

The Rohingya and national identities in Burma

By Carlos Sardiña Galache.

Earlier this year, the Burmese government held its first census in three decades with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The census was a risky undertaking from the very beginning. Some international organizations warned that the thorny question of ethnicity in particular was liable to generate conflicts.¹ The Burmese government assured the UNFPA that it would allow everyone to identify themselves freely by the ethnic name of their choice. But this promise was broken just before the census started, when it was announced that Muslims in Arakan state would not be allowed to identify themselves as *Rohingya*, and the national military-dominated government claimed it was under pressure from the Buddhist Rakhine community.

As a result, as many as a million people remain uncounted in Arakan. The government denied their right to self-identify with the term of their choosing and pushed them to identify as *Bengalis*. This is just the latest episode in the decades-long persecution of the Rohingya by the Burmese state and Rakhine nationalists, who have denied them citizenship since the mid-seventies. The justification for such persecution asserted by the Burmese government, and shared by many Burmese citizens, is that the Rohingya ethnicity is an invention devised by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to take over the land of 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*.² His articles are well researched, and his command of the British colonial records is nothing less than impressive, but by relying almost solely on them 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.” That was the year before the first Anglo-Burmese war, when the British annexed provinces of the Burmese kingdom (Arakan, Tenasserim, Assam and Manipur, areas that are now part of India).

This is the basic conceptual framework within which Mr. Tonkin operates, the same conceptual framework within which Rohingya, Burmese and Rakhine historians alike hold heated debates. Rather than attempting to defend Rohingya claims, I shall 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.

The debate over Rohingya identity has been reduced 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. These narratives are mutually contradictory, making it impossible to find any common ground for all sides involved.

This is not unusual in a global context. Virtually all ethnic and/or national communities construct histories about themselves in order to advance their nationalistic claims.³ These histories are often loaded with myths more or less disguised as fact, anachronisms, and mystifications about the origins of the groups involved and importantly, their neighbors. The past is interpreted, constructed, and sometimes simply invented, to fit present political agendas.

Competing historical narratives

Burmese and Rakhine nationalists often accuse the Rohingyas 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. Arakanese history from the Rohingya point of view is littered with statements such as follow: “in the 15th century, a number of Muslim kings ruled Arakan, which was a golden period in the history of Arakan,” or “the ancestors of the people now known as the Rohingyas, came to Arakan more than a thousand years ago.”⁴

In all likelihood, the origins of the Rohingya presence in Arakan are much more recent than that –albeit not as recent as the Rakhine and Burmese historians claim. The idea of “Muslim kings” is at best a misunderstanding, or at worst a willful distortion: in the 14th and 15th centuries, some Arakanese Buddhist kings adopted seemingly Muslim titles because they followed models of rule taken from Bengal in equal measure as from the kingdoms in central Burma, if not more.⁵

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.⁶ Now Rakhine leaders 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.”⁷ Again, blatantly untrue.

This version is not only officially sanctioned, it’s actually the official history curriculum taught in Burmese schools. Secondary school textbooks are full of assertions like this, from a book published in 2006: “Pagan was based on the systematic unification of the accomplishments of ancient civilizations. In Pagan era, all the indigenous groups/national races, Pyus, Mons, Palaungs, Karens, Taughtus, Thets, Chins, Arakanese, Burmans, Shans etc., united with solidarity to build a Myanmar nation. They lived in harmony. That is why Pagan became famous and was respected by its neighbors.”⁸

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 Burma⁹ (the history of the population living in outlying areas like the present-day Kachin, Chin or Shan states is a different matter), and replaced them with others that the Burmese often did not understand or refused because they had been imposed by force by foreign invaders.¹⁰

But pre-colonial Burma was by no means an era of uniform political order and stability. In fact, not even central Burma was always ruled by a single political authority, and 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.¹¹

As the scholar Victor Lieberman has remarked: “the post-Pagan era of civil wars (conventionally dated 1287-1555) is usually regarded as a mere interlude; but in chronological terms, surely, it is equally valid to view Pagan as a temporary break in the normal polycentric pattern.”¹² During that long period, the institutions that underpinned the social order in Burma were far from static and the changes they suffered were just as influenced by external forces as by internal dynamics.

