

The King Who Could Not Die

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Abstract

On June 22 1935, the supreme ruler of highland Burma's largest and most powerful indigenous principality died. Yet until January 1938, the *Sambwa* of Kengtung remained in state, his body ceremoniously exposed to view in the Great Hall of Kengtung Palace. For over two years, the *Sambwa's* mortal remains could not be put to rest. It was an unusual occurrence, and grieved his family and subjects, not least because the splendid non-burial represented a "financial embarrassment," "intrigue," an "unsettled condition of affairs" that endangered the spiritual and moral health of the Shan State.

This paper has two intertwined objectives. First, it seeks to understand why the ruler's funeral was so delayed and second, by identifying the forestalling party to his royal burial, this paper offers to expose a hidden world of colonial jurisprudence. The strange death of the *Sambwa*, I argue, was an unintended consequence of Britain's quasi-sovereign rule in South and Southeast Asia, or more specifically, the legal category of suzerainty. This paper traces the commercial origins of this category binding the British Crown and her Asiatic colonies. It utilizes primary sources to develop a comparative analysis of Britain's 18th and 19th century political treaties and trade agreements with indigenous rulers in India and Burma that came to define this constitutional relationship by the early 20th century. My analysis highlights the haphazard process by which the category of suzerainty evolved and came to encode multiple and competing meanings, such as a feudal principle of superiority, a traditional and "oriental" mode of domination, as well as a power-sharing arrangement appropriate for core-periphery states. In addition to explaining how an ambiguous definition of suzerainty came to prevent the *Sambwa* from his proper interment in 1935 Kengtung, the paper's findings engage with scholarship on British imperialism and customary law, the comparative politics of opium trade control in colonial Asia, and post-colonial legacies of ethnic federalism.