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Arakan and Bengal : the rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD

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CHAPTER SIX

THE DECLINE OF ARAKANESE CONTROL IN BENGAL (1638-1652)

The reign of Narapati-kri (1638-1645) was characterized by several rebellions, indicating that his authority was not directly accepted from the start. After initial victories over his enemies in Arakan and the Mughals in Bengal he soon fell seriously ill. This illness would prevent the king from ruling effectively during a large part of his reign. In the course of his reign large groups of discontents left Arakan after unsuccessful attempts to wrest royal control from the new king. A major result of these uprisings was the loss of control over the strategically important island Sandwip. In this Chapter we will see how under Narapati-kri the Arakanese slowly lost their ability to control south-eastern Bengal.

6.1 *The revolt of Nga Thun Khin*

Immediately following the coronation of Narapati-kri, the *lashkar-wazir* was thrown in prison, robbed of all his possessions and after a prolonged period in jail put to death. Adam van der Mandere considered this a just punishment as according to him the *lashkar-wazir* had raised himself above the rest of the Arakanese nobility and had started to behave like he was king in Arakan.¹ It has to be remembered that Van der Mandere had enough reasons to resent the powerful position of the *lashkar-wazir* as from a Dutch perspective he obstructed the VOC in the rice trade. The way in which Narapati-kri deposed of his primary rival is another indication that the two had been adversaries during the reign of Sirisudhammaraja, confirming the earlier hypothesis that the last years of his reign had seen an increase in factional strife amongst the Arakanese nobility. Charney has noted that the Arakanese chronicles are divided over whether or not there was a purge of the old royal family after the coming to power of Narapati-kri.² Some chronicles suggest that Narapati-kri had the princes, princesses, other royal kinsmen, the royal ministers, and royal commanders put to death, while others claim they were only disciplined. The VOC sources indicate that if there was a purge, it was very selective. There appears not to have been a substantial change in the composition of the king's Privy Council. The only person who is mentioned as being first gaoled and then executed is the *lashkar-wazir*. Narapati-kri and some of his ministers took former queens of Sirisudhammaraja as their wives, another indication the purge was not as

¹ NA VOC 1126, fol. 291-297 Letter from Adam van der Mandere to Batavia, dated Arakan November 1638.

² Charney, *Jambudipa*, p. 194.

radical as some chronicles suggest.³

The succession of Narapati-kri was immediately challenged. In August news reached Mrauk U that the governor of Chittagong, a legitimate successor to the throne, was preparing to rise against Narapati-kri.⁴ Narapati-kri himself was not part of the royal family. Charney has suggested that it is more likely he was a descendant of a Mon minister, captured in 1600 in Pegu. This Mon minister had been given Laungkarak, a former royal city of Arakan close to Mrauk U, as his appanage.⁵

The news that Narapati-kri was to be challenged by a legitimate heir to the throne was reason enough for the VOC to ready itself to evacuate from Mrauk U, plans were made to embark and to proceed to Urittaung to weather the expected storm. The idea that Arakan might consequently loose its territories in Bengal caused grave concern in VOC circles:

Were they to loose these lands, the whole kingdom will be ruined. Arakan, without Bengal, will be worth nothing to the Company. Almost all the cloth is brought in *bouris*⁶ with rice and slaves in large numbers from Bengal. In Arakan itself slaves are not to be had, other than those coming from Bengal. If the Arakanese loose Bengal it will be more profitable to establish a factory in Chittagong.⁷

In some Arakanese chronicles the king of Chittagong is identified as a son of Sirisudhammaraja by the name of Nga Tun Khin, while in contemporary Mughal accounts he is styled the brother of the Arakanese zamindar by the name of Mangat Rai, probably a corruption of the Arakanese Man-Raza or king-king.⁸

On 5 September 1638 the Dutch were summoned to court and asked to provide Narapati-kri with six gunners, who were to form part of an expeditionary force to quell the rebellion in Chittagong.⁹ From the Mughal history of Shah Jahan it appears that even before

³ See the previous Chapter.

⁴ NA VOC 1126, fol. 291-297 Letter from Adam van der Mandere to Batavia, dated Arakan November 1638.

⁵ Charney, *Jambudipa*, p. 193 and n. 425.

⁶ A kind of boat.

⁷ 'Soo dit lant geheel in ruyne sal loopen, Arracan Bengaellen missende, sal alhier voor de Compagnie niets te verrichten vallen, want meest alle de cleeden met groote *bouris* met rys en slaven in groot getal gebracht werden, want alhier geen slaeven en vallen noch comen dan uyt Bengaelle soo dat als dan beeter en profytelycker voor de edele Compagnie soude wesen in Sitigam een comptoir te hebben.' NA VOC 1126, fol. 291-297 Letter from Adam van der Mandere to Batavia, dated Arakan November 1638.

⁸ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Badshahnamah* [The history of Shah Jahan] 2 vols. (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1867) 2: 117-118, 2:115; Abstracts were translated in W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai eds., *the Shah Jahan Nama of 'Inayat Khan. An abridged history of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, compiled by his royal librarian. The Nineteenth-century manuscript translation of A.R. Fuller* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 249-251; Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p. 280; Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 193-194; L.S.S. O'Malley, *Eastern Bengal District Gazeteers. Chittagong* (Calcutta, 1908), pp. 65-72.

⁹ Van der Mandere had been extremely reluctant to supply Narapati-kri with the requested six gunners, for this he was censured by Batavia who accused him of having been stupid not to grant such a small request to the new

the army of Narapati-kri could reach Chittagong, troops loyal to the new king had successfully driven Nga Tun Khin to Bhalua.¹⁰ The Mughals at least claimed they drove away some 200 Arakanese *jelias* who obstructed the passage of Nga Tun Khin across the Feni river. The Arakanese pretender moved to Dhaka with 9,000 followers and 14 elephants. In Dhaka he was welcomed by Islam Khan Mashhadi the Bengal *subahdar*. The fleet prepared by Narapati-kri was then sent in pursuit and entered the Bengal delta, sailing as far up the river as Sripur. Islam Khan met the Arakanese force only eight miles below Dhaka, near Dhapa. The Mughals raised several forts near the *mohana* of Khizrpur. Apparently the big guns mounted on these forts prevented the Arakanese from reaching Dhaka.¹¹ In later years the Mughals would build more permanent fortresses on the banks of the rivers around Dhaka to prevent Arakanese forces reaching Dhaka. The fort at Idrakpur from the 1660s is a good example of such a fort, with its large circular platform ideally suited to mount large guns.¹²



The *Fatiyyah-i-ibriyyah* has a slightly different version of the events. Shihab ud-Din Talish also describes the flight of the governor of Chittagong, whom he names Dahar Mah, with 4,000 or 5,000 followers and 19 elephants. According to Talish the Bhalua *faujdar* brought

king. Batavia reminded him that a prompt compliance had probably improved the VOC's position at court. Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants', p. 224 discussed Van der Mandere's reluctance, for Batavia's reaction see NA VOC 863, fol. 479-485 Letter from Batavia to Adam van der Mandere, dated Batavia 6 August 1639.

¹⁰ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Badshahnamah*, pp. 2:117-118.

¹¹ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Badshahnamah*, pp. 2:117-125.

¹² Or Idreckpoer in Dutch sources. Photo's from Banglapedia online. Idrakpur, a place at a distance of about 15 miles from Dacca still contains the dilapidated remains of a small brick fort built in 1660 A.D. by Mir Jumla. The fort is situated at Munshiganj proper, on the west bank of the canal running through the town, and in the eastern vicinity of Deobogh village. The fort was built on the bank of the river Ichhamati, (the river has now dried up). The fort, quadrangular in size, consists of two main parts: i) the wider open area surrounded by curtain walls crowned by machicolated merlons with engaged rounded corner bastions pierced by musketry, and ii) the smaller area containing a round drum of huge dimension surrounded by another series of similar curtain walls. An approach to the drum is provided from the bigger court. A small magazine exists just at the foot of the drum. The fort is 270 feet x 240 feet, containing a long high platform used probably for mounting the big guns. Two other small forts were also built by Mir Jumla in the vicinity. www.banglapedia.org

the Arakanese party over land to the Lakhiya river, which they managed to cross to Khizrpur only one day before the arrival of the Arakanese fleet. Islam Khan, who according to Talish was at this time without his army and fleet, which were both operating in Assam, prepared the defences of Dhaka. Talish describes how the Mughals blockaded the Dhaka channel with mats of bamboo and afterwards sent their army to Dhapa, presumably to construct the forts mentioned by the *Badshahnamah*. Talish also relates how the Arakanese left after a few days without picking a fight with the Mughals. The Arakanese *ko-ran-kri*, or Chief of the Royal Bodyguard, left a letter for Islam Khan hanging from a tree in Khizrpur:

