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Foregrounding the Muslim periphery

Guest Editorial by Jonathan Benthall

Social anthropology has intermittently succeeded in claiming a seat at the top tables of international affairs, but its spiritual home remains at the margins. Hence the temptation to become a sectarian enclave. An alternative response – because so many of the peoples that have been its traditional focus of enquiry are suffering severely – is to engage in activism, like Survival International. Suppose, though, that an intellectual formulation were found that could bring anthropology to the heart of momentous discussions in Western foreign ministries and the White House, while also foregrounding the predicament of marginal peoples as a reproach to the West's moral conscience?

Akbar Ahmed's new book *The thistle and the drone: How America's war on terror became a global war on tribal Islam* (Brookings Institution Press) seems to fill the bill. During a week in June it was the centrepiece of a number of panel discussions at London venues, including the House of Lords (27 June) and the School of Oriental and African Studies (29 June). There was no rigorous examination by specialists, but opportunities will come up in the future, as well as for a broader appraisal of a book that includes some forty ethnographic case-studies – carried out with a small team of young American researchers and sustained reflection on the geopolitical decisions reached by Osama bin Laden and the former President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, as well as on the current dilemmas that still face President Obama. Ahmed, now the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University in Washington, DC, is one of the most media-savvy and self-conscious of writers, and he will no doubt be following up the publication of his book with an account of its reception, which varies at this early stage from the admiring to the hostile and is handicapped in that probably no single person is qualified to review it adequately.

Some of the discussants in London concentrated on the literal issue of drones, or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which have victimized Muslim tribal societies disproportionately. According to Ahmed, even if the rate of civilian casualties can be shown to be lower than that resulting from the use of more traditional weapons, it is the UAV's usurpation of the powers of God that Muslim tribespeople condemn as not only dishonourable but blasphemous. A military expert, Douglas Barrie, reacted in the House of Lords with the surprising argument that UAVs are not risk free, while declining to substantiate this statement by giving examples of UAV operators who had so far suffered any injuries. Ahmed argued that even if UAVs were to be discontinued tomorrow in the Pakistan tribal areas, the violence in Waziristan – where he was the government's political agent from 1978–80 – would not stop. His book is not just about UAVs.

The book's immediate reception may be inhibited by its poetic title. The drone is a material technology that becomes a metaphor for the current age of globalization: something which comes from nowhere, destroys your life and goes away. The thistle 'captures the essence of tribal societies', an image borrowed from Tolstoy's posthumous novel *Hadji Murad*, about a Caucasian Avar leader's struggles under the yoke of imperial Russia. Thistles are prickly, tenacious and survive even when crushed. 'Man has conquered everything', writes Tolstoy's narrator, 'and destroyed millions of plants, yet this one won't submit'. Ahmed notes that others before him have drawn an analogy between the recalcitrant Scots, who chose the

Jonathan Benthall is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College London. He reviewed Akbar Ahmed's documentary film *Journey into America* in AT. He is co-editor, with Robert Lacey, of Gulf charities and Islamic philanthropy in the 'age of terror' and beyond (*Gerlach Press, forthcoming*). His email is jonathanbenthall@hotmail.com.

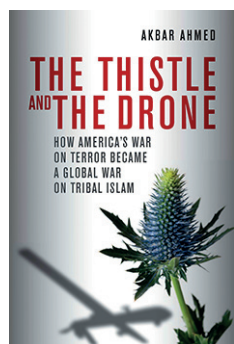


Fig. 1. Cover of Akbar Ahmed's *The thistle and the drone* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

For an interview with Akbar Ahmed see: Ahmed, A. & Houtman, G. 2009. Swat in the eye of the storm: Interview with Akbar Ahmed. *Anthropology Today* 25: 20-22.

1. This exchange has been reprinted in *The anthropology of Islam reader*, edited by Jens Kreinath (Routledge 2012).

thistle as their national emblem, and other thistle-like tribal societies such as the Pukhtun, Somali and Kurd.

