

Rohingya and national identities in Burma



The most controversial aspect of the census recently held in Burma has been the denial of the large Muslim population in Arakan to identify themselves as Rohingya, the term of their choice. The government ban means as many as one million people remain uncounted in Arakan. That is scarcely surprising, as the Burmese government, Rakhine ultra-nationalists and seemingly a majority of the Burmese population have denied for years the existence of the Rohingya identity. According to them, the Rohingya ethnicity is an invention devised by immigrants from Bangladesh to take over the land in Arakan.

Few people have made more effort to deny the claims of ethnicity by the Rohingya than Derek Tonkin, former British ambassador to Thailand and editor of the website Network Myanmar. Mr. Tonkin has reached [his conclusions](#) after digging deeply in colonial British archives, where he has not found a single use of the term *Rohingya*. His command of the British colonial records is nothing less than impressive, but by relying almost solely on these sources he only offers a partial picture, from which I think he draws incorrect conclusions.

The debate on whether the Rohingya ethnicity should be regarded as one of the “national races”

or not, assumes - implicitly or explicitly - as its framework of reference the definition to be found in the controversial Citizenship Law passed in 1982. According to this definition, only those ethnic groups which were already in Burma in 1823 qualify as “national races.”

Rather than attempting to defend Rohingya claims, I argue that the notion of “national races” itself, and thus the set of assumptions hitherto determining the terms of the debate, are fundamentally false and do not facilitate any understanding of the history and present social realities of Burma.

This notion has reduced the debate on Rohingya identity to a confrontation between three different historical narratives: what we might call “Rakhine history” and “Burmese History” on the one side (on this point both are basically indistinguishable, albeit there are important divergences in other aspects), as opposed to the “Rohingya history” on the other. As in many other nationalist histories all around the world, these narratives are loaded with myths and distortions. They are also mutually contradictory, making it impossible to find any common ground for all sides involved.

Competing historical narratives

Burmese and Rakhine nationalists often accuse the Rohingya of falsifying their history in order to advance their claims for ethnicity. It is true that Rohingya historians tend to minimize or ignore altogether the importance of the migration of laborers to Arakan from Bengal during colonial times; moreover, some have made claims that are historically incorrect: for instance, Rohingya historians often claim that some Muslim kings ruled Arakan in the 15th century.

Meanwhile, mirroring the distortions of “Rohingya history,” Rakhine historians tend to minimize, or to ignore altogether, the large numbers of Muslims living in Arakan before colonial times and to emphasize only the influx of Bengali laborers during colonial times. Now some Rakhine go so far as to claim that “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh” have arrived as recently as a few years ago and have continued arriving up to the first wave of sectarian violence in 2012, [a highly dubious assertion](#) for which there is no evidence.

On the Burmese side, we find assertions of a history of unity and continuity stretching back for hundreds of years and which was only broken by the traumatic colonial experience. Thus, in 2002, the military ruler, Senior General Than Shwe claimed that “thanks to the unity and farsightedness of our forefathers, our country has existed as a united and firm Union and not as separate small nations for over 2,000 years.”

This extraordinary kind of assertion only makes sense in the context of the state-building project to unify all the ethnic groups under the guardianship of the (Bamar-controlled) *Tatmadaw* (Burmese military). This has been the ultimate goal for the Burmese state since Ne Win staged his coup d'état in 1962. It is in this context that, at least during the last two decades, the generals have been increasingly trying to present themselves as the heirs of the Burmese kings and their mission as that of restoring some sort of “natural Burmese order” which the British interrupted.

There is no doubt that the British colonization of Burma dealt a highly traumatic blow to every dimension of social order in Burma, from which it has yet to recover. The British dismantled completely all the political institutions and cultural structures that had more or less glued together the society of central Burma and replaced them with others that the Burmese often did not understand or refused because they had been imposed by force by foreign invaders.

But pre-colonial Burma was by no means an era of uniform political order and stability. In fact, the centuries between the first Burmese kingdom which managed to unify this territory, the Pagan dynasty (1057-1287), and the colonial times was a period in which central authority was only gradually asserted, at every point confronting many difficulties and including long periods of anarchy when petty states competed for power.

In any case, before the first Anglo-Burmese war, the domains of the Burmese kingdom were never coterminous with those of the present Burmese state: in large areas, particularly in the hills to the North and East, the grip of the Burmese kings was at best extremely weak. And the Arakanese kingdom was only invaded in 1784, just forty years before it was taken by the British.

It is an anachronism to talk about borders, as we understand them now, in Southeast Asia before the arrival of the colonial powers. As the anthropologist Edmund R. Leach [put it](#) more than fifty years ago in his paper, "The Frontiers of 'Burma':" pre-colonial Burma was a "wide imprecisely defined frontier region lying between India and China" where "the indigenous political systems which existed prior to the phase of European political expansion were not separated from one another by frontiers in the modern sense and they were not sovereign Nation-States."