The Raja has ordered me to fulfil the following objectives: first to catch his rebellious subject, second to prevent him to attack Arakan and third to prevent him to enter Arakan. He did however not order me to attack Jahangirnagar [Dhaka], or to attack your people. Thus in compliance with my orders I have now returned to Arakan. If on the contrary, I will be given the order to come to Bengal to murder, plunder, loot and so on, I will be back next year.¹³

The force sent by Narapati-kri under the leadership of the *ko-ran-kri*, to put down any resistance was thus partly successful and forced the legitimate pretender to the Mrauk U throne to withdraw into Mughal territory.¹⁴ Nga Tun Khin and his retinue subsequently resettled on the Mughal-Arakan frontier in the Dhaka area in December 1639.¹⁵ The presence of a legitimate successor supported by the Mughal empire on the borders of the Mrauk U state presented a constant threat to the new royal house for a long time to come. Up to the conquest of Chittagong by the Mughals, rumours in central Arakan of an imminent Mughal invasion were usually coupled with those intimating an impending restoration of the old royal line.¹⁶ The immediate threat to Narapati-kri was however gone.

In the rainy season of 1640 the king constructed according to VOC sources 'the largest armada ever seen in Arakan'. This fleet sailed for Bengal in November 1640. By December it was clear that Nga Tun Khin was in no position to threaten the new king and that the Mughals were not planning to assist him in any plans he might have to recover the throne.¹⁷ The Mughals probably had little interest in providing the Arakanese with an excuse to sail up the Brahmaputra and did not want to get involved in a war of succession fought near Dhaka. The large armada that the king had sent to Bengal in November 1640 was

¹³ Talish, *Fatiyyah-i-ibriyyah*, fol. 155b and 155a.

¹⁴ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Badshahnamah*, pp. 2:117-125.

¹⁵ O'Malley, *Chittagong*, pp 65-72.

¹⁶ NA VOC 1221, fol.469-491 Letter from Hendrick de Dieu and Gerrit van Voorburg to Batavia, dated Arakan 22 February 1657, folia 470v-72v.

¹⁷ NA VOC 1134, fol. 183-189 Letter from Arent van der Helm and Abraham van de Water to Batavia, dated Arakan 20 December 1640.

reported to have lost more people than it had been able to capture. As a result the price of slaves remained high.¹⁸

Perhaps as a result of the flight of the governor of Chittagong in 1638, Arakan was during 1639 and 1640 at war with Tripura. Tripura forces harassed the Arakanese from the mountains. They were notoriously difficult to attack in their hideouts in the jungle. In October 1640 the VOC reported the arrival in Arakan of three ambassadors from Tripura. The legation had been sent to conclude a peace with Arakan. It was concluded that a shortage of salt, as a result of an Arakanese blockade, had induced them to talk about peace. The war with Tripura had resulted in sharp rise in the price of cloth. In Chittagong three quarters of the cotton needed for cloth production came from Tripura.¹⁹ The peace with Tripura ensured that the following season the price of cotton came down again. In January 1641 Pieter Cocqu expected that as a consequence cloth production during the rainy season in Chittagong would attain its old volume.²⁰ In February 1642, however, cloth production in the Chittagong area was again troubled by a renewed outbreak of hostilities with Tripura.²¹

It is unclear whether the king sent a fleet to Bengal in 1641. In October 1642 the Arakanese sent their ships to raid Bengal. The fleet was instructed to sail all the way up to the pagoda of Jagannath in Orissa. This fleet returned in December bringing with them a ship belonging to an Armenian merchant from Balasore with a cargo of lead, tin, wood, porcelain and Japanese piece goods. The cargo was estimated at 16,000 to 17,000 guilders. Apart from the capture of this ship the Arakanese had sank 11 fully laden Portuguese salt-ships. These ships had the intention of sailing to Sripur to sell their cargoes there.²² On the Burma front Narapati-kri continued Sirisudhammaraja's policy of blockading the coast of Lower Burma.²³

¹⁸ *Dagh-register*, vol. 1640-1641, p. 211 entry for 16 March 1641 containing a transcript of a letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 8 February 1641.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Dagh-register*, vol. 1640-1641, p. 211 entry for 16 March 1641 containing a transcript of a letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 8 February 1641. Cocqu had returned from Chittagong to Arakan on 25 January 1641 and NA VOC 865, fol. 526-530 Letter from Batavia to Arent van der Helm, dated Batavia 19 October 1641.

²¹ *Dagh-register*, 1641-1642, pp. 140-141 entry for 24 April 1642 containing the transcript of a letter from Arent van der Helm and Lunnenburgh to Batavia, dated Arakan 15 February 1642.

²² NA VOC 1143, fol. 629-634 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 31 October 1642 and NA VOC 1143, fol. 613-617 Letter from Arent van der Helm and Abraham van de Water to Batavia, dated Arakan 22 February 1643.

²³ NA VOC 1134, fol. 183-189 Letter from Arent van der Helm and Abraham van de Water to Batavia, dated Arakan 20 December 1640.

6.2 *The depopulation of Chittagong*

In December 1642 Narapati-kri fell ill. The last time he gave a public audience was on 18 December 1642.²⁴ This illness would have an immense impact on the political situation in Arakan. In the coming years Narapati-kri would withdraw himself in his palace. This would result in a power struggle within the Arakanese nobility.

The main primary sources for the reign of king Narapati-kri are the letters and diaries of the Dutch chief in Arakan, Arent van der Helm. Van der Helm had arrived in Arakan in the 1630s. As chief of the VOC's operations in Arakan he had been given a designated seat (a golden cushion) in the public audience hall of the palace, and like other persons of rank he had also been provided with a golden umbrella by the king. The diaries of 1644 and 1645 show that Van der Helm was present at the palace almost every day, lobbying for the VOC and discussing matters of state with the Arakanese nobility. Van der Helm was in this respect on a par with the lesser Arakanese nobles. Only the members of the king's Privy Council were allowed to enter the private audience hall, of course only when they were asked inside. The diaries present an interesting picture of the life at the Arakanese court.

The illness of Narapati-kri prevented him from giving public audiences between 18 December 1642 and 18 June 1643.²⁵ The sickness was apparently so severe that nobody, not even the king's eunuchs, were allowed to enter the inner courtyards of the palace.²⁶ All contacts with the palace and the royal family were during this period firmly in the hands of the queens of Narapati-kri, not even the highest ranking courtiers were allowed inside the palace.²⁷ The prolonged absence from public by the king led to civil war in Arakan. Arent van der Helm reported that within the nobility several powerful men had started behaving like they were already king. The reports of civil war and rebellion could explain why already in 1643 coins were struck by the man who would become the next king of Arakan in 1645, Satuidhammaraja.²⁸ The king finally appeared in public again on 18 June 1643. This public audience served to show the king was still alive and in control. As a result the political situation seemed to have become more stable for a while. The king's authority received a further boost when a fleet he had sent to Bengal with his chief military commander, the *ko-ran-kri*, routed the Mughal fleet in an engagement in the Bengal delta. From a total of 75 *cousabs* only five Mughal ships survived the attack by the Arakanese fleet. As a result Bengal was laid wide open for the Arakanese. The victory over the Mughal fleet served to confirm

²⁴ NA VOC 1143, fol. 613-617 Letter from Arent van der Helm and Abraham van de Water to Batavia, dated Arakan 22 February 1643.

²⁵ NA VOC 1151, fol. 622-634 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 30 October 1643.

²⁶ The king ordered large quantities of medicine from Masulipatnam. *Dagh-register* 1643-1644 261.

²⁷ Subrahmanyam has *the* queen, while the Dutch text has the plural *koninginnen*. Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants', p. 228.

²⁸ M. Robinson and L.A. Shaw, *The coins and banknotes of Burma* (Manchester: Lancashire and Cheshire Numismatic Society, 1980), p. 57.

the Arakanese that they now ruled supreme in south-eastern Bengal. In a letter to Batavia Van der Helm remarked that the king now thought himself invincible.