The relations between religious and secular power were not always smooth or idyllic. The fact that monasteries were exempted from paying taxes and the kings were expected to give donations (often land titles) to the Buddhist clergy bled the economy of the Pagan kingdom and contributed to its ultimate demise. The kings attempted to unite the Sangha (Buddhist clergy) but they failed. Sectarian

rifts within the Sangha, most often about small points of practice rather than doctrinal controversies, were a permanent feature of the religious landscape that the kings were never able to control completely, however hard they tried.¹³

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. 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: power was centralized from the royal capitals and disappeared gradually the farther from them. Outlying states just paid tribute to the central courts, often to different courts at different times and at times even simultaneously to more than one, and they could preserve a high degree of autonomy.¹⁴

As the anthropologist Edmund R. Leach put it more than fifty years ago, 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. [...] The political entities in question had interpenetrating political systems, they were not separate countries inhabited by distinct populations.”¹⁵

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. And, by implication, if there were not clearly demarcated geographical borders between different “states”, then the ethnic (or “national”) distinctions between their inhabitants were not as clear-cut as that of the current world of sovereign and uniformly ruled Nation-States.

Colonial conceptions of ethnicity

What the Burmese, Rakhine and Rohingya historical narratives have in common is an essentialist and racialist conception of ethnic identities as something primordial and fixed in time. This conception also implies that ethnic identities have an objective and absolute reality. 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, in order to classify and administer it, 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.”¹⁶ But the pre-Colonial reality was quite different.

The scholar Victor Lieberman has shown that 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: “Throughout the Taung-ngu period (c. 1539-1752) the composition of the royal service people (ahmú-dàns) and of the royal court was surprisingly diverse. The crown, chronically in need of manpower, invited to the capital area, or forcibly deported, large bodies of non-Burmese who were settled in separate service communities and allowed to retain their ethnic identity.”¹⁷

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 “cannot readily be fitted into any ethnographic scheme which, on linguistic grounds, places Kachins and Shans into different ‘racial’ categories”¹⁸.

But that is exactly what the British did. And, at times they classified the different people with names which had not any racial or linguistic meaning and those very same peoples had not used to identify themselves before. For instance, the word Kachin was a Burmese word which initially referred to a “vague” category “loosely applied to the barbarians of the north-east frontiers.”¹⁹ It was the British who gave it a “racial” meaning, thereby creating an ethnic category.

In the case of the Shan, Leach pointed out that their “culture, as we now know it, is not to be regarded as a complex imported into the area ready made from somewhere outside, as most of the authorities seem to have supposed. It is an indigenous growth resulting from the economic interaction of small-scale military colonies with an indigenous hill population over a long period.” Moreover, there was strong evidence that “the Shans are descendants of hill tribesmen who have in the recent past been assimilated into the more sophisticated ways of Buddhist-Shan culture.”²⁰

The separation between groups by the British was not merely descriptive, it was actively enforced for administrative purposes: “One of the few continuing elements in British administrative policy towards the Kachins was the policy of treating Shan and Kachin as separate racial elements. Even to the last –in 1946!– British officials were engaged in surveying precise boundaries between Kachin and Shan territory. The political dependence of Shan and Kachin or vice versa was excluded by edict; economic relations between the two groups, though not prohibited, were made extremely difficult. Everything possible was done to deter the more sophisticated Kachins from settling in Shan territory in the plains. This policy originated from a desire ‘to establish peace and security within the settled districts,’ and it achieved its end, but at a high cost.”²¹

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, animosities that survive to this day. They solidified ethnic divisions and identities that had been much more fluid and less prominent in pre-colonial times. The ethnic taxonomies that were imposed by the colonial apparatus were not always consistent and often were determined by people with little knowledge of realities on the ground, but by their very imposition, ended up shaping social divisions up to this day.