Therefore, it makes little historical sense to classify any ethnic group as a "national race" on the basis that it already inhabited *before* the colonial period a territory demarcated *after* the beginning of the period.

Colonial conceptions of ethnicity

What the Burmese, Rakhine and Rohingya historical narratives have in common is an essentialist and racist conception of ethnic identities as something primordial and fixed in time. Arguably, this is one of the most enduring and deleterious legacies of the British rule in Burma and lies at the heart of the now hegemonic and highly dangerous notion of "national races."

When the British arrived in Burma, they found a land with a bewildering and confusing (for the external observer) variety of human groups, and where ethnic affiliations were enormously fluid. To make sense of that complex human landscape, they imposed a rigid grid of ethnic classification in which they conflated the mother tongue of the speakers with the category of "tribe" or "race."

But, as the scholar Victor Lieberman [has shown in his paper](#), "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma," ethnicity had virtually no bearing at all as a marker of political loyalty to the different

kingdoms which ruled Central Burma during the 17th and 18th centuries. Ethnic distinctions were even more blurred in the “hill areas,” as Edmund R. Leach showed in his classic book *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. The distinction between Kachin and Shan categories was rather vague, and it was not uncommon for “Kachins” to turn into “Shan” or vice versa depending on the social systems in which they decided to live, a phenomenon which, according to Leach, “cannot readily be fitted into any ethnographic scheme which, on linguistic grounds, places Kachins and Shans into different ‘racial’ categories.”

But that is exactly what the British did. And the colonial officials held a set of views of ethnicity and race strongly influenced by the social Darwinist prejudices of the time, and they attributed to the different groups personal and innate characteristics: the Karen or Kachin were stereotyped as simple and honest people, included within the “martial races;” the Burmans were devious and childish, not to be trusted, and so on.

On the basis of these spurious classifications, they recruited people to their armies using ethnicity as criteria, and favored some groups over others. They also tended to employ Indians as civil servants, rather than Burmese, because they had more experience with the colonial bureaucratic system and thus were better trained. These policies reinforced, and in some cases generated, ethnic classifications which are still widely accepted in Burma, and animosities that survive to this day.

The anthropologist F. K. Lehman identified the problem more than fifty years ago in his study “Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems.” According to him, before the colonial period, “the Burmans had a reasonably correct tacit understanding of the nature of their relations with bordering peoples, tribal and non-tribal,” an understanding which was lost due “to the importation of very explicit European ideas about nations, societies and cultures.”

Lehman suggested that when people identify themselves as members of an ethnic group, they were merely “taking positions in culturally defined systems of intergroup relations,” and that those ethnic categories were “only very indirectly descriptive of the empirical characteristics of substantive groups of people.” Therefore, local or regional groups were “inherently likely to have recourse to more than one ethnic role system and more than one ‘identity’.”

As a consequence of the fluidity of these roles, Lehman asserted that “we cannot reconstruct any demonstrable discrete ancestral group for some ‘ethnic category’ –no matter whether we define such a possible ancestral group as a discrete dialect group, or as a group with relatively sharp discontinuities from its neighbors.” But this kind of “discrete ancestral groups” is precisely what the notion of “national races” assumes as certain.

Arakan: “The Palestine of the Farther East”

In 1891, the Swiss Pali scholar and archeologist Emil Forchhammer wrote [a small book about Arakan](#) in which he described it as the “Palestine of the Farther East,” because, as he put it,

Arakanese Buddhism was the inspiration of the Buddhism practiced in the rest of Burma. More than two hundred years later, the comparison has a different resonance: as in Palestine, Arakan is the land of a conflict with some religious undertones between two communities. As in Palestine, the conflict involves a clash of historical narratives. And, as in Palestine, one of the two communities has been stripped of its political rights.

Arakan is separated by a range of mountains from the rest of Burma, making it relatively isolated from the Irrawaddy delta and central Burma. For most of its history, Arakan's relations with the kingdom of Bengal in the west were just as rich and close as with the Burmese kingdoms in the north, if not more so, thus creating a culture distinct from that of Burma.

As in the rest of Southeast Asia, there were not clear borders between Arakan and Bengal in pre-modern times, the areas of influence of both kingdoms overlapped and were constantly fluctuating. The historian G. E. Harvey wrote in his classic *History of Burma* that, throughout the Middle Ages, "when Bengal was in the ascendant, some kings sent tribute to Bengal and when the Arakanese were in the ascendant they received tribute from the Ganges delta, 'The Twelve Towns of Bengal'." At that time, the Bengali court provided a political model for the Arakanese kingdom, and from the 15th to the 17th century, it was common for the kings to use Muslim/Bengali designations and to issue coins with the *kalima*, the Muslim profession of faith.