Soon after this victory however the king fell ill again. The last time Van der Helm saw the king was on 11 October 1643.²⁹ The struggle for the crown soon started in earnest again. After the king had again withdrawn himself from public he had his brother, who had up till then been his left hand man or *leiwei-mran*, put into gaol. The same brother had earlier succeeded Narapati-kri as lord of Laungkarak. In the Dutch sources he is alternately named *Longrasa*, ie. *Laungkarak ca*, or *Black Sit-ke*, corresponding in this case to *leiwei-mran*.³⁰ The imprisonment of the brother of the king is the first indication that the struggle for Narapati-kri's succession was now in full swing. In December 1643 the *ko-ran-kri*, who was still in Bengal with a large fleet rebelled. The illness of the king had now given rise to rumours of his death. These rumours had prompted the *ko-ran-kri* to attempt to take the crown per force. The *ko-ran-kri* had tempted the Portuguese leadership in Arakan and Bengal to take his side and he had killed the two principal Arakanese governors in south-eastern Bengal *Pammagia* and *Asagansougrij*.³¹ On 11 December 1643 the Dutch were asked to assist the king in an effort to quell this rebellion. Van der Helm obliged, sending 21 men to gun the larger ships of the king's armada, in return for a free trade in rice.³² The fleet, commanded by the *sattannangh*, set sail for Bengal on 16 December 1643, consisting of 29 galleons with three masts, 17 galleons with two masts, more than 100 *sanghselisz*, and innumerable *balang* and *jelias*.³³ The fleet was manned by some 1,200 sailors. Two days earlier 20,000 men had left over land to Chittagong. The quick advance of the king's army so unsettled the rebellious *ko-ran-kri* that on 24 December 1643 he fled, taking all the Portuguese with him.³⁴ The VOC representative in Chittagong, Hendrik ter Horst, reported that the *ko-ran-kri* had 'destroyed Bengal' and robbed all the merchants of their property before leaving the country.³⁵ Ter Horst reported that the *sit-kes* in charge of the king's fleet had orders to bring from Chittagong to Arakan all craftsmen. These reports were confirmed when early in 1644 Van der Helm wrote to Batavia that in the space of a few days more than 5,000 families had been brought from Chittagong to Arakan. These people were in fact all weavers, barbers, carpenters, potters, and other craftsmen. The king was evidently bent on curbing Chittagong's power as the area had grown into a rival centre of power in the Arakanese kingdom. At a time when his rule in

²⁹ NA VOC 1157, fol. 632-640 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 13 February 1644.

³⁰ Dutch sources consistently differentiate between *Sit-kes* in general and the two most powerful *Sit-kes* who are named either black and white, or simply the two *sit-kes*. This corresponds to the Arakanese titles of left and right hand man. Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, pp. 380-381.

³¹ Both are probably Arakanese names or titles hitherto unexplained.

³² Van der Helm received 50 Tanka for his help, the sailors each 18 Tanka. NA VOC 1157, fol. 632-640 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 13 February 1644.

³³ *Sattannangh*, probably an Arakanese title not yet explained.

³⁴ The rebels were reported to have settled on an island in the mouth of the Ganges named Casjurij or Cassurij with the permission of the Mughal Mossendalij. *Dagh-register*, vol. 1643-1644, p. 292 entry for July 1644.

³⁵ Probably referring to south-eastern Bengal, or the Chittagong region.

Arakan was insecure this second centre of power needed to be depopulated. Rumours circulated that the king would destroy the fortress of Chittagong and build a new fort at Ramu.³⁶

The rebellion of the *ko-ran-kri* and the assistance he had received from the Portuguese had turned public opinion in Arakan against the Europeans living in Arakan.³⁷ Van der Helm reported that people dressed in European cloths were yelled at in the streets and called traitors by all and sundry. The Portuguese who had fled had left their families in Mrauk U. The detention of families at the king's court was common practice in Arakan; also Arakanese noblemen serving the king outside of the capital city had their families living in Mrauk U. The families of the Portuguese men serving the king now had to pay for the betrayal of the king by their husbands and fathers. Their properties were confiscated and the Portuguese wives were incorporated in the royal harem or settled in the jungle. The king even went as far as to detain and subsequently resettle in the Arakanese jungles his Portuguese subjects who had received *wilayat* in Arakan proper and who had not participated in the rebellion.³⁸ In March Arakanese officials arriving from Hijli with revenues from Bengal reported the rebellious Portuguese had been seen near Hijli.³⁹

In his letter to Batavia of 13 February 1644 Van der Helm already noted that 5,000 families of skilled craftsmen had arrived in Mrauk U from Chittagong. The days and months that follow in his diary are full of entries describing the arrival of yet more people from Bengal. From 1 to 4 March 23 ships arrived full of weavers, carpenters and other craftsmen. Between 10 and 11 March 1,300 people arrived from Bengal. On 13 March 700 persons from Bengal were brought into the palace at Mrauk U. According to Van der Helm one third of the people arriving from Bengal soon died after their arrival. He described how these people were transported almost naked and without food. Prices for food and building materials such as bamboo and cane tripled. The king requisitioned all building material to build new houses for the Bengalis. On 15 March again more than a thousand people arrived from Bengal. The king now prohibited the sale of quantities of rice larger than needed to feed one person a day. With the influx of such a large number of people without money or land of their own to provide for themselves food shortage or famine was now not far away.

The king's sickness had by this time progressed so far that it was reported that he was lame on one side of his body. The members of the king's Privy Council had not seen him in person for a long time either. The king conducted his private audiences with this council from

³⁶ NA VOC 1157, fol. 632-640 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 13 February 1644.

³⁷ NA VOC 1149 folia 524-567v. Summary of the diary of Arent van den Helm from 19 February 1644 to 30 October 1644, entry for 20 February 1644.

³⁸ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 9 and 10 March 1644.

³⁹ Diary of Van der Helm 1644 entry for 14 March.

behind a curtain so that nobody would be able to see him.⁴⁰

The mass deportations of people from the Chittagong area led to an uprising late in March 1644. On 29 March the *sattannangh*, who had commanded the fleet that was sent to quell the rebellion of the *ko-ran-kri* in 1643, returned to Mrauk U with news of the uprising. The king promoted the *sattannangh* to the rank of *sonodo*⁴¹ and the *sonodo* was promoted to *ko-ran-kri*. On 1 April Van der Helm found the palace buzzing with activity. Troops were mustered and news had reached the court that the *leirei-mran* and the *kotwal* had been attacked in the Chittagong area by a force of 500 Mon soldiers, who had been settled there by the king.⁴² The fort of Chittagong was now in the hands of the rebels who had sent their families into the woods and had vowed to defend the fort at any cost lest they be deported to Arakan as well. The rebellion of the Bengali population of Chittagong only served to strengthen the king's resolve to depopulate the area and resettle this part of the kingdom with Arakanese. On 2 April 3,000 men had already left for Chittagong and a few days later *sonodo* left with a force estimated at between 10,000 and 12,000 men. The *leiwei-mran*, who had stayed behind in Mrauk U, received news of the victory of the *leirei-mran* in the evening of 10 April 1644. The Arakanese generals had set fire to the fort and reconquered Chittagong for the king.

The pacification of Chittagong was however only a partial victory for Narapati-kri. Immediately following the take over of the fort, some 5,000 men with their families fled to Mughal controlled Bengal. Van der Helm remarked that these people, together with the persons who fled in 1638 with the previous governor of Chittagong Nga Thun Khin, and those who left with the *ko-ran-kri* in December 1643 would, if united, form a substantial threat to Arakanese control over this part of Bengal. The people who had left Arakanese Bengal were in fact the oarsmen of the Portuguese galleys, skilled in warfare and according to Van der Helm much better soldiers than the Arakanese from Arakan proper. Van der Helm remarked they were soldiers by profession and used to confront the enemy. On top of this these people had mostly been born in Chittagong and would know all the roads and waterways, so that they could easily find their way around, even at night.⁴³

Although the governor of Chittagong had in an earlier letter to the court in Arakan requested help from Arakan to suppress the rebellion, he too was taken captive by the Arakanese army sent to put down the resistance to Narapati-kri's resettlement program. The

⁴⁰ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 15 March.

⁴¹ Probably an Arakanese title not yet explained.

⁴² *Leirei-mran*, refers to the 'White Sit-ke' of the VOC source.

