

Arakan State

The rust bucket which passed as a ship blew its shrill whistle, and the last scurrying sarong clad passengers hurried across the gang plank as we cast off from Sittwe in Arakan state before 6 am. Arakan state borders Bangladesh to the northwest, and chin state to the north. Moving into the current, we passed by the rotting hulks of other neglected boats, some of them confiscated Thai fishing vessels with Thai markings whose crews had been imprisoned for fishing illegally in Burmese waters. There were dozens of boats beached like dead whales, exposing their sad bleached ribs in the mud on the banks of the Kaladan river. Through the morning fog, jagged islands rose up in the distance, and hundreds of seagulls followed the ship from the bay of Bengal, catching whatever food the passengers tossed skywards. Upper class consisted of reclining deck chairs of wood screwed together and seats of stiched thai rice sacks. Below on the lower level, there wasn't a spare inch to move about as vendors and passengers wrapped themselves sardine packed into blankets against the cold.Â

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In the east, the diffused tangerine color of the sun rose like a scalded welt distorted by the soupy atmosphere. Young girls returning home from school on term break, huddled together for warmth against the forward windbreak, wearing pastels and pure hues of color, gathered together against the wind like a bouquet of ruffled flowers.Â Â

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As we sailed up the Kaladan river to Mraug-u, some five or six hours away, somebody plucked at the strings of a mandolin whose sweet melody drifted over the upper deck of the ship. In no time the deck was littered with crunching sunflower seeds and peanut husks and stained vermilion with splashing squirts of chewed betal juice followed by the acrid smell of wafting fish. The river banks of the Kaladan were never far away, and most of the upper deck passengers slept in rickety lounge chairs. The river sculpted the curves of silt rich sand dunes, meandering inland as the back lit hills rose up in a line to the east.

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It was easy to see how a combination of such abundant fresh water, proper irrigation, and flat fertile lands made this place such a strong ancient empire. Arakan's documented history extends to the second century, but surly goes back much further than when Buddhism became established during the reign of King Chandra Surya in 146ad. It was here in Arakan state that the famous Mahamuni Buddha was cast in what was said to be the time of Buddha's life 2,500 years ago. That however was not possible as the first images of the Buddha were from the Gandharan period at the time of Christ, and were inspired by none other than the sculpted Greco-roman gods of Alexander the great who carried his gods with him into India.

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Silver coinage was a much more reliable way to historically document the periods, and much comes from the advanced Pyu people who introduced the first coinage from 190ad. The Pyu seem to have been absorbed by the Burmese in the 9th century, although their language lasted several more centuries. Many of these coins could be found throughout Burma in Halin, Vesali and Srikestra and in other parts of South East Asia, proving that trade at a very early period was already flourishing. Vesali, a few miles north of Mraug-u, suggested a Hindu dynasty previous to the inroads of Buddhism. The earliest coins from the Chandra period date from 420ad. For a long period no more coins were minted and then in the fifteenth century coins were again produced in Arakan.

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Mrauk-u was founded in 1433ad. By King Minsawmun who was told by his astrologers that if he moved the capital from

the "unlucky" royal city of Launggyet that he would be dead within the year. The following year, the prophecy was fulfilled and the king died. By the 16th century, Arakan was influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch and Danish traders and the Moghul empire of India. It was during this period that an influx of people came to Arakan who were to lend this particular mixture and flavor for which Arakan is noted. The Thet or Shakama people came from what is now Bangladesh along with the Daingnet who were said to have fled to Arakan state to escape the fighting between the Maramagyi and the Bangaladeshi in the 15th to 17th centuries. The Maramagyi say that they came to Arakan state from India during the Vesali period in the 5th century as traders and stayed at Mraug_u. Rakhine people claim that they were the first settlers along with the Khami or Mro who first came here thousands of years ago.