This is not a process unique to Burma, but to many colonized countries which after independence have found themselves ensnared in seemingly intractable ethnic conflicts. As Donald Horowitz remarked, “the colonialists set in motion a comparative process by which aptitudes and disabilities were to be evaluated,” and, “like the new polity and economy in which the disparities were embedded, the evaluations took hold.”²²

While not everybody in Burma necessarily agree with this or that concrete classification, it seems that the form of classification itself is accepted by an overwhelming majority of Burmese. For instance, the present official list of 135 “national races” was derived from the census carried out by the British in 1931,²³ and it has been highly contested by many ethnic organizations; but none of them has challenged the existence itself of such a list.

Two years ago, I interviewed the activist Ko Ko Gyi in the headquarters of the 88 Generation Students Group (later renamed 88 Generation Peace and Open Society Group), in a room over which presided a portrait of the anti-colonial hero of Burma, Aung San. Ko Ko Gyi defended the list, and the exclusion of the Rohingya from it, arguing that “we [the Burmese] haven’t invented it, it was taken from the British.” The paradox here (which I don’t know if he was aware of), is that an authoritative argument was made employing as the authority the very same power whose defeat marks the very foundation of Burma.

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.”²⁴

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’.”²⁵

As a consequence of the fluidity of these roles, “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. In this case there should also be evidence that the category has never achieved the degree of cultural and/or linguistic discreteness from its neighbors that it may claim for itself or have claimed for it by observers treating it as having a global culture consequent upon a distinctive history.”²⁶ But it is precisely this kind of “discrete ancestral groups” what the notion of “national races” assumes as certain.

There is no need to go into detail here on the post-independence history of conflict between the central Burmese government and the different ethnic minorities. After decades of war between the *Tatmadaw* and different minorities fighting for their political rights and the control of natural resources in Burma’s “border areas,” ethnic identities that were to some degree “imagined” by the British have become deeply felt by millions of people to the point of sacrificing their lives in their name, and therefore have become very “real.”

But we should keep in mind the subjective and political elements inherent in any ethno-nationalist affiliation, be it Bamar, Kachin, Rakhine, Rohingya or any other. As Max Weber pointed out, ethnic groups are “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exist. Ethnic membership (*Gemeinsamkeit*) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter. In our sense, ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity.”²⁷

Arakan: “The Palestine of the Farther East”

In 1891, the Swiss Pali scholar and archeologist Emil Forchhammer wrote a small book about Arakan²⁸; 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, thus creating a culture distinct from that of Burma. For instance, the historian G. E. Harvey wrote in his book *History of Burma*, published in 1925, that "doubtless it is Mahomedan [sic] influence which led to women being more secluded in Arakan than in Burma."²⁹

As in the rest of Southeast Asia, there were not clear borders between Arakan and Bengal in pre-modern times, and the areas of influence of both kingdoms overlapped and were constantly fluctuating. According to Harvey, the Arakanese king Basawpyu (who wore the Muslim/Bengali name Kalima Shah), occupied Chittagong in 1459, and Arakan controlled it up to 1666. 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'."³⁰ 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.

Nevertheless, 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."³¹ 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)*, the 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."³²

Arakanese kings showed a religious tolerance that stands in stark contrast to the positions of contemporary Rakhine nationalist leaders. They usually 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 practice of the Arakanese kings to win over the hearts and minds of their subjects 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, even then only under external influences. "By 1785, the Arakan Littoral was effectively divided in two, northern Arakan being absorbed by an essentially Muslim and Indian polity, and central and southern Arakan by a Theravada-Buddhist Irrawaddy Valley based polity."³³

The origins of the Muslim inhabitants of Arakan are the subject to much controversy, and it is to be expected that this controversy will not be solved in the foreseeable future. There were Muslims there as early as the Ninth century but, as Charney asserts, “there is little reason to believe that they formed ‘communities’ in the Arakan littoral on a par with those that developed in the seventeenth century.” They were “castaways, mercenaries, intermediary service elites (that is, court functionaries, such as scribes, eunuchs who handled matters involving the royal bodyguard and so on), and itinerant traders.”³⁴

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 and transferring thousands of its inhabitants to Arakan. For the Portuguese it was a lucrative trade; they could sell the slaves to the Dutch, but they had to hand over at least one-fourth of them to the Arakanese crown. Meanwhile, for the Arakanese, the slave trade was a way to get manpower to populate a harsh area with few inhabitants. 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.

