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Muslims in Arakan (Burma)*

A Brief Study of the Rohingyas, a Muslim Racial Group of Arab Descent in Arakan

The Rohingya Poet, Alawal

By BA THA (BUTHIDAUNG)

"At a time when other indigenous races such as Tibeto-Burmans, Tai-Chinese and others were infiltrating into the fertile valleys of Burma, Arab traders who commanded both Eastern and Western waters in those days had also found Arakan a suitable land, and the local chiefs, who were very few in number, honoured these traders and warriors by giving them high positions and allowing them to inter-marry into high families, and by such inter-marriages and ardent missionary work Islam became so powerful that it became a living force not only in Arakan but also in other parts of Burma. . . . Many old religious edifices and buildings which are regarded as the legacy of influences of the Islam of those days are still found in Arakan" (M. A. Ghaffar).¹

Introduction of Islam by the seafaring Arabs into Burma

History says that the early Muslims had entered Arakan firstly through its coastal parts and secondly through its mountain passes. They were the 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.

Arakan saw the light of Islam very early in Islamic history through an intimate contact with the Arab warriors, sailors, merchants and missionaries who used to call at the old ports of Arakan. The Arabs were a trade-loving nation and for the purpose of commerce, trade and missionary work they travelled from one country to another. In the 8th century C.E. Burma was a ready and good market for the indigenous industries and products. As there was barter system in force and no currency bar, the Arabs found a very good harbour along the coastlines of Arakan for the purpose of trade. Arakan, as history tells us, became a developed and economical country establishing active commercial relations with Arab traders. The Arabs being traders were expert in sea-piloting and commanded both the Western and the Eastern waters. The Arabs, who were masters of the Eastern seas from the 8th to the 16th century, not only had heard of Arakan and the Delta Region of Burma, but also visited them.² During this period their influence was very strong and they controlled the maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and China, including Arakan. At that time Burma was known to them as Arakan and Lower Burma.³ The Arab geographers, missionaries and historians Ibn Khurdadbeh (844-848 C.E.),

Sulayman (851 C.E.) and Ibn Faqih (902 C.E.), named Arakan and Lower Burma as Rahma.⁴ Their 9th century writings mention its products such as cotton, yak tails, velvet, woods, aloes, rhinoceros and precious metals — gold and silver.⁵

During the reign of Maha Sandra, who ascended the throne of Waithali in 788 C.E., several merchant ships were wrecked on Ramree Island. The crews were Arabs. They were sent to Arakan Proper and settled in villages.⁶

The king, Maha Sandra 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 motherland, Arabia, but made their homes in the villages. They intermarried and intermixed with the indigenous races of Arakan, 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.

Some Arab and Persian missionaries

Muhammad Hanif, one of the warriors and missionaries of Arabia who came to Arakan in about 680 C.E., defeated Koyapuri, the beautiful queen of the cannibals living in the dense forests of North Arakan. Converting her and her subjects to Islam, he sought her hand in marriage.⁷ Amir Hamza converted King Gaulongyi, whose territory was known as Kalapanzin Valley in Buthidaung township. He also conquered Arakan,⁸ but the Hindus regained their kingdom because their immigrants from Bengal were greater in number.

The Persians followed the footsteps of the Arabs. They also brought with them the religion of Islam, and by inter-marriages with those Arab settlers and through wilful conversion Islam became a living force in Arakan.

* This article is based on the book *The Loyal Rohingyas* by Ba Tha but under the different pen name of M. A. Tahir Ba Tha.

1 M. A. Ghaffar, *My Activities in Parliament and Outside*, Part II, pp. 27 and 28.

2 G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 10.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

6 H. R. Spearman, *British Burma Gazetteer*, Vol. II, p. 7; and R. B. Smart, *Burma Gazetteer*, Aykab District, Vol. A., p. 19.

