

A Note on the International Utilisation of the “Rohingya” Designation

Derek Tonkin

First published on 24 April 2020, revised on 19 December 2021

Prior to the second mass flight of Arakan Muslims to Bangladesh in 1991-92, the designation “Rohingya” had no international currency. There are traces of the term in diplomatic and UN archives up to 1990, but the designation was never used formally to describe the Arakan Muslim community. There are of course references to militant organisations using the name “Rohingya”, but there is no evidence that “Rohingya” was used internationally as an official designation for the scattered communities of Muslims in Arakan.

In late 1991 however, **armed incursions by the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front** which preceded the second mass exodus of Arakan Muslims to Bangladesh drew attention to the “Rohingya” designation and in the international exchanges and negotiations which ensued, the term “Rohingya” soon came into widespread international use as a designation for Muslim communities in Arakan, apart from the Kaman minority. It was felt necessary to find a simple designation in place of anything like “Arakan-Muslims-some-of-whom-identify-themselves-as-Rohingya”.

During the first mass exodus in 1978, the term favoured by the international community was either “Chittagonian” (**US diplomatic missions**) or “Arakan Muslim” (**UK diplomatic missions**). “Rohingya” was generally found only in press reports on the Bangladeshi side of the frontier, though the term was not in formal use by the Bangladeshi authorities themselves.

The designation “Rohingya” has now been in international use for almost 30 years. It may be seen as a nascent, emerging ethnicity born out of the trials and tribulations of Muslim communities in Arakan. “Rohingya” may well mean no more than “Arakaner” in Bengali, much as one would speak of “New Zealanders” and “Londoners”, not so much as an ethnicity as a geographical locator. Its origins have been much discussed and **the many and at times bewildering variations of the designation** have been noted by scholars.

It was first recorded as “Rooinga” **in 1799 by Dr Francis Buchanan** surgeon and botanist in the employment of the East India Company. Buchanan was writing in the journal ‘Asiatic Researches’. He makes the point that “Rooinga” was not an indigenous language of Burma, but was derived from Hindi (Hindustani), that those who spoke the language called themselves “Rooinga, or natives of *Arakan*”, and together with Hindus in Arakan were known by “the real natives of Arakan” as “*Kulaw Yakhain*, or stranger *Arakan*”. It might appear from the context that Buchanan and his colleagues met one or more “Rooinga” at the Burmese royal capital of Amarapura near Mandalay, whither they had been transported by the victorious Burmese after the capture of Arakan in 1785. Buchanan does not say how many “Rooinga” he met, but he does provide a basic vocabulary of their language which appears to be an archaic *patois* derived from Bengali, recognisable as of ultimate Bengali origin but distinct from the Chittagonian Bengali introduced by immigrants during British rule.

On Page 223 of Buchanan, we read:

The proper natives of *Arakan*, call themselves *Yakain*, which name is also commonly given to them by the *Burmas*. By the people of *Pegu* they are named *Takain*. By the *Bengal Hindus*, at least by such of them as have been settled in *Arakan*, the country is called *Rossawn*, from whence, I suppose, Mr. RENNELL has been induced to make a country named *Roshawn* occupy part of his map, not conceiving that it would be *Arakan*, or the kingdom of the *Mugs*, as we often call it. Whence this name of *Mug*, given by *Europeans* to the natives of *Arakan*, has been derived, I know not; but, as far as I could learn, it is totally unknown to the natives and their neighbours, except such of them as by their intercourse with us have learned its use. The *Mahommedans* settled at *Arakan*, call the country *Rovingaw*, the *Persians* call it *Rekan*.