⁴³ '...te meer sy inbooren van Sattigam (ende de wegen al is't by nacht bekent) zyn ende een persoon van die tegen drie van deze Moogen derft presteeren ende vyj beter soldaten als dese syn, sulcx is oock geen wonder want de meest part roeyers van de Portugeesen vaertuygen syn en dagelijks aende dans moeten zoo dat in hun wanneer tegen haer vyant moeten veel minder (als in deze Mooghe) schrick is.' Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 12 April.

governor of Chittagong was brought to Arakan in May, where he was kept in prison in the house of the *leirei-mran* who himself stayed in Chittagong. In Mrauk U the governor of Chittagong was united with his family who, in conformity of the practice described earlier, resided in Arakan. In June the governor of Chittagong was released. It was reported that Arakanese officials from Bengal had spoken favourably about the way this governor had tried to oppose the rebellion of the *ko-ran-kri*. There were however important conditions to his release. The former governor of Chittagong would not be allowed to fulfil any official position and he would have to part with his youngest wife, who had been married to Sirisudhammaraja. This queen had been given the title Queen of Gold by Sirisudhammaraja.⁴⁴ In the Arakanese chronicles there is a story that is remarkably akin to the forced separation of the governor of Chittagong and his wife. Leider describes how Narapati-kri asked the advice of twelve abbots of the most important monasteries in Mrauk U on what to do with the governor of Sam thon⁴⁵ who had married a former queen of Sirisudhammaraja. In the end the king decided to relegate the governor to the class of water carriers and the queen to another service group.⁴⁶ Although we cannot be sure if the chronicles refer to the same event as the VOC source, it seems plausible enough that the same event is meant. This interesting story could well be another indication of the important role of women at the Arakanese court, even more so if we were to assume this sort of thing happened to two (or more) officials. It should equally be remembered that at the same time Nat Shin May, the most important queen of Sirisudhammaraja, who was married to Narapati-kri as well, controlled access to the royal ear. The king after all was sick and not seen outside since October 1643. It is difficult to assess the exact role and importance of these women, but it may well be that the separation of the governor of Chittagong from his former wife was more to the detriment of the first. A suspicion that is confirmed by the fact that a year later the future king Satuidhammaraja, at that moment still *ein-shei-min* would request from his uncle the hand of the same queen, ‘as she was an experienced queen who could help him’. The king refused this and scorned the young boy that if he thought it was a good idea to be guided by an older woman, he would never become a good king.

The depopulation program marks the start of the decline of Arakan’s ability to control south-eastern Bengal. In the course of 1644 the returning army brought with them an estimated 85,000 Bengalis, a large number of cattle, estimated at 30,000 oxen, cows, and buffaloes, and a large sum of money of about 15,000 to 16,000 Tanka.⁴⁷ Although these numbers seem to be very large, they were reportedly taken from lists the *leirei-mran* and *kotwal* had kept during

⁴⁴ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entries for 12 April, 5 May, 12 May, 1 June and 2 June 1644.

⁴⁵ It is unclear which locality is meant here.

⁴⁶ Leider, *Le royaume d’Arakan*, p., 281.

⁴⁷ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 10 June.

their campaign in Chittagong. The numbers also are in conformity with the earlier diary entries by Van der Helm describing how sometimes within one week thousands of people arrived in Arakan from Chittagong. The people who were brought to Arakan were mostly weavers, dyers and other skilled craftsmen working in the Bengali textile industry. The operation to resettle in the Danyawati area the Chittagonians as *man-kywan* or royal service groups⁴⁸ was however not a success.

The resettlement of large parts of the Chittagonian population in Arakan was a major issue for discussion at the Arakanese court and it caused deep divisions within the nobility. The group opposing the programme argued that the king would lose his largest source of income: the rents from Bengal.⁴⁹ Arent van der Helm joined this group in their opposition. Van der Helm and his friends at court argued that the mass movement of people from Chittagong to Arakan on top of this not only destroyed the weaving industry in Chittagong and was detrimental to the rice export, but also caused food shortages and eventually famines in Arakan itself. Instead of an increase in population the resettlement scheme would cause starvation and death they argued. The reasons for Van der Helm's opposition to these resettlements are not hard to find. Chittagong would not be a reliable source for cheap rice for a long time, cloth production had already come to a standstill and with the departure of the Portuguese and their oarsmen, slaves were not brought to the market. The departure of the Portuguese would moreover seriously diminish Arakanese military capabilities in south-eastern Bengal. The quality of the cloth produced in Arakan could not in any way rival that of Chittagong and Van der Helm expected that the dyers would need at least two years before they could produce high quality dyes needed for the cloth industry.⁵⁰

The king and a group headed by the *leirei-mran* argued that the resettled Bengalis would soon restart their businesses again and create a flourishing weaving industry in Arakan proper. The object of the king was to secure his frontier with Mughal Bengal and to eliminate members of the Chittagonian elite as rivals to the throne. The king had come to view Chittagong as a threat to Mrauk U. The area in Bengal under Arakanese rule had developed in a rival centre of power, mostly populated by Bengalis and difficult to control from Arakan. Narapati-kri therefore wanted to resettle the Chittagong area with ethnic Arakanese and hoped to revive the trade and commerce in the area within two or three years.⁵¹ He even expected to be able to restart collecting revenues from Chittagong after only one or two years.

⁴⁸ See M. Aung Thwin, 'Athi, Kyun.Taw, Hpayà-Kyun: Varieties of commendation and dependence in pre-colonial Burma', Reid ed. *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 64-89 and Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan* (1998), pp. 450-454. My thanks go to Jacques Leider for relating the Dutch expression "Man Ghewijn of 's konings slaven" to *man-kywan*.

⁴⁹ The discussions at the Arakanese court can be followed from Van der Helm's diaries for the years 1644 and 1645. Van der Helm is present at court approximately five days of the week, discussing freely with the Arakanese nobility about matters of state. Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 24 February.

⁵⁰ NA VOC 1155, fol. 493-516 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 31 October 1644.

⁵¹ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 10 June.

The resettled Bengalis indeed proved to be a great burden for the king's treasury as they could not feed themselves the first few years to come. The king counted on the fact that the Bengalis would be removed from the Mrauk U area and settled throughout Arakan within 9 months or one year, after which they would be subject to taxation.⁵² In the short-term however the skeptics of the resettlement scheme were proved right. The groups resettled in Dhanyawati were decimated by famine in 1645, partly as a result of the increased prices of rice caused by the sudden increase in population in Dhanyawati and partly as a result of the sharply diminished rice production because of the shortage of labour in Chittagong and environs. It is not clear if the plan to conversely resettle Arakanese in Chittagong was ever put into action.

In the first half of the seventeenth century a coarse cloth named Dungarees, or called *dougries* by the VOC, was exported from Arakan. These coarse cotton cloths were mainly used to clothe the slaves during transport to the Indonesian archipelago and were sold with some profit to provide clothing for slaves on Ambon and Banda.⁵³ The VOC also ordered Guineess linen from Arakan for sale to the Dutch West Indies Company (WIC). In 1656 prices of Dungarees had risen to such an extent that the VOC chief in Arakan decided to send the slaves naked to Batavia.⁵⁴ By 1663 Dungarees would be imported in Arakan from Coromandel where they were at that time considerably cheaper than those manufactured in Arakan itself.⁵⁵ The attempt to create a flourishing weaving industry in Arakan had certainly proved to be a complete failure. In 1665 the VOC chief in Arakan received 960 packets of Dungarees from Coromandel on a Muslim ship freighted by the VOC.⁵⁶

The removal of a large part of the Bengali population of Chittagong also did not have the positive effect on the security of Arakan's borders with the Mughal empire as the king had hoped. Soon after the *leirei-mran* and *kotwal* had returned from Chittagong, reports reached Mrauk U that the governor of Sandwip had also rebelled, and had opened the island to the rebellious Portuguese. Sandwip was well defended and it was expected that it could only be taken with a substantial force. It was regarded of the utmost importance to bring Sandwip under Arakanese control again. From Sandwip the river of Chittagong could easily be blockaded, which the Portuguese did not hesitate to implement without delay.⁵⁷ The king

⁵² Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 10 June.

⁵³ NA VOC 863, fol. 600-607 Letter from Batavia to Adam van der Mandere, dated Batavia 30 September 1639. Arakanese cloth exports to Aceh in 1615 in F. Danvers and W. Foster eds., *Letters received by the East India Company from its servants in the East, 1602-1615* 3 vols. (London, 1896-1898), p. 3:103.

⁵⁴ NA VOC 1214, fol. 201-206 Letter from Hendrik de Dieu to Batavia, dated Arakan 8 January 1656, fol. 204v-205.

⁵⁵ NA VOC 1242, fol. 739-754 Letter from Daniel Six and Nicholaas Boukes to Batavia, dated Arakan 17 December 1663.

⁵⁶ NA VOC 1252, fol. 401-416 Letter from Daniel Six to Batavia, dated Arakan 30 January 1665.