7 M. K. Rahman, *Burma Muslims*, p. 25.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The culture of Islam has many facets and some special features unknown to the people of Arakan. In Arakan these Arab and Persian missionaries came across a civilization which was completely opposed to the outlook of Islam in many respects. Before the 10th century C.E. Arakan was an Indian land, the inhabitants of which were Hindus similar to those of Bengal.⁹ These Hindus had developed highly the thoughtful and reflective arts. But doubtless the caste system as in India had taken root in them, under which life had little to offer to the lower classes. The power of the Brahmans had become cruel and unjust. Although they upheld the better ideals in religion their rules of caste became more and more strict and severe. The religion of the new school became the exclusive control of the Brahmans. They widened the gap between the lower and the higher classes. The knowledge to be acquired and the profession to be adopted in human life was determined by the caste system. The society of the inferior classes was under the injustice of the higher classes, who shut all doors of learning against the lower classes. They also barred the way which led the lower classes to a higher life.

All these distinctions are unknown to Islam. It gave the liberty, equality and opportunity for social, economic and development to the people who were suffering from the caste system, and it came as a revelation from on high. Its missionaries like Muhammad Hanif, Amir Hamza, Badar Shah, Babajee Shah, Hydar 'Ali Shah, Nurullah Shah, Afzal Shah, Gulmul Shah, Sikandar Shah, Kalasee Meah Shah, Husayn Shah, etc., in Arakan were men of zeal who brought the gospel of the unity of God to the neglected people, and it also brought the noblest idea of the brotherhood of human beings. It also offered a free entrance into a new social organization to the people who had willingly changed their religion and become Muslims. The prince and the peasant began to pray together in the same place of worship. They could sit in the same ranks. There was no difference of positions in the House of God. There is no other institution in the world which has the same influence in levelling out all distinctions of colour, race, caste, wealth, poverty and rank, and making people realize that all humanity is one.

The Mongolian invasion of 957 C.E. brings into being the Arakanese race

In Burma no other Muslim settlement can be found earlier than those of Arabs and Persians. These Arabs and Persians settled in Arakan even before Mongolians or Tibeto-Burmans entered and made their kingdom in Arakan in the 10th century C.E. The Tibeto-Burman or Mongolian invasion in 957 C.E. changed the country from Indian to Arakanese. It destroyed the Waithali kingdom.¹⁰ They placed Amiathu as the first king of the Tibeto-Burmans on the throne, killing Sula Sandra, the last king of the Sandra dynasty of Waithali. They also brought the Pala dynasty of Bengal to an end. In Bengal the Hindus regained their kingdom in a few years. But in Arakan the Tibeto-Burmans increased their number by recruiting more of them from Burma Proper, and the influx of Mongolian immigrants was decisive.¹¹ They became more powerful and stronger than before. So the Hindus of Waithali failed to regain their ancestral kingdom in Arakan.

The Mongolians looked East and they cut Arakan away from India. They intermarried and intermixed with the Hindus, who were assimilated by them in the first or second generation, creating the Arakanese race. The history of Arakan in connection with the Arakanese began then and

lasted eight centuries until 1784, when the country was annexed by Bodawpaya (1782-1819).

After the 10th century C.E. the religion of Islam spread at full speed all over Arakan, and it had dotted the coast from Assam to Malaya with curious mosques known as Badarmokans.¹² There is still a Badarmokan revered by all communities in Akyab. The descendants of these early Arab settlers and converts formed a group orthodox to the extreme, retaining Islamic names, faith and culture. This group is known as the Rohingyas, who later spread all over Arakan, mainly the Mayu and Akyab districts,¹³ these being more fertile than other parts of Arakan. The word *Rohingya* is derived from the Arabic original word *Rahmah*, which means kindness.

