

Contagion: Thinking about Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Burma

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In this scholarly note, Peter Coclans utilizes fragmentary evidence relating to an outbreak of cholera in Burma in the early 1840s to open up a discussion about issues relating to narrativity and historical method more generally.

Introducing a Post-Colonial Inversion

Much is still unknown about Burma in the first half of the nineteenth century; indeed, much is still unknown about Burma (Myanmar) even today. In the first half of the nineteenth century, one part of the country, the isolated Tenasserim Provinces—the elongated stretch of land snaking down the southeast coast of the country—seemed particularly remote. Ceded to Great Britain after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), the Tenasserim Provinces—Maulmain, Tavoy, and Mergui—started to register on some Western minds and balance sheets once British capital began to penetrate Lower Burma in the 1830s and 1840s.¹ In 1837 an English-language newspaper was established in the region's largest town, Maulmain, capital of British Burma between 1827 and 1852.² Although nineteenth-century runs of this newspaper are incomplete, extant issues from the 1840s allow us to get at least some sense of goings-on in the region. The following extracts from this newspaper, known as the *Maulmain Chronicle*, shed some light, for example, on a terrible cholera epidemic that “visited” various parts of Burma in 1842 and 1843. Even so, much remains obscure.³

Such obscurity is not necessarily all to the bad, for it allows us interpretive space to think about, even to meditate upon, the meaning(s) of historical representation/documentation, particularly regarding areas where conventional historical sources are scarce and description perforce likely to be “thin” in Geertzian terms. More specifically, the cholera “visitation” to Burma cuts to the heart of epistemological questions of great importance to historians today. To cite an obvious example, does an epidemic—or even a disease—occur only if someone is there to record it? You know, *esse est*

percipi—to be is to be perceived—as Bishop George Berkeley, the great eighteenth-century immaterialist, might have put it. Put another way: We know all about the great cholera “waves” of the nineteenth century—1832, 1849, 1866, and the like—but what about “quotidian” outbreaks in and around the so-called Indian subcontinent, where the disease was endemic? Is it enough to say cholera was endemic in such areas, then to cut and run? Moreover, if the past is a foreign country, as David Lowenthal (1985) provocatively suggested two decades ago, what to Westerners is the Burmese past? A universe unto itself?

Nor is that all. Although the above questions are themselves extremely interesting, I am equally concerned here with the subject–object problem inherent in all historical documentation. With this question in mind, I try to raise some issues relating to this concern by employing an ancient narrative strategy—a chronicle, as it were—in such a way as to open up and destabilize the very idea of documentation. For even a chronicle, which in Hayden White’s (1980) view is rather resistant to subjectivity effects, is marred/marked by the same. Indeed, the seemingly straightforward register of “facts” and “events” reprinted below arguably tells us as much about the cultural assumptions and conventions of the Western documentarians as about that which they purport to document: a cholera epidemic coursing through Burma in 1842 and 1843. Let us call our methodological conceit “documentary inversion” and move on to the chronicle itself to illustrate briefly what we mean.⁴

The “facts” that prove most compelling in this text, at least to me, pertain as much to mid-nineteenth-century Europeans as they do to cholera and to the indigenous population of Burma: to the positivist conceptions of knowledge held by Europeans, that is to say, and their ambitious and imperious attempts to survey, map, and manipulate information; to their increased numeracy and newfound recourse to statistical evidence marshaled and arrayed; to their confident, if deeply flawed, theories of disease etiology; and to their thinking about “primitive” cultures and ethnographic hierarchies. And, as the entry for February 1, 1843, suggests (see p. 171), to their Romantic, almost modern regard for affect and sensibility.⁵

The trajectory of a dreadful disease is traced to some degree as well, of course, but it is the contagion of assumptions and ideas held by globalizing European authorities and revealed, however inadvertently, in the chronicle that I wish to call attention to here. I encourage readers to approach the text below in this inverted, post-colonial way. In so doing, you, too, may find illumination even in a place so “obscure” as the Tenasserim Provinces of Lower Burma in the early 1840s.

