (*pyi-thu*), namely *hmu-maq* (high officials) building on the principle of *a-wirawdhana* (non-opposition) [Candier 2007]. The principle of *a-wirawdhana* states that the king should not oppose the wishes of the "others", which includes five groups, namely *rahan, shin, lu, hmu-maq, pyi thu* (the monks, the novices, the laymen, the high officials, the people). What U Hpo Hlaing seemed to be suggesting was the introduction of a formal, and perhaps legalized, group of "high officials", which in the modern parlance could be a close equivalent to a cabinet in a parliamentary monarchy. In previous kingship manuals too non-opposition was emphasized, but not in a legislatively binding fashion as the category of *hmu-maq* wasn't present. U Hpo Hlaing translated "elected officials or representatives of the British Parliament" as *pyeithu thabaw tu pei thei hmu* – "officials given the people's agreement" [Bagshawe 2004, *103*]. Therefore it appears that the idea of *hmu-maq* was drawn from the "elected officials or representatives of the British Parliament". Candier has suggested that the introduction of the category *hmu-maq* under the principle of *a-wirawdhana* was specific to U Hpo Hlaing's reformist context as it seemed no longer appropriate or relevant for U Tin, a later writer, under the British colonial rule:

> "Hpo Hlaing encouraged the king to see his officials not only as counsellors, but as an intermediary group between him and the people. This discourse is specific to Hpo Hlaing's reformist context and not continued by U Tin" [Candier 2007, *39*].

As discussed earlier, when Prasat Thong of Ayutthaya wanted to augment his legitimacy as a king, he pushed kingship towards cosmic dimension by drawing on the Brahmanical *devaraja* model of Angkor. In U Hpo Hlaing's *Rajadhammasangaha* we see a reversal: he starts his theory of reform with a proposal to shred off the cosmic-immanentist elements – or the *devaraja* elements – of Konbaung kingship by excising out the role of the ponnas, the diviners, and reiterating the Buddhist contractual-transcendentalist model of the ruler as an ethical subject with responsibilities such as *a-wirawdhana*. This in turn facilitated him to introduce categories such as *hmu-maq,* effectively devising a plan for a constitutional monarchy.

Bagis Sarma's Nitilatankur: A manual for sustaining a chakravarti king

The scribal colophon of *Nitilatankur* attributes its authorship to Bagis Sarma, a poet in the Ahom court during the reign of King Kamaleswar Singha (1795–1810). Very little is known about Bagis Sarma except that he was a late 18th to early 19th century poet patronized by the Ahom court. *Nitilatankur* has been dated to the first decade of the 19th century [Goswami 1941; Singh 1998]. Another *niti* text, an Assamese translation of Narayana's *Hitopadesa*, from this period is also attributed to the poet, locating his oeuvre in arthashastric gnomic literature [Goswami 1941]. While its patron remains unnamed, the colophon of *Nitilatankur* suggests that a military general from the Duara Phukan family who hereditarily held high offices in Ahom administration, commissioned the text, presumably as an instruction manual for princes. *Nitilatankur* was an addition to a flourishing body of gnomic literature produced in the Ahom court since the adoption of Sākta Hinduism by the Ahom nobility in the 16th century[21]. Through this corpus, Indic political thought circulated into the vernacular political discourses shaping practices of statecraft.