The invasion of Arakan by the Pathans from India

In 1429 C.E. Arakan was invaded by Wali Khan, the commander-in-chief of 20,000 Pathans of Nazir Shah of Bengal (at that time Bengal was under the Sultans of Gour), and he made Narameikhla, the exiled king of Arakan who had taken shelter in Bengal and remained there for more than twenty-six years king of Arakan. But later joining with a discontented Arakanese chief, Anandathein, Wali Khan kept Narameikhla in restraint¹⁴ and ruled over the country for one year and made it an Islamic kingdom. He sent some of the Pathan soldiers to the frontiers such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Akyab, Ramree and Sandoway for offensive and defensive purposes, and adopted Persian as the court language and also appointed *qazis* (administrators) for Islamic administration. Since then the *qazi* system has been in force in Arakan. Some of the famous *qazis* of Arakan were Daulat Qazi, Nala Qazi, Gua Qazi, Shuia' Qazi, 'Abd al-Karim Qazi, Muhammad Husayn Qazi, 'Usman Qazi, 'Abd al-Jabbar Qazi, the Maulavi 'Abd al-Ghafoor Qazi, Muhammad Yusoof Qazi, the Maulavi Raushan 'Ali Qazi, Noor Muhammad Qazi¹⁵ and Zaynul Ahmad Qazi, who was the grandfather of the writer of this article.

However, Narameikhla escaped from the restraint and ran away to Bengal, and with the assistance of another force under the command of Sandikhan sent by Nazir Shah, Narameikhla was reinstated in 1430 C.E. on the rightful throne of Arakan.¹⁶ He placed this Pathan force in the neighbourhood of the capital and on the frontiers of Arakan and on the various strategical points on the banks of the Lemyo, Mingan, Kaladan, Mayu, Kalapanzin and Naaf rivers for offensive and defensive measures.¹⁷ With this force Nazir Shah also sent two Chief Ministers by the name of Sattar Khan and Razu Magni.¹⁸ From then Arakan became the vassal of Sultans of Gour for one hundred years¹⁹ and the Arakanese had to learn the history of Islam and Muslim rulers of India and westwards beyond who were Mongolian Muslims, while the rulers of Further India, including Arakan and Burma, were Mongolian Buddhists. It took the Arakanese a hundred years, from 1430 to 1530 C.E., to learn the doctrine

9 D. G. E. Hall, *Burma*, p. 57.

10 The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of the *Burma Research Society Journal*, p. 488.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 488.

12 Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 137.

13 *Burma Muslims*, pp. 27 and 28.

14 Arthur P. Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 78.

15 *Burma Muslims*, p. 102.

16 Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 78.

17 *Burma Muslims*, pp. 104 and 105.

18 Sayadaw U Nyana, *Danyawaddi Razawinthat*, p. 172.

19 *Burma*, pp. 31, 32, 57 and 58.

from the Mongolian Muslims. During those hundred years Arakanese kings paid tribute to the Sultans of Gour and learnt history and politics, and they became proficient in their Muslim studies during the reign of Minbin (1531-1553 C.E.).²⁰ Many high-ranking positions such as those of ministers,²¹ generals,²² doctors,²³ etc., were held by the Rohingyas and Kamans. (Kaman is another Muslim racial group in Arakan. They are the descendants of the followers of Shah Shuja', who took refuge in Arakan with the Arakanese king Sandathudamma (1652-1684 C.E.) in 1660 C.E.) This help of the Sultan Nazir Shah to Naramaiklha, however, paved the way for the Muslims to strengthen their footholds and ties on Arakan. The Arabs and the Persians settled down there between the 7th and the 16th centuries, and the Pathans and the Moghuls between the 15th and the 17th centuries,²⁴ and other Muslims from India during the reign of the Myauk-U dynasty.