The Maulmain Chronicle

August 31, 1842

We hear from Burmah that the cholera is raging throughout the country with dreaded fatality. The inhabitants of Amarapoora have suffered extremely. It has entered the Court and taken off the Mya-waddee-Woon, one of the king's most substantial friends. The Pagan-Meag-thamee, sister of his Majesty, and prominent in the history of the late revolution, has fallen a victim to this desolating malady. Other officers and men of rank have also fallen.

September 7, 1842

We have still the most melancholy accounts of the fatal effects of the cholera among the inhabitants of the interior of Burmah. We hear of whole villages on the banks of the river having become desolate, the inhabitants either cut off by this frightful malady, or having sought to escape its ravages by fleeing for safety to other parts of the country. We presume none who are attacked ever recover, as the Burmese are wholly unacquainted with the use of any of the remedies which the science of medicine has provided in more enlightened countries.

We do not hear that the cholera has yet reached Rangoon. Should it, however, prevail at that place, we shall have no reason not to expect its appearance amongst our own population on this side of the river. It would be benevolent and show but a proper regard for the lives of the natives, were our public authorities to cause the goungs [leaders, chiefs] and some of the principal men among the natives, perhaps also their physicians, to be made acquainted with some of the ordinary remedies used in cases of cholera, that they might be, even in a small degree, prepared to meet its attacks.

September 14, 1842

We learn that the Cholera is on the decrease in Burmah. It is reported, and we have no reason to dispute the truth of the report, that not less than 10,000 in Amarapoora alone have fallen victims to this disease. Among the members of the Court, we hear the Mya-wa-dee Woongyee, (a relative of his Majesty) one of the Princesses, a son of the Prince of Prome, a daughter of the Prince of Pakan, an Atwen-woon, a Woon-douck, and several other officers of rank, have died. In Rangoon the Cholera has carried off great numbers. Notwithstanding the great mortality which has prevailed almost throughout the country, the native reports are to the effect that the King is preparing to come down to Rangoon with an "immense army."

October 12, 1842

We are sorry to state that among the native inhabitants of the town, there have been within a week past, a more than ordinary number of deaths, by cholera, than usually happens at this change of the season. Their superstition has suggested to them various absurd means to drive the demon from the place, but as yet without success. We understand that there were thirteen deaths between sunrise and sunset yesterday.

October 19, 1842

The reports of deaths during the last week of Cholera are on Tuesday 11th, 13; Wednesday, 23; Thursday, 18; Friday, 33; Saturday, 16; Sunday, 20;

Monday, 35; Tuesday, 26; Total 184. Of these a large proportion are said to have been priests. This probably has proceeded from the nature of their food, which is collected by them in the morning from the charitably disposed and kept for hours in the collecting pots till it becomes cold and sour. An idea has got abroad among the people that a dram or two of arrack⁶ during the day is likely to prove a good preservative from the disease, in consequence of which the arrack shops are doing an unusual quantity of business, and no doubt have their emissaries abroad to foster the delusion. So much has the alarm spread among the people that they have given up all idea of assembling this year for the Boat Races, and herein they are wise, as, so long as the disease is known to be in the place, the strong exertion, the exposure, and the crowd, are likely to increase the tendency to it. As yet, there are no indications of the disease among the European residents, and we believe but very few natives of India have fallen victims to it. We have not heard whether it has yet appeared at Martaban to disturb the contemplated festivities there.

The disease here must be different from that which prevailed in Burmah, inasmuch as it appears to yield to the remedies of the Native Doctors who are successful in numerous instances, while at Ava no medicine had the slightest effect, and those attacked died in a few hours.

Since the above was written we learn that the Cholera has extended to Martaban where the mortality has been comparatively equal to what has taken place here. We regret to learn that a seaman of H.M. Brig *Britomart* has been carried off by the disease, but this is the only instance that has yet occurred among the Europeans. It is satisfactory to know that the majority of attacks yield to the remedies applied by the Native Doctors when administered at the earliest stage of the disease.