Meanwhile, as Harvey points out, though the geographical isolation of Arakan from Burma "rendered her immune to attack on the east, the resultant peace did not give her unity, because her territory is a long thin strip of coast intersected by hill torrents."

This fragmentation made the Arakanese kings more tolerant than the Burmese kings to the religious beliefs of the different communities under their rule. [In his doctoral dissertation](#), *Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)*, Professor Michael Charney wrote: "In Arakan the royal center was not simply indifferent to promoting one particular religious identity over another, but rather was one of the chief barriers restricting the emergence of a Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy in the Arakan littoral."

Arakanese kings did not try to establish a "Buddhism kingdom" or centralize the Sangha, as their Burmese counterparts did, but worked through local patron-client networks and tried to present themselves as the patrons of whatever religion was practiced at a local level, be it Buddhism, Islam or even Catholicism in some Portuguese communities in the coast. Charney argues that this prevented for centuries the creation of communal identities based on religious beliefs, Buddhist or Muslim; and that these did not emerge until the late 18th century, and even then only under external influences.

There were Muslims in Arakan as early as the Ninth century but it is likely that their presence was not very strong. It was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the Arakanese and

Portuguese communities settled in Southern Bengal (then under the authority of the Arakanese court) started to raid Bengal for slaves and transferring thousands of them to Arakan. The Arakanese kings settled most of these slaves in Northern Arakan, but took the well-educated in Mrauk-U to serve in the court as functionaries.

Before its conquest by the Burmese in 1784, there was already a substantial rural Muslim population in Arakan. “Perhaps up to three-quarters of Danra-waddy’s [northern Arakan, including Sittwe and Mrauk-U] population by the 1770s may have been Muslim,” asserts Charney. Meanwhile, “some Bengali Muslims in Mrauk-U participated in the development of an elite Muslim culture in the royal city, perhaps reflecting their privileged backgrounds in Banga [Southern Bengal].”

It is worth mentioning that the border along the Naf River between the British-controlled Bengal and Arakan did not have the same meaning for the British and the Burmese. If, as Leach pointed out, pre-colonial Burma was a “wide imprecisely defined frontier region lying between India and China,” Arakan was a “frontier region” between Burma and Bengal.

Whatever border there was between Arakan and Bengal, it disappeared completely after the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826), when Arakan passed to British hands. At that time, Charles Paton, the sub-Commissioner of Arakan, [estimated that](#), from a total population of 100,000 people, 60 percent were ‘Mughs’ (Rakhine), 30 percent were ‘Mussalman’ (Muslims) and 10 percent ‘Burmese’. It is clear that those were highly tentative figures, but at the same time it’s impossible to deny that there was a substantial Muslim population in Arakan before the arrival of the British.

It is also undeniable that there was migration of Muslims from Chittagong during colonial times, and that not all of the newcomers were seasonal laborers. This immigration was encouraged by the British, something that was resented by the Buddhist Rakhine population and contributed to reinforce the communal divisions between Muslims and Buddhists in the region. There is no need to repeat here the arguments demonstrating this, the [reader can review the article published by Mr. Tonkin](#) to find extensive evidence for that.

The point is that there was a migratory wave of Muslims from Bengal in colonial times that joined an already sizeable Muslim population made up of the descendants of the slaves taken by the Portuguese and the Arakanese during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Present-day Rohingya are the descendants of both waves of migration, which intermingled to such a degree that now it would be impossible to distinguish who descends from one or the other.

In any case, as Lehman pointed out, it would be impossible “to reconstruct any demonstrable discrete ancestral group” for the people who now have chosen to call themselves Rohingya, as it would be impossible for any other Burmese ethnic group. But that does not imply that the Rohingya ethnicity is not real *now*. In any case, the Rohingya identity was not “invented” recently out of the blue, as some claim; it had been “gestating,” so to speak, for at least three hundred years, and the

term itself was not new.

The “R-word”

The first known record of a very similar word to *Rohingya* used to refer to the Muslim inhabitants of Arakan is to be found in [an article about the languages](#) spoken in the “Burma empire” published by the Scottish physician Francis Buchanan in 1799. He wrote: “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 long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan.”

It has been argued that *Rooinga* (or *Rohingya*) derives from Rohang, the word used in Bengal to refer to Arakan, and thus was just another way to say Arakanese. [Michael Charney suggests tentatively](#) that “Rohingya may be a term that had been used by both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis living in Rakhaing [Arakan] since the sixteenth century, either as resident traders in the capital or as war captives resettled in the Kaladan River Valley.” But he is careful to point out that in the past “Rohingya and Rakhaing [Rakhine] were not mutually exclusive ethnonyms. Rakhaing's topography may have led to Rohingya and Rakhaing emerging as separate versions of the same term in different geographical contexts that came, in the eighteenth century to be associated closely with the predominant religious makeup of the local area concerned.”