The Arakanese adopt some Muslim ways of life

The Pathan force built historical edifices such as mosques, of which Sandikhan Mosque²⁵ of Kawalaung, near Myohaung, still exists. They started missionary work like the Arabs and the Persians, though they were soldiers. Islam became stronger than before and many Arakanese became Muslims²⁶ and the children of mixed marriages between the Europeans and the Arakanese women were brought up as Muslims when they were left in Arakan by their European fathers, who smuggled their mothers out of Arakan in large Martaban jars, as the foreigners residing in Arakan and even the visitors to the country were prohibited to take with them their wives and the children of such mixed marriages when they left the country, though they were allowed to make temporary alliances with the Arakanese women.²⁷ Arakanese kings kept Muslim titles in addition to their own names — Min Khari (1433-1459 C.E.) was known as 'Ali Khan, Ba Saw Pyu (1459-1482 C.E.) as Kalima Shah, Minbin (1531-1553 C.E.) as Zabeek Shah, Min Phalaung (1571-1593 C.E. as Sikandar Shah, etc., and they even issued medallions and coins bearing the *Kalimah*, the Muslim formula of faith, in Persian script.²⁸ The Myauk-U coinage which played an important part in the history of Arakan was designed on the model of the Muslim coinage, which had opposite characteristics. It is of an inscriptional design. It does not carry a portrait figure, which the Waithali coins or Hindu coins of Arakan do.²⁹ Arakanese women adopted the Purdah system.³⁰ The court ceremonials were also Moghul style and many terms apparently current at the Royal Court of Arakan were Persian in form,³¹ while Persian literature was in use in Arakan. Inscriptions were inscribed in Arabic and Persian languages, which are still found in Arakan. Some of them are displayed in the Myohaung National Museum. The relics and ruins of the architects of the Rohingyas and the Kamans are still found with inscriptions in Arabic and Persian languages, which are a tangible evidence of the Muslim domination over Arakan in different periods of the history of the country. There are still many villages in Mayu and Akyab districts bearing an Arabic name side by side with those of Arakanese, and to quote a few instances in Arabic Nurullah village (Tetchaung Ywa), Arabshah village (Hlapaw Ywa), Hanifah Tanki (Maunghnama Ywa), Bandar village (Baundwet Ywa). Nine out of ten villages of Akyab town itself bear Muslim names, such as Barasah, Nazir Para, Kathit Para, Amla Para, Mauleik Para, etc., and several roads also carry Muslim names, such as Kadansi Road, Kadir Road, Mauleik Road, etc. Even the name of the present Akyab itself is a Persian name given by the Prince Shah Shuja' while he was proceeding from Bengal to Myauk-U (Myohaung) via Maungdaw

and Akyab, which is a corruption of the Persian words *Ek-aab*, one water or one island.³² In fact the very name Arakan is a corruption of the Arabic original word *al-Rukn*, meaning the foundation of Islam in Burma, given by Ibn Battutah.³³

During the latter part of the 17th and the early part of the 18th centuries the influence of the Pathan Cavalry Escort and Eunuch Swordsmen and the *Kamans* (Archers) was so much that they made and unmade ten kings at their will between 1684 and 1710 C.E. whose reigns averaged 2½ years each. In 1692 C.E. they burnt the palace and haunted the country for twenty-six years.³⁴ They carried swords, bows, arrows and flambeaus with them wherever and whenever they went. If any one of them drew his sword in anger in an Arakanese village the villagers ran away in fright.³⁵

The Rohingyas' distinctive habits and ways

The Rohingyas are of the Sunni school of thought, and take pride in their Arab descent. They are very strict in their religious performances, and in every village there is at least one mosque. Though the Arakanese and the Rohingyas have lived together for centuries, their cultures have remained distinct. The Arakanese and the Rohingya villages have also remained separate. Even in dress they are distinctive. The Arakanese wear head-scarfs (*gaung-baung*) while the Rohingyas wear *toopees* (caps) at present. The Rohingya Maulavis cut their hair to a certain length and allow it to fall back on the nape of their necks. Although the Rohingya women dress in Arakanese 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 Rohingya women keep separate clothes for the purpose of prayers. In matters of food the Arakanese are more fond of pork, while the Rohingyas prefer meat and beef if slaughtered in accordance with Islamic requirements. They abstain from pork and drink no intoxicants.