October 26, 1842

The following are the daily reports of deaths by Cholera since our last, and we are glad to perceive an abatement of the disease:—On the 19th inst. 43 deaths; 20th 47; 21st 36; 22d 47; 23d 51; 24th 35; 25th 21; total 280; grand total since the 11th inst. 464.

November 2, 1842

The number of deaths from Cholera during the week amount to 138, and we are happy to find that the daily mortality is considerably on the decrease. The deaths which we have been enabled to report in this paper have taken place within the limits of the town only, and do not include those in the country, in some parts of which the mortality is said to have been comparatively greater than in the town. Several large villages, such as Kudo, Kotoun, and Zathabyeen, are said to have been deserted by their inhabitants who have retired into the interior. Many villages have shut themselves up and deny all access, the creeks leading from the rivers to some of them being barred up. In the Martaban districts, and especially at and around Bileng, the mortality is said to be very great. We have not learnt whether the epidemic has entirely left Rangoon or not, but as no allusion to the subject is made in the latest letters from that place, we presume that it must at least have very sensibly abated. The next accounts from the southward will enable us to judge of the course the disease may have taken, whether down the coast of the Peninsula or eastward towards Siam. If the latter, its effects among the dense population of the capital, Bankok, will be awful.

November 9, 1842

We are sorry to have to notice the continued prevalence of the Cholera among the native population. There was some appearance last week of an abatement of the disease, but since then the number of deaths daily have been nearly the same. The returns are as follow:—On the 2d 12; 3d 16; 4th 15; 5th 21; 6th 15; 7th 18; 8th 11; total during the week 108 deaths. The whole amount of the returns of deaths since the first appearance of the Cholera in town is 710. Most of these were Burmese, who, from some cause which no one probably can assuredly ascertain, seem to have been peculiarly susceptible of the disease.

November 16, 1842

The number of deaths by Cholera since our last, are reported as follows:—On the 9th 9,—10th 16,—11th 9,—12th 9,—13th 15,—14th 10,—15th 9,—total 77.

November 23, 1842

The following are the daily returns of deaths by Cholera, during the past week: viz., 16th 5,—17th 7,—18th 8,—19th 9,—20th 8,—21st 10,—22d 8,—total 55. We regret to learn that the Cholera has again made its appearance in Rangoon, where it is ravaging those parts of the town that suffered least on the former visitation. Its effects are said to be more speedily fatal than before and the number of deaths to be great. The idea of the King visiting that place this season seems to be nearly given up, and it is now supposed either that some high official will be sent down from the Capital to superintend the casting of the Bell, or that the Governor of Rangoon himself will be invested with this important function. Several vessels appear to have lately sailed from Rangoon for Calcutta, but on the whole the port is said to wear a deserted aspect. The number of native craft from the Coromandel Coast has greatly fallen off this year, owing, we believe, to some annoyances to which they were subject on the part of the Government, last season. Rangoon has indeed sadly fallen from her former high estate, which is to be attributed to the vicious measures of the present Central Government, for her advantages and resources are as great as they ever were, and require only a fostering hand to develop[e] *[sic]* themselves. It was confidently expected, when the present King gained the throne, that his enlightened mind would have been directed to the encouragement of trade, and that Rangoon would have materially benefitted by his measures; but these expectations have been sadly disappointed, and the royal visit of last year appears to have almost put the finishing hand to her prosperity by causing the forcible removal of the inhabitants to a site unfavorable to their avocations.

November 30, 1842

We are glad to say that the Cholera has nearly disappeared from the town, and that during the past week not more than one or two deaths have occurred daily.

December 7, 1842

We learn from Tavoy and Mergui that the Cholera began to prevail at the former place in the early part of last month, where from the 10th to the 28th

the number of deaths amounted to 71; and at the latter place 5 had died between the 25th and 30th.

December 21, 1842

Some weeks ago we dropped the insertion of the cholera reports, as the disease seemed almost to have disappeared. We understand, however, that generally since then, there have occurred 6 or 8 deaths weekly, and that the returns of the past seven days amount to 10 deaths.