⁵⁷ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entries for 12 and 18 June.

reacted with an order to all his subjects to ready themselves for war in September. From 19 June 1644 men with gongs proclaimed throughout Arakan that everyone was required to keep his boat ready to join the fleet that would depart in September for Sandwip. The king announced that he would lead the operation in person and that whoever was found absent would be punished severely. The loss of Sandwip was perceived as such a severe threat to the security of the kingdom that the king ordered an extra five large galleons with three masts to be built, and that he had distributed large amounts of iron to make weapons for his army.

A few days later, on 21 June, it was announced that the king had chosen the son of his eldest brother as his successor. It was expected that the king would now appear in public again to officially bestow the regalia that belonged to the rank of *ein-shei-min* on his nephew. To everyone's surprise in the event the king did not personally crown his nephew. The task to install the young man as crown prince on 23 June was left to the *leirei-mran*, who was assisted by *piesa*, *sjouppa*, *cachma*, and the son of *asagrii*.⁵⁸ After he had received the regalia the prince was carried three times around his house in a golden palanquin, after which he exchanged gifts with the nobles and the Dutch merchants, who were also present. The choice of the king was not applauded by the members of his privy council. The most important noblemen in Arakan told Van der Helm that they thought this young prince was a madman, or at least insane. Van der Helm suspected that *cachma*, the king's treasurer, was seeking the VOC's assistance in the event he would try to take the Arakanese crown per force. The treasurer was estimated by Van der Helm to be the richest of the Arakanese nobles, and he thought he would use his money to lure the common people into his camp.⁵⁹ The coronation of the crown prince did not mean the king was not in control of the government. Perhaps to prove he still ruled the country the king had the *insougrii*⁶⁰ of the *ein-shei-min* caned⁶¹ after hearing complaints from his subjects who had told him the *ko-rans* of the *ein-shei-min* had collected more taxes from them than allowed.⁶² The king also rebuked the prince for asking permission to marry the "Queen of Gold", who had earlier been married to the former governor of Chittagong and before that had been wedded to Sirisudhammaraja.⁶³ The king apparently went into a rage, saying that the prince was not worthy of his new position if he thought he needed to be educated by this woman. Although the sources do not permit us to venture behind the palace walls, it is highly probable that the proposed marriage was in some way connected to the succession struggle still raging at the court. After his installation the *ein-shei-min* had become part of the Privy Council of the king, and from that moment on Van der Helm regularly reports his presence at the palace.

⁵⁸ Arakanese title hitherto not traced, 'in *su kri*'.

⁵⁹ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 17 August.

⁶⁰ Arakanese title as yet not traced.

⁶¹ With 200 lashes.

⁶² Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 31 June.

⁶³ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 20 July.

6.3 *The loss of Sandwip*

In August and September 1644 Arakanese fears of Mughal intervention on Sandwip were proved to be just. Early in August rumours had it that Mughal cavalry had arrived on the island, and in early September news was confirmed that 100 horsemen of the Mughal frontier guard at Bhalua had arrived at Sandwip.⁶⁴ According to Van der Helm the Arakanese were very much afraid of the Mughal cavalry. A story circulating in Mrauk U described how last year a single Mughal horseman had scared 700 to 800 Arakanese back into their boats. The king now ordered all his noblemen to provide a *bourij* each so that in October he could collect all the paddy available in Chittagong, hoping that in doing so he could deny his enemy the food needed to sustain an invading army.⁶⁵ At the end of September 1644 the Portuguese 'Balerij', who had been sent by the king as an ambassador to Bengal, returned with ambassadors of Diogo de Sá, one of the Portuguese captains who had taken part in the rebellion of 1643 and had fled Arakan together with the *ko-ran-kri*. The ambassadors reported that their *capitão-mor* Manuel Rodrigo Tigre, the captains Pedro Martim, Gonçalves de Reijs de Melle had died and that Diogo de Sá had killed Manuel Cardosa, who had been the 'left and right hand' of the *ko-ran-kri*. The Portuguese came to try and settle their disputes with the king and asked him to take them back into his service. The return of the Portuguese had in fact already been predicted by the king who had in 1643 said that within a year they would be either dead or dispersed all over India, and that they would come crawling back to his feet to ask forgiveness, which now they did.⁶⁶ Now they were back he refused to take them into his service again.

In October 1644 the fleet sailed for Sandwip. Although the Arakanese outnumbered their enemy fifty to one, they lost 3,000 men and the nobles in charge fled the battlefield in disgrace. The king immediately sent the *leirei-mran* with a second fleet to Sandwip on 8 December 1644. In a *firman* the king offered his nobles and soldiers half of the spoils if they would succeed in bringing Sandwip under Arakanese control again.⁶⁷ The *leirei-mran* promised the king that he would bring the governor of Sandwip to the Arakanese court. He was however unable to keep his promises. On Sandwip he was heavily defeated and had to swim to his boat in order to save his life and sail for Dianga. He lost on the island 5,000 soldiers, some cannon, elephants, and horses. For a while it was rumoured that the *leirei-mran* would now also seek refuge in Bengal with the rest of the fleet, because he would

⁶⁴ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entries for 6 August and 7 September.

⁶⁵ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 15 August.

⁶⁶ NA VOC 1155, fol. 493-516 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 31 October 1644.

⁶⁷ NA VOC 1158, fol. 175-180 Summary of the political and commercial events in Arakan compiled from the letters of the *opperkoopman* Arent van der Helm received in 1645 from Arakan. This was also published in the *Dagh-register* 1644-1645 56-60, 58.

probably not dare to come home to confront the king with this humiliating loss.⁶⁸ The *leireimran* was in the end excused when he brought with him from Bengal a large, but undisclosed, sum of money he had taken from Buddhist monks in the Chittagong area.⁶⁹

In August 1645 the Arakanese king and his nobles heavily debated whether they should postpone the attack on Sandwip and organize a raid on Mughal Bengal instead. This time the mestizos living in Arakan had to take the place of the Portuguese who had fled the kingdom or who had been resettled in the jungle.⁷⁰ Earlier in May 1645 the king ordered all the *meijnedaers*, mestizos, and Japanese to present themselves at the court.⁷¹ The eunuch *Louwedansougrij* collected all their weapons and registered them. The king issued these orders so that he would know how many foreign soldiers each noblemen controlled and how many, and what kind of, weapons these soldiers had at their disposal. The fleet finally departed for Sripur at the end of October, planning to leave Sandwip in peace this season. Sripur was also chosen because the Arakanese wanted to fetch water from the Ganges for the annual Festival of Lights (Diwali). The fleet however struck a sandbank near Sandwip when it returned from Sripur. Stuck in the mud they were an easy target for the rebels at Sandwip. In the end 17 out of 19 *Gelias* with approximately 2,000 men on them were lost to the enemy.⁷²

6.4 The illness of king Narapati-kri

The second half of Narapati-kri's reign was, as described above, marred by a severe illness that left the lower part of the king's body half dead, one leg eventually dried out completely and was reportedly severely shrunken by 1645.⁷³ In the Arakanese sources Narapati-kri is noted as a great donor to the *sasana*, patronizing monks and monasteries, and building new pagodas.⁷⁴ Charney has suggested two reasons why Narapati-kri might have become such an important donor to the *sasana*.⁷⁵ The first reason for this being that the *sangha* provided advisors whom he could trust, because he did not rely 'on the heads of the elite clans'. This should be illustrated by the creation of a council of twelve Buddhist monks, who advised him on important matters in the kingdom. The second reason being that Narapati-kri turned to

⁶⁸ NA VOC 1155, fol. 479-487 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 3 February 1645, fol. 485v.

⁶⁹ Summary of the diary of Arent van den Helm from 26 February 1645 to 29 October 1645 NA VOC 1155 folia 759-797. Entries for 26 February and 1-4 March.

⁷⁰ Van der Helm here describes the Portuguese as the holders of *wilayat* (*Billatteers*), the mestizos are more commonly termed *Topassen*. Diary of Van der Helm 1645, entry for 11 August.

⁷¹ *Meijnedaer*. Probably a corruption of an Indo-Persian title as yet untraced.

⁷² Diary of Van der Helm 1645, entry for 8 October.

⁷³ The disease could have been Leprosy as the king was supposedly an ugly sight, could not crown the prince, probably because he was now impure and he was not weak mentally or sickly.

⁷⁴ Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p. 283 and Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 195-197.

⁷⁵ Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 195-197.