Before the British rule in Arakan and Burma the Rohingyas' distinguished marks of nationality were turbans and long hair, but during the British rule a mixture of English and Indian civilization and culture took place in the Rohingya society, and marks of nationality were removed by European and Indian teachers, who made them adopt European and Indian forms of dress. Therefore the Arakanese are shouting at the top of their voices that the Rohingyas still remain alien, particularly Indian, in dress, habit and culture. As the birds are known by their feathers so also the nationality of a race or sect can be judged by its dress, language and culture. It is time now, therefore, for them to reform the dress of their ancestors.

20 The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of *Burma Research Society Journal*, pp. 491-493.

21 *Burma Muslims*, pp. 47 and 48.

22 Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, pp. 129 and 215 : and U Myo Min, *Old Burma*, pp. 47 and 48.

23 *The Land of the Great Image*, pp. 203.

24 Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, Vol. II, p. 287.

25 Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 139 and 140.

26 U Kyi, *Essentials of Burmese History*, p. 130.

27 The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of *BRSJ*, p. 72.

28 Harvey, *History of Burma*, pp. 139 and 140.

29 The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of *BRSJ*, pp. 485-491.

30 Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 137.

31 *Old Burma*, pp. 73 and 79.

32 *The Burman Daily* for 22 March 1959.

33 M. K. Rahman, *Burma Muslims*. This is an article published in the Rangoon University Muslim Students' Association Annual Magazine 1952-53.

34 Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 148.

35 *Burma Muslims*, p. 134.

They were not accustomed to keep Arakanese or Burmese names. But in imitation of the Kamans (Kamans keep Arakanese or Burmese names) and Burmese Muslims, and as today they are learning in Anglo-Vernacular schools, they use Arakanese or Burmese names in addition to their own, on account of the non-Rohingya teachers, especially Arakanese, who cannot pronounce Rohingya names properly or correctly. In those schools where there are no Arakanese teachers they do not appear to keep Arakanese names. If they keep them it is an admixture of the Rohingya and the Arakanese, such as Ahmed Maung Maung, Saleh Tun Sein, etc., which is also not suitable. It is better for them to take pride in that the Arakanese kings once had used the Muslim titles while they were vassals of the Sultans of Gour. The Rohingyas are not the vassals of the Arakanese.

The Rohingyas of North Arakan dislike to intermarry and intermix with the people of other religions. If any one of them has intermarried into a non-Muslim family he or she is expelled for life from the Rohingya society, as a Muslim cannot marry a non-Muslim in accordance with their religion. So the parents take care of their young sons and daughters, and give them to suitable Rohingya girls and men in marriage by a go-between system when they are of a marriageable age. The brides and bridegrooms are not allowed to meet each other freely before marriage. They celebrate their marriage ceremony in as splendid a manner as possible. An elopement is unknown in their society. Parents are always careful to prevent their sons and daughters falling in love with whom they do not agree. If any elopement takes place in a family it is always looked down upon by other families.

Many Arakanese sometimes say that the Rohingyas are Chitagonians or Kalas as they are similar to the East Pakistanis in appearance; but they are distinct in habit, culture, dress, names and language and literature. If this logic is applied we may expect to hear from the West Pakistanis that the Chitagonians or East Pakistanis are Rohingyas because they are similar to them. In this connection Anthony Irwin writes: "They (Rohingyas) are generally known as Bengalis or Chitagonians, 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 two hundred years, coming at first in twos and threes. . . ." ³⁶

The literature, language and script of the Rohingyas

The ancestors of the Rohingyas use Arabic script, and have literature of their own. They have had time and leisure to develop their artistic and cultural talents. The present spoken language of the Rohingyas is an admixture of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali and Arakanese. The admixture in their dialect came to be adopted as they are a border race, and this generally happens with all other border races of the Union. Their language is quite different, as in the case of other indigenous races of the Union of Burma, and has continued to draw inspiration from Islam. Their literature and culture have developed on individual lines mainly influenced by Islamic traditions. During the subsequent centuries their literature was continuously enriched by their poets and writers. Their literary books written in Arabic script were saturated with Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali words and phrase-