The tribal groups discussed in his book are characterized by egalitarianism, hospitality, a strong sense of justice, a commitment to freedom, a tribal lineage system defined by common ancestors and clans, a martial tradition, and a highly developed code of honour and revenge. The exclusively domestic sphere allocated to women is unacceptable today and Ahmed does not defend it, but he insists that the transition towards gender equality has to be negotiated sensitively through the tribal structures and their relationships with religious authority and with national governments. After an exceptionally varied career as a diplomat, sought-after authority on contemporary Islam, and inter-faith campaigner (also a spare-time poet and playwright), Ahmed has reverted to his roots as an anthropologist: the author of *Millennium and charisma among Pathans* (1976), one of the late Ernest Gellner's favourite interlocutors, and promoter of the concept of an 'Islamic anthropology' against Richard Tapper's sharp caveats.¹

Disturbed by the wide acceptance of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis and George W. Bush's foreign policy, largely continued by President Obama, Ahmed decided to examine the interstices between states, beginning with a return visit to Waziristan. He identifies four historical stages. First, a thousand years, when emirates were largely left on their own: an equilibrium between tribal and Muslim values. Second, the imposition of colonial boundaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, with elements of ethnocide. Third, after World War II, the launching of independent nations, whose central governments tended to treat peripheral groups as badly as their colonial masters had. And lastly, the post-9/11 period when the United States declared the 'war on terror', which continues as a reality, although the phrase itself has been dropped by the US government.

Tribal Islam, contrary to popular misunderstandings, is antithetical to Wahhabi-Salafi literalism, being typically

grounded in oral folk traditions, emulation of the Prophet, and veneration of intercessionary spiritual figures or saints. It has also accommodated pre-Islamic and non-Islamic customs such as facing the sun rather than Mecca to pray (the Asir of Saudi Arabia) or trial by ordeal (the Bugti of Baluchistan, or the Bedouin of the Sinai and Negev). Bin Laden was primarily a demented tribal leader from Yemen, refusing to renounce the code of honour and revenge that is at odds with clear religious injunctions against suicide and the murder of innocents. Yemen was also the ethnic affiliation of most of the Al-Qaeda activists, especially from the southwestern Saudi province of Asir which was annexed by Saudi Arabia in 1934 after bitter fighting.

Two of the discussants in London – Owen Bennett-Jones at the House of Lords, and Gilbert Achcar at SOAS – reproached Ahmed for apparently praising benighted tribal practices; and some American commentators have assumed that he is anti-American. But the former objection misunderstands the anthropological approach of trying to project oneself into other frames of mind, while the latter ignores the fact that Ahmed finds much to admire in the United States, especially the heritage of the Founding Fathers – as is evident from his book *Journey into America: The challenge of Islam* (2012).

The sorry conclusion of *The thistle and the drone* is that brutal revenge attacks from the periphery will continue: groups such as the Taliban see them as a way to communicate the pain that they are experiencing. Drones and central government invasions will not work. Ahmed remains committed to inter-faith dialogue as a means to encourage respect for peripheral peoples – including non-Muslim minorities such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Nagas and Adivasi in India. But there are also more pragmatic suggestions in his final chapter 'How to win the war on terror': with Aceh in Indonesia, Mindanao in the Philippines and Albanians in Macedonia cited, with qualifications, as cases of moves towards core-periphery reconciliation. ●

Scapegoating in Burma

Guest Editorial by Elliott Prasse-Freeman

Elliott Prasse-Freeman is an Associate Fellow at Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights and a PhD candidate in anthropology at Yale University. He can be reached at prasse@post.harvard.edu.

When sectarian violence first broke out in Burma's north-western Arakan state between Buddhist Rakhines and the historically marginalized Muslim Rohingyas, the effective response from Burma's government and Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party was silence. There was a sense at the time that during this delicate transition period nothing should rock the boat, certainly not two minority groups fighting hundreds of miles away from the real sites of power, Yangon and Naypyidaw.

But the issue did not go away. Not simply because clashes continued, but because the rest of the country became fixated on them. Local media, citizen bloggers, Buddhist monks all rallied around the Rakhine. Or more accurately