It is not clear how many slaves were taken to Arakan, but the Portuguese kept detailed records of their spoils. According to Charney’s calculations, the Portuguese took around 147,000 captives between 1617 and 1666. Many died on the way, others fled back to Bengal or were sold to the Dutch, but “a conservative estimate for the number of Bengalis who survived their resettlement to Danra-waddy [northern Arakan, including Sittwe and Mrauk-U] by the end of the seventeenth century was perhaps sixty thousand, probably much higher.”³⁵

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 population by the 1770s may have been Muslim,” asserts Charney.³⁶ 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].”³⁷

After the Burmese invasion, up to one quarter of the population, both Buddhist and Muslim, fled Arakan across the border to Bengal,³⁸ which was then part of the British Empire. On the other hand, the conquerors took with them to Arakan the royal family, and tens of thousands of people, including Muslims from Mrauk-U. But there is no reason to believe that this forced migrations in both directions altered substantially the demographic ratios between Buddhists and Muslims.

However, the Burmese invasion changed the Arakanese religious landscape in other ways. The Burmese not only brought to Mandalay the ancient Mahamuni statue, symbol of Arakanese Buddhism, but also “tried to centralize Buddhism Arakanese religion under their authority in various ways, most of all by burmanizing Arakanese Buddhism through Burman monks, texts, and a *sangha* organization that reached from Arakanese villages to the Burman court.”³⁹

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,”⁴⁰ Arakan was a “frontier region” between Burma and Bengal. Eastern Bengal was not only environmentally and geographically coterminous with Arakan, but for the Burmese it seems to have been also a political part of it. In 1797, before diplomatic relations between the British and the Burmese were irredeemably poisoned by the incursions of Arakanese into the Burmese side and the Burmese Army in the British to chase them, the Burmese court entertained the idea of claiming East Bengal to the British on the grounds that Arakan had ruled the region in the past, and a junior minister suggested informally to the British envoy in Rangoon that the British and the Burmese should share the revenues of the region.⁴¹

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 ‘Mughls’ (Rakhine), 30 percent were ‘Mussalman’ (Muslims) and 10 percent ‘Burmese’.⁴² 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 evident that the Kaman, the descendants of royal guards taken in the late seventeenth century from Bengal to the Arakanese court and who exerted a great political influence over it, were just a tiny minority concentrated in Ramree Island.⁴³

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 convincing article published by Mr. Tonkin in *Democratic Voice of Burma* to find extensive evidence for that.⁴⁴

But, as I have already suggested, the classifications made by the British must be read with a certain degree of skepticism: as Tonkin himself recognizes, the Maramargyi were classified “incongruously” as “Chittagonian Buddhists.” It is also necessary to emphasize that those “Chittagonians” who migrated to Arakan during colonial times cannot be regarded as “illegal immigrants:” at the time there was no border between Arakan and Bengal, so any migration was perfectly legal.

I would like to venture another possibility: given the uninterrupted relations between the kingdoms of Bengal and Arakan, the lack of clear borders in pre-colonial times, the fluctuating spheres of influence of both kingdoms, and the almost constant transfers of population; who is to say that at least some of the migrants who arrived to Arakan in colonial times are not descendants of people who had inhabited that land in previous times?

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”⁴⁵ 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*. Or, to put it another way, its reality is no more (or less) problematic than that of any other ethnicity in Burma and elsewhere. In any case, the Rohingya identity was not “invented” recently out of the blue, as some claim. As I hope I have shown, it had been “gestating,” so to speak, for at least three hundred years, and the term itself was not new.

The “R-word”

The origins of the term “Rohingya” are extremely difficult to trace. The first known record of a very similar word 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.”⁴⁶

Apparently, Buchanan did not use the word in any other of his writings, and it does not appear in any work by other writers at the time, except as quoting Buchanan almost verbatim. 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.”⁴⁷

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.