Buchanan does not clarify the relationship of *Rovinga* to *Rooinga*, though we may assume that both words have the same root word *Rohang* for Arakan in Bengali. Buchanan informs us that there are Muslims settled in Arakan who speak *Rooinga*. On page 233 he states:

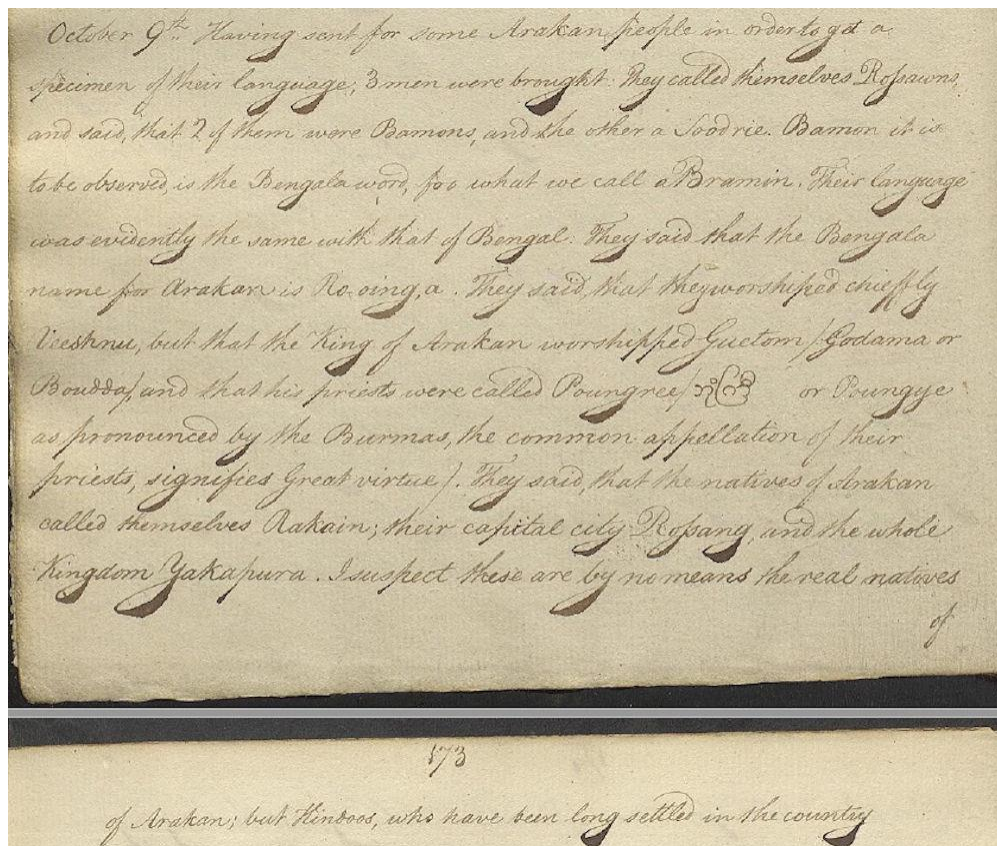
I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the *Burma* empire, but evidently derived from the language of the *Hindu* nation.

The first is that spoken by the *Mohammedans*, who have been long settled in *Arakan*, and who call themselves *Rooinga*, or natives of *Arakan*.

The second dialect is that spoken by the *Hindus* of *Arakan*. I procured it from a *Bráhmén* and his attendants, who had been brought to *Amarapura* by the king's eldest son, on his return from the conquest of *Arakan*. They called themselves *Rossawn*, and, for what reason I do not know, wanted to persuade me that theirs was the common language of *Arakan*. Both these tribes, by the real natives of *Arakan*, are called *Kulaw Yakain*, or stranger *Arakan*.

The last dialect of the *Hindustanee* which I shall mention is, that of a people called by the *Burmas* *Aykobat*, many of whom are slaves at *Amarapura*. By one of them

My research since this article was first published has lead me to doubt that Buchanan derived his knowledge about Rooinga” from Arakan Muslims. His source may have been Arakan Hindu scholars, for we reads on Pages 172 and 173 of extracts (from his missing 1795 diary) recorded in the British Library Manuscript No. Mss Eur-C-13:



which transcribed reads:

“October 9th. Having sent for some Arakan people in order to get a specimen of their language, 3 men were brought. They called themselves Rossawns and said that 2 of them were Bamon and the other a Soodrie. Bamon it is to be observed is the Bengala word for what we call a Bramin. Their language was evidently the same with that of Bengal. They said that the Bengala name for Arakan is Ro-oinga. They said that they worshiped chiefly Veeshnu, but that the King of Arakan worshipped Guetom/Godama or Budda and that his priests were called Poungee ဘုကြံ Poungee as pronounced by the Burmas, the common appellation of their priests signifies great virtue. They said that the natives of Arakan called themselves Rakain, their capital city Rossang and their whole Kingdom Yakapura. I suspect that these are by no means the real natives of Arakan; but Hindoos long settled in the country.”