Bagis Sarma's *Nitilatankur* not only heavily drew from a compendium of Kamandaka's *Nitisara* – one of the most influential texts composed between c. 325–550 CE on statecraft and leadership across South and Southeast Asia [Dutt 1896] – but also carried its political ethos[22]. Gautam and Morkevičius have shown that Kamandaka deviated from its more prominent parent text, that is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, by endorsing the use of "unrighteous" means for achieving "righteous" ends [Gautam 2021; Morkevičius 2018]. Along the lines of *Nitisara*, *Nitilatankur* too endorsed the use of guileful tactics (*kuta-yuddha)* and torture as instruments of just rule and exonerated the king from any moral/dharmic repercussions: "monarchs can inflict tortures for the purposes of justice... therefore kings are not tainted with sin when they put impious wretches to death"[23]. This invested unlimited and unchecked power on the king, an essential element of a chakravarti king in a Hindu context. Also noteworthy is the fact that unlike Kautilya, Kamandaka incorporated Brahmanical elements that offer a compensatory propitiatory system to cancel the effects of "unrighteous" acts the king is supposed to perform as his duty. For instance, Kamandaka acknowledged *nimittajnana*, the efficacy of omens and portents and associated rituals, to influence, avert destiny and retrospectively block karmic retribution. While *Nitilatankur* has little to say on *nimittajnana*, it recommends ritual sanctification of canons in order to enhance efficacy and suggests use of occult practices of *indrajal/maya*, to strike terror in the enemy[24]. Most importantly, in *Nitilatankur* a comparison is drawn, through a parallelism, between the king and God as the cosmocrator as well as the microcosm of the universe. The comparison that appears in the section titled *prakriti-paricchedа* is as follows:

> "*Sri Narayan parameswardeve prakriti svamayak āshray kari sarasar biswak sristi kari Brahma Vishnu Rudra dasdikpāladi niyujan kari sristi samhar bihar bhogadik kare, tene prakare narendra rājao amatyadik sva sthānat niyujan kari param xukhe bihar bhogadi kariba*" (*Nitilatankur* p. 5).
>
> (Just as God Narayan has created the world, appointed Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and the guardian deities of the four directions in appropriate positions basing on the element of

prakriti, so should the king appoint ministers in appropriate positions to enjoy his reign) (translation mine).

With efficient management of the elements of the state and placing himself at the centre, a king can add a cosmic dimension to his person, thus enhancing his influence over the neighbouring kings in the *rajamandala*, circle of kings – which is a step towards chakravarti kingship. The clearest empirical evidence in *Nitilatankur* for its endorsement of chakravarti kingship is, however, the inclusion of seven diagrams of *rajamandala* from Kautilya and Kamandaka known as a key instrument for conducting politics for a chakravarti king [Kangle 1960].

Another important element of chakravarti kingship evinced in Kamandaka's *Nitisara* finds an oblique expression in *Nitilatankur*. Kamandaka notes, "A foe whose possessions have been snatched away, gets back his territory if he serves the victory faithfully"[25]. In other words, a defeated enemy who accepts the terms of peace and submits to the authority of the victorious king can maintain some of his power. Thus, a powerful king expands his sovereignty over more territory, but retains the local systems of governance for the sake of continuity and order. In this light, Morkevičius suggests, conquest is not an end in itself. Instead, it is a means by which to establish "just order" and achieve chakravarti status for a king: a chakravarti exercises sovereignty over multiple local polities/rulers adopting the title *rajadhiraja* (king of kings) [Morkevičius 2018]. In other words, this is how kings in Theravāda Southeast Asia turned themselves into chakravartis or galactic overlords. *Nitilatankur* doesn't make any direct reference to this idea, but obliquely acknowledges it while discussing the sixteen types of treaties noted by Kamandaka. These treaties suggest that the subjugated king is allowed to retain some form of power and local governance when accepting the sovereignty of the *vijigisu*, the victorious king, thus effectively making the *vijigisu* a *rajadhiraja chakravarti*.