Buddhism for personal spiritual protection and to strengthen his authority. The first reason seems not so probable. The Privy Council of the king did consist of the leaders of elite families in Arakan and in the copious material left by Van der Helm there is never any mention of monks as the king's advisors. The king kept on discussing matters of state with his Privy Council until his death, be it from behind a screen so that no one could see the state his body was in. Leider has argued that the chronicle traditions regarding Narapati-kri are possibly the result of an early eighteenth century historiography primarily concerned with the origins of the decline of the Arakanese kingdom. They represent therefore not so much an accurate account of the events during the reign of Narapati-kri but are a reflection on the origins of the decline of the kingdom.⁷⁶ The idea that these chronicle traditions are not contemporary is confirmed by a factual comparison of dates and events between these chronicle traditions and the contemporary evidence provided by the records of the VOC in this Chapter. The second reason given by Charney is more probable. The illness of the king probably prompted him to patronize the *sasana* for his own spiritual and physical well being, and of course also to strengthen his authority in the kingdom, which he was not able to do in any other way because of his illness.

The Dutch sources provide substantial evidence for the king's reliance on Buddhism to restore his health. On 23 August 1644 the king prepared a vegetable meal of which the nobility and also Van der Helm were expected to buy small portions for a large amount of money. The king used this money to buy fish and rice for the Buddhist monks, who in their turn would pray for his health. In September 1644 the king had seven very precious Buddha statues made for a new pagoda he was planning to make. The statues were made of the purest gold. The largest one weighing 30 *ser*, or about 13 kilo. This statue was beset with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and pearls. The value of this statue was estimated at 100,000 Tanka, the other six at 3,000 Tanka each.⁷⁷ In November and December 1644 the king distributed alms to all the Buddhist monks, Brahmins, and *Roegies* in Arakan., to a total of 460,000 Tanka.⁷⁸ On 4 July 1645 the king ordered his treasurer again to distribute alms to the, according to Van der Helm, already extremely rich Buddhist monks.⁷⁹ In the space of 18 days the king had 40,000 Tanka distributed. The alms giving was accompanied by large festivities with dancers from Pegu, musical performances and the firing of small guns. Thousands of monks entered the palace daily. According to the Arakanese nobles, whom Van der Helm questioned about the ritual, all this was done to restore the king to his former health. On 9 October 1645 Van

⁷⁶ Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p., 283.

⁷⁷ Diary of Van der Helm 1644, entry for 13 September.

⁷⁸ NA VOC 1155, fol. 479-487 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 3 February 1645, fol. 485v. has Rouwelis, Bramenis and Roegies as the recipients of the alms. It is not clear to which group *roegies* refers.

⁷⁹ Diary of Van der Helm 1645, entry for 8 July. This time only Rouwelis are mentioned as recipients.

der Helm reported that the king had again invited some 2,000 monks⁸⁰ to come to the palace and receive their *ismole* or alms. Finally, more evidence for the idea that the king turned to Buddhism in an attempt to restore his health, is provided by Forchhammer who noted that:

king Narapati-kri was recommended by his astrologers to set up a large number of statues of Gotama [imitations of the Mahamuni image] about Launggyet to expel the fever; the statues black with age and exposure still sit [as melancholy solitary guardians] in the paddy fields about Nankya, but the climate is as bad as ever.⁸¹

It seems clear that the sudden distribution of precious metals, alms giving, the construction of new pagodas and new Buddha images were made possible by the plunder obtained during the destruction of Chittagong the previous years.

The last year of Narapati-kri's reign factional strife determined the atmosphere at the Arakanese court. A confrontation between Van der Helm and The *rwa ca* of the *bandel* on 14 September 1645 illustrates the situation nicely.⁸² Van der Helm had lashed out to a servant of the *rwa ca* who had offended him in public. The *rwa ca* was extremely angered by this and said to Van der Helm:

that his behavior was unheard of and quite unacceptable, that his servants had never before been hit by a captain, and that Van der Helm evidently thought he was already king in Arakan because he had dared to hit a royal servant inside the palace walls.

To which Van der Helm replied saying:

as everyone knows there are these days so many kings in this palace that the presence of one more would not make any difference.⁸³

⁸⁰ Rouwelis.

⁸¹ E. Forchhammer, *Notes on early history and geography of British Burma: Arakan* (Rangoon, 1891), pp. 48-49.

⁸² The person holding the appanage of the Mrauk U harbour. The *bandel* was at Diegrepare

⁸³ 'Ghylieden hoort gesamentl. hoe sy ons hier in ues. bywesen toespreecken, en ghy straft haer daer niet over, dien volgens ben ick genootsaecht, 't selve haer in u bywesen en hier in't fort te doen, want soo imant van ues allen ons soo bejegende soude het ues niet ongeloont laten, al souw hier sterven, mits spronck op en gaf dien onbeschaemde guyt een trap met onse voet op zijn borst, dat achterover viel, ende doen noch eenige slagen met de staert van onse wayer, die inde hant hadde, in zijn aengesicht, Rosje syn meester die daer present was ende alles benevens de groote hoorde en sach, begost seer te flumineeren, seggende syn volcq noyt slaech oft stoot buyten Conincx paleys van geen capiteyns en hadden gehadt en wy ons lieten voorstaen al coninck te syn, dewyle syn volck in't paleys dorst slaen, wy zeyde daer syn dagel., soo ooghschynel. byjckt, hier soo veel coninghen, dat het op een niet aen en compt'. Diary of Van der Helm 1645, entry for 14 September.

The same day a conflict over the protection of a garden⁸⁴ between the *leirei-mran* and the eunuch *Louwedansougrij*, both members of the Privy Council, resulted in the imprisonment of the *Louwedansougrij*. The king's authority finally ebbed away as he became weaker and weaker. A few months before the death of the king the Dutch factor described the Arakanese king in unflattering terms, excusing himself for his harsh words to his superiors, but hoping Narapati-kri would die soon, Van der Helm ended a letter to Batavia describing Narapati-kri as: 'this old, half dead, impotent king hiding in his palace'.⁸⁵

In a letter dated 22 February 1646 Arent van der Helm announced that the king had finally died and that the son of his brother had succeeded him peacefully.⁸⁶ The letter itself with all the details regarding the succession has not survived as most of the VOC documentation from Asia for 1646 is no longer extant.⁸⁷ According to Leider Arakanese chronicle traditions all claim Narapati-kri was succeeded by his own son.⁸⁸ The contemporary Dutch sources however never mention the existence of a son of Narapati-kri. The coronation of Narapati-kri's nephew in 1644 as *ein-shei-min* and the statement that the son of his brother had succeeded him, prove that at least this time the crown was not handed down from father to son, as described in the Arakanese chronicles.⁸⁹ It is however curious that the Dutch authors Frans van der Heijden en Willem Kunst in their travelogue describing their shipwreck in the Bay of Bengal claim Satuidhammaraja was the son of Narapati-kri, who they say died in 1646. They also state that his coming to power was the final result of a war of succession. It therefore seems that already in the early 1660s, when Van der Heijden and Kunst were in Arakan, the notion that Satuidhammaraja had been Narapati-kri's son had taken root in Arakan, or was at least the preferred version of the genealogy of the reigning royal family.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Which could mean a fruit garden, a plantation of (betel) palms, etc.

⁸⁵ NA VOC 1159, fol. 369-383 Letter from Arent van der Helm to Batavia, dated Arakan 31 October 1645, fol. 381.

⁸⁶ NA VOC 1160, fol. 13 Generale Missive van Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden, dated 15 January 1647.

⁸⁷ The *Dagh-register* for 1646 is missing as well.

⁸⁸ Phayre however has a list of Arakanese kings in which Satuidhammaraja is also styled Narapati-kri's brother's son. Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 303.

⁸⁹ For the chronicles see Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, passim.

⁹⁰ F.J. van der Heiden and W. Kunst, *Vervarelyke schipbreuk van't Oost-Indisch jacht Terschelling onder het landt van Bengale; Verhalende desselfs verongelukken, en den gruwelijken hongersnoot van 32 schipbreukelingen op zeker onbewoont eilant, daer sy van't wrak met een vlot aenquamen. Hoe sy van het selve eilant in Bengale landen, en voorts in 't veltleger van den grooten Mogol, tot in 't koninkrijk van Assam landewaerts opgevoert zijn. Benevens een bondige beschrijving der koninkrijken van Arrakan, Bengale, Martavan, Tanassery &c.* 2nd edition; (Amsterdam, 1675), p. 83. NA VOC 1236, fol. 892-901 Letter from Gerrit van Voorburg to Batavia, dated Arakan 20 November 1661., fol. 896. On 31 October 1661 10 sailors of the *Terschelling* were handed over to Gerrit van Voorburg. They were captured near Dianga after having been sent out by their captain to seek assistance after their ship was wrecked near the Sunderbans. The location of their shipwreck is marked on the map of Bengal made on orders of the chief of the Bengal operations of the VOC Mattheus van den Broeck, which is reproduced elsewhere in this dissertation.

