In the Shade of the Golden Palace

Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan

Thibaut d'Hubert

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Contents

Acknowledgments

THE MAKING OF *In the Shade of the Golden Palace* mirrors the literary processes that it describes: It is a work driven by intellectual curiosity and a will to savor all sorts of poetic nectars in a variety of languages. It is itself the product of several translations and adaptations that, hopefully, result in a coherent whole. Because it is my first monograph, the list of those who contributed to its making should contain the names of all my teachers and friends who made me the researcher and teacher that I am today through their generous teaching and inspirational conversations. I will inevitably omit some names, but whoever while reading this book reminisces an encounter, a conversation, thoughtful advice, or a challenging question should consider himself or herself the recipient of my sincere gratitude.

I shall certainly open my acknowledgments with a *guru-vandanā* and thank my teachers of Bengali at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO, Paris), France Bhattacharya and Philippe Benoît. To them I owe my love for the Bengali language, a taste for premodern literature, and enthusiasm to transmit and spread knowledge about South Asian literature. Following Philippe Benoît's example and advice, I studied Sanskrit, first in Hyderabad (India) with Professor Nilakantha Dash, and then at Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle. Among the teachers whose courses and seminars I attended during those years, I am particularly grateful to Nalini Balbir and Jean Fezas for helping me put some order in a scattered brain through the healthy practice of Sanskrit grammar, while constantly kindling my sensibility as a reader of Sanskrit literature. During my time at Paris 3 I also had the privilege to study Sanskrit poetry and poetics with Professor S. N. Chakraborty for two years. Witnessing his lively erudition provided me with a compass that will always orient my life as an aspiring *sahṛdaya*.

Françoise "Nalini" Delvoye, my supervisor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), was an unfailing source of support throughout

the preparation of my dissertation and introduced me to the world of Indo-Persian culture. Her research on the Braj lyric tradition and Indo-Persian sources on musicology proved crucial to the formulation of some of the key arguments of the present monograph. My hope is that *In the Shade of the Golden Palace* will shed some light on the history of Indo-Persian culture and its contribution to the making of vernacular poetics in eastern South Asia, thus carrying out the work that Professor Delvoye accomplished in the domain of Braj literature.

Many people within and without my academic homes also provided feedback and precious encouragements over the years: Imre Bangha, Elena Bashir, Aditya Behl, Mandira Bhaduri, Sebastien Belheur, Dulal K. Bhowmik, Kalpana Bhowmik, Irving Birkner, Yigal Bronner, Thomas de Bruijn, Steven Collins, Whitney Cox, Alicia Czaplewski, Tracy L. Davis, Islam Dayeh, Wendy Doniger, Sascha Ebeling, Stephan van Galen, Arlo Griffiths, Ayesha Irani, Christian Lammerts, Corine Lefèvre, Jacques Leider, Rochona Majumdar, Md Abdul Mannan, C. M. Naim, James Nye, Francesca Orsini, Alexandre Papas, Stefano Pellò, Jérôme Petit, Muhammad Abdul Qayyum, Francis Richard, Laura Ring, Sunil Sharma, Ulrike Stark, Tony K. Stewart, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Razia Sultana, Marc Toutant, Audrey Truschke, Gary Tubb, Richard Williams, Tyler Williams, Paul Wormser, and Saymon Zakaria. To this list I should also add the students at the University of Chicago with whom I read Ālāol's texts and who enriched my understanding of Middle Bengali poetics with their questions and comments. I owe a special thanks to Allison Busch for the interest she expressed for my work and for providing me with invaluable feedback. Over the last few years, I was given the chance to work with and learn from Muzaffar Alam, who has been my most valuable companion and mentor as I was giving this project its final shape. I am also grateful to the graduate student of the department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) Nell Hawley who turned copper into gold by fixing the broken English of the drafts of Chapters 1–5.

I also have a special thought for the late Christopher Bayly who, as a Swami Vivekananda Professor in South Asian studies at the University of Chicago, attended one of our SALC faculty forum in which we discussed a draft of the introduction of this book. In a way typical of him, he provided thoughtful comments during our discussion and immediately after in written form. As a junior scholar, I was touched by his genuine interest for what was presented to him and the tone of his comments: Devoid of the sententiousness of experience, his input displayed the freshness of an

indefatigably curious mind. This brief encounter made me wish I could be as present, as truly beneficial to my colleagues and friends as he was. This exchange took place in the week when he suddenly left us.

Over the years, I received the support of several entities who afforded me the opportunity to lead my archival research in Europe, India, and Bangladesh: the UMR 7528 Mondes Iranien et Indien (Paris), the École Francaise d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO, Paris), the program Zukunftsphilologie (Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin), and the Committee on Southern Asian Studies (COSAS, the University of Chicago). Thanks to the work of Martha Selby, the editorial board, the anonymous reviewers who provided precious feedback on the first draft, and the production team this monograph found its proper home in the OUP South Asia Research series.

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Transliteration Charts

Bengali

The system adopted here is a transliteration, not a phonetic transcription of Bengali. For an introduction to how Bengali should be pronounced, see William Radice and Hanne-Ruth Thompson, *Complete Bengali: A Teach Yourself Guide*, 4th ed. (Blacklick, OH: McGraw-Hill, 2011).

Vowels

অ—a	আ—ā	ই—i	ঈ—ī
উ—u	ঊ—ū	ঋ—ṛ	ৠ—ṝ
ঌ—ḷ	ৡ—ḹ	এ—e	ঐ—ai
ও—o	ঔ—au	০ৎ—ṃ ০ঁ—˜	০ঃ -ḥ

Consonants

ক—ka	খ—kha	গ—ga	ঘ—gha	ঙ—ṅ
চ—ca	ছ—cha	জ—ja	ঝ—jha	ঞ—ñ
ট—ṭa	ঠ—ṭha	ড—ḍa ড়—ṛa	ঢ—ḍa ঢ়—ṛha	ণ—ṇa
ত—ta	থ—tha	দ—da	ধ—dha	ন—na
প—pa	ফ—pha	ব—ba[1]	ভ—bha	—
য—ya য়—ẏ	র—ra	ল—la	ব—va[1]	—
শ—śa	ষ—ṣa	স—sa	হ—ha	ক্ষ—kṣa[2]

¹ These two letters are the same in most manuscripts, and they are always pronounced [bɔ] (or [bo] in cases of vowel harmony). When *va* is the second letter of consonant cluster, it is assimilated by the letter that precedes it (*kavitva* = *kobitto*). Nevertheless, I do maintain the difference between both letters for the following reasons: 1. Although *va* and *ba* were not distinguished in the script and in the pronunciation, they were theoretically perceived as two different letters—as is shown in premodern syllabaries and in the occasional recourse to diacritical marks to distinguish both letters in some manuscripts. 2. Because Bengali orthography is today, and was—although to a lesser extent—etymological (as opposed to purely phonetic), I use *va* in words directly borrowed from the Sanskrit (i.e. *tatsama*s).

² *kṣa* is technically speaking not a letter, but a conjunct (*ka* + *ṣa*). The traditional name of the letter is *khya* [kʰjɔ] and it is often used in manuscripts to transcribe geminate aspirate gutturals [kkʰɔ].

