

ROEWENGYAS IN ARAKAN

by

Ba Tha

I wrote about Rakhaing Kaman Muslims, the descendants of Shah Shujah's followers in a previous article entitled "Shah Shujah in Arakan" which was published in this magazine vol: VI, No. 9 for the month of September 1959. Now I take great pleasure in writing about the Muslims who stepped into the soil of Arakan and settled in the country before Shah Shujah took refuge with the Arakanese king Sandathudamma (1652-1684) in 1660.

History says that the early Muslims had entered Arakan firstly through its coastal parts and secondly through its mountain passes. They were all military races of Arabia and India. They came to Arakan as traders, missionaries, warriors and refugees. They were welcomed and well treated by the Arakanese kings because of their honesty, loyalty, bravery and the good services rendered by them.

While the Arabs were masters of both Western and Eastern Waters they had found Arakan a suitable land for many purposes. Arakan, as history says it, became a developed and economical country establishing active commercial relations with Arab traders. Many historical edifices known as Badermakans are still found in Arakan.

From the 8th to the 16th century Muslim influence was very strong and they controlled the maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and Indonesia, including Arakan. Ibn Khurdad Zabeih (844-848), one of the Arab geographers, mentions Lower Burma under the name of Rahmanyadesa. The Arab missionaries and historians, Sulaiman (851 A.D.), Ibn Faquih (902 A.D.) named Arakan as Rahma while Ibn Batuta called it as Arcan which was corrupted from the Arabic original word "Al-recon", meaning discipline. Under the British Rule people wrote it as Arakan.

After the death of Hazrat Ali, the fourth Caliph of Arabia, there was a scramble for power between his son Imam Hussain and Yazid, son of Hazrat Mubiah. The scramble was won by Yazid, poisoning Imam Hason, elder brother of Imam Hussain and executing him (Imam Hussain) in the battle field of Karbala in 680 A.D., the news of which reached the ears of Mohammed Hanif son of Hazrat Ali by other marriage. Hanif declared war against Yazid. But he was defeated and then he fled with his followers towards eastern countries.

At last Hanif came to Arakan and took refuge in Waithali, the capital of the country. Later Hanif with his followers fought

Demands and counter-Demands claiming statehood for Arakan have been under way for some time now. The main contending communities have been the Arakanese proper and the Roewengyas, whose interests have clashed on certain points.

In this well-consulted and fully authenticated article, U Ba Tha gives the history of the Roewengyas, the first Muslims in Arakan—or in Burma for that matter—who have been sons of the soil in Arakan for over a thousand years.

a furious battle in Maungdaw Township in North Arakan against Koyapuri, the beautiful Queen of the cannibals living in the dense forests, who laid depredation on the Arakanese kingdom. The troublesome Queen and her cannibals had crushed and devoured battalions of soldiers of the Arakanese kings. But at length the Queen was the victim of Hanif. Converting her and her subjects into Islam, he sought her hand in marriage. They passed the remaining part of their lives on Hanifa and Koyapuri Tankees in Mayu Ranges between Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships.

In accordance with the British Burma Gazetteer Vol: II and Burma Gazetteer Akyab District

Vol: (A)—about 788 A.D. Maha Taing Chandra ascended the throne of Waithali, founded a new city on the site of the old Ramawaddi and died after a reign of twenty-two years. During his reign several merchant ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the crews, said to have been Muslims called Arabs or Moors, were sent to Arakan proper, that is, Waithali, and settled in villages.

The king of Arakan favoured them in every respect. They were expert in trading. They could go easily from one place to another by small local boats. Arakan is a fertile and agricultural country. Therefore they did not return to their mother land, Arabia, but made homes in villages. They intermarried and intermixed with the indigenous races who changed their religion and became Muslims. They adopted the nationality of their wives and transferred their properties to them (wives). They had discarded their seafaring lives and turned to agriculture. They built mosques and started missionary work. Islam became powerful in Arakan since then. In Burma no other Muslim settlement can be found earlier than those of the Arabs. The Arakanese Muslims of Arab descent are called as Roewenhnyas (ရိုဝှော်ဏှယ်) which literally means favoured or pitied.