Two semantic frames: dharmaraja and devaraja

The varying ideas of kingship are not confined to the contents of the two texts. Rather, the semantic frames – coherent structures of related concepts[26] – in the two texts also index to different visions of kingship. For instance, both texts dwell on the duties of the king, but the way they are framed indicates their underlying Buddhist and Brahmanical visions. The Burmese text produces a list of seven *aparihaniya* – meaning "that which cannot be diminished" – rules for the king through which the prosperity, order and wealth of a polity is to be secured, maintained and increased. The Assamese text, on the other hand, lists a set of duties, for the king, termed *karaniya*, meaning "that which is to be done". While *Rajadhammasangaha* employs the Buddhist rhetorical logic of "double negation" [Herzberger 1975], *Nitilatankur* frames the rules of kingly conduct in a positive logic. In other words, the *aparihaniya* rules in *Rajadhammasangaha* postulates that "the King should not *not do* A" whereas the *karaniya* set of rules in *Nitilatankur* instructs "the king *to do* A". There is an apparent variance in the two texts in terms of logic and semantic framing while discoursing on the same topic. What bears emphasis here is that as a result of the divergent ways of semantic framing, the ideas outlined in the two texts about the duties of the king seem to align to two different models of kingship, at least in theory. U Hpo Hlaing's framing aligned more with the Buddhist righteous-contractual *dharmaraja* vision, his primary emphasis being the king's duty, as the "donor and protector of religion" (*sasanadayaka*), to ensure non-diminishment of *aparihaniya* rules depreciation of which would jeopardize prosperity, order and stability of the polity, or in other words, the conducive environment for the flourishing of *dharma*. Bagis Sarma's exposition of kingly conduct, on the other hand, fits the Brahmanical *devaraja* model in which the king is supposed to execute a set of ritual and political/strategic actions in order to achieve chakravarti status.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, the two overlapping models of kingship that shaped the two texts and are in turn expressed in them had one key difference: the element of merit (*hpoun)*. U Hpo Hlaing could propose devolution of kingship because Buddhist kingship was contractual in its origin and essentially premised on *hpoun* – a karmic fruit. The king was not divinely sanctioned, but one was chosen as king due to his excessive and "unparalleled" merit. Because it is impossible to verify who possessed greater merit, the logic of merit became a retrospective justificatory logic for usurpers. In other words, the logic of merit not only left room for coup d'état but encouraged imagination of alternative political authority such as U Hpo Hlaing's revolutionary proposal for constitutional monarchy in *Rajadhammasangaha.* Furthermore, a contract could always be re-imagined, re-configured or even breached if the terms are not honoured. Contrarily, Ahom kingship was divinely sanctioned. Any human intervention to trump the king was seen not just as a treason against the ruling king but also against the cosmos – at least this is how the chronicles and other records left by the Ahom court literati portrayed it[27]. This, however, must be immediately underlined that ministers could and did certainly dethrone multiple ruling kings in order to install princes of their choice on numerous occasions but it was a matter of reshuffling rather than usurping the ruling dynasty, a divinely sanctioned bloodline. In short, these manoeuvres by ministers were driven by motives to install a favourable or competent prince on the throne rather than attempts of reforming or challenging the institution of Ahom kingship itself. In such a context it was only natural that Bagis Sarma composed a thoroughly conformist text.

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[1] Tambiah has noted that it is within the Brahmanical regime of thought that a school of *artha* emerged that attempted to investigate and systematize the foundations of political economy and statecraft. The Buddhist writers did not produce this kind of differentiated "science" of administration [Tambiah 1976, *52*]. Bechert similarly observes, "Kautalya's book was read and used for the instruction of princes in Ceylon and Burma" [Bechert 1970]. Here we are dealing with this kind of arthashastric texts, typical of statecraft in a wide range of polities in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, rather than Theravāda Pali canon. Hence the preference for Pollock's concept of Sanskrit cosmopolis over Frasch's otherwise useful model of Pali cosmopolis to understand Theravāda Southeast Asia.

[2] Manjeet Baruah terms Assam a region of civilizational crossroads between South and Southeast Asia cf.: [Baruah 2012]. More recently multiple scholars have proposed Burma-inclusive South Asia Studies, underscoring the deep historical connections and geo-cultural proximity of Burma with the Indic world cf.: [Emmrich et. al. 2023].

[3] U Hpo Hlaing is referred to in different works with different spellings, pseudonyms or titles such as "U Bo Hlaing", "U Pho Hlaing", "the Yaw Atwinwun", "the Shwei-pyi Atwinwun", "the Wetmasut Myoza", or "the Magwe Myoza" etc., "atwinwun" and "myoza" being Burmese royal titles roughly analogous to "minister of interior" and "governor of town".