NB:

·   When quoting MB versified texts, because the prosody requires it, I include the final inherent *-a* in my transliteration, but I omit it when transliterating modern texts.
·   The orthography of Middle Bengali is extremely unstable, and I chose to be very conservative in my transliterations. Therefore it is not rare to find the same word transcribed in sometimes completely different ways.
·   When quoting from an already edited text, I indicated orthographic changes and emendations. I systematically rehyphenated the quotations from Middle Bengali to indicate nominal compounds (which is not done in most modern editions). I have not signaled these modifications in my text; therefore the hyphenation reflects my own understanding of the morphology and syntax of the texts.
·   *Sandhi*s are not always applied in Middle Bengali compounds; e.g., *kāvya-alaṅkāra*.

Hindi and Avadhi
Vowels

अ—a	आ—ā	इ—i	ई—ī
उ—u	ऊ—ū	ऋ—ṛ	ॠ —ṝ
ऌ—ḷ	ॡ—ḹ	ए—e	ऐ—ai
ओ—o	औ—au	○—ṃ ○—˜	○: -ḥ

Consonants

क—ka	ख—kha	ग—ga	घ—gha	ङ—ṅ
च—ca	छ—cha	ज—ja	झ—jha	ञ—ñ
ट—ṭa	ठ—ṭha	ड—ḍa ड़—ṛa	ढ—ḍa ढ़—ṛha	ण—ṇa
त—ta	थ—tha	द—da	ध—dha	न—na
प—pa	फ—pha	ब—ba	भ—bha	–
य—ya	र—ra	ल—la	व—va	–
श—śa	ष—ṣa	स—sa	ह—ha	

Sanskrit

Sanskrit has no alphabet of its own. The quotes given in the present monograph are based on texts written or edited in Devanagari or Bengali scripts.

a	ā	i	ī
u	ū	ṛ	ṝ
ḷ	ḹ	e	ai
o	au	ṃ	ḥ

ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅ
ca	cha	ja	jha	ñ
ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍa	ṇa
ta	tha	da	dha	na
pa	pha	ba	bha	–
ya	ra	la	va	–
śa	ṣa	sa	ha	

Languages written with the Arabic alphabet

Name of letter*	Alone form	Transliteration
alif	ا	a—i—u
bā	ب	b
bā-yi fārsī	پ	p
tā	ت	t
thā	ث	th
jīm	ج	j
jīm-i fārsī	چ	ch
ḥā-yi ḥuṭṭī	ح	ḥ
khā	خ	kh
dāl	د	d
dhāl	ذ	dh
rā	ر	r
zā	ز	z
zā-yi fārsī	ژ	zh
sīn	س	s
shīn	ش	sh
ṣād	ص	ṣ
ḍād	ض	ḍ
ṭā	ط	ṭ
ẓā	ظ	ẓ
ʿayn	ع	ʿ
ghayn	غ	q
fā	ف	f
qāf	ق	q
kāf	ک	k
kāf-i fārsī	گ	g

Name of letter*	Alone form	Transliteration
lām	ل	l
mīm	م	m
nūn	ن	n
wāw	و	w—ū—o (*wāw-i majhūl*)
hā-yi hawwaz	ه	h
γā	ى	y—ī—e (*γā-yi majhūl*)
baṛī ye (Dakani, Urdu)	ے	e

* The names given here follow the premodern Indo-Persian philological tradition.

NB: Premodern Persian texts are transliterated according to the rules of classical Persian orthography (e.g., verbal prefix *bi-* and preposition *ba*; use of *majhūl* letters *e* and *o*). Modern Persian is transliterated according to modern Persian orthographical rules (e.g., verbal prefix *bi-* and preposition *bi-*; no *majhūl* letters).

Dakani and Urdu

Retroflex letters in Dakani and Urdu are transliterated: ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṛ, ṛh.

Burmese/Arakanese

Almost all the Burmese terms and proper names mentioned in the book are found in Leider, Jacques P. *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie: son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004. I followed the transliterations of this author, with one exception: the sign of the *visarga* [:] > [ḥ] (*maṅ: > maṅḥ*).

Format of versified texts
Sanskrit/Bengali/Avadhi

The first line of a distich/stanza is punctuated by a single vertical line (|), the second line by a double vertical line (||). In Bengali, prosodic segments are punctuated with a colon (:).

Persian

The first and second *miṣraʿ* of a *bayt* are separated by a slash (/). Each *bayt* is punctuated with a period (.).

Place names, proper names and work titles

Only some historical place names (i.e., places mentioned in the sources under scrutiny) have diacritics. All proper names of premodern individuals are transliterated from the script in which they are mainly associated with (e.g., Ālāol [Ben.], not ʿAlāwal [Ar.]). The title of some works may not be rendered similarly in my text and in the bibliography (e.g., *Saptapaẏkar/ Sapta paẏkar*).

Map of Arakan and Eastern South Asia in the Seventeenth Century

NEPAL
Kathmandu
Patan ● ● Bhaktapur

MITHILA
Darbhanga

KUCH BIHAR
Teesta River
Kuch Bihar
Brahmaputra River
Sibsagar

KAMRUP

Patna
Ganges River
MUGHAL BENGAL
Kahalgaon
Rajmahal ● Gauda

Sylhet
Kangla
MANIPUR

Jahangirnagar
Fatihabad ● Sonargaon
Navadvip
Jalalpur
Bhulua
TRIPURA
Udaipur

Hooghly River
CANDRADVIP
Sandvip
Chittagong

Irrawaddy River

ORISSA
Pipli

Ramu

Ava

ARAKAN
Mrauk U
DHAÑÑAVATI

BURMESE KINGDOM

Puri

Sandoway

Pegu ●

Bassein ●

In the Shade of the Golden Palace

Introduction

POETICS IN THE MARGINS

THE PRESENT MONOGRAPH is a study of the Bengali literature that was produced in the seventeenth century CE in the coastal kingdom of Arakan. This literary tradition stands as one of the most fascinating instances of cultural encounter that took place in the premodern world, yet very little focus has been drawn to it in anglophone scholarship. Margins and frontier areas foster self-reflexivity, the explicit formulation of identities, as well as the formation of new cultural ethos. The texts that I comment upon in the present book, and the courtly poems of the Bengali author of Arakan Ālāol (*floruit* [*fl.*] 1651–1671) in particular, are the product of a poetics fashioned in the overlapping margins of many worlds.

The frontier region between today's Bangladesh and Myanmar is the meeting point of what post–WWII scholarship defined as South, Southeast, and East Asia. It was, and remains today, a region of intense circulation of people, goods, and ideas. Historians recently highlighted the political unity of this frontier area from the fifteenth up to the eighteenth century CE with the formation of the kingdom of Arakan. These approximately four centuries are designated by historians as the Mrauk U period (1430–1784), using the name of the capital city of the kingdom founded in 1430.[1] This historical moment was the cradle of a cultural ethos that

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1. Jacques P. Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie: Son histoire politique entre le début du XVᵉ et la fin du XVIIᵉ siècle* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004); Jos Gommans and Jacques P. Leider, eds., *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural, and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200–1800* (Amsterdam; Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen; KITLV Press, 2002); Michael W. Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious

was manifested in a variety of artistic and literary productions.[2] The multiple redefinitions of regional frontiers, radical changes in administrative and political culture, large-scale religious reforms in both urban and rural areas, and, as a consequence of those structural shifts, deep changes in the way literacy and collective memory were acquired and transmitted, all these factors contributed to the complexity of the study of Arakan's past. Therefore the corpus of texts that I propose to explore gradually became strange to the eyes of both the general readership and scholars.