In colonial times, the indigenous Burmese population was as resentful of the British as it was of the large numbers of Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, who migrated to Burma in their wake. This anti-Indian sentiment was compounded by the preferential treatment dispensed by the British to the Indian migrants, because the British authorities preferred to recruit Indians in the Army and in the bureaucracy.

On the other hand, the beginnings of the Burmese nationalist movement were strongly Buddhist in character, and some of the first nationalist leaders were monks.⁴⁸ Thus, Burmese nationalism acquired a religious hue from the beginning. But it is often forgotten that this did not always necessarily entail anti-Indian xenophobia, and many Burmese nationalists were strongly influenced by the Indian National Congress. U Ottama (1879-1939), perhaps the most famous “political monk” of the era, and an ethnic Rakhine born in Sittwe, advocated the unity of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in the struggle against the British, he declared that Burmans and Indians were friends, and supported publicly an anti-British Muslim rebellion that took place in India in the early twenties.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Buddhism and both Bamar and Rakhine nationalism were, and still are, closely intertwined. U Nu, the first prime minister of independent Burma was a fervent Buddhist who sponsored Buddhist projects throughout all his tenures and won his last election on the promise of declaring Buddhism the state religion. This decision was not well received by the followers of other faiths. It contributed for instance, to the creation of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in 1961– and he was forced to backtrack by the introduction of a constitutional amendment which granted protection to other faiths. A number of Buddhist monks reacted violently to the amendment storming a mosque in Rangoon and killing two Muslims.⁵⁰

The episode shows that the phenomenon of Buddhist monks engaging in anti-Muslim violence is not new in Burma. These events and other anti-Muslim riots, like those of 1938, also show that 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.⁵¹

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. At the beginning of the war, the Buddhists expelled thousands of Muslims from the Japanese-controlled areas in Southern Arakan, and many were killed. The Muslims retaliated from British-controlled territories and were armed by the British when they retreated from Northern Arakan. Summing up, the Second World War 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.⁵² As David Keen pointed out, “conflict generates ethnicity.”⁵³

In the aftermath of the war and during the first years of independence, Arakan was plagued by three insurgencies: Rakhine rebels in the south, Communists hiding in the Arakan Mountains and a Muslim Mujahid insurgency in the north.⁵⁴ Burmese and Rakhine nationalists often recall that Mujahid rebellion to demonize the Rohingya. 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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ It is necessary to recall that 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.⁵⁷

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. No other ethnic group has undergone such marginalization. And it can be argued, that paradoxically, nothing has done more to reinforce the Rohingya identity than the attempts to suppress it.

Another accusation directed against Rohingya is that they are illegal immigrants that arrived from Bangladesh after independence up until as recently as the first wave of sectarian violence in June 2012. Hard data about migrations between post-independence East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Burma is non-existent, so these claims are difficult to verify. In the 1950s there were accusations by the Burmese government that the Mujahid rebels were encouraging illegal immigrants from East Pakistan to cross the border to Burma.⁵⁸ But there were also movements in the opposite direction; for instance, in 1951 *The New York Times* reported that 250,000 refugees had fled from Arakan to East Pakistan in the previous three years.⁵⁹

When Bangladesh fought the war for its independence from Pakistan in 1971, an undetermined number of refugees crossed the border to Arakan. Later on, 17,000 of them returned, but it is not known how many stayed.⁶⁰ Then, in 1978 the Ne Win government launched the operation "Dragon King" in Arakan and up to 250,000 Muslim refugees crossed the border to Bangladesh. Most of them returned after a few months under pressure from the Bangladesh government.⁶¹ From then on, the Burmese government reinforced security at the border and it became much more difficult for illegal immigrants to cross into Arakan state,⁶² provided they wished to do so.