6.5 *Satuidhammaraja*

Satuidhammaraja (1645-1652) was 26 years old when in November or December 1645 he succeeded his uncle as king of Arakan. Not much is known about his short reign, which lasted until his death in February-March 1652. In Leider's work on the Mrauk U kingdom his reign only begets just more than one page in a book totaling more than 500 pages. Dutch sources on the reign of this king are also scant as the VOC left Arakan in May 1647 when long standing conflicts over the rice trade and the killing of several Dutch free merchants had developed in a *casus belli*.⁹¹

The Arakanese chronicles describe several military expeditions by Satuidhammaraja to the North-East and Bengal. Rammapura⁹² and Kamboja⁹³ are mentioned as to have renewed their submission to the Arakanese king.⁹⁴ The ruler of Takkatya⁹⁵ and six other principalities are also said to have come again under Arakanese suzerainty. The evidence from the chronicles thus points to a gradual restoration of central authority in the Arakanese kingdom, following the disastrous effects of Narapati-kri's reign on the authority of the king throughout Arakan. Apart from these brief remarks in the chronicles, Dutch sources provide only two fragmented snapshots of Arakan during the reign of this king.

Following the abrupt departure of Arent van der Helm in May 1647, Satuidhammaraja had sent two ambassadors, one of them named *Ugga* the other *Ammon*⁹⁶, to Batavia. The ambassadors had orders to try to tempt the VOC to renew its trade with Arakan.⁹⁷ The VOC felt a renewal of the trade with Arakan could be useful, but was not necessary because its metropolitan centers at Melaka and Batavia were sufficiently provided with rice and other sources of slaves had been found in Coromandel. The recent conquest of Melaka and the victories in Sri Lanka, moreover meant the VOC's military position vis-à-vis its Asian counterparts had also improved considerably. Jacobus Hensbroeck was therefore sent to Arakan with orders that were primarily aimed at exacting an exaggerated amount of damages from the Arakanese. Hensbroeck's orders also specified the need for apologies from the Arakanese following the death of Company subjects enslaved in Arakan. Hensbroeck was instructed to declare war if these demands were not met and to start the attack immediately if the king failed to comply. Satuidhammaraja himself was informed of the VOC's intentions in a letter sent to him by the governor-general Cornelis van der Lijn, who declared in no

⁹¹ The backgrounds of these conflicts are vividly described in Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants'.

⁹² Leider suggests this might be an Indianized name of Ramu. Note that this place is also mentioned in the Letter from Man Khamaung to the VOC, quoted in a previous Chapter.

⁹³ Leider suggests the area North of Chittagong might be identified with Kamboja.

⁹⁴ Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p., 285.

⁹⁵ Leider suggests Dakatiya, near Bhalua.

⁹⁶ Oega in the Dutch sources.

⁹⁷ NA VOC 873, fol. 145-147 Instruction for Jacobus Hensbroeck, dated Batavia 21 October 1649.

uncertain terms:

We, who are in times of need not only merchants, but soldiers as well, are resolved to make our intentions crystal clear to your Majesty. According to the laws of nature and to safeguard our rights we are prepared to declare war on Arakan in compensation and revenge for the never heard of and horrific killing of our people⁹⁸, the affronts shown to our resident, and in recompense for our losses and the debts remaining in Arakan, of which you shall be acquainted by our captain. Our captain has orders to attack and blockade your country, with the aid of more ships that will be sent to him. With the help of God he will destroy your country as much as he can. We therefore hope your majesty has the wealth and prosperity of his country foremost in his mind and we suggest he will think wisely, so that we might get what is due to us and your majesty will in return get a peaceful and rich country,

With which we recommend your majesty in the protection of God.⁹⁹

The diary of Hensbroeck's embassy has been preserved and provides us with a unique picture of Arakan under the reign of Satuidhammaraja during the first three months of 1650.¹⁰⁰ After his arrival at the mouth of the Kaladan river on 5 January 1650, Hensbroeck sent the ambassadors to the king, who at that time had gone to Paragri¹⁰¹ to pay homage to the Mahamuni.¹⁰² On 14 January they returned with news that the king was eager to read what the

⁹⁸ Dutch free merchants from the yacht *de Goeden Engel*, operating from Melaka arriving with contraband in Arakan and consequently condemned to serve as *man-kywan* in Arakan where they died from diseases. See Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and tyrants' for a description and infra Chapter 8 for more details.

⁹⁹ 'Soo syn wy, die in tyde des vereyschende, soo wel soldaten als coopluyden syn, mede van resolutie onse meeninge de majesteyt rondelycq bekent te maecken. Dat is, volgens de wet der nature, tot manctenue van ons recht, Arracan den oorloge aen te seggen, in revengie vanden onnatuerlycke noyt gehoorde en gruwelycq ombrengen onses volcx, de doorgaens gepleechde affronten onser residenten, als voldoeninge van onse achterheden ende uitstaende schulden, gelycq in dien gevalle dan door onsen capitain bekent sal gemaect werden, ende ordre heeft in't wercq te stellen, omme met de macht van schepen, die hem dan staen toe te comen alle advemien ende Arracanse revieren te infesteren, besetten, ende allen affbreuck te doen soo veel mogelycq, ende met de macht by Godt ons verleent, uyt te voeren sal syn. Wy willen dan tot een besluit uwe majesteyt tot welstandt van't Arracanse ryck indachtigh maecken, hem wel ende wysselycq te beraden, op dat wy contentement ende uwe majesteyt een vredigh florissant ryck mach erlangen, waarmede wy uwe majesteyt inde bewaringe Godes bevolen laten.' NA VOC 873, fol. 148 Letter from Cornelis van der Lijn to Satuidhammaraja, dated Batavia 21 October 1649.

¹⁰⁰ Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants' has extensively used the diary in an attempt to analyze the VOC source as a proto-colonial discourse, focusing on notions of tyranny. The inclusion of the instructions for Hensbroeck and the letter from Batavia to the Arakanese king in his article would have enlightened much of his discussion of the embassy of Hensbroeck, which sometimes misses the point when attempting to analyze the behavior and actions of the two parties. This is for example striking when Subrahmanyam ridicules Hensbroeck's suggestion the king had organized a show of force to impress his might on the VOC, something which does not sound improbable when we keep the text of Van der Lijn's letter to the king in mind.

¹⁰¹ Here written Sragrij.

¹⁰² NA VOC 1177, fol. 124-195 Summary of the diary of our trip to Arakan with the yacht *Leeuwerik* from 22 October 1649, containing the most important events which happened to us in this kingdom by Jacobus Heusbroeck. Entry for 5 January 1650.

governor-general had written, the following days were spent on translating the letter. While on board the ship the Arakanese ambassadors related how a while ago the king had shed many tears over the death of one of his most important lords the *Laungkarak ca*.¹⁰³ The *Laungkarak ca* and a group of other high ranking nobles had been murdered in eastern Bengal by the local Arakanese governors of Bengal. The *Laungkarak ca* and the other officials had been sent to Bengal by Satuidhammaraja to collect taxes; they were killed when they were invited to a party by the Arakanese governors there. They had actually been burned in the houses where they had been invited to a feast. Only one nobleman escaped to bring the news to the court in Mrauk U.¹⁰⁴ This report confirms the notion in the Arakanese chronicles that Satuidhammaraja was campaigning in Arakan to restore control. It also shows that by 1650 Satuidhammaraja was all but sure of his footing in Bengal. The disastrous policies of his uncle had left Satuidhammaraja with a divided kingdom.



The Karaweik in Rangoon¹⁰⁵

The Dutch envoy Hensbroeck was finally allowed to present himself at the king's feet on 5 February 1650, almost a month after he had arrived in Arakan. Hensbroeck himself speculated that he had been kept waiting so that the king could assemble the large army to impress him while he was being rowed towards the king's temporary floating palace near Paragri. Given that Hensbroeck carried letters, the contents of which was already known to the king, threatening Arakan with war, this is a distinct possibility. Hensbroeck describes the spectacle on the river as follows:

we arrived in the middle of a very wide royal river [with] a countless many galliots of

¹⁰³ Here *Tompaxa*.