The fate of the Bengali literature of Arakan is but one of the many symptoms of the estrangement from the cultural past of the frontier area between modern Bangladesh and Myanmar, which was manifested through the repeated communal and ethnic conflicts that had struck the region since the colonial period up to this day.[3] Moreover, as a consequence

Changes and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan, 15th–19th Centuries," PhD dissertation (University of Michigan, 1999); Stephan van Galen, "Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom (Burma) From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century A.D.," PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 2008); Thibaut d'Hubert and Jacques P. Leider, "Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court: On Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth-Century Arakan," in *Pelagic Passageways: Dynamic Flows in the Northern Bay of Bengal World Before the Appearance of Nation States*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 345–79.

2. Muhammad Enamul Haq and Abdul Karim, "Ārākān rājsabhāẏ bāṃlā sāhitya (1600–1700)," in *Muhammad Enāmul Haq racanāvalī*, ed. Monsur Musa, vol. 2 (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangla Academy, 1993), 17–142; Mijānur Rahmān, *Ārākāner bāṃlā romāṇṭik kāvye āoẏādhī-hindī sāhityer prabhāv* (Kolkata, India: Śrībhāratī Press, 2011); Pamela Gutman and Zaw Min Yu, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill, 2001); Thibaut d'Hubert, "Arākān aur janūb-i mashriqī Bangāla-desh mẽ musulmānõ kī tahdhīb aur zabānẽ," trans. Timsal Masud, *Ma'ārif* 194 (2014): 265–88.

3. Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1972); Gabriel Defert, *Les Rohingya de Birmanie: Arakanais, musulmans et apatrides*, Mondes contemporains (Montreuil, France: Aux lieux d'être, 2007); Pascal Arcaro and Loïs Desaine, *La junte birmane contre l'ennemi intérieur: Le régime militaire, l'écrasement des minorités ethniques et le désarroi des réfugiés rohingya* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008); Hans-Bernd Zöllner, "Die Rohingyas-Konstruktion, De-Konstruktion und Re-Konstruktion einer ethnisch-religiösen Identität/The Rohingyas in Myanmar. Construction, De-construction and Re-construction of an Ethnic Identity," *ASEAS—Österreichische Zeitschrift für Südostasienwissenschaften/Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 53–64; Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas : Responses of the State, Society & the International Community* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: University Press, 2010). For a recent, rather polemical, discussion on Rohingya historiography, see Jacques P. Leider, "Competing Identities and the Hybridized History of the Rohingyas," in *Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar*, ed. Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), 1–28. See also the rich historical study of the Bengal–Arakan frontier, with a focus on discourses about identity formation and migrations in Kyaw Minn Htin, "Where 'Imagined Countries' Overlap: Histories, Identities and Fates of the People From Arakan and South-eastern Bangladesh," PhD dissertation (National University of Singapore, 2017).

of the epistemic shift that occurred during the colonial and postinde-
pendence periods, the scholarly community either neglected or adopted
a markedly presentist reading of the texts that reflect this polyvocal cul-
tural ethos. The Bengali literature of Arakan is thus marginal in various
ways: Although it is presented in textbooks as a major moment in the early
history of Bengali Muslim literature, it originates from the limits of the
cultural area of South Asia, which also coincides with one of the frontiers
of the Muslim World.[4]

The rhetoric of light and darkness as it is found in both premodern
discourses and modern historiography offers interesting ways to encap-
sulate what is at stake in the study of Arakan's past. On the one hand,
the Mrauk U period is seen as a Golden Age, witnessing the maximal
territorial expansion of the kingdom and its inclusion as a major player
in the emerging trading, diplomatic, and religious networks of the Bay of
Bengal.[5] For this Golden Age, we have a Golden Palace, which became part
of the king's title, royal eulogies—including those composed by Bengali
poets—and its mention of figures among the typical tropes about Arakan
in contemporary travel narratives.[6] From the mountain-like Golden Palace
whose roofs radiated a dazzling light, dominating the city as Mount Meru
in the center of the microcosm of Mrauk U, with its channels, its rich mar-
kets and neighborhoods organized by the ethnic origins and religions of
the inhabitants: the Portuguese Christians in the western part of the town,

4. See, for instance, Sukumar Sen, *Islāmi bāṃlā sāhitya* (Calcutta: Ānanda Pābliśārs, 1358),
23–36; Māhbubul Ālam, *Bāṃlā sāhityer itihās: Prācīn, madhya, o ādhunik yug*, 11th ed. (Dhaka,
Bangladesh: Khān Brādārs, 2000), 249–75; Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 53–4; Wakil Ahmed, *Bāṃlā sāhitya koṣ
(prācīn o madhyayug)* (Dhaka: Ahmed Publishing House, 2015), *s.v.* "Ālāol." Regarding
Bengal and Arakan as frontiers of the history of the Muslim and Buddhist worlds, see
Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1993), xxi–xxvii; Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged."

5. Gommans and Leider, eds., *The Maritime Frontier of Burma*; Sanjay Subrahmanyam,
"Persianization and 'Mercantilism' in Bay of Bengal History, 1400–1700," in *Explorations in
Connected History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45–79; Sanjay Subrahmanyam,
"Slaves and Tyrants: Dutch Tribulations in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U," *Journal of Early
Modern History* 1, no. 3 (1997): 201–53.

6. Wouter Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie van Wouter Schouten*, ed. Michael Breet and
Marijke Barend-van Haeften (Zutphen, The Netherlands: Walburg Pers, 2003); Gautier
Schouten, *Voiage de Gautier Schouten aux Indes orientales. Commencé l'an 1658 et fini l'an
1665*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Pierre Mortier, 1708); Sebastião Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien
Manrique, 1629–1643: A Translation of the Itinerario de Las Missiones Orientales*, ed. Charles
Eckford Luard and Henry Hosten, 2 vols. Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society 2nd Series 59,
61 (Oxford: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1927).

the Hindus in the South, and Muslims in the harbor, whereas the large Buddhist monasteries, libraries, and pagodas were located in the eastern and northern parts of the city.[7]

But if Arakan's history is today covered in darkness for the various reasons just mentioned, its location in the margins of the civilized world was also present in the perception of the region by both people who dwelled within the limits of the kingdom as well as by those looking at it from a distance. Muslim authors saw Arakan as belonging to the world of marvels described by the earliest cosmographers, who were themselves transmitting a knowledge gathered from Hellenic cosmography.[8] It was a land of darkness in a figurative sense, because its inhabitants lay beyond the civilized world.[9] An eloquent example of the perception of Arakan as a land beyond the span of civilization is found in the inability of early modern authors, until as late as the last decades of the eighteenth century, to clearly distinguish the nature of the religion prevalent among the Maghs (i.e., the Arakanese).[10] In a classical understanding of world geography, Arakan was one of those remote countries where monsters and fairies lived, just before one reached the Dark Ocean surrounding the world [*ẓulmāt*].[11] Local

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7. See maps in Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie*, 507–9. See also the illustration in Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie van Wouter Schouten*, 158. For an analysis of the illustrations of Schouten's travel account, see Catherine Raymond, "An Arakanese Perspective From the Dutch Sources: Images of the Kingdom of Arakan in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Maritime Frontier of Burma*, 177–95.