The evidence available shows that the term *Rohingya* was not widely used to describe a distinct ethnic group until the twentieth century. I would argue that the explanation for this is as simple as that there was no reason for the *Rohingya* to distinguish themselves in such a manner until the rise in Burma of the Bamar and other ethno-nationalisms against British colonialism.

The beginnings of the Burmese nationalist movement were strongly Buddhist in character, and some of the first nationalist leaders were monks. Thus, Burmese nationalism acquired a religious hue from the beginning. On the other hand, the Burmese have always viewed Indians with suspicion, and particularly Muslims. At that time, the general public did not distinguish much between Burmese Muslims and Indian Muslims, so Burmese Muslims felt they needed to distance themselves from Indian Muslims throughout the country.

The tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan, which had been mounting during colonial times, came to a head in the Second World War. When the British retreated to India and the Japanese advanced in Arakan, the Rakhine Buddhists sided mostly with the Japanese and the Burmese Independence Army of Aung San, while the Muslims were armed by the British; but the conflict soon turned into a civil war between Muslims and Buddhists. When the war ended, the north was mainly Muslim, the south was mainly Buddhist, and the communal divisions reached a point of no return.

Anti-Rohingya discourses often recall the Mujahid insurgency that took place in Arakan during the

fifties. As the goal of some of the insurgents was the annexation of northern Arakan by East Pakistan, Rohingya are accused of disloyalty to the Burmese State. But there was scarcely any popular support for the rebellion, and many of its victims were Rohingya. In fact, some Rohingya leaders demanded U Nu to provide them with weapons in several occasions, a demand which was never met.

Meanwhile in Rangoon, Rakhine nationalists were pushing for a separate Arakan State, while Rohingya politicians, wary of their Rakhine neighbors after the Second World War sectarian violence, demanded a separate region in the north for them ruled directly by Rangoon. And during the Parliamentary period (1948-1962) and the first years of Ne Win's dictatorship, there were not only many Rohingya organizations, both in Arakan and Rangoon, but the government recognized Rohingya as a Burmese ethnic group, [as documents compiled by Dr. Zarni show](#).

It was the government of Ne Win and its military successors who denied Rohingya their rights and began to persecute them, from the mid-seventies until now. And it can be argued that, paradoxically, nothing has done more to reinforce the Rohingya identity than the attempts to suppress it.

Burma and its national identities

There is no historical precedent for an independent political entity for Burma as it exists now, and the different groups that make up the complex ethnic tapestry of Burma were never under the authority of a single government before the arrival of the British. Like many other post-Colonial countries, Burma emerged from British rule as a country deeply divided along ethnic and sectarian lines.

The Bamar was in some ways an underprivileged group during the colonial era but, after turning the tables in the Second World War, since independence it has become the privileged group. As a result of these competing nationalisms and the repeated attempts of the Bamar majority to impose its centralized vision of a Nation-State, the Burmese state has failed to generate a supra-national identity powerful enough to include and transcend the several ethno-nationalisms that awoke during colonial times.

The Rohingya identity is not more "artificial" or "invented" than any other, but the story of its ethnogenesis does not fit easily in the all too narrow concept of "national races" as is currently understood in Burma: ethnic groups which were already fully formed as we know them now in pre-colonial times. Others would also fail the test, because the test itself stems from a misunderstanding of ethnicity and group formation, but it is the political context that has determined that the Rohingya, and the Rohingya alone, should fail it. Their mere existence as a people is a serious challenge to the weak mainstream historical narrative imposed by the military regime.

This, and the Rohingya's cultural, religious and linguistic differences, has made them expedient

scapegoats in the context of a failed process of nation-building. Nothing glues together a divided community more than a common threat, real or imagined, and nothing has united the Rakhine and the Bamar more than identifying the Rohingya as their common enemy. The consequence is [a campaign of ethnic cleansing](#) that has been going on for decades. In this situation, it would be very naive to believe that they are suffering such persecution because they have chosen to call themselves *Rohingya*, a claim for ethnicity that they have as much right to make as any other community in Burma, instead of accepting the designation “Bengalis” enforced by the Burmese regime.

If, as Mr. Derek Tonkin claims, the word Rohingya “is offensive to many Burmese,” that tells us more about those Burmese than about the Rohingya themselves. Burmese define themselves and what it means to be Burmese in the very act of exclusion. What is at stake in the way that the Burmese nation treats and identifies the Rohingya and other Muslim communities is not only the future of those communities, but also the kind of Burma that the Burmese want to build for themselves.

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