ology, and could be easily understood by the people who knew Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali. These books are still found in Arakan. One of them is in my possession. During the Myauk-U dynasty one of the most important duties of the Muslim ministers in the Royal Court of Arakan was to choose the best Muslim names for the Arakanese kings when they ascended the throne, and encouraged the Rohingya poets and writers to write literary books for the improvement of education and culture of the Rohingyas.³⁷ Some of the famous Muslim ministers in the Royal Court of Arakan were Sulayman, Mujallis, Sayyid Musa and Ashraf Khan.³⁸ Magan, the Prime Minister of Sandathudamma (1652-1684 C.E.), was also a Muslim.³⁹ The people of Arakan spoke highly of him because of his cleverness and education, and he had no partiality, nor did he take part in the Shah Shuja's revolt nor supported him. Sayyid 'Alam Shah, 'Ali Bha'i of Bandari village, Ye Hla of Keem village and Bo Min of Bal dipara were the famous generals of Arakan during the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴⁰ The mosque built by the general 'Ali Bha'i still exists in the Bandar village of Myohaung.⁴¹

The Rohingya poet, Alawal

The Rohingya poets and writers were also encouraged 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 Sayyid Shah Alawal in the Royal Court of Arakan. Daulat Qazi was skilful in mixing one language with another. He was well versed in many languages, including Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. It was his scholarship and poetic genius that did much to raise the Rohingya language and literature and poetry in the estimation of the cultured classes. His lyrical poems, called "Baramashya", were invaluable treasures in the Royal Court of Arakan. Alawal's work was remarkable for its freshness and richness in beauty. He was a master of rhetoric and prosody, and a scholar of Bengali, Sindhi, Sanskrit, Hindi, Arabic and Persian. He had a passion for music and had a natural ardour for songs. He has painted the picture of this land in his several beautiful poems and books. Many changes that transferred the life of the Rohingyas took place in this land after the days of the great poet. He lit the torch of education for the Rohingyas. It is very deplorable that the great poet is not among them today, but it is a deep satisfaction to them that they are attempting to make his ideals, his image of the land of peace and prosperity, a reality. Indeed, he is a poet who holds aloft the highest values of life and conduct. The deep sincerity of his moral tone is apparent in his great works.

Magan, the then Muslim Prime Minister of Arakan, became an enthusiastic admirer of his lyrical poems and encouraged him to translate a Hindi poetry book, *Chandravati Keshya*, the poems of which were composed by Mir Muhammad, who was a spiritual poet. Alawal's fame spread throughout the length and breadth of Arakan by composing and translating this book. He also translated a Persian poetry book. But unfortunately the Shah Shuja's revolt broke out in the country of Arakan before the book was completed by him.

When the revolt came to an end Alawal was thrown into prison on suspicion that he encouraged Shuja' to revolt

36 Anthony Irwin, *Burmese Outpost*, pp. 22-24.

37 The Union Citizenship Act, 1948.

38 *Burma Muslims*, pp. 47 and 48.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 47 and 48.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 47 and 48.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 47 and 48.

against the Arakanese king, Sandathudamma, and also took part in it. Henceforth, though he was released from prison, he had to undergo a miserable life. He was charged with washing the images in the Buddhist temples in Myohaung by bringing water from the creek. But he never washed them because to wash an image of the Buddha and other gods is against the Islamic law and he himself was a *faqir* (saint). It was brought to the notice of King Sandathudamma. The king became very angry with him. The matter was explained by Magan to the king, who said that Alawal was a *faqir* and not an ordinary man, and to wash an image of the Buddha is against the religion of Islam. By giving 1,000 coins as a fine Alawal was released from this miserable plight. The money was given by Magan. Alawal repaid the money to Magan by writing books.⁴² Alawal in his old age also wrote several books of poetry. He was requested to do so by the Muslim ministers and the Rohingyas. His last days in this mortal world were full of sorrow and poverty.