8. André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*, 4 vols., École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1967).

9. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Southeast Asia as Seen From Mughal India: Tahir Muhammad's 'Immaculate Garden' (ca. 1600)," *Archipel* 70, no. 1 (2005): 209–37.

10. For instance, in Ṭāhir Muḥammad's comographical account (ca. 1600) "[i]t is mentioned that this is a land which is ruled over by the Magh who are a kind of Hindus [*az firqa-i Hindūʾan and*], as distinct from Pegu which he regards as different from both Hindus and Muslims." Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Southeast Asia as Seen From Mughal India," 223. Similarly Shihāb al-Dīn Tālish in his account of the conquest of Chittagong by the Mughals makes the following statement: "The inhabitants have no defined faith or religion, but incline [a little] to the Hindu creed." Jadunath Sarkar, "The Feringi Pirates of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.," *Journal & Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Numismatic Suppl. 3 (1907): 419. A questionnaire commissioned to his Persian secretary [*munshī*] by John Murray MacGregor (1745–1822) titled *Sūʾāl-i āʾīn wa rawāj-i qawm-i magh wa jawāb-i ān* [*Questions regarding the customs of the Magh* (i.e., Arakanese) *people and their answers*] shows the same ignorance regarding Arakanese Buddhism. Wilhelm Pertsch, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, vol. 4 of *Verzeichniss der persischen Handschriften der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1888), no. 15.10; Ms. or Fol. 281.

11. Travis E. Zadeh, *Mapping Frontiers Across Medieval Islam: Geography, Translation, and the ʿAbbāsid Empire*, Library of Middle East History 27 (London; New York: Tauris, 2011).

authors completely embraced this perception of the region, and they actually considered that they were living in the margins of the civilized world.[12]

On the one hand, we have the picture of the grandiose cosmopolitan city with its palace standing for the *axis mundi*, spreading its light far and wide, and, on the other hand, Arakan was perceived as a twilight zone of the civilized world. This general observation is symptomatic of the reconfiguration of cosmographical imaginaires in the early modern period and of the anxiety of the literati living in emerging polities to locate themselves in already existing representations of the world, while asserting the role of those places as major culture centers.[13] This phenomenon of self-affirmation of previously "silent" polities would significantly contribute to the formation of a polycentric cultural geography that is characteristic of the early modern period.[14] Those cosmographical considerations are essential for the interpretation of the works of an author such as the Bengali poet and translator Ālāol (*fl.* 1651–1671), whose oeuvre displays at every step his attempt to make sense of, and benefit from, the expanding horizons of human knowledge occasioned by the intensification of supraregional interactions.[15]

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12. Thibaut d'Hubert and Paul Wormser, "Représentations du monde dans le golfe du Bengale au XVIIᵉ siècle: Ālāol et Rānīrī," *Archipel* 76 (2008): 15–35; Thibaut d'Hubert, "Living in Marvelous Lands: Islamic Cosmography and a Bengali Version of the Adventures of Saif al-Mulūk," in *The Persianate World: Towards a Conceptual Framework*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, forthcoming).

13. Denys Lombard, *Le carrefour javanais: Essai d'histoire globale* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990).

14. Over the last decades, the focus seems to be moving away from the study of the gunpowder empires (i.e., Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires) to "peripheral" polities. For instance, R. M. Eaton provided some pioneering works in the study of the cultural history of the Deccani and Bengal sultanates. The rich scholarship on Southeast Asia and the Malay world also highlighted the presence of such polycentric cultural areas. A recent volume edited by F. Orsini and S. Sheikh builds on the work of S. Digby regarding the rooting of Islam and the formation of regional polities in South Asia during the late Sultanate period. See, for instance, Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760*; Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, eds., *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Lombard, *Le carrefour javanais*; Vladimir Braginsky, *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature: A Historical Survey of Genres, Writings and Literary Views* (Leiden, The Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2004).

15. Thibaut d'Hubert, "Ālāol," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Denis Matringe, Everett Rowson, and Gudrun Krämer (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Online, 2013), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27295; d'Hubert and Wormser, "Représentations du monde dans le golfe du Bengale au XVIIᵉ siècle: Ālāol et Rānīrī."

Ālāol's life and works at a glance

During the Mrauk U period (1430–1784), the Bengali language became the privileged means of literary expression of Muslims living in the kingdom of Arakan.[16] It is also worth mentioning that until well into the eighteenth century, southeastern Bengal and Arakan were the only regions in which the Bengali language was used by Muslims to produce literary works.[17] There were mainly two centers of literary production during the first phase of this history: the rural areas around the port of Chittagong and the capital of the kingdom, Mrauk U.[18] Later on, in the late eighteenth century, another center of literary production was formed in Ramu, south from Chittagong, near today's Cox's Bazar. Technically, during this period Ramu lied beyond the boundaries of Arakan, but its literary tradition was closely connected to the Bengali literature of Mrauk U. More generally, the accounts found in the prologues of the texts composed in Chittagong after the Mughal conquest of 1666 always refer to the Mrauk U period. In terms of language and style, the eighteenth-century Chittagongian literature is also reproducing the models elaborated in Mrauk U. In the nineteenth century, Mughal intellectuals actively engaged in reforming the literary culture of Muslims in Chittagong and condemned their attachment to the works composed during the Mrauk U period. This opinion is partly echoed in the works of the scholar Ḥamīd Allāh Khān (ca. 1789–1870) who wrote a history of Chittagong in Persian that was published in 1871.[19] In this text the author, while praising Ālāol's eloquence and skills as a translator from Persian into Bengali, bemoans the poet's choice to render "absurd and ludicrous tales of the Hindus." In the same spirit,

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16. Thibaut d'Hubert, "Pirates, Poets, and Merchants: Bengali Language and Literature in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U," in *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India*, ed. Thomas de Bruijn and Allison Busch, Brill's Indological Library 46 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 47–74.

17. d'Hubert, "Arākān aur janūb-i mashriqī Bangāla-desh mē musulamānō kī tahdhīb aur zabānē."

18. See *infra*, Chapter 1.

19. Mawlawī Ḥamīd Allāh Khān Bahādur, *Aḥādīth al-khawānīn, yaʿnī tārīkh-i Islāmābād Chāṭgām ki ham musammá ba-Tārīkh-i Ḥamīd ast* (Calcutta: Maẓhar al-ʿAjāʾib, 1871). The chronogram of the title *Tārīkh-i Ḥamīd* indicates that the book was written earlier in 1273/ 1856. For a rather unreliable Bengali translation, see Maulabhī Hāmidullāh Khān Bāhādur, *Āhādisul khāoẏānin: Caṭṭagrāmer prācīn itihās*, trans. Khāled Māsuke Rasul, ed. Tānbīr Muhāmmad (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Anupam Prakāśanī, 2013).