Nara Meik Hla, son of Razathu, ascended the throne of Laungkyet in 1404 after the death of his paternal uncle, Thingathu. Saw Pu Nyo, sister of the Dalet Myosa or Governor, Ananda Thein, was a very beautiful lady who had a husband. By force Nara Meik Hla made her husband to divorce her, and married her. Ananda Thein, therefore, rose up against him and called in the aid of Min Swe (Min Khaung), the king of Ava to capture Arakan. In the same year Min Khaung despatched a force consisting of 30,000 men in number under the command of his son Min-ye-kyaw-swa who

drove Nara Meik Hla and made him flee to Bengal to take shelter with the king Ahmad Shah of Gour in 1410 (B.E. 722). In his exile Arakan became a battle field but at last it was occupied by Talaings.

During his exile in Bengal, Nara Meik Hla fought furiously in the invasion of Bengal by Sultan Ibrahim of Jaunpur, and it was won. So Ahmad Shah loved him very much and gave him the promise to help in getting back his forefather's throne of Arakan. In 1426 Ahmad Shah was succeeded by his son Nazir Shah who made Nara Meik Hla promise to undertake six conditions such as:—

1. to give back the (previously captured) 12 towns of Bengal to Nazir Shah;
2. to use Muslim titles in addition to their own names;
3. to use medallions bearing the Kalima, the Muslim confession of faith, in Persian script;
4. to strike coins of Arakan in Bengal in Persian script;
5. to submit tribute to the king of Bengal; and
6. to adopt Persian as court language.

All these conditions were agreed upon by Nara Meik Hla.

On this agreement Nazir Shah sent a Muslim force of Pathan race, twenty thousand in number, under the commander in chief Wali Khan with the exiled king Nara Meik Hla in 1429. They crushed the occupying Talaing force and invaded Arakan. They made Nara Meik Hla to be the king of Arakan, but for some reasons Wali Khan had thrown him into prison. Anyhow he escaped from restraint and ran up to the king, Nazir Shah, who took pity on his miserable plight. The Sultan (King) despatched with him another force stronger than the former one under the command of General Samad Khan with whose help Nara Meik Hla was reinstated on the rightful throne of Laung-kyet; Wali Khan was called back to Bengal. As the second force was loyal to him he placed some

of them on the border side for offensive and defensive purposes, some of them in the capital and some were put on the coastal parts. In 1433 he founded Myohaung as the capital of the country, and the Muslim force built historical buildings such as mosques of which Sandikhan Mosque of Kawalaung near Myohaung still exists.

D. G. E. Hall writes, "In 1430, however, with the assistance of Bengal, the exiled king Nara Meik Hla, returned and was reinstated as the vassal of the Mohammedan king of Gour. He founded Myohaung as his capital, and his Mohammedan followers built a mosque there. From this time onwards the Arakanese kings, although Buddhists, used Mohammedan titles in addition to their own names. They even issued medallions bearing the Kalima, the Mohammedan confession of faith... Mohammedanism spread to Arakan... Myohaung had its Sandikhan Mosque...."

From the reign of Nara Meik Hla Muslims were appointed as ministers of the country and commanders of the army and navy. According to the statement of Syed Shah Alawal the

famous Muslim poet in Arakan, Magan the Prime Minister of Sandathudamma was a Muslim. M. K. Rahman writes that in the 17th century Syed Mussa, Mujallis and Sulaiman were the ministers in the Royal Court of Arakan; and Ashraf Khan was the General of Sandathudamma.

Muslim influence became stronger; Islam became more powerful than before and it became a living force in Arakan. Arakanese women adopted *pardah* system; and medallions and coins were issued bearing Kalima in Persian script. Arakanese kings apparently used Muslim titles in addition to their own names. Many Indian Muslim terms were currently used in the Royal Court of Arakan such as Raulin; Maugh; Boines; Bhuyas which mean Phoneygi; Arakanese; Princes; and Land Lords respectively; and the court ceremonial also was Moghul style.

U Myo Min writes, "The Arakanese kings not only had Indian titles, in imitation of the Moghul Emperors, but also a great deal of the court ceremonial was Moghul style. Many terms apparently current at the court were also Indian in form."