Over 1,200 years ago Arakan was the gateway of Islam for Burma. Many saints and savants have lit the light of spiritualism for the people of this part of the world since then. Among them Sayyid Shah Alawal was a prominent figure. Today the Rohingyas need to understand, more than ever before, the message of Alawal, whose life story is a great inspiration to them. It is very important to translate the works of Alawal and other poets and authors into Burmese so that their life stories and messages can be carried to every citizen of Burma.

When English and Urdu were introduced the Rohingyas lost touch with their Arabic and Persian literary culture and had nothing but some poems of love and chivalry to turn to. It is noted that the poetical works of the earlier poets were written in their literary language with more Arabic, Persian and Bengali words. During the British rule Urdu was introduced in Burma at the recommendation of the Indian Muslim rulers and members in the Burma Legislative Council. Urdu has removed the ancestral literature of the Rohingyas, who had then been reduced to great poverty and distress and had lost their ancestral literary culture. Urdu was used by the Rohingyas as a written language till the British re-occupation of Burma in 1945.

The architecture of the Rohingyas

All the great architecture corresponds to the needs of the people. It is a study of religious and social customs of the Rohingyas and the natural conditions under which they lived. The Rohingyas prayed in large congregations. Their religious ceremony was simple and did not permit any symbolism and idolism. Their religion discarded priesthood. They believed in the burial of the dead. A custom grew up of building enduring monuments over their graves. Their social life was also congregational.

In Arakan the Islamic civilization developed in a land where vast and thick forests are unknown. The forms of all objects, therefore, looked well-defined and clear. The clarity and beauty of form played an important part in Rohingya architecture. Their religious performances and social customs demanded large gatherings. So the Rohingya architects had to cover large spans. They developed the arch and its adaptations, the vaulted roof and the dome. Islamic religious architectural buildings depended upon a lavish use of mortar, without which their system of construction would be impossible. The Rohingya mosques are open and spacious, and consist of large halls for congregations.

They introduced new features like minars and minarets, honeycombing and half-dome double portal. They sometimes painted the buildings and used stones for creating colour effects to bring out the more prominent architectural features. They introduced the beautiful calligraphic curves into architecture. Their architecture remained Islamic in spirit. In their architecture the Saracenic style had influenced them even in their earliest days of settlement in Arakan. The Sandikhan Mosque, built in 1433 C.E. by the Pathan general Sandikhan at Kawalaung, near Myonaung, one of the historical buildings in Arakan, has successfully withstood the ravages of time. The mosque, with its solid stone brickwork, monumental repose and simplicity of design, is regarded as one of the finest architectural specimens of the earliest Islamic civilization in Arakan.

The calligraphy or the art of beautiful handwriting of the Rohingyas was influenced by the *Naskh* and *Nasta'liq* characters which were used in Arabia and Persia respectively. The Rohingyas used the *Naskh* characters in copying the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, and other books in the Arabic language, and the *Nasta'liq* characters were used in writing their literary books. The beautiful calligraphic curves in glass frames in floral design can be seen in most houses of the Rohingyas.

Music and musicians

In music, too, the Rohingyas have built up their own traditions, and *batali*, the tune of the rural singers, has become very popular with the *élite*, and 'Alimuddin, of Rowangyadaung village, was a popular singer. He could sing a mournful song so sweetly that tears welled up in the eyes of the listeners.

Zari, the memorial song, is a very old and popular entertainment in the villages. It enacts the story of Karbala and other episodes from Islamic history. It is a sort of indigenous theatre, and music and dancing play an important part in it, although too much emphasis is not laid on costumes and settings. It is performed in a spacious courtyard of some well-to-do villagers under a canopy. It is generally performed at night, much to the delight of the simple rural folk, in the month of Muharram, in which the Imam Husayn, son of 'Ali, was killed on the field of Karbala in 680 C.E.