Ḥamīd Allāh Khān composed several books in Bengali to reform the customs of Chittagongian Muslims.[20]

The main figures of the formation of the Bengali literary tradition of Arakan are Daulat Kājī (*fl.* 1637) and Ālāol.[21] The influence of the latter on the authors who followed was remarkable.[22] Daulat Kājī came from Chittagong in the western part of the kingdom in circumstances unknown to us. Ālāol was captured in his native region of Faridpur, in today's Bangladesh, by Luso-Arakanese raiders who brought him to Mrauk U. He hailed from the local Indo-Afghan courtly milieu and became a royal slave in Arakan. His literary talents and command over Persian, Hindavi (/Avadhi), Sanskrit, and Bengali—the regional literary idiom—made him a valuable member of the assemblies of the Muslim dignitaries of the Buddhist kings of Arakan.

The texts written by Ālāol are complex textual transpositions of Hindavi and Persian narrative poems and treatises into Bengali.[23] His translation techniques show his familiarity with the methods of Sanskrit textual exposition.[24] There were two phases to his literary career, one rooted in the regional literary traditions of eastern Hindustan and Bengal and another

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20. Khān Bahādur, *Aḥādīth al-khawānīn*, 54–5; Muhammad Kalim Sahsarami, *Khidmatguzārān-i fārsī dar Banglādish* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Rāyzanī-i Farhang-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān, 1999), 265–70; Ahmad Sharif, *Bāṅālī o bāṅlā sāhitya*, vol. 2, reprint (Dhaka, Bangladesh: New Age Publication, 2004), 295; Shahed Ali, *Bāṃlā sāhitye Caṭṭagrāmer avadān* (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Jilā Kāunsil, 1965), 151–4; Muḥammad ʿĪsá Shāhidī, "Nufūdh-i fārsī dar minṭaqa-yi Chītāgang, Bangāldish," *Nāma-yi Pārsī*, no. 2 (1375): 89–111.

21. Haq and Karim, "Ārākān rājsabhāẏ bāṃlā sāhitya (1600–1700)"; Satyendranath Ghoshal, *Beginning of Secular Romance in Bengali Literature*, Visva-Bharati Annals 9 (Santiniketan, India: Visva-Bharati, 1959); Amṛtalāl Bālā, *Ālāoler kāvye Hindu-Muslim saṃskṛti* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemī, 1991); d'Hubert and Leider, "Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court."

22. See *infra*, the last section of Chapter 2.

23. Although I do use the term "translation" throughout the present monograph, "textual transposition," because of its wider conceptual scope, reflects better how I approached Ālāol's text. The terminology offered by the domain of transtextuality, and hypertextuality within it, offers the possibility to locate Ālāol's texts within a larger set of textual practices than translation studies would do. However, the stark distinction formulated by Genette between hypertextuality and "metatextuality" (i.e., commentaries) does not allow us to conceive of Ālāol's texts from the sole perspective of hypertextuality. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*, Points 257, reprint (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), 11–12; Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, Stages 8 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 4.

24. Thibaut d'Hubert, "'Bhāṅgiẏā kahile tāhe āche bahurasa': Madhyayuger kavi Ālāoler anuvād-paddhati," *Bhāvnagar* 1 (2014): 59–76.

during which he derived his material exclusively from Persian *adab* literature (texts oriented toward an ideal refinement of thought, word, and deed) and *mathnawī*s (long poems consisting of distichs rhyming AA, BB, CC. . . and dealing with any subject, epic, mystical, or didactical). The works he translated between 1651 and 1671 are *Padmāvat*, originally composed in Avadhi in 1540 by Malik Muḥammad Jāyasī (d. 1542);[25] *Tuḥfa-yi naṣāʾiḥ* [*A Gift of Guidance*], an ethical treatise in Persian verse, originally composed in 1393 by Yūsuf Gadā;[26] and *Haft paykar* [*Seven Beauties*] and *Sharafnāma* [*Book of Nobility*], the first part of the *Iskandarnāma* [*Book of Alexander*], two *mathnawī*s composed in 1197 and 1196–1202 by Niẓāmī Ganjawī (d. 1209).

Ālāol also composed poems based on works whose authorship is not known: the *dāstān* [story] of *Sayf al-Mulūk wa Badīʿ al-Jamāl* [*Sayf al-Mulūk and Badīʿ al-Jamāl*], treated in various ways in North Indian literature since the seventeenth century,[27] and the story of *Satī Maẏnā Lor-Candrāṇī* [*The Truthful Maynā, Lor and Candrāṇī*]. The first part of the latter work was composed by Daulat Kājī, Ālāol's predecessor in the courts of the Muslim dignitaries of Mrauk U. The language of Ālāol's texts is highly Sanskritized, with Arabic and Persian loanwords used to treat specific religious topics and depict certain aspects of court protocol. Ālāol's oeuvre is representative of the multilingual *adab* (i.e., Islamicate cultural ethos) that developed around the Bay of Bengal during the seventeenth century. To compose his text, Ālāol used the traditional Bengali *pãcālī*, which is a fluid form of narrative poetry that allows the inclusion of short lyric poems and technical digressions. Ālāol included several such digressions, in which he quoted from Sanskrit didactic literature on prosody [*chandas*] and lyrical arts [*saṅgīta*]. There are also fragments of treatises on lyrical arts and a rare specimen of vernacular work of lexicography that bear Ālāol's name.

Sufism makes an important contribution to the courtly literature produced by Ālāol. *Padmāvat* and *Tuḥfa-yi naṣāʾiḥ* were composed by authors affiliated with the Chishtī Sufi order, and Ālāol himself was initiated in the

25. Thomas De Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust: Poetry and History of the Padmāvat by the South-Asian Sufi Poet Muhammad Jāyasī* (Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2012).

26. Simon Digby, "The *Tuḥfa i Naṣāʾiḥ* of Yūsuf Gadā: An Ethical Treatise in Verse From the Late-Fourteenth-Century Dehlī Sultanate," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–123.

27. Christopher Shackle, "The Story of Sayf al-Mulūk in South Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 17, no. 2 (2007): 115–29.

Qādirī order by the Islamic judge (*qāḍī*) of Mrauk U. The poet was also familiar with regional yogic practices that were part of the Sufi religious idiom of southeastern Bengal.[28] His last work, *Sikāndarnāmā*, was never completed, which may indicate that either Ālāol's patron or the poet himself passed away around 1671. Nothing is known about the exact date or circumstances of the poet's death.[29]

Seen from Bengal, Ālāol's works represent a very original contribution to the Bengali poetical tradition by the diversity of his models, the courtly nature of his work, the expression of an authorial persona that was virtually absent before him, and, most important, what I have called the extension of the paradigm of composition and performance, which is an added value to poetical speech as bearing a multiplicity of semantic layers carefully crafted by the poet and unfolded by the perceptive reader–auditor.[30] Unlike that of the previous poems constituting the Bengali poetic tradition, the value of a text did not lie solely in its narrative qualities and the skills of the performer. The text was made an object of scrutiny and one could even say of philological investigation. This experiment was short-lived and too closely connected to the multilingual court milieu of Arakan. When this environment collapsed, his texts were still copied and read, and his poetry was seen as a model of vernacular eloquence, but the state in which the texts were transmitted shows the cultural gap between Ālāol and his readers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Another crucial aspect of Ālāol's discourse and views on the realm of poetry is the virtual absence of hierarchy among languages. The Hindavi poet Jāyasī is considered as a *kavi-kula-guru* (a master among all poets), and he is given as much praises as the classical Persian poet Niẓāmī and the Sanskrit poets Kālidāsa (ca. fourth century) and Bhavabhūti (ca. seventh century). Moreover, Ālāol, unlike some of his contemporaries, never

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28. Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–87; Shaman Hatley, "Mapping the Esoteric Body in the Islamic Yoga of Bengal," *History of Religions* 46, no. 4 (2007): 351–68.