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In 1782, Burmese King Bodawpaya killed his nephew, a rival for the throne, all of his advisors, all possible rivals in the royal family, four queens and their children. All of their followers and servants. Soon after That when he found his own brother plotting against him, he eliminated all the rivals of the remaining families, killed some 200 more in an uprising, burned their villages, killed the entire population, all the animals, crops, and cut down the fruit trees. In 1784, King Bodawpaya invaded Arakan, till then an independent kingdom, and carried away the Mahamuni Buddha to Mandalay, where it resides today, inches thicker than the original casting with gold leaf constantly pressed onto it's surface by the faithful. The Arakanese equate their loss of their independence and of becoming a part of Burma to the loss of this Buddha, and it is still a very touchy and emotional subject for them. I found the Arakanese to be exceptionally aware of their own history.

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All around Mraug-u, from the diggings of the royal palace, surrounding the Shitthaung temple, around the andaw temple and dozens of others for miles around, in nameless hills, are the remains of Buddhas and wall carvings. Knocking away a bit of soil, I saw excavations come to light for the first time in 600 years, and there can be no doubt that much more will be found in the future.

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I had been to Arakan state before, checking into the prawn business, when i met a young man at the airport who was born in Mrauk-u. He had to return home when the government had again closed the schools. I found him to be very knowledgeable and told him that I wanted to photograph the various groups which lived here, and he agreed to help me. I first wanted to find the Thet or Shakama which in 1919, C.C. Lowis said were disappearing from Arakan state, remarking that only 230 villagers had returned themselves as Thet in the census of 1901. My new friend knew where we could find one village, and we went to visit. We found a pair of old Thet women with the large traditional silver disks worn in their ears. After I had shot their pictures, they held my hands and wept, they just could not believe that anybody was interested in them or in their culture. There were Rakhine people everywhere and the Maramagyi who resemble more than the others, their Indian origins. I photographed many Maramagyi girls at the well drawing water, and some of them were charming.

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The Khami or Mro had a tradition of being judged as a potential wife by the skill of her weaving. In the whole of Burma, I believe that the finest weaving is done by the Mro. I found a woman at her loom weaving an incredibly intricate design which I understand was to be the front part of what the Mro use to cover up the breasts. The back section was of a different design. One single panel can take three months or more to complete, at least a half a year for one set. Traditionally, since the shoulders of the Mro women were bare, tattoos were displayed there as signs of beauty. The girls of the Mro would receive their tattoos at the age of seven or eight years old. I spoke to the head of the Mro and Khami cultural association who told me that there were no longer any Mro women with the tattoos, since the younger girls did not want to be tattooed, but the woman at the loom had the original tattoos on her shoulders which matched her weaving, and I photographed her.

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A few miles from Mraug-u, across dry harvested rice fields whose stalks stood up dry and as stiff as porcupine quills, were the foundations of fortifications laid centuries ago stretching to the banks of the Lemro river. Although the road to Kyauktaw in the north was officially closed, I figured that I would meet little resistance if I sailed up the Lemro river into the equally forbidden southern Chin State.

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We hired a small local motor boat after I had shot more pictures of Rakhine girls on the banks of the Lemro river, drawing water which was clear, clean, and for them, drinkable. I brought along a cooler filled with iced beer. Since the prawn business was so important to this region, there were plenty of cold storage facilities which produced ice. A few hours upstream, we cut the engine and drifted with the aid of a bamboo pole into a cove below a village of Daingnet. The Daingnet claim to have been here for 450 years. We walked up the river bank and collected curious Daingnet children as we walked to the house of the headman. The Daingnet have distinctly wider noses than those of the Thet, and the similarity is evident between all of those in the village. The headman had never seen a foreigner and said that he thought foreigners were taller. The fire burning billowed with smoke and the crowds pressing in made it difficult to breathe. The girls sat in the sunshine, one behind the other in a row, pulling lice out of each others hair. The Daingnet were dirt poor as children with distended stomachs illustrated, but with great generosity, offered me everything they had. Many of the children and even the horse had the cloudy eyes of glaucoma. I shot photos of a Daingnet girl wearing the one remaining piece of original clothing that the headman still owned.

