

The Rohingya Origin Story: Two Narratives, One Conflict

At the center of the Rohingya Crisis is a question about the group's origin. It is in this identity, and the contrasting histories that the two sides claim (i.e., the Rohingya minority and the Buddhist government/some civilians), where religion and politics collide.

Although often cast as a religious war, the contemporary conflict didn't exist until World War II, when the minority Muslim Rohingya sided with British colonial rulers, while the Buddhist majority allied with the invading Japanese. However, it took years for the identity politics to fully take root. It was 1982, when the Rohingya were stripped of their citizenship by law (For more on this, see "Q&A on the Rohingya Crisis & Buddhist Extremism in Myanmar").

Myanmarese army commander Senior General Min Aung Hlaing made it clear that Rohingya origin lay at the heart of the matter when, on September 16, 2017, he posted to Facebook a statement saying that the current military action against the Rohingya is "unfinished business" stemming back to the Second World War. He also stated, "They have demanded recognition as Rohingya, which has never been an ethnic group in Myanmar. [The] Bengali issue is a national cause and we need to be united in establishing the truth."ⁱ

This begs the question, what is the truth?

There is no simple answer to this question. At the present time, there are two dominant, opposing narratives regarding the Rohingya ethnic group's history: one from the Rohingya perspective, and the other from the neighboring Rakhine and Bamar peoples. Outside scholars and historians acknowledge that both narratives have elements of truth.

The Narrative of the Rohingya:

The Rohingya version of their historical narrative in the region reflects 5 main points:

1. Ethnic Rohingyas have lived in Rakhine (the most western part of Myanmar) for centuries, even before Islam arrived in the region at the end of the 8th Century.ⁱⁱ

2. The Rohingya language and culture was dominant in Rakhine during its rule by Mrauk U Dynasty from the 15th to the 18th centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ
3. The Mrauk U Dynasty was Muslim. With the conquest of Rakhine by the Burmese Empire in 1785, Muslim rule in the region ended.^{iv}
4. The Rohingya stayed in Rakhine after the collapse of the Maruk U Dynasty. Rakhine became a British colony in 1826, and made the Rohingya British subjects.^v
5. During WWII, many Rohingya joined the British Army and fought the Japanese in a guerrilla war.^{vi} The Rohingya contend that the British promised them an independent state after the war, but that this promise was broken and the Muslim parts of Rakhine remained part of Myanmar.^{vii}

The Narrative of the Rakhine and Bamar Peoples:

The neighbors of the Rohingya, in the Rakhine and nearby Bamar, have a different perspective. Like the Rohingya, the Rakhine people are an ethnic minority who live in the Rakhine state. Different from the Rohingya, they are Buddhist. The Bamar, also Buddhist, are the ethnicity majority in Myanmar's population. Both these peoples contend the following:

1. Islam had only a small presence in Rakhine during the Maruk U Dynasty's rule, which was Buddhist, not Muslim.^{viii}
2. The Rohingya are not native to Rakhine. Rather, they are Bengali migrants, or "Chittagonians," who arrived in 1826 after the British conquest of Rakhine.^{ix}
3. The small number of Muslims who lived in Rakhine before British colonialization are not the ancestors of the modern Rohingya.^x
4. The Rohingya benefited from British colonialization and used the World War II to consolidate their strength in Myanmar.^{xi}

Sorting Out These Narratives—What Do the Scholars Say?

In short, most scholars agree that:

1. The Rohingya are an amalgamation of peoples, from native Muslim Rakhines who lived in Myanmar for many centuries, to Bengali immigrants who arrived in Rakhine in the 19th century.
2. Islam had a strong influence in the Rakhine state before its colonialization by Britain. The Mrauk U Dynasty in particular sought and held Islamic titles.^{xii} That said, there is an unresolved debate as to whether the Mrauk U Dynasty was actually Islamic. It was common for non-Muslim rulers in Southeast Asia to seek Islamic titles due to the perceived prestige but not to actually be followers of Islam.^{xiii}
3. Regardless, there is further evidence that some semblance of the Rohingya community existed in Myanmar before British colonialization. In 1799, 25 years before the British invaded Myanmar, Francis Bacon, a surgeon employed by the British East India Company, traveled throughout

Myanmar and documented the existence of a Muslim ethnic group “who have long settled in Arakan [Rakhine], and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan.”^{xiv} As noted, modern Rohingya may not be solely descendants of the “Rooinga.”^{xv}

4. It is undeniable that large-scale migration from Bengal to Rakhine occurred during the British occupation of Myanmar from 1826 to 1948. The native workforce of Myanmar could not meet the demands of their British occupiers. The British therefore encouraged Bengalis to migrate to Myanmar.^{xvi} Higher wages and the absence of a border between Bengal and Myanmar resulted in a “flood” of migrants into Rakhine. The British labeled these immigrants either “Mahomedan” or “Chittagonian,” and they became an important part of the colonial workforce and bureaucracy.^{xvii} Professor Rei Nemoto hypothesizes that these new migrants integrated with the Muslim population already living in Rakhine, but alienated the Buddhist Rakhine.^{xviii}
5. World War II enflamed tensions between the two communities as both the Japanese and the British took advantage of underlining sectarianism to win the war. The Japanese recruited Buddhist Rakhine into the “Patriot Arakan Force,” while the British recruited the Rohingya into “Force V.”^{xix} Violence occurred between these two communities even after the World War II ended.^{xx} Initial attempts by the Muslims in Rakhine to carve their own state, and later to join East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), failed. All of Rakhine became part of an independent Myanmar in 1948. The term “Rohingya” arose at this time.

ⁱ Human Rights Watch, “Crimes Against Humanity by Burmese Security Forces Against the Rohingya Population,” https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/burma_crimes_against_humanity_memo.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Nemoto, Kei, “The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.” (1991). http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/Kei_Nemoto-Rohingya.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Syed Zain Al-Mahmood, “Timeline: A Short History of Myanmar’s Rohingya Minority,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2016. <https://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2016/12/23/timeline-a-short-history-of-myanmars-rohingya-minority/>.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Nemoto, Kei. “The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.” (1991). http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/Kei_Nemoto-Rohingya.pdf.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Gregory B. Poling, “Separating Fact from Fiction about Myanmar’s Rohingya,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 13, 2014. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/separating-fact-fiction-about-myanmar%E2%80%99s-rohingya>.

^{xv} Nemoto, Kei. “The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.” (1991). http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/Kei_Nemoto-Rohingya.pdf.

^{xvi} Aye Chan, “The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar).” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no. 2 (2005): 396–420.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Nemoto, Kei. “The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.” (1991). http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/Kei_Nemoto-Rohingya.pdf.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} Ibid.