

The 'Rohingya' Identity - Further Thoughts

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I have received one or two expressions of disbelief about the conclusion I reached in my essay on 9 April 2014 ([The 'Rohingya' Identity – The British Experience in Arakan 1826-1948](#)) that the designation 'Rohingya' was totally unknown to the British administration of Burma.

I willingly acknowledge that it is for populations themselves to decide their own identity, and if particular Muslim communities in Northern Rakhine State in Myanmar today wish to identify themselves as 'Rohingya', it is not for outsiders to argue that they should not do so. How long, after all, does it take for a person to feel that he or she is a New Yorker, or a Londoner, or a New Zealander, or for that matter an Arakaner (Rohinger)? It is nonetheless important that the historical truth about Muslim communities in Arakan should not simply be swept under the carpet, especially in their hour of need.

I have conducted research on the censuses completed by the British in Burma in 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941 (although most of the detail relating to the 1941 Census was lost during the war). Most of these reports can be read online at the Digital Library of India and each report runs to several hundred pages. I can confirm that the designation 'Rohingya' does not appear anywhere in these reports.

The 1921 and 1931 British Censuses of Burma were the first to attempt, not all that successfully by their own admission, an analysis and record of ethnicity, based primarily on language rather than on anthropology. By 1931, the British had identified no fewer than 19 major Muslim communities in Burma, including five in Arakan, but 'Rohingya' was not among them. If the designation had existed, the British would have wanted to know. There was absolutely no reason to keep it secret from them or from anyone else.

Apart from these eight Census reports, from time to time regional 'gazetteers' were published in Burma. Taken together with the Census reports, these documents highlight the presence in Arakan of a number of indigenous Muslim communities, including the Kamans, Myedus and 'Arakaner Mohamedans' (see Note below), as well as more recent arrivals recorded as Chittagonians and Bengalis.

[The 1917 Akyab Gazetteer](#) compiled by Deputy Commissioner R B Smart has an especially revealing passage on pages 89 and 90 about Muslim residents in the Akyab District, which is the name given by the British to the town and district of Sittwe and which encompassed the northern part of Arakan. We read:

"The Mahomedans, who in 1872 numbered 58,255, had by the year 1911 risen to 178,647. Many are men who come down for the working season only from Chittagong and are included in the census returns, but are not, properly speaking, inhabitants of the country. In 1879 it was recorded that those who were *bona fide* residents, though recruited by

immigrants from Bengal, were, for the most part, descendants of slaves captured by the Arakanese and Burmese in their wars with their neighbours.

"The Arakan kings in former times had possessions all along the coast as far as Chittagong and Dacca, and many Mahomedans were sent to Arakan as slaves. Large numbers are said to have been brought in by [Min Raja-gyi](#) [King of Arakan 1593-1612] after his first expedition to Sundeep [[Sandiva](#)] and the local histories relate that in the ninth century several ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the Mussalman crews sent to Arakan and placed in villages there.

"They differ little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs; in writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors.

"Long residence in this enervating climate and the example set by the people among whom they have resided for generations have had the effect of rendering these people almost as indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese themselves. They have so got out of the habit of doing hard manual labour that they are now absolutely dependent on the Chittagonian coolies to help them over the most arduous of their agricultural operations, ploughing, reaping and earthwork.

"Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part, in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung [Mrauk U] townships. Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district. The later settlers, who have not been sapped of their vitality, not only do their own labour but it not uncommon to find them hurrying on their own operations to enable such as can be spared to proceed elsewhere to add to their earnings by working as agricultural labourers, boatmen or mill coolies."

Although the story about Ramree Island is probably little more than popular legend, the Gazetteer identifies the two townships of Kyauktaw and Myohaung/Mrohaung/Mrauk U as the principal localities where Arakaner Mahomedans had settled, indeed mostly resettled after seeking refuge in Bengal in British India following the Burman conquest of Arakan in 1785, but returning to Arakan soon after the British took control in 1826. These residents would indeed seem to be the 'original' Muslim residents of Arakan before the influx of large numbers of labourers from Chittagong and further afield in Bengal which started in earnest in the latter part of the 19th Century.