Although numerous writers were subsequently to refer to Buchanan’s “Rooinga”, there is no secondary source for this designation until Burmese independence in 1948. However, on the reasonable assumption that the descendants of Arakan’s Muslim settlers prior to 1795 continued to call themselves “Rooinga” in their own *patois* throughout the period of British rule, the term may be assumed to have survived by way of oral tradition. This is paralleled by

the continuing use of the local description "Kulaw Yakain". Thus we read on Pages 213-4 of Part I of the 1921 Census:

159. Arakan-Mahomedans.—The Arakan-Mahomedans are practically confined to the Akyab district and are properly the descendants of Arakanese women who have married Chittagonian Mahomedans. It is said that the descendants of a Chittagonian who has permanently settled in Akyab district always refuse to be called Chittagonians and desire to be called Arakan-Mahomedans; but as permanent settlement seems to imply marriage to an Arakanese woman this is quite in accordance with the description given. Although so closely connected with Chittagonians racially the Arakan-Mahomedans do not associate with them at all; they consequently marry almost solely among themselves and have become recognised locally as a distinct race. The Arakanese Buddhists in Akyab asked the Deputy Commissioner there not to let the Arakan-Mahomedans be included under *Arakanese* in the census. The instruction issued

214

CHAPTER XI.

to enumerators with reference to Arakan-Mahomedans was that this race-name (in Burmese *Yakaing-kala*) should be recorded for those Mahomedans who were domiciled in Burma and had adopted a certain mode of dress which is neither Arakanese nor Indian and who call themselves and are generally called by others *Yakaing-kala*.

The number of Arakan-Mahomedans tabulated in 1921 was nearly 24,000. The numbers tabulated at previous census as Mahomedan Arakanese have been as in Marginal Table 8. Such differences of

There can surely be little doubt that the "Yakaing-kala" of the 1921 Census are the same as the "Kulaw-Yakain" of Buchanan in 1799. These Arakan-Mahomedans of the 1921 Census, designated "Arakan Muslims" in the 1931 Census, were classified as "Indo-Burmans" along with the Kaman, Myedu and Zerbadis domiciled in Arakan, while Chittagonian and other migrants from the Indian sub-continent during British rule were classified as "Indians".

In the immediate post-war years from 1945, and especially after Burma gained independence in 1948, the minority of Arakan's quasi-indigenous settlers sought to distinguish themselves from the majority of immigrants from the Chittagong region of Bengal, who mostly arrived during the last Quarter of the 19th Century and the first Quarter of the 20th Century. This minority let it be known that they called themselves "Rwangya" and the designation, **whenever used in British diplomatic correspondence**, in the late 1940s/early 1950s, distinguished between this "Indo-Burman" minority, numbering 56,963 at the 1931 Census, and the majority of "Indian" immigrants from the Chittagong region during British rule, numbering 201,822 at the same Census. From this it will be noted that by 1931 the descendants of the "old" or pre-1785 settlers represented only about 20% of all Muslims domiciled in Arakan. I am more than willing to recognise that "Rwangya" may reflect the continuance by oral tradition of the Buchanan's "Roinga" from 1799.

During the fifteen years after independence in 1948 Muslim scholars and political writers sought to establish terminology for the historical kaleidoscope of Muslim communities in

Arakan. Particularly prominent was **Tahir Ba Tha, a Muslim banker**, who in a series of essays, mostly **published in a monthly magazine "The Guardian" between 1959 and 1963**, examined the historical origins of these communities, attributing various names to these communities and finally subsuming them into "Rohingya". The Israeli diplomat and scholar Moshe Yegar who studied Muslim communities throughout Burma during his diplomatic posting there in the early 1970s refers to some of Tahir Ba Tha's articles in books **written in 1972** and 2002 and himself uses the terms "Rohinga", "Rohingya" and "Roewengya" used by U Ba Tha.

However, Moshe Yegar uses the terms in a completely different sense to Tahir Ba Tha. He makes it clear **in his 2002 publication** that many of the Muslims recorded in the 1931 Census as domiciled in Maungdaw and Buthidaung "were not properly speaking Arakan Rohingya Muslims but Chittagongs who arrived with the annual migration of cheap labour brought to Burma by landowners and merchants". Tahir Ba Tha, on the other hand, like other Rohingya ideologues, makes no reference at all to migrants from the Chittagong region under British rule who, according to British statistics and though mostly born in Burma, represented almost 80% of all Muslims in Arakan.

We are now at the heart of the controversy separating Muslim from Buddhist residents in Rakhine State. Muslim religious and political leaders generally deny that there was any migration of significance during British rule. The tone was set in **an Address to visiting Prime Minister U Nu on 25 October 1948** by the influential, quasi-political organisation known as the Jamiat ul-Ulema of North Arakan (the Council of Scholars of North Arakan who included elected politicians like Sultan Ahmed and Abdul Gaffar). The Council denied, astonishingly, that there had ever been any substantive migration from the Chittagong region into Arakan at any time:

We feel that we should appraise your Excellency of the Historical background of our people in this part of the Union so that there may not be any doubt as to our rights and status. We are dejected to mention that in this country we have been wrongly taken as a part of the race generally known as Chittagonians and as foreigners. We humbly submit that we are not. We have a history of our own district from that of Chittagonians. We have culture of our own. Historically we are a race by ourselves our religion of Islam was propagated amongst our ancestors by the Arabs sin e. 788 A. D., in this land of ours.

This perspective has become the unshakeable, default mantra of Rohingya ideologues. It is now likely that the majority of Rohingyas hold this perception of their indigeneity to be historically true, despite the consistent statistical evidence from British sources of migration into Arakan over many decades during their rule. We should in the circumstances not be surprised at the current polarisation between the Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya Muslim communities, the former claiming that the Rohingya are illegal migrants from Bengal, and the latter insisting on their historical indigeneity.

The detailed report on the Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar has unfortunately given further credence and support to this denialism. In Footnote 2 on Page 9 we read: "The Mission is conscious of the sensitivity concerning the term 'Rohingya' in Myanmar, where the group is generally referred to as 'Bengali'. The Mission uses the term in line with the concerned

group's right to self-identify". There are no reasonable grounds to challenge this position, even though the concept of "self-identification" in the case of the "Rohingya" reflects their traditional willingness to accept uncritically the guidance of their clerical and political leaders about their ethnicity and historical origins.

The Mission however takes no position on the extent to which Muslim communities in Rakhine State have been established as a result of migration from the Chittagong region during British rule. The report does however dwell at length on the extent to which "illegal migration" into Rakhine State is a concern of the Buddhist community, though without examining whether these concerns have any serious justification. The Report unfortunately indulges in anachronistic description of a supposed Rohingya presence in Rakhine State at chronological periods when the term "Rohingya" was unknown.

- a) We are told in paragraph 473 that: "Both Prime Minister U Nu, and Sao Shwe Thaik, the country's first President, are reported to have referred to the Rohingya as an indigenous group of Myanmar...". Any such reports which may or may not exist have no basis in historical fact. There is no record of Sao Shwe Thaik(e) ever using the term and only one confirmed occasion in 1954 when U Nu used the term "Ruhangya" in a religious broadcast;
- b) We are told in paragraph 475 that: "The 1974 Constitution did not alter the definition of 'Rohingya' significantly. All Rohingya who were citizens during the 1948-1962 period were still to be considered citizens." There is no reference to the Rohingya in the 1974 Constitution and there is no definition in any Burmese law of "Rohingya" prior to 1974 (or indeed later). The term "Rohingya" is to be found in no act of primary or secondary legislation from independence in 1948 to the present day.
- c) We are told in Footnote 2959 on Page 336 that the communal violence of 1942 "occurred during World War II when the Rohingya supported the British and the Rakhine supported the Japanese". It is true that most Chittagonians supported the British, but some Yakhain-kala (the old settlers) and some more affluent Chittagonians did not, while some Rakhine, notably those in the administration, remained loyal to the British.

It is unfortunate that the Mission Report seeks to rewrite British military history by replacing Britain's Chittagonian allies and with a phantom ideological force of "Rohingya". The children and grandchildren of these Chittagonians may well wish to be known nowadays as "Rohingya", but that does not mean that their fathers and grandfathers were known as, or wished to be known as "Rohingya". The Mission have no justification for such anachronistic liberties.

The reality in Arakan 1942-45 is to be found in British military and diplomatic archives, notably in the unofficial history of the V Force of Chittagonian Scouts written in 1971 by Brigadier CE Lucas Phillips, with a Foreword by Earl Mountbatten of Burma. In this history we read on Page 9:

WHAT HAPPENED IN BURMA

9

red and charged their spittle, which they expectorated frequently, with the colour of an advanced tuberculosis. They loved bright colours and ornaments, as manifested in the men's calf-length *lungyis* and in the women's red drapes, ear-rings, bangles and the flowers in their black, glossy, high-piled hair, their *panache* accentuated by their love of cigars.

The Muslims had their origin in the District of Chittagong, in the Bengal Province of British India, and all Muslims, whether natives of Arakan for generations or recent immigrants, were known as Chittagonians, or in the British forces, as 'CFs'. They were poor, thrifty, hard-working, peaceful, superstitious, stoical in adversity and nearly all were completely loyal to the British, who protected them from Mugh oppression, and they frequently risked life, liberty and all that they possessed in the Allied cause. They were to become the most trusted and fearless of Denis Holmes's scouts. Masters of intrigue and deception, the Chittagonians made extremely good Intelligence agents behind the enemy lines but, when it came to a clash of interests among themselves, they quarrelled violently and were awful liars.

A bewildering babel of languages was spoken by these people. The Arakanese spoke a dialect of Burmese, but the Chittagonians stuck to the Bengali of their former homeland, but, if educated, spoke Urdu as well. The official language of British Burma was pure Burmese, so that a man might speak three or even four languages. Confusingly, place names often had more than one form; but in these pages they will have the style and spelling used in the British Cabinet Office official histories.

To readers of English many of these names have the most forbidding appearances but the British soldier, studying the seemingly crazy maps, with their dense maze of contour lines, their serpentine chaungs and their crackjaw names, found his own ways of overcoming this difficulty and we shall very often follow his example in order to make the flow of our narrative the smoother. Thus, to quote the most celebrated instance, Ngakyedauk, which gave its name to one of the most spectacular of battles, appropriately became 'Okydoke'. In like manner, the little, mud-girt island of Nahkaungdo, which in a special sense was Denis Holmes's discovery, obviously became 'No-Can-Do'.

In conclusion, it can be seen that, as a matter of practical necessity created by circumstances, the international community decided at the outbreak of the second mass exodus in 1991-92 that it would be sensible to use the term “Rohingya” as short-hand for the kaleidoscope of Muslim communities in Rakhine State. This decision does not however represent any recognition of the “Rohingya” by the international community as an ethnicity in Myanmar. The result though has been to establish “Rohingya” as an international designation. Given the circumstances, this would seem to be both understandable and acceptable.

The difficulty however remains about how to refer to Muslim communities in Arakan prior to 1991-92. It is in my view not reasonable simply to delete “Arakan Muslim” wherever it appears in historical contexts and replace it with “Rohingya”, which is what the UN Fact-Finding Mission seemed only too willing to do, back at least to the Second World War and by implication even further. More historically defensible would be the utilisation of **the matrix of 144 ethnicities used at the 1973 Census** which included six Burmese Muslim ethnicities, including “Arakan-Chittagonian”, later removed from **the official list of 135 ethnicities** first published on 26 September 1990. The 1973 list of 144 ethnicities also designated a range of non-Burmese ethnicities for use in the enumeration of foreigners resident in Burma at the time of the Census, including “Chittagonian”. The designation “Arakan-Chittagonian” was used in the same sense as the British designation “Arakan Muslim” to identify quasi-indigenous migrants into Arakan prior to the Burmese invasion of 1795.

It is regrettable that there is as yet no internationally accepted, let alone agreed, understanding on the utilisation of the designation “Rohingya”. This situation is likely to remain so long as there are such divergent historical narratives on the matter.