

INTERVIEW WITH THE GUEST EDITOR STEPHAN VAN GALEN

TANJA CHUTE

Stephan van Galen at the Hortus Botanicus, Leiden, the Netherlands (June 2001).

By the time of his first visit to Arakan in 1999, Van Galen had already read about Southeast Asia and Arakan for several years. At a young age, he had read the children's book, *De Scheepsjongens van Bontekoe*, which was based on the seventeenth-century travel logs of an East India ship's captain named Bontekoe, who was shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean. 'The story had become a classic already during the seventeenth century. Of course, I never realized just to what extent the stories were true until I started doing my research on Arakan, and going through the archival material I came across his name again,' he recalls. But visiting the country one studies as a historian is felt by Van Galen to be a vital part in the process of understanding it. If not, then one would have to go on such descriptions like 'Arakan is a wild and jungly Holland', recorded as having been uttered by Robertson (the first British Commissioner of Arakan), a comparison Van Galen cites not without some humour, as he himself was born and raised in the Netherlands.

He did travel long journeys by boat and, in Mrauk-U, had to hire people to cut routes through the jungle a day in advance if he and his travel companions wanted to visit areas blocked by vegetation. Aside from that, research there was quite trouble-free. The people there 'were very excited to meet a foreign scholar doing research on their history. Many went out of their way to show us things and to help us out. Those I met were quite knowledgeable, themselves, of course they publish magazines with translations of the Arakanese chronicles, and publish work by Jacques Leider and myself.'

Van Galen is a PhD student at the Research School CNWS at Leiden University, the Netherlands, who is presently writing a dissertation on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century

Arakanese history.

Although he started in Leiden as an undergraduate in history, it was at Kings College, London

University, under the supervision of Professor Peter Marshall, where he was encouraged to continue

further in Asian Studies with a focus on India. He conducted his doctoraal research at archives in

London, Oxford, the VOC archives in The Hague and, upon his return to Leiden, at the Kern

Institute, and graduated with the thesis: 'The Opium Trade in the Eighteenth Century from Bengal

to Java'. He then pursued studies of the British Raj, with a minor in Persian, and completed a oneyear MA at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Experiences at SOAS

eventually led Van Galen to his academic fascination with Arakan. 'Looking from Bengal, Arakan

always lurched there somewhere on the frontier. It's an area about which in terms of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and later, as well people really don't know very much. And

that intrigued me. It was such a dark spot on the map, really. If you look at the historiography of

Burma and India, we have a rather clear idea of how they developed, but Arakan, which is in

between these two areas, was still very unstudied. It was going into a territory where not many

historians were active.'

Communication between those scholars doing research on Arakan is profoundly important, Van

Galen feels, as there still remains very little by way of modern research on this area, and there are

few academic experts in the world who publish about it. 'During my PhD research, I discovered that

there were two other guys doing PhD research on the same period, as well! And both of them were

using the Arakanese chronicles. One of them was in Michigan, and the other in Bangkok, Thailand.

I met one via the Internet, and the other I located after reading something he wrote on Arakan it

took a few months to do this. Then, I brought us all together. The three of us didn't know we were

working on the same subject until then. That was, of course, a very pleasing experience to be able

to discuss our findings with each other. Both of them have completed their PhDs now, so I can

draw on their expertise on the Arakanese chronicles. It is an extremely small circle of experts.'

Continuing his enthusiasm for connecting researchers in the field, Van Galen has gathered a few from this small circle for this issue's special theme section.

Van Galen is set to complete his PhD next year, and he will shortly take on a job with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands in which he will be doing quality assessment of research and educational programmes in the Netherlands. Research into the history of Arakan and mainland Southeast Asia continues to be a central interest for him. (TC) *

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