

# VERY INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS FROM A BRITISH SEA CAPTAIN IN ARAKAN IN 1831 - 5 YEARS AFTER THE BRITISH ANNEXATION OF ARAKAN

by Rick Heizman, June 16, 2018

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selections in [ ] and **bold** by Rick Heizman

## General Remarks on the Coast of Arracan

Captain Laws, H.M.S. Satellite, communicated by Captain Beaufort, F.R.S.

June 13, 1831

THE HARBOURS, PRODUCE OF THE COUNTRY, NATIVES, &C.

The islands on their northern and eastern sides are fertile, producing rice in abundance; also cotton, silk, and indigo; but only sufficient is cultivated for the consumption of the very few inhabitants, who are now reduced to little more than 200,000 in the whole province, almost every Burman, with all that was costly or respectable, having recrossed the Yeomandong [Yoma Mountains - a formidable mountain range separating Arakan from the Burmese] when the province was ceded to the East India Company, who, with one regiment of sepoy [natives of India in British military service], now hold the scattered remains of **its ancient inhabitants - the Mughls** [a term for the Arakanese Buddhists, not used by them] - in perfect subjection.

[Notice - No mention of Muslims, its 'ancient inhabitants' unambiguously are the Arakanese Buddhist]

**The inhabitants are a hardy, inoffensive race**; and, having had little intercourse with strangers, supply all their wants from the immediate vicinity of their houses, which are universally bamboo huts, raised upon piles about four feet from the ground, and generally in some thick jungle near the water, with small patches rice, indigo, cotton, tobacco, and fruit-trees at no very great distance. Fish are abundant, constituting, with rice, their principal food; and this year, for the first time, a cargo of both has been purchased for the Mauritius—the rice at the rate of 1 *l.* 8s. per ton, and the fish equally

low. Poultry is also very numerous in Arracan—eighteen for a rupee, nor is there any scarcity of bullocks or buffaloes. The latter they esteem most, from their being docile and useful in cultivating and treading out rice; and it is difficult to say what other use they make of either, as they neither kill them for food, nor do they use milk or anything made from it, and were much amused at the Europeans and Hindostanees [Hindus] wishing to get it, asking whether they were not afraid of becoming calves.

**Their religion, that of Buddha, enjoins them not to take away life; but they do not appear very bigoted to this part of their creed,** as they had no objection to part with their oxen or buffaloes, and ate any part when dead, even to the offal usually given to dogs.

**Though, in many respects, the people are far from being civilized, in others they surpass the most polished nations. There is rarely a person to be met with who cannot read and write;** and records are kept on the palm-leaf, beautifully lacquered in japan or red, generally on a gilt ground, with dark letters. Their common accounts are written with a chalk pencil, resembling talc, on folds of paper made from the bark of a tree, and then covered with lamp-black, or a smooth board, besmeared with the same substance. They have thirty-six characters in their alphabet, written from left to right; and they hold their pen or pencil as we do, the lines being as fine, and the characters as beautifully formed, as if made with a pen and ink.'

**Their priests [Buddhist monks] appear entirely occupied in the education of the children, and in every village there are two or three. Their schools are equally open to all;** and the only remuneration appears to be a sufficient quantity of food, and the erection of a house, which answers as a residence, temple, and school-room; with generally a small pagoda, having a number of poles and pendants hanging from it, much after the manner represented on the common chinaware. Indeed, all their habits, as well as their persons and dress, resemble those of the western part of China. **Celibacy is observed by the priests, who universally shave their heads, and wear a dirty yellow cotton dress; and before any boy can be prepared for admission as a priest, he must publicly declare his own and his parents' free consent.** Should he afterwards, however, at any time of his life, repent of his resolution, it is not thought disgraceful for him to say so, and he may return to the common walks of life, and take a wife as soon as he pleases.

The only foreigners now in Arracan are the servants of the East India Company, who, both civil and military, **spoke of the priests [monks] (or pondis, as they are termed) as being an unpresuming, well-disposed set of men, never interfering with the concerns of others, unless applied to as arbitrators, when they exercise their judgment with impartiality.**

**The ‘Mughs,’ [Arakanese Buddhists] in their manners, are perfectly free from the servile hypocrisy of their western neighbours, and equally unlike them as to probity— their words being generally to be taken;** [the western neighbors of the Arakanese are, of course, the Bengali Muslims, the Arakanese do not have the disingenuous supremacy, or false pretenses of the Muslims, and are honest, sincere and trustful, unlike the Muslims.] and, in dealing with you, they ask the price which they consider the article worth, and no more; **though it is to be feared the intercourse which they are likely to have with the natives of Bengal will soon remove these honest traits in their characters.** [So, the captain, in 1831, seems to know enough about Bengalis to see that there will be future trouble. The captain has been in Chittagong, where at that time, there were many many Buddhists - the Arakan Kingdom ruled Chittagong for several centuries and it was thoroughly Buddhist (and Hindu) before the Muslim conquest came - and he may have observed the Muslim aggression and supremacy with Buddhists]

**The women dress much after the Chinese fashion, but are by no means secluded, having a full share in all the common intercourse or transactions in life.** [here, again, is a comparison as the captain saw it, between the stature of women in the Muslim world, and Buddhist women who are much more respected, interactive, and valued]

by Rick Heizman, June 16, 2018, San Francisco

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