29. A Muslim gentleman from Arakan claimed to be one of Ālāol's direct descendants and provided a genealogy and indications regarding the location of the poet's tomb near Mrauk U. See "Ālāol sambandhe kaẏekṭi nūtan kathā," in *Abdul Karim Sāhityaviśārad racanāvalī*, ed. Abdul Ahsan Chaudhuri, vol. 1 (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1997), 246–47.

30. Thibaut d'Hubert, "Patterns of Composition in the Seventeenth-Century Bengali Literature of Arakan," in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance Cultures in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherin Brown, 423–43 (Cambridge, UK: Open Books Publishers, 2015) and *infra*, Chapter 5 in the present monograph.

apologized for using the Bengali literary idiom to compose texts on Islamic topics. This attitude toward languages is consistent with the poetics of his works, which is not solely based on the resources of the Bengali tradition, but also implies a familiarity with the other linguistic–literary traditions present in the *adab* of the elite of Arakan's capital.

As I mentioned earlier, Ālāol's poetics was not transmitted in its entirety to the next generations, but this flattened understanding of literary multilingualism (i.e., which does not imply a linguistic hierarchy) was still cultivated in some milieus in the region of Chittagong during the following two centuries. The gradual disappearance of this very specific kind of literacy can be explained by several phenomena, such as the spread of standardized curricula, the pressure of reformist movements in the nineteenth century to reject the Arakanese past of Bengali Muslims, and the predominance of nationalist cultural narratives; this historical moment and such a polyvocal political and cultural entity could obviously not fit in essentialist national discourses.[31]

Thanks to the efforts of basically one man, Abdul Karim "Sāhityaviśārad," and a few other individuals concerned with the need to preserve a fading regional tradition, it is today possible to access the literature preserved on the Bangladeshi side of the frontier.[32] But there still remains a lot to be done to correctly edit those texts and collect the few manuscripts that remain scattered in the rural areas of Chittagong, and potentially of Myanmar.[33] So far, the scholarship on the Bengali literature of Arakan has tended to consider this corpus the product of a Bengali diaspora, rather than of the original expression of the Bengali-speaking Muslims of the former kingdom of Arakan.[34] Such an approach entailed the almost-complete neglect of the multicultural environment in which the texts were produced, and it tended to encourage interpretations exclusively from within the world of Middle Bengali literature, which ignored the original source texts and the other intellectual traditions of Arakan. This revealed a very poorly productive method, and, as a matter of fact, it is no overstatement to say that

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31. See, for instance, Francesca Orsini, "How to Do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons From Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century North India," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 49, no. 2 (2012): 225–46.

32. Abdul Karim, "Sahityaviśārad," *Ābdul Karim Sāhityaviśārad racanāvalī*, ed. Abdul Ahsan Chaudhuri, 3 vols. (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangla Academy, 1997).

33. Ba Tha, "Roewengya Fine Arts," *The Guardian, Rangoon*, February 1961, 20–22.

34. Sharif, *Bāṅālī o bāṅlā sāhitya*, 197.

today virtually no original scholarship is produced on this immensely rich material.

Studying Middle Bengali literature

My work, although it is grounded in history, is primarily concerned with poetics and how to read Middle Bengali literature. Its aim is to provide a possible template for the study of vernacular poetics in the multilingual context of South Asia. Middle Bengali literature has mostly been studied from a purely linguistic and textual critical perspective (especially in the first decades of modern Bengali historiography) and then to write the religious and social history of Bengal.[35] Very few attempts were made to combine those approaches and put aesthetics and poetics at the center of the interpretation.[36]

Moreover, the study of Bengali literature has been strongly shaped by a quest for identity, whether communal or national, and therefore efforts were made to isolate it from other linguistic trends current in premodern Bengal.[37] The formation of Bengali literature was seen as a reaction either to Brahmanism or to orthodox Islam and the languages associated with

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35. See, for instance, Mahasweta Sengupta, "Problems in Bengali Literary Historiography," *Social Scientist* 23, no. 10/102 (1995): 56–69; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 654–82.

36. Although the author's endeavor is praiseworthy, Lutphar Rahmān's *Bāṃlā sāhitye nandanbhāvanā: Prācīn o madhyayug* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangla Academy, 2009) constitutes a rather unsuccessful attempt to provide a comprehensive study of Middle Bengali poetics and aesthetics. This monograph mostly reproduces received understandings of Middle Bengali poetry, and it omits productively exploring the rich terminology and metadiscourses on the practice of poetry that Middle Bengali poets formulated in their texts.

37. A major exception to this tendency to isolate Bengali literature from other trends is found in the works of Sukumar Sen (1900–1992). One of the best linguists of his time, Sen had a very nuanced approached to the linguistic diversity on which Middle Bengali literature was formed, but his understanding of the Muslim tradition was rather limited. In the domain of Bengali Muslim literature, scholars like Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar (1928–1997), Ghulam Samdani Qurayshi (1929–1991), and Raziya Sultana remarkably contributed to our knowledge of the Hindavi and Persian backgrounds of Middle Bengali poetry. As far as my understanding of their otherwise major contribution goes, scholars who were trained in both Indic and Islamic languages (i.e., Sanskrit, Middle Indo-Aryan languages, Persian, and Arabic) such as Muhammad Shahidullah (1885–1969) and Muhammd Enamula Haq (1902–1982) did not really mobilize the full range of their competences to study Middle Bengali literature in its multilingual context.

them: Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and, later, Urdu.[38] In this attempt to carve a space for the vernacular and its history, the multilingual intertextuality that characterizes most Middle Bengali texts was purposely put aside. This resulted in the loss of crucial interpretative tools for the reading of those texts. The present book provides a first attempt at reading Middle Bengali texts using the full range of sources that participated in their conception and reception. In addition to a more relevant understanding of the texts themselves, an important outcome of this endeavor is the opening of Bengali historiography to other trends of South and Southeast Asian literatures.[39]

How to retrieve a unified literary idiom formed in a context of multilingual literacy? Bringing to the surface the multiliterate background of a literary tradition, although it is a necessary task, presents the risk of missing the coherent system that it constitutes. To do so, we must move away from theories of cultural syncretism or binary readings of communal–secular interpretations of Bengali Muslim literature[40] and pay attention to the poetics of the texts (and not assumed religious and political agendas) and the discourse of the poet on his art and aspirations.[41]

The scholars who wrote the only monographs devoted to Ālāol in English and Bengali are Satyendranath Ghoshal and Amritalal Bala.[42] Both authors surveyed the content of Ālāol's works from a historical and cultural perspective. Considering the very poor understanding of the history of Arakan and eastern Bengal that we had prior to the recent studies of P. Gutman, J. P. Leider, M. Charney, and S. van Galen, contextualizing

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38. Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study,* 2nd ed. (Dhaka, Bangladesh: University of Dhaka, 1999). Interestingly, he was the author who most emphasized this discourse on cultural–linguistic competition, but he was also the last scholar who was actually well trained in Persian, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Hindi, and Urdu and he did use them in his interpretative works—see his excellent *Bāṃlā romāṇṭik kāvyer Āoẏādhī-Hindī paṭabhūmi,* reprint (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Jātīẏa Sāhitya Prakāś, 2009).