Some Arakanese kings who adopted Muslim titles

Original names	Period	Muslim titles
1. Nara Meik Hla	1404-1433	Samoon
2. Nara Nu (Min Khari)	1433-1459	Ali Khan
3. Ba Saw Phyu	1459-1482	Kalima Shah
4. Min Bin (Min Pa Gyi)	1531-1553	Zabek Shah (Sultan)
5. Min Palaung	1571-1593	Sikandar Shah
6. Min Yaza Gyi	1593-1612	Salim Shah I
7. Min Kha Maung	1612-1622	Hussain Shah
8. Thirithudamma	1622-1637	Salim Shah II

When Khan Jahan the general of the Moghul Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) had been well established in Western and Central Bengal by beheading Daud the last king of the independent kingdom of Bengal on the 10th July 1576, many Pathans fled to Arakan and took refuge in the country. Historian Jadunath Sarkar writes that many dwellers in Arakan were Moghuls and Pathans who showed themselves inclined towards Shah Shujah.

The Arakanese kings had occupied the twelve towns of

Bengal for many years and also remained under the Muslim kings of Gour for over 100 years. The province of Chittagong was administered by the Arakanese for 207 years from 1459 to 1666. In this period, doubtless, the people of the two countries migrated from one country to the other, especially the Muslim migrated to Arakan, as they were tied up in friendship with the Arakanese for many purposes.

In 1666 when Umaid Khan, the General of Shaista Khan who was

the Viceroy of Bengal had captured Chittagong and occupied Ramu within 36 hours, the Arakanese were running for their lives from north to south of Arakan because they were afraid of the Muslims as two thousand of them were sold into slavery and their escaped troops were attacked by the Bengali Muslims. At that time, no doubt, many Muslims entered Arakan and made homes in villages in North Arakan. It is said that North Arakan was depopulated by the Arakano-Moghul war of 1666.

The Pathans and the then immigrants from Bengal intermarried with the Roewenhnyas, the Arabs descendants. By such intermarriages the Roewengyas (ရဝေင်္ဂယား) came into being. Year by year the Arab descendants so intermarried and intermixed with the Roewengyas that they were indistinguishable from the latter and gradually lost their identity. The word Roewengya is a mere corruption of Arakanese original word "Rwa-haung-ga-kyar", Tiger from Old Village. This word Roewengya literally means brave, because the Pathans who were brave had driven out the occupying Talaing Forces from Arakan whom the Arakanese could not crush.

They are inhabiting Akyab District; but about 95% in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, and 50% in Rathedaung Townships of the population are Roewengyas. They are also found in other parts of Arakan. The Muslim population of Akyab District, who in 1872 numbered 58,255, had by the year 1901 risen to 154,887 which at the census of 1911 had increased to 178,647 while the Arakanese were only 209,432. At the census of 1921 the Muslims in the district were 208,961 while the total population was 576,430 including Animists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, others and 315,140 Buddhists. It shows that the average increase of the Muslim was over 30,000 in each decade.

These Muslims are the Muslims of Soonee Sect and they take pride in their Arab and Pathan descent. They are very strict in their religious performances, and in every village there is at least

one mosque. Though the Arakanese and these Muslims have lived for centuries together, their cultures have remained distinct. There has never been frequent inter-dining or inter-marriage between the two communities. Arakanese and Muslim villages have also remained separate. Even in dress they are distinctive. The Arakanese wear head-scarfs (gaung-baungs) while the Muslims wear toopees (caps) at present. Some of these Muslims cut their hair to a certain length and allow it to fall back on the nape of their necks. Although the Muslim women dress in Arakanese women habit, they wear shawls, drapes and 'gaung-pasoes' which are of more ample form than in use amongst Arakanese women, and they also wear belts.

The Roewengyas have their own dialect, literature and culture which have developed on individual lines mainly influenced by Islamic traditions. Their literature was written in Arabic and Persian scripts, which is still found in Arakan. Their dialect is an admixture of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali and Arakanese. This admixture in their dialect came to be adopted as they are a border race, and this generally happens with other border races of the Union of Burma.

During the subsequent centuries their literature has been continually enriched by the Muslim writers and poets. Muslim poets were encouraged and supported by the Arakanese kings during the Myauk-U Dynasty. The greatest personalities among the poets of this time were the court poets Daulat Qazi and Syed Shah Alawal of the Royal Court of Arakan. Daulat Qazi wrote the famous *Lore-chand rani*, and *Sati Moina*, which last was not finished by him. His lyrical poems were to the twelve months, called *Bara-Mashya*. One of his famous poems translated into English is;—

"In the coolness of the place she is not calm;

Affliction of love is in her heart and tears dwell in the eyes.

She gives no ear to sagacious talk or wise counsel.

