

PREFACE

The *galon*, more popularly known as the *garuda*, is a well-recognized figure in the iconography and literature of Hindu-Buddhist Southeast Asia. Sometimes described as half-man and half-raptor, the *galon* is best known as the celestial vehicle of Vishnu, one of the three great deities of the Brahmanic universe. Embedded in the region's temple architecture, performance, astrology, literature, and ritual, this winged creature embodies the centuries of cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia that contributed to the formation of the region's earliest civilizations. In regional folklore, the *galon* is also regarded as the eternal archenemy of the *naga* (snake/dragon). Driven by an ancient grievance, the *galon* hunts the *naga* from the skies in hope of devouring and defeating its traditional earthbound foe. This cosmic battle between *galon* and *naga* would come to represent ideas about the power of nature, the dualities of the world, and the challenges of the human condition.

While the symbol of the majestic *galon* had been circulating in the region for centuries, it was only in British Burma that this mythology was evoked as a metaphor for the colonial situation. In 1930, the *galon* came to represent the Burmese peasantry's aspirations to restore the banished monarchy by overthrowing the British (represented by the *naga*). By tattooing themselves with the *galon* symbol, rural cultivators exhibited their allegiance to Saya San, the rebellion leader who would be known as the *Galon King*. In time, the *galon* would become synonymous with the very notion of Burmese resistance. As such, the narrative that unfolds in this book might be seen as one chapter in a

much longer story of the *galon* and its place in the cultural histories of Southeast Asia.

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My initial encounter with the Saya San Rebellion and its historiography did not stem from an inherent interest in *galons*, *nagas*, or Burmese kings. At the time I began thinking about Saya San in 1995, I was only beginning to develop an ear for some of the ongoing discussions about empire, ethnohistory, and postcolonial studies that were permeating the graduate seminars and the Lane-Hall brown-bag lunch talks at the University of Michigan. Issues concerning the construction of knowledge, the history of anthropology, orientalism, and the postcolonial predicament were still very new to me, and I did not anticipate their potential for the study of Burmese history. Although the scholarship in the present book would eventually intersect with many of these conversations, these issues were not in play when I stumbled on what would become my focus for the next fifteen years of my academic life. As the book is primarily concerned with the epistemological construction of Burmese resistance in a particular time and space, it may be worthwhile to present a brief narrative about the context within which this study has taken place.

I “met” Saya San in Professor Rudolf Mrazek’s exciting graduate seminar that explored the role of colonial scholar-administrators in the historiography of Southeast Asia. Our term paper required us to write an essay on a colonial scholar-official (loosely defined) of our choice and reflect upon the person’s contributions to the field and perceptions about Southeast Asia. Having very little training in postcolonial methods but armed with Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*,¹ I set out to read Dr. Ba Maw’s autobiography (Ba Maw was the head of state in Burma during World War II) in order to study how an anglicized Burmese elite had defended the apparently traditional Saya San at his trial.² I had hoped to discover whether Ba Maw experienced the same internal conflict of identity that Memmi writes about in his portrait of the “colonized who accepts colonialism.” I wondered whether I could detect in his defense of the famous peasant who per-

sonified the “last-gasp” of traditional Burma the internal conflict of identity that characterizes much of what Memmi termed the “colonial situation.” I intended to explore the transcripts of the trial in order to reconstruct Ba Maw’s impression of Saya San. I was disappointed, however, to find little with regard to the trial documents. After reading nearly everything available in the secondary literature, I realized that there were very few references to the trial at all, but nearly every scholar had cited the official blue-book report, *Origins and Causes of the Burma Rebellion, 1930-1932* (1934), as the foundational source to the historical narrative.

Thinking that my quest to find Ba Maw’s voice was nearly over, I dove into the report only to discover that the entire narrative about the rebellion was actually based on findings derived from earlier trial judgments that were compiled by a Special Rebellion Tribunal who had overseen the majority of rebel hearings. Passages from these documents had been cut and pasted in order to supply much of the official report’s text. To my surprise, the report presented only the legal positions, evidence, and contentions made by the prosecution team, led by (Sir) Arthur Eggar. The defense’s case had not been recorded. I understood at once that the primary source that had been used by nearly every scholar on the Saya San Rebellion to authenticate the veracity of the event was not only a compilation of earlier legal documents but a record of only the prosecution’s version of events. Realizing that such issues put into question nearly everything that we thought we understood about the Saya San Rebellion, I decided to shelve Ba Maw for the time being and devote at least the rest of the semester to this problem. I did not realize that fifteen years later, these initial encounters would result in the present book.

Notes

1. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, New York: Orion Press, 1965.
2. Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939-1946*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.