In early days *Qasidas* (Panegyrics) were very popular in Arakan. The Rohingyas sing *Qasidas* in praise of God and the Prophet Muhammad whenever there is a religious ceremony. Alawal, Daulat Qazi, Shuja' Qazi and other Rohingya poets recited *Qasidas* in praise of the Arakanese king who was presiding over the royal ceremony, and for this they were rewarded. The *Qasida* poems possessed real literary merit, though they are not famous in literature.

Rohingya music found influential supporters among Sufi saints; for example, Babaiee of Akyab and the Maulavi Meah Husayn Shah of Kynuthi village were great lovers of music. Sufi musicians are to be commended for the general encouragement they give to the Rohingya music. *Ma'rifati*, *Murshidi* and *Naqshbandi* songs are concerned with the type of Sufi music.

Baramashya is a musical item. It is very difficult to sing. Muhammad Inu Meah of Rowangyadaung village is the popular singer of Baramashya. He generally sings at midnight when the village is quiet and calm. At night in the calm-

⁴² *Burma Muslims*, pp. 72 and 73.

ness of the village he sings so sweetly that most of the villagers get up from their beds to listen.

Today Rohingya modern songs and music can be heard over the radio three times a week broadcast by the Burma Broadcasting Service (SBS), Rangoon. The popular singers are Syed Ahmed and Abu Shama and their parties of Maungdaw.

With the advent of Urdu literature during the British rule *Qawali* meetings were held in Arakan, and the greatest *Qawal* was Ja'far Ahmad of 'Ali Khang Para. A singer in Urdu *Qawali* like him has not been known in Arakan for the last hundred years. He was also a great composer of songs, and was himself a musician who set his songs to his own

tunes. The melody of the Urdu *Qawali* and songs have become very popular today.

In art and painting Rohingyas have sought inspiration from Islamic civilization and have developed their own traditions. The pictures of birds and animals, the interest in landscape, and all the calligraphic curves are Rohingya, which are all in miniature form and in floral designs which testify to the glory of the Islamic civilization in Arakan.

The descendants and the heirs of those once enriched Islamic civilization in Arakan are today in Mayu district, the predominated Rohingya area in Arakan. Therefore the cultural heritage of Northern Arakan cannot be limited to what flowered within its scope all that was noble and beautiful in Islamic civilization.

Muslims in Australia

Canberra

There is a small but active group of Muslims in Canberra, the national capital of Australia. They number about one hundred, and consist mainly of the members of the diplomatic missions of Muslim countries, students studying in Australia under the Colombo Plan, and a few permanent residents. The Canberra Mosque was built in 1960 from funds provided by the Government of Indonesia, Pakistan and the then Government of Malaya. The Imam of the Mosque is Mr. S. Mashur Din, a member of the Indonesian Embassy.

In Canberra, Muslim children attend primary and secondary Government schools with children of Christians, but are given regular Islamic teaching at the Mosque. Adult Muslims and Christians attend each others' social gatherings, and on occasions the Mosque committee, by invitation, sends speakers to address Christian groups on the Islamic faith. On the academic side, the growing interest in Islamic history and culture has been recognized with the introduction of special courses in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra. The Department of Indonesian Languages and Literature within the faculty has an introductory course in Arabic, and seminars on Islam and institutions for fourth-year students.

Adelaide

In Adelaide, South Australia, there is another Muslim community numbering about 200. The City also has a vigorous Islamic Society which places great emphasis on encouraging young Muslims to take keener interest in their religion. The Adelaide Mosque was completed in 1890. It was erected for the benefit of the Afghans who came to South Australia in the early days of the settlement to organize the frequent camel trains which, loaded with goods and merchandise, journeyed through the outback of South and Central Australia. The Imam of the Adelaide Mosque is Yugoslav-born Mr. Ahmad Skaka, who has led the Muslim community there for more than fourteen years.

It is in Adelaide that the official organ of the Australian Federation of Islamic Societies, *The Minaret*, is edited and published. The publication, a quarterly, features items of spiritual, cultural and educational value, as well as items of current world affairs.

Members of the Muslim community in Canberra outside the Mosque in Canberra after Friday prayers