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The next morning, as we shoved off, young Daingnet girls beat their laundry against a tree which had fallen into the Lemro river, and the headman loaded the boat with bananas. We would be going to the upper Lemro river into an area of the tattoo face chin women. A few years ago, I had brought some Chin from Kampetlet and from Mindat in the eastern chin state near Mt. Victoria at an elevation of 10,016 feet (3,053 meters), to photograph west of Pakokku. It was at this time that a chin state representative told me the history of the Chin or Zomi as they call themselves. Many of the chin women in the south had their faces tattooed. This practice originated during the Pagan period nearly 10 centuries ago. It seemed that the king whose capital was at Pagan, desired the beauty of the wide eyed light skinned Chin women, and carried many of them off in slave raids. After having his way with them, he would discard them. The Chin in their shame, with the intention to disfigure their women, and to be able to identify them by clan when they were carried off, began to tattoo their women faces. They said that at present, there were less than one thousand tattooed women left in the towns of Mindat and Kampetlet. The men were great warriors. The few facial hairs that they had, grew long like fine black corn silk into wispy mustaches and beards. They were expert marksmen with a bow and arrow. Each man wore a plume of red or silver blue cock feathers arching out from a turban with crossed rows of cowery shells stitched into the black and red striped tunic, crossed like bandoleers over the chest.

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The Chin Bok women wore a great number of necklaces of reddish orange cornelian and musk oxen teeth with strings of tiger teeth. Some of the women were quite beautiful with their faces covered in uniform designs of dots, dashes, nicks and lines. Fair skinned, some of the girls are so heavily tattooed that their natural pigment was nearly absent under the intricate geometric loops and swirls, black vertical lines etched into the bridge of a nose, or dashes following the line of a pouting lip. The men wore thin disks of gold in their ears which were engraved at the ends.

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Divorces were not known. If a man's wife went off with another man, the husband must kill his rival, if he can, and takes his wife back again. Chins must take revenge to balance the wrong committed against them. One Chin warrior told me of a woman who had gone down to the river to draw water, fell in and drown. Her husband took a length of bamboo to that river and filled it with water, drew his sword, and cut the bamboo in half, punishing the water for drowning his wife. Harmony was restored. In places on the Lemro river it was very shallow and so clear that I could easily see to the bottom. We had to avoid the engine shaft being tangled in weeds or breaking against the rocks. Across the surface of the water flew silver flying fish, which surfaced, skipped across the water, and dove back into the current. Some times the current was so strong that even with the engine at full bore, we were almost stationary. Hundreds of white heron passed low over the water and the trees on the banks of the river were shrieking with unseen birds. After a few hours of snaking upstream into southern chin state, we slid like a knife into a sandbank below the village of the arrow throwing chin.

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These chin called themselves the Laytoo Chin or arrow throwing chin. They were a formidable group, the men beating drums and crashing gongs in a mock battle scene with leather shields and iron tipped spears. The shields had an ox skin handle on the back and were v shaped to deflect blows. The chin warrior would duck behind his shield then rise up screaming, his spear cocked and ready.

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These Chin said that their primary group here in the delta region are called the Sountoo. Many of the women had tattooed faces. The tattoo pigment was made from black buffalo bile added to carbon. They began to tattoo the face at about thirteen years old, and the process can take years. Chins under thirty years old no longer tattoo the face as the thousand year old practice is now illegal. In those younger chin girls, the skin was very light colored, with fine features and delicate hair. The older Laytoo chin women had tattoos which began with a circled x on the forehead and had lines radiating outwards like a setting sun with vertical and horizontal lines below the eye and across the cheek, which cross hatched over the sensitive eyelid like the threads of a spiderweb. In their ears, some of the women still had silver drums which weighed heavily, and pulled at their elongated earlobes. There is a wide flange at the top which keeps them from falling through. I had now seen the Chin Bok, the Chin Bon, and not this group of Laytoo Chin which I believe till now had never been recorded in color.

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