It is not all that clear to me yet, though others may know, what happened to these particular indigenous Muslims at the time of the Japanese invasion in late 1941. The Kamans and Myedus are thought not to have been persecuted by the Rakhine in the communal violence of 1942 and to have stayed in their well settled localities. There is however evidence that [many Arakaner Mohamedans perished during this violence in March and April 1942](#) in the wake of the British retreat into India. The two townships are listed in most accounts of the violence, which affected both Buddhist and Muslim communities, with the Buddhists seeking sanctuary in the south and the Muslims in the

north of Arakan. Those Muslim residents of the two townships able to escape would have fled to Maungdaw or into Bengal, but a few pockets seem to have survived to this day around Kyauktaw and Mrauk U.

After the convulsions of the Second World War and the struggle for independence in both India and Burma, the Muslim community of Northern Arakan, which consisted primarily (but not exclusively) of Bengali immigrants, would seem to have taken up the mantle of the Arakaner Mohamedans and sought to regularise their presence on a more permanent basis. Many of them had crossed quite legally into, and taken up residence in Burma half a century or more previously, but some were still only recent arrivals and may well have had Pakistani nationality. [Writing for 'The Scotsman' on 18 May 1949](#), their special correspondent Michael Davidson in Sittwe noted that: "The great majority of Arakan Moslems are said to be really Pakistanis from Chittagong, even if they have been settled here for a generation. Of the 130,000 Moslems here, 80,000 are still Pakistani citizens."

I do not know the source of Davidson's information, but I have no reason to doubt that he believed what he wrote. On the other hand, in his ['Burma Outpost'](#) published in 1945 Anthony Irwin, who fought with local Muslims in Northern Arakan against the Japanese in 1942 and 1943, expressed the view that: "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.....As a race they have been here for over two hundred years." [British administrators on the other hand with expertise of Burma](#) had no doubt that in 1942 the populations of Maungdaw and Buthidaung were overwhelmingly "Chittagonian", enigmatically abbreviated to "CFs".

From 1946 a separatist, jihadist uprising had gripped Arakan and in support of their political objectives, the 'Rohingya' myth was created. It gained some acceptance nonetheless with the Burmese military and political leaderships in Rangoon, concerned to bring about a peaceful ending of the jihadist revolt which lingered on until 1961, as well as to seek political alliances with the Muslim community for the ruling political party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, which in April 1958 split into 'clean' and 'stable' factions. The designation 'Rohingya' became established among the Bengali speaking community.

The fact remains though that it was a fiction when created in the late 1940s, even if internationally it is now widely accepted as fact, though not by the greater majority of the Burmese people, who understand the reality on the ground rather better than most.

For all these reasons, we need to be so careful when speaking of the right of self-identification. On the one hand, the retiring UN Special Rapporteur [Tomás Ojea Quintana](#) has said in the context of the recent Census that: "Self-identification should constitute a pillar of the collection of ethnically disaggregated data. It is related to respect for the rights of individuals to assert their own identity. To deny self-identification is therefore a violation of human rights." On the other hand, we might well ask whether self-identification which is based on a fiction and which may have been foisted on an impressionable community desperately seeking citizenship might not also be a violation of their human rights, even if they were willing accomplices. No wonder this fiction has set Buddhist against Muslim in Rakhine State.

I have [assembled a range of materials on the 'Rohingya' issue](#) which includes under the section "British Reminiscences and Official Reports" relevant extracts from the British census and gazetteers quoted above. In most cases the full reports are available online from the [Digital Library of India](#) .

The [UN Security Council was briefed on the situation in Myanmar on 17 April 2014](#) by UN Special Adviser Vijay Nambiar. The troubles in Rakhine State were high on the agenda. The US and the UK took the lead in expressing their serious concern over recent events. They were absolutely right to do so. Both countries, though, tend to shoot from the hip; they were so very prompt to condemn the [reported massacres at Du Chee Yar Tan](#) on 9 and 13 January 2014. Myanmar has responded by issuing a [110 page detailed rebuttal of the allegations](#) - and they have pointedly declined to issue a full English translation, only [a summary](#). I do not need to tell you why.

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Note: From the 1921 Census of Burma: "The Arakanese Buddhists in Aykab asked the Deputy Commissioner there not to let the Arakanese-Mohamedans be included under 'Arakanese' in the census. The instruction issued to enumerators with reference to Arakanese-Mohamedans was that this race-name (in Burmese Yakaing-kala) should be recorded for those Mohamedans 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" ['Rakhine foreigner', [to which Francis Buchanan first alluded](#) in 1799].