To demonstrate that many Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, it is argued that they do not have identity cards. But many Burmese of other ethnic groups lack them as well, especially in remote border areas. Moreover, Rohingya have argued that in 1962, when the Burmese government issued identity cards, they were given Foreigner Registration Cards instead of National Registration

Cards, which most of them refused. The few who accepted them were forced to give them back to the authorities in 1977.⁶³

Another argument is that many of them are unable speak Burmese. That should not come as a surprise, considering that the government policies have denied most Rohingya access to education in the last four decades and have confined them to areas from which they cannot move freely. But this argument was debunked by the Burmese Supreme Court itself as early as 1960: in one case, the Court revoked orders of deportation issued by immigration authorities against a group of Rohingya ruling that, in a country with so many ethnic groups as Burma, it was perfectly possible to find Burmese citizens who did not speak Burmese and whose customs were different from those of the rest of the population.⁶⁴

In any case, the scarce demographic data available about Arakan does not show an increase of its Muslim population since 1953. And given that, by any measure, Arakan is much less developed than Bangladesh, it would make little sense for Bangladeshi economic migrants to try to find a better life in Burma.⁶⁵ On the contrary, the data available and recent history show a constant stream of Rohingya trying to escape their plight in Burma to Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Burma and its national identities

Like many other post-Colonial societies, Burma emerged from British rule as a country deeply divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. 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. The ideas themselves of nationalism and ethno-nationalism were imported and, like virtually all nationalist movements, during the process of nation-building after independence, Burmese nationalists have often read the past according to the political agendas of the present and their plans for the future.

In the Burmese case, there is not just one nationalism, but several competing ethno-nationalisms with different visions and projects. 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.⁶⁶ 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. What predominates in contemporary Burma is a series of “organic nationalisms” which look to idealized pasts for inspiration, rather than a “civic nationalism” focused on building a common future.

The sociologist Michael Mann explained that “ethnic hostility rises where ethnicity trumps class as the main form of social stratification, in the process capturing and channeling classlike sentiments towards ethnonationalism.”⁶⁷ Thus a breeding ground for ethnic cleansing is created, and this indeed is the case

in Burma, a country with huge class inequalities and no social justice, but where truly progressive class politics are almost completely absent, even within the mainstream “democratic opposition,”⁶⁸ and where ethnic identification seems to overrule any other affiliations.

The idea of “national races,” understood as those which had settled within the present borders of Burma before the arrival of the British in 1824, is not an invention of the military regime; it gained currency on the eve of independence as an attempt to rally all the ethnic groups around a common project of nation-building and it was already enshrined in the Union Citizenship Law passed in 1948.⁶⁹ But that act did not stipulate it as the sole criterion of citizenship and did not contemplate different layers of citizenship as the 1982 law did.

This conception of citizenship based on ethnicity is also shared by many in the pro-democratic opposition, including the late U Win Tin, who told me in an interview two years ago that the Burmese people “cannot regard them [the Rohingya] as citizens, because they are not our citizens at all, everyone here knows that,” and added: “they want to claim the land, they want to claim themselves as a race, they want to claim to be natives and this is not right.” As Myo Yan Naung Thein, director of the Bayda Institute, put it: “The military, Aung San Suu Kyi, the 88 generation students and the politicians, we all share the same opinion about national identity.”⁷⁰

It is not clear whether the Rohingya were included among the “national races” during the Parliamentary period, but their ethnicity and the name was recognized by the government at the time. It was under Ne Win’s dictatorship that they were stripped of citizenship and their ethnicity started to be officially denied, applying retrospectively a new law in a way which would not stand up to serious legal scrutiny and which seems to have been designed specifically to target them.

The ethnogenesis of the Rohingya which I have tried to sketch out in this article does not make it a more “artificial” or “invented” ethnicity than any other, but it does not fit easily in the all too narrow concept of “national races” as is currently understood in Burma: ethnic groups which were already formed as we know them now in pre-colonial times. Others, perhaps the Kachin or the Chin, 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.⁷¹ In this situation, it would be very naïve to believe that they are suffering such persecution because they have choose 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; who are excluded from being Burmese also defines who the Burmese themselves are. The plight of the Rohingya people is not an issue which only concerns them and their Rakhine neighbors. 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 way that the Burmese at large identify themselves and the Burma they want to build for themselves.

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