December 28, 1842

We understand that the number of deaths by cholera reported during the week past, amount to six.

January 4, 1843

We hear by private letters from Tavoy and Mergui, that the cholera has been more fatal in its effects in those places, in proportion to the amount of population, than at Maulmain. Deaths are almost daily still occurring at Maulmain, and we hear it prevails greatly among the Karen villages in the interior.

January 11, 1843

The deaths by Cholera still continue to average nearly one a day. Last evening a Burmese priest, while eating rice, fell down and instantly expired.

January 18, 1843

We are sorry to say that the cholera appears [*sic*] to be on the increase again in this town. During the last week 30 deaths occurred.

We hear from Tavoy and Mergui, that the cholera has been uncommonly fatal in both those places. At Tavoy up to the 12th inst. the number of deaths had amounted to 700, and at Mergui, to the 8th inst. to 340, in a period embracing about two months. The above returns do not extend to the surrounding villages.

January 25, 1843

The Police returns of deaths by cholera, during the last week, we are sorry to say, amounted to 53.

February 1, 1843

It has been intimated to us that the prominent manner in which we have noticed the reports of deaths by Cholera, has a disagreeable effect on the minds of some of our readers. We have therefore directed this week's report to be inserted in a less conspicuous place, that those whose feelings are likely to be disturbed may avoid noticing it.

CHOLERA REPORTS

The deaths by cholera during the last week as reported at the Police were 64.

From Mergui we hear the cholera continues to prevail with fatal effects. The number of deaths from the 9th to the 21st inst. were 92. By our latest accounts from Tavoy we learn that the disease there had considerably abated.

February 8, 1843

We are glad to be able to state that the cholera at Tavoy and Mergui has very much subsided; after having prevailed to a degree of fatality seldom known. The effect of it has been, not only a great destruction of life, but to cause an abandonment of the harvest which was just beginning to be ripened on the appearance of the disease. The fields were forsaken while the paddy was being reaped, and the Authorities, we hear, employed the convicts to gather in what portion of the grain they were able, but still great quantities of it were destroyed. We hear that many fields, in this province, were also abandoned for a similar reason. We have not heard that the price of rice has yet been affected by these circumstances, and we should hope that it might not be, as it has been sufficiently high for some two years past.

CHOLERA REPORT

The deaths by cholera during the last week as reported at the Police were 22, the whole of whom, except one, were adults.

February 15, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

The Police reports of deaths by cholera during the past week, were 107, besides others, strangers from Tavoy and Rangoon, who are known to have died, but whose deaths have not been reported.

February 22, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

Number of deaths on Thursday last	7
Do. Friday	7
Do. Saturday	7
Do. Sunday	11
Do. Monday	11
Do. Tuesday	15
Do. Wednesday	9
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Total	67

March 1, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

Number of deaths on Thursday last	21
Do. Friday	20
Do. Saturday	11
Do. Sunday	20
Do. Monday	17
Do. Tuesday	7
Do. Wednesday	13
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Total	109

March 8, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

Number of deaths on Thursday last	5
Do. Friday	6
Do. Saturday	5
Do. Sunday	4
Do. Monday	2
Do. Tuesday	3
Do. Wednesday	1
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Total	26

March 15, 1843

There appears to be, we are glad to say, some abatement in the number of victims to cholera among the native population of the town—within the last week, only 19 deaths having been reported to the Police. Not so, however, we learn, on the opposite side of the river, where its ravages are truly frightful. It is a circumstance deserving particular attention, that this disease during its 5 months prevalence here, has been, with very few exceptions, confined to the native Burmese, among whom, within the precincts of Maulmain only, during the above period, not less, we presume, than fifteen hundred have been taken off by death. This remarkable discrimination observable in the progress of the disease throughout this region, would seem to indicate that the cause of the disease is not to be attributed to any peculiar state or change of the atmosphere.