[4] Strathern clearly points out, along the lines of Skilling, that to speak of "Buddhist" discourse of kingship and a "Brahmanic" one in Theravāda Southeast Asia is to use etic categories rather than emic understandings of kingship [Strathern 2019b; Skilling 2007]. H. L. Seneviratne too speaks of the overlaps between Hindu and Buddhist kingship models [Seneviratne 1987]. In the context of the present article the primary difference between the two models is the logic of merit, which was paramount in "Buddhist" Konbaung kingship and non-existent in "Brahmanical"/"Hindu" Ahom kingship.

[5] A chakravarti king is an ideal (or idealized) universal ruler. This Indic kingship concept holds specialized meaning in different Indian religious traditions. For Buddhist and Hindu contexts cf.: [Tambiah 1976].

[6] Drawing on Tambiah and Kulke, Alan Strathern has explored the "contractual-transcendentalist" and "divine-immanentist" aspects of Buddhist and Brahmanical kingship [Tambiah 1976;

Kulke 1978; Strathern 2019b]. These two terms have been discussed in relation to Konbaung and Ahom kingships in the following section.

[7] Following Myanmar historians, I prefer this term over the title "Alaungpaya", alternatively spelled as "Alaungphaya", "Alaunghpaya", -phaya (or -paya, -hpaya) being honorific suffix in Burmese.

[8] For more details on the concept of *phaya-laung* cf.: [Leider 2011].

[9] For more details on the concept of *min-laung* cf.: [Prager 2003].

[10] Etymologically derived from the Pali term *Puñña,* a key doctrine in Buddhism, *hpoun* refers to "merit" or "glory". For more details cf.: [Leehey 2010].

[11] To the same effect, Leider interprets the expression "*hpoun daw alwan gyi myat taw mu hla thaw*" as "great [king] due to his merit" cf.: [Leider 2011, *171*].

[12] Considered as the king of heaven, Thagya-min is the Burmese adaptation of Lord Indra. He is believed to be the highest ranking *nat* (spirit) in traditional Burmese Buddhist belief.

[13] This myth states that a prince related to Gotama Buddha's clan from northern India arrived in Burma to set up a kingdom. For details about this myth cf.: [Charney 2002].

[14] Mahāsaṃmata was the first monarch of the world according to Buddhist tradition. He was chosen as the ruler by the people. Theravāda Buddhist chronicles such as the Sinhalese *Mahavamsa* and the Burmese *Maha Yazawin* state that he was the founder of the Sakya dynasty, to which the historical Buddha belonged.

[15] For the paradox and ambiguity of kingship, and the paternalistic as well as hideous and polluting aspects associated with kingship cf.: [Graeber and Sahlins 2017].

[16] In a broad sense, metapersons refer to beings believed to be endowed with immanentist and supernatural qualities that inspire awe in human societies. In anthropology of personhood, metaperson is a widely explored concept, and pertaining to its relationship with kingship cf.: [Graeber and Sahlins 2017].

[17] Matsa-nyaya, translated as "the law of fish", refers to the fundamental law of nature of the big fish devouring the small fish or the strong devouring the weak. For details cf.: [Vajpeyi 1973].

[18] In Tai-Mao, the closest surviving language to Tai-Ahom, "chum" means seal or roundel and "sheng" means resplendent diamond, which has a connotation of divine authority. The efficacy of chumsheng (chum-deo sheng-deo) is documented in Ahom Assamese chronicles. For instance, a high-ranking Ahom official and contender to the throne, Debera Barbarua was recorded to have said, "*Ahome shengdeor jahat rājya khai... shengdeok panit pelam*" (The Ahoms continue to rule thanks to sheng-deo... I will throw sheng-deo into water) (translation mine) cf.: [Bhuyan 1932, *44*].