39. See *infra*, Chapters 6 and 7.

40. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence."

41. Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 29–34; Sheldon Pollock, "Introduction," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions From South Asia,* ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1–36.

42. Ghoshal, *Beginning of Secular Romance in Bengali Literature*; Amṛtalāl Bālā, *Ālāoler kāvye Hindu-Muslim saṃskṛti.* To which we may add the following work that offers a reading of *Padmāvatī* from the perspective of Persian Sufi poetry: Abu Musa Mohammad Arif Billah, *Influence of Persian Literature on Shah Muhammad Sagir's* Yūsuf Zulaikhā *and Alaol's* Padmāvatī (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Abu Rayhan Biruni Foundation, 2014).

Ālāol's works was not an easy task, and the result was rather superficial and of little interest for anyone willing to interpret them to the light of the social and political context. On the cultural side, Ghoshal put forward the contribution of Muslims to the birth of a secular literature in Bengal. This reading was motivated by an ideologically biased reading of Ālāol's texts that were seen as an alternative to the religious literature written by Hindu authors. Ghoshal's views are the result of a very superficial understanding of Hindu and Muslim Middle Bengali literature, which ignores the striking tendency to desacralize divine characters in Hindu narratives[43] and the fact that Muslim romances are means for religious and spiritual teachings very much rooted in the doctrines of Islam.[44] Bala opted for syncretism and attempted to show how Ālāol consciously tried to bring together Hinduism and Islam in his poetry.[45] Once again we have the result of the amalgamation of linguistic and religious identities and the misunderstanding of the status of Persian, Sanskrit, and Bengali in seventeenth-century Arakan. Another misunderstanding, which also occurred in the case of Avadhi romances, has to do with the exoticization of Hindu culture through regionalized [*deśī*] aesthetics. Hindu culture became part of an imaginaire only remotely related to the actual Hindu society of the time. It became the realm of a metaphorical idiom, which, I would argue, was hardly concerned with actual religious dialogue.[46] Ālāol makes very clear his religious opinions that are in no way syncretistic. Both scholars put forward the "human" dimension of his works and thus display a partial understanding of "humanism" when commenting on it. Foregrounding Ālāol's works as "humanistic" has some truth in it, but not in opposition to a literature focusing on divine matters, and more in terms of intellectual open-endedness and, in the field of arts, of a taste for experiments and the creation of new idioms.[47]

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43. W. L. Smith, *Rāmāyaṇa Traditions in Eastern India : Assam, Bengal, Orissa* (Stockholm: Department of Indology, University of Stockholm, 1988); Philippe Benoît, "Le Rāmāyaṇa de Vālmīki et le Rāmāyaṇa de Kṛttibās. Recherches comparatives en littératures sanskrite et bengalie," PhD dissertation (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III, 1994).

44. Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*, ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

45. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Amṛtalāl Bālā, *Padmāvatī samīkṣā* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Sāhitya vilās, 2008).

46. Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*; De Bruijn, *Ruby in the Dust*, 2012.

47. Ghoshal, *Beginning of Secular Romance in Bengali Literature*.

The corpus I propose to study offers ways to start afresh this reading of Middle Bengali texts. As I argue in Chapter 5, Ālāol ran various experiments with the traditional formats and genres. He did those interventions on the inherited generic models in a very self-conscious way, which allows us to reconstruct, not only the empirical aspects of his style, but also the discourse he had on his own art. The way Ālāol's texts are anchored in their historical contexts through explicit and implicit references to the culture and politics of "secondary courts" in Arakan in the mid-seventeenth century, combined with the explicit intertextuality of his works, makes of his oeuvre an ideal point of entry to think about Middle Bengali poetics from within.[48] As one could expect, the result of this endeavor contains its idiosyncrasies and one cannot extend all conclusions to the entire corpus of Middle Bengali literature, but it provides a landmark, both historically and conceptually, to extend such interpretative methods and reflections to other Middle Bengali texts.

As I mentioned earlier, Middle Bengali literature was mainly studied for linguistic and social–historical purposes, and the main contribution of this book is the recourse to a different interpretative approach that focuses on the notion of tradition, not as the vague term used to designate any pre-Enlightenment knowledge system, but rather as the dynamic process of transmission of generic models. The term tradition, as I use it throughout the book, implies the recourse to a methodology mapping the intertextual nexus in which each text is located.[49] The modalities of those intertextual relations and of the interventions made by the author are governed by specific knowledge systems that are partly recorded in didactic texts, partly derived from the formal features of traditional models, and partly transmitted through the performance of the texts. I therefore pay equal attention to structural features and questions of intentionality (here treated in connection with courtly sociability).[50]

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48. "Secondary courts" are the courts of dignitaries, and I use the term in contrast with the "royal court." For further details on those two types of court and the kinds of literary patronage they entail, see *infra*, Chapter 2.

49. Regarding tradition as a "world of ideas in which intertextual relationships are generated" [*lieu idéal ou s'etablissent les rapports intertextuels*] see Paul Zumthor, *Essai de Poétique Médiévale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 22; Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 50.

50. Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006);

The high level of historicization of my reading of Ālāol's texts is not due to some absolute disciplinary position that I would try to impose or defend regarding whether premodern literature should or can be read historically.[51] The way an author and a text engage with time changes from one text to the other, and consequently our method must change in each case. A philological approach to literature does not, at least as I understand it, imply the systematic imposition of historical interpretative schemes, but it demands that the philologist assesses as precisely as possible if and how a text engages with time and its historical context. History and the relative positioning of an author and the author's text in the chronological unfolding of the tradition are one aspect of the semantic content of a work, but they are not always present in the same way. What I want to contribute with my study is thus a finer understanding of the historical reading of premodern Bengali literature and a redefinition of the philological methods used to read those texts. I want to question the assumed naïveté of this literature and depart from the idea that premodern vernacular texts almost passively captured the aesthetic aspirations and social reality of their time.[52]

The historian of Bengali literature Sukumar Sen bestowed a crucial importance on the geographical spread of texts and genres, which condition our context-sensitive recourse to intertextuality.[53] A text does not only need to be written in Bengali to participate to the traditional background of another Bengali text. The study of the geographical spread of Bengali manuscripts clearly shows that, with a few exceptions, texts circulated within very limited areas.[54] This geographically fragmented picture of Bengali literary culture—which is much more complex than the usual East–West Bengal dichotomy—reflects the political reality of premodern Bengal and the constraints of natural geography on networks of communication.[55]

Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings : The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, South Asia Research (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

51. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David D. Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

52. Ahmad Sharif, *Madhyayuger sāhitye samāj o saṃskṛtir rūp* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Samaẏ Prakāśan, 2000).