¹⁰⁴ Dairy of Hensbroeck, entry for 18 January 1650.

¹⁰⁵ Fashioned after the floating palaces of the Burmese kings, but now made out of concrete. See also the illustration of a Burmese royal barge in H. Malcolm, *Travels in South-Eastern Asia, embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam and China; with notices of numerous missionary stations, and a full account of the Burman Empire* 2 vols. (London, 1839) p. 1:113.

which several were rigged like ships in the Moorish manner, as also a great number of galleys lying at anchor, besides over 1500 *jelias*, which we saw on either side along the shore, all full of well armed soldiers carrying small iron and metal pieces, all decked out with flags and liveried in the king's colors with golden shields and standards, apart from the these ships there were about 4,000 *prahu* and other vessels with provisions. For two-and-a-half miles¹⁰⁶ armed soldiers flanked both shores, with cavalry in Persian style and some elephants with golden howdahs.¹⁰⁷

The total numbers of soldiers was estimated by Hensbroeck at 350,000, adding that in his opinion the king had pressed his whole army and a good part of the Arakanese population to attend his arrival. Although the estimate of 350,000 seems too high, it is likely Satuidhammaraja wanted to impress the warlike VOC that he possessed a large army. The king received Hensbroeck onboard a temporary palace that was fashioned on three royal barges, of which the central ship was made to resemble the mythical bird *karaweik*.¹⁰⁸ The vessels had large galleries with pillars and were decorated with painted cloth resembling the night's sky and carpets with gold and silver patterned motives. The audience did not bring the Dutch and the Arakanese anything nearer to each other. When the king had terminated the audience by closing the window behind which he sat, and the Dutch had left the floating palace, the court and the army disbanded. Soon the large crowd that had greeted the Dutch envoys disappeared. The following day Hensbroeck got news from the monk from the *badr maqam* at the mouth of the Kaladan that reinforcements had arrived. A second audience with the king in Mrauk U on 27 February did not serve to resolve the differences between the VOC and the king. Dutch demands amounted to 800 slaves and 23,660 Tanka, before they could even start rethinking trade with Arakan, whereas the king was unwilling to accede to these demands and wrote Van der Lijn a letter in which he told him that these demands were unjust and unfounded. On 1 March 1650 the Dutch made their escape from Mrauk U, after having been told they could not leave without Satuidhammaraja's permission. Hensbroeck, in compliance with his orders, started attacking Arakanese shipping in the Kaladan, and after a tumultuous retreat reached Urittaung on 3 March with several *jelias* and their crew as his prizes. The result of this embassy should not, as Subrahmanyam has suggested, be seen as a

¹⁰⁶ Dutch miles.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants', p. 239.

¹⁰⁸ 'naer syn tente geroeyt te werden, welcke tenten op 't cierlyckste van wit lywaet overspannen waren, op 's Conicklycke prauwen, welcker twee neffens malcanderen leggende, wel schenen de grootste maer de derde de aensienelyckste als synde gemaect op 't fatsoen van een haen, met welckers hals (in plaetse van de steven) was leggende tusschen beyde 't assterste van de twee voorsz. groote prauwen, soo dicht aen den anderen ende met cleden behangen dat men gevouchelyk van d'een inden anderen conde treden sonder eenigh water te sien, dese vaertuygen waren binnen verciert met pilaren ende galderyen die alle met geschilderde cleden (gelyck als 't verhemelt) becleet waren ende de vloer was met alcatieven beleydt'.. Diary of Hensbroeck, entry for 5 February 1650.

failure, nor should the privateering expedition sent to Arakan that same year be seen as another attempt to re-establish friendly relations.¹⁰⁹ Hensbroeck had been sent to Arakan to fight a war. Hensbroeck was expressly authorized to attack Arakan if Satuidhammaraja would fail to give in to Dutch demands for compensation. Following the Arakanese unwillingness to accept the VOC terms the company immediately decided to send an expedition to Arakan.

6.6 War between Arakan and the VOC

On 23 August 1650 Pieter Cocqu received instructions for a privateering expedition aimed at the Arakanese littoral.¹¹⁰ Cocqu, who had been in Arakan in the company's service in Arakan since the 1630s and possibly already earlier was very well acquainted with the region as a private merchant, was ordered to go and plunder the Arakanese coast and rivers in compensation for the losses already mentioned.¹¹¹ The VOC had decided not to send a blockading fleet as Arakanese maritime commerce was regarded as of no great importance. Instead it was thought more profitable to attack the Arakanese in a way familiar to them, by going slave raiding in the Arakanese countryside with a fleet of shallow draft ships.¹¹² Cocqu was the best man for the job; he had been the VOC representative in Dianga. In Dianga he had accompanied the Arakanese and Portuguese fleets that went slave raiding in Bengal. There was therefore probably not one person better equipped to head this expedition than Cocqu.

The plan was to follow the coast from the point of Negrais and start the raids near the river of Talak, or the island of Cheduba, from there the expedition should proceed to the river *Augruckim*.¹¹³ Leaving the river of *Augruckim*, the month of February 1651 should be used to attack and plunder Arakanese shipping destined for India, taking care to leave other local merchants in peace. After February Cocqu was to proceed to the Mayu and the two islands under the command of Martim d'Alfonso¹¹⁴, the final destination being Sandwip. The slaves captured were to be sent to Melaka or Masulipatnam. Sandwip was included in the plans of the expedition because the company thought it could use the island as a base instead of Arakan. The ruler of Sandwip had already since 1645 freed himself from Arakanese control.

¹⁰⁹ Subrahmanyam, 'Slaves and Tyrants', pp.245-246.

¹¹⁰ NA VOC 874, fol. 326-327 Commission for Pieter Cocquij with three yachts and a boat destined for Arakan, and NA VOC 874, fol. 327-334 Instructions for Pieter Cocquij and council of the yachts *Delfshaven*, *Klein Batavia*, *Troostenburgh* and the *chaloupe Siam* to cruise along the rivers and coast of Arakan.

¹¹¹ Cocqu was known in Arakan as captain Lagohin, see *Dagh-register*, vol. 1653, p. 113.

¹¹² 'Om dit voorgenomen dessain naer de menige aen te leggen, ende wel uyt te voeren is geen ander wech open als langs de wal ende op de rivieren te gaen moes-coppen op hare vaertuygen, als af-loopen der dorpen alsoo Araccan gantsch weynige en van geringe importante frequentatie by der zee is hebbende; waer toe oock soo lichte jachten ende kleyn vaertuygen derwaerts uyt setten'. NA VOC 874, fol. 327-334 Instructions for Pieter Cocquij, fol. 329-330.

¹¹³ This is not the Kaladan, because this is known as the Kacchapanadi Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p. 302.

¹¹⁴ Saint Martin's island (Now in Bangladesh).

Cocqu had with him 4,000 Reals of eight to persuade the Sandwip governor to allow the Dutch to build a factory there and to provide them with slaves. The expedition was not a total success for the VOC. In 1651 Satuidhammaraja had just sent to Bengal a large fleet to regain control over Sandwip. The news that Cocqu was plundering the Arakanese littoral caused such a fright at the Arakanese court that this fleet, of about 800 ships, quickly returned to Arakan. Cocqu thought it not advisable to engage this fleet with only 4 ships in his own company. He therefore retreated to Batavia again, without sailing for Sandwip. Cocqu finally brought only about 145 Arakanese as slaves to Batavia.¹¹⁵ It was reported that as a result of the war with the VOC and the plundering of the Arakanese countryside the position of Satuidhammaraja as king had received some severe blows and rumours were heard that a rebellion was imminent. Satuidhammaraja's reign would indeed not last much longer; he died under uncertain circumstances about a year later in April 1652 at the age of 34.

Conclusion

The coup d'état of Narapati-kri in 1638 led to a prolonged period of instability in the Arakanese kingdom. The resistance to his rule from members of the old royal family in the Chittagong area and the threat that Chittagong posed as an independent centre of power in the Arakanese kingdom moved Narapati-kri to move against Chittagong. The resettlement of large groups from the Chittagong area to the Arakanese littoral had however not the desired effect. On the contrary Arakan's ability to control south-eastern Bengal was seriously handicapped when as a result of the resettlement several important groups deserted the Arakanese king and moved to areas outside royal control. Satuidhammaraja would be able to restore royal authority to some extent but as we will see in the next Chapter Arakan was soon about to loose its remaining grip on south-eastern Bengal.

¹¹⁵ NA VOC 1182, fol. 15v-17 Generale Missiven van Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden, dated Batavia 24 January 1652.