CHOLERA REPORT

Number of deaths on Thursday last	7
Do. Friday	4
Do. Saturday	1
Do. Sunday	1
Do. Monday	3
Do. Tuesday	2
Do. Wednesday	1
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Total	19

March 22, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

Number of deaths on Thursday last	3
Do. Friday	1
Do. Saturday	0
Do. Sunday	0
Do. Monday	2
Do. Tuesday	2
Do. Wednesday	0
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Total	8

April 5, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

For the week ending Wednesday morning the 29th—ult. 11 deaths.
For the week ending this morning, the 5th, 4 deaths.

April 19, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

The reports of deaths by cholera during the last week were on Thursday 2, Friday 1, Saturday 1, Sunday 3, Monday 4, Tuesday 5, Wednesday 5, Total 21.

April 26, 1843

CHOLERA REPORT

The reports of deaths by cholera during the last week were, on Thursday 5, Friday 4, Saturday 3, Sunday 1, Monday 4, Tuesday 1, Wednesday 5, Total 23.

May 24, 1843

We are sorry to observe that several fatal instances of Cholera have occurred among the privates of H.M. 84th Regiment, within a few days past—the consequence, probably, of too free an indulgence in the fruits of the season, particularly pine-apples which are now cheap and abundant.

May 31, 1843

The progress of Cholera among the men of H.M. 84th Regt. has, we hear, been nearly or quite arrested. The almost immediate change from extreme heat and dryness to a cloudy sky and abundance of rain may in part have removed the cause of the disease.

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CHOLERA REPORT

The report of deaths by Cholera among the native population during the week ending May 24th.—Thursday 2, Friday 1, Saturday 1, Sunday 1, Monday 0, Tuesday 3, Wednesday 2, total 10.

The report of deaths by Cholera among the native population during the last week were on Thursday 8, Friday 2, Saturday 1, Sunday 1, Monday 1, Tuesday 1, Wednesday 1, total 15.

[no further mention]

Notes

¹On the First Anglo-Burmese War in general and the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo in particular, see, for example, Hall (1981, 625–41); Tarling (1992).

²The port city of Maulmain (also known as Moulmein and today known as Mawlamyine or Mawlamyaing) had a population of almost 30,000 by the early 1840s. The total population of the sparsely settled Tenasserim Provinces as a whole—including four British infantry regiments and a small number of Western civilians—was only about 130,000 at that time. See the *Maulmain Chronicle*, June 16, 1838; July 31, 1839; June 30, 1841.

³Cholera almost certainly originated in Asia and was long endemic in parts of the Indian Subcontinent. In recent decades, a number of scholars have argued, however, that Western-inspired war and trade in South Asia led to a series of cholera epidemics in the region and, indeed, sparked the four great pandemics that struck the West in the nineteenth century. See Arnold (1993, 159–99); Morris (1976, 21). On Western misperceptions in the 1840s regarding the etiology of cholera, see, for example, Johnson (2006). On the broader epidemiological experience in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, see, for example, Owen (1987); Rimmer and Allen (1990). On the European morbidity and mortality experience in nineteenth-century South and Southeast Asia (including Tenasserim), see Bamber (1993); Curtin (1989); Taylor (1993). Also see Committee of the Statistical Society (1840, 1841); Sykes (1847); [Tulloch] (1842). On the broad contours of disease morbidity and mortality in colonial Burma, see Coclanis and Bassino (2008); Richell (2006). On the British mortality experience in Tenasserim specifically, see Coclanis (1999). For basic statistical data on nineteenth-century Burma, see especially Saito and Kiong (1999).

⁴Such inversion is, of course, similar in many ways to the concept of “oppositionality” employed by a number of post-colonial writers. For good introductions to post-colonial writing, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1995, 2002); During (1999, 169–230).

⁵On these developments, see, for example, Adas (1989); Barrow (2003); Cullen (1975); Curtin (1989, esp. 39–61); Desrosières (1998); Edney (1997); Headrick (2000); Michie and Thomas (2003); Porter (1986); Richards (1993); Winichakul (1994).

⁶From the Arabic word meaning “sweat,” arrack is a strong, fiery liquor distilled from the fermented sap of coconut palms, molasses, rice, or other materials.

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