[19] For a general overview of the importation and incorporation of Brahmanical knowledge, rituals and practices in the Konbaung court cf.: [Lieder 2005; Yi Yi 1982; Charney 2002].

[20] The idea of entering the spirit world alive would normally be understood as a form of *yadaya* from an orthodox Burmese Buddhist parlance. And Hpo Hlaing's suggestion that this is a "false idea" perhaps has this connotation, i.e. that it is a Brahmanical idea, a form of *yadaya*, that goes against and aimed at distorting the Buddhist doctrine of karma. For an extensive discussion of *yadaya* cf.: [Leehey 2010].

[21] A few textual precedents of *Nitilatankur* in the Assamese gnomic genre are translations of the *Santi Parvan* of *Mahabharata*, *Chanakya, Dipika Chandra, Hitopadesha*, among others, all composed under the patronage of the Ahom court.

[22] Except chapter five, which is built upon Māgha's *Sisūpālabadh*, all other chapters of *Nitilatankur* quote heavily from *Nitisara.* The other sources of *Nitilatankur* include *Hitopadesa*, *Amarakosa*, *Ratnakosa*, and *Prayog Ratnamala*, a distinctively regional text.

[23] [Kamandakiya Nitisara, 1896, VI.5, *64*].

[24] [Nitilatankur 1941, *18*].

[25] [Kamandakiya Nitisara, 1896, IX.6I, *225*].

[26] The concept of "semantic frame" was popularized by Charles Fillmore cf.: [Fillmore 1982].

[27] This sentiment is reflected in the way multiple Ahom Assamese chronicles record the statement made by Debera Barbarua on the sacred chumsheng and the ruling Ahom dynasty. For more cf.: [Bhuyan 1932]. Another work, the late 18th century Sanskrit play titled *Dharmodaya* also framed Ahom-Moamaria battles as a confrontation between *dharma* (just) and *a-dharma* (evil) in which eventually *dharma*, i.e. the Ahom king emerges victorious. This text evinces similar sentiments cf.: [Goswami 2014].

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ЯК (НЕ) ЗРОБИТИ ЧАКРАВАРТІНА КНЯЗЕМ: КНЯЗІВСТВО ТА ПОЛІТИЧНА ДУМКА В "РАДЖА-ДГАММА-САНҐАЗІ" У БО ЛА́ЙНА ТА "НІТІ-ЛАТАНКУРІ" БАҐІСА САРМИ

Стаття є спробою порівняльного аналізу двох текстів XIX ст., що містять політичні поради й настанови щодо етики й князювання. Ці праці були створені на перехресті Південної та Південно-Східної Азії, а саме в буддійському дворі династії Конбаун (Бірма) та в індуїзованому середовищі князівства Тай-Агом (Ассам). Перша з них – "Раджа-дгамма-санґага", трактат про князівську владу та державний устрій, керівництво до потенційних реформ і "праведної" поведінки монархів, – була написана бірманською мовою У Бо Лайном (видатним придворним, міністром та інтелектуалом з оточення правителя Міндона) 1878 року в уряді Бірми, коли молодий Тібо Мін, останній бірманський монарх, щойно посів трон як наступник Міндона. Другий текст, "Ніті-латанкур", був складений десь у першому десятилітті XIX ст. придворним поетом на ім'я Багіс Сарма під патронатом генерала Агома. Обидва тексти були вбудовані у взаємопов'язані, але різні структури правління: *дгармараджа* (буддійське праведне владарювання) та *девараджа* (брагманське божественне владарювання).

У дослідженні стверджується, що бірманський текст, спираючись на договірну природу буддійської влади та глобальних конституціоналістських ідей, окреслив революційну пропозицію щодо переходу від монархічної влади чакравартіна до конституційної монархії та скасування абсолютизму, тоді як ассамський текст був класичним посібником з порадами щодо забезпечення правління чакравартіна в брагманській державі.

Ключові слова: князівство; "Раджа-дгамма-санґага"; "Ніті-латанкур"; буддизм; індуїзм; Конбаун; Агом; Південна Азія

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