53. See S. Sen's preface in Ghoshal, *Beginning of Secular Romance in Bengali Literature*.

54. For instance, all the manuscripts of Ālāol's works were found in eastern Bengal, in Chittagong and Comilla.

55. Tirthankar Roy, "Where Is Bengal? Situating an Indian Region in the Early Modern World Economy," *Past & Present*, no. 213 (November 1, 2011): 115–46.

Unsurprisingly, the texts that are found all over the Bengali-speaking area are early *pā̃cālī*s (namely the *Kṛttivāsī Rāmāyaṇ* [ca. fifteenth century CE] and the *Śrīkṛṣṇavijaẏ* [ca. 1470s]) composed during periods of territorial and administrative expansion of the Bengali sultanate with its capital in Gauda—which is located near Malda in West Bengal, right on the border between India and Bangladesh.[56] Outside those brief moments of political unity, Bengal's history is characterized by what one may call the "*ṭāʾifa* effect." At the other end of the Muslim world, in Al-Andalus, the eleventh century witnessed a period of cultural efflorescence, which was explained by historians as being the result of the political fragmentation of the Iberian Peninsula that occasioned a multiplication of the centers of literary production.[57] The tumultuous political history of Bengal from the fall of the Ḥusayn Shāhī dynasty from 1538 onward favored the development of regional literary traditions. These literary traditions relied on common earlier models, which explains the maintaining of prosodic forms such as the *paẏār* and *tripadī*, and the use of Brajabuli (a literary language derived from Old Maithili) in lyric poetry. But other than that we see very few horizontal forms of intertextuality (i.e., from one Bengali text to another). This also appears in the total absence of what could be considered a canon of Middle Bengali poetry—each text somehow reinvented the tradition.

Writing a history of Middle Bengali literature today thus requires a reformulation of notions of tradition, history, and cultural geography. These methodological considerations all aim at providing an effective framework for the study of the poetics of Middle Bengali texts. The visible decline in the study of Middle Bengali literature in recent times is certainly due to the interpretative dead ends reached by previous scholarship in this domain and it is due time to offer new ways to enliven our understanding of those texts.[58] Hopefully, the present monograph will contribute to challenging received knowledge on Middle Bengali literature and invite readers to engage with a corpus, the study of which reaches far beyond concerns of regional literary history.

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56. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1538 A.D.*, 33–95.

57. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, "Introduction," in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22–23; Pierre Guichard and Bruna Soravia, *Les royaumes de Taifas: Apogée culturel et déclin politique des émirats andalous du XIᵉ siècle* (Paris: Geuthner, 2007).

58. See the chapter titled "Madhyayuger bāṃlā sāhityacarcā: biś śataker prekṣite" in Sanatkumār Naskar, *Prāgādhunik bāṃlā sāhitya: Paripraśna o punarvivecanā* (Kolkata, India: Diẏā Pāblikeśan, 2012), 560–684.

Overview of the contents of the book

The first chapter is concerned with setting a frame for a unified understanding of a composite literary tradition. I start by giving a general overview of how the Bengal–Arakan continuum has been defined in terms of both geographical and cultural features and its place in the Bay of Bengal as a zone of commercial and cultural exchanges. I then turn to the formation of an Arakanese Islamicate idiom in official documents (coins and inscriptions) from the foundation of Mrauk U in 1430 up to Ālāol's lifetime, in the mid-seventeenth century. After the study of the official use of an Islamicate idiom, I identify the centers in which Bengali literature was produced in Arakan during approximately the same period. I distinguish two different trends in the Bengali literature of Arakan: One is represented by the works of rural or provincial authors, and the other by texts produced and consumed—at least in a first phase—by urban audiences and readerships. In doing so, I try to highlight the shared features of those two corpuses, as well as what clearly allows us to distinguish one set of texts from the other; the main distinctive feature being the function of multilingual literacy in the composition and reception of the texts.

Chapter 2 focuses on urban literature and the milieu of the Bengali-speaking dignitaries of Mrauk U. I provide a bird's-eye view of the cosmopolitan society of Mrauk U, and I try to locate Bengali-speaking Muslims in this environment. Gradually narrowing down the focus on Ālāol's immediate entourage, I observe the economy of the secondary courts that he attended. These gatherings were organized by Bengali-speaking Muslim dignitaries who worked for the king of Arakan's administration. I analyze how Ālāol described the relationship of his patrons with the royal court and how the notion of "grandeur" [*mahimā/mahattva*] was used by the author to articulate the various aspects of his own activity as a court poet. In the last section of this chapter, I focus on a story found in one of Ālāol's poems, which I read as a *mise en abyme* of his activity as a man of letters that provides insights into the way he conceived of patronage and the function of poetic speech and eloquence in a courtly context.

Chapter 3 looks at Ālāol's early literary career and the evolution of his concerns and style during a period that stretches over ten years, between 1651 and 1661. It is the occasion to highlight connections between themes treated in his poems and contemporary events that marked the end of the Golden Age of Arakan. To keep track of his aesthetic and poetic choices, I translate and analyze short lyric poems inserted in his otherwise

narrative texts. This allows us to follow the themes and stylistic features that characterize each period of his literary career to offer both textual and contextual motivations to interpret the orientation of his oeuvre. The over-arching argument that ties together Chapters 3 and 4 lies in the shift from lyricism and cultural polyphony to didacticism and the exclusive recourse to Persian literary models.

The political crisis of 1661 that was triggered by the arrival in Arakan of Mughal Prince Shāh Shujāʿ (d. 1661) who was fleeing away from his brother Awrangzeb's (r. 1658–1707) army, marks the beginning of major shifts in Ālāol's literary activities. In Chapter 4, I follow the thread of Ālāol's poems' stylistic evolutions during the decade spanning from 1661 to 1671—the date of the composition of *Sikāndarnāmā*, Ālāol's last work. This period is characterized by the progressive degradation of the relation-ships between the Bengali Muslim elites and the Buddhist Arakanese ruler that deeply modified the configuration of the literary gatherings in Mrauk U, as well as the aspirations of their members. In my analysis I trace how these changes affected the poet's recourse to the romance and epic genres, as well as to lyric poetry.

The first section of Chapter 5 goes one step further toward the analysis of Ālāol's speech by focusing on the modes of performance of his works. Here I argue that the traditional Bengali *pācālī* (i.e., versified narrative poem) was partially redefined as it became a part of the Indo-Persian mode of sociability of the *majlis* (social venue). Words, their ornaments and semantic depth—in contrast with plot—became the subject of hermeneu-tic inquiry to serve both mundane and spiritual ends in the courtly context. The second part of the chapter is a systematic exploration of Ālāol's *ars poetica*. It focuses on the terminology used by the poet to speak about his practice of literature. I look at the multilingual traditional background of the poet to assess the range of his models and the scope of the terms that he uses in his technical digressions. Tracing the genealogies of Ālāol's ter-minology is only one part of my approach; the other—and somehow more necessary—part is to draw the outline of his poetics as a coherent system for his works. In a linguistic tradition virtually lacking theoretical litera-ture on poetics, the interpretation of his discourse and the reconstruction of his *ars poetica* constitute a necessary attempt at reading Middle Bengali literature on its own terms.

In the final chapters of the book, I take a step back, using the conclu-sions that I reached about the background and nature of Ālāol's poetics. I use those observations as a lens to look at cultural trends that spread