Now conversing and now mumbling to herself,

She has the melancholy of the blooming youth;

The poison of the snake, Cupid, traverses her being:

No OJHA has power to assuage the poison,

The only doctor is the consort, and satiety the only drug."

Syed Shah Alawal, regarded as one of the greatest Roewengya Muslim poets, was the author of several works. For the encouragement of the education of these Roewengya Muslims he wrote many books in Arabic and Persian scripts as he was requested by Magan, Prime Minister of Sandathudamma. He completed *Sati Moina* which had not been completed by Daulat Qazi and wrote other books of which *Padavati* was the greatest work; and *Saiful Mulk Badi-ul-Jamal* has ensured a permanent place for him in literature. His work was remarkable for its freshness and rich in beauty. Alawal was impassioned with music and had a natural ardour for songs. His fame spread throughout the length and breadth of Arakan for composing a poetry book entitled "Chandravati". When Shah Shujah's revolt had come to an end Alawal was thrown into prison on suspicion that he encouraged Shujah to rebel. Though later he was set free, he had to undergo a miserable life. Alawal in his old age also wrote several books of poetry. His last days in this mortal world were full of sorrow and poverty. Yet he presented literary compositions to these Muslims of Arakan.

During the British Rule Urdu was introduced which removed the ancestral literature of these Muslims. Urdu was used by them as a written language till the attainment of freedom of Burma. Before the British conquest their distinguished marks of nationality were turbans and long hair which were removed by English and Indian civilizations during the British Rule. As the birds are known by their feathers so also the nationality of a race or sect

can be judged by their dress, language and culture. It is time now, therefore, for them to reform the dress and literature of their ancestors.

In architecture the Saracenic Style had influenced the Muslims even in their earliest days of settlement in Arakan. The Sandikhan Mosque at Kawalaung near Myohaung, one of the ancient architectures in Arakan, has successfully withstood the ravages of time. The mosque with its solid stone brick-work, monumental repose and simplicity of design is regarded as one of the finest architectural specimens of the earliest Muslim civilisation in this part of the world.

Many Arakanese of Akyab District are shouting at the top of their voice that these Muslims are Chittagonians or Kalas as they are similar to the East Pakistanis in appearance; but they are distinct in habit, culture, dress, name, and dialect. If this logic is applied we may expect to hear from the West Pakistanis that the Chittagonians are Roewengya Muslims because they are similar to them.

Anthony Irwin writes, "Of course I met all the types and castes of locals that we had working for us. As the area then occupied by us was almost entirely Mussulman country, it was from the followers of Mohammed that we drew most of our Scouts and Agents. The Arakan before the war had been occupied over its entire length by Mussulmans and Maughs.... They are generally known as Bengalis or Chittagonians, quite incorrectly, and to look at they are quite unlike any other product of India or Burma that I have seen. They resemble the Arab in name, in dress and in habit. The women, and more particularly the young girls, have a distinctive Arab touch about them. They wear bright red shawls and drapes, and hide their faces from the Unbeliever..., and have long, straight black hair. As a race they have been here for over two hundred years, coming at first in twos and threes in the days when the Northern boundaries of the Arakanese Empire lay along the Southern edge of Portuguese influence. ..."

Historically they are an indigenous race by themselves, as old as other races in the Union of Burma, and their religion of Islam was propagated since 7th century A.D. in this part of the world by their Arab ancestors. They are a hardy, diligent, trustworthy, courageous, brave and fair people. Their bravery was proved in the second world war.

Anthony Irwin again writes, "Added to the fact that the Mussulmans are the more trustworthy and in my opinion the more courageous, is the point that at the moment the Jap (Japanese) has had to fight in an area the Northern Section of which is entirely Moslem.... Since I've been with the Force I have taken part in patrol scraps in which these untrained, unarmed and unenlisted Scouts have stuck by till the end, whilst others, trained, armed, enlisted and proud, have run...."

In the Second Great World War they sacrificed their lives and property, and fought with blood and sweat against their enemies for the freedom of Burma. The Japanese occupied Southern Arakan within a few days. But as they pushed North, so they met up against stiffer and more organised resistance that not only held their progress but also forced them to retreat. The Japanese made advances again and again to occupy Northern Arakan, but their attempt was fruitless. It shows that they were resisting the Japanese from the very beginning. Certainly their heroic records would go down in the history of Burma. They are law abiding, peace loving, loyal and an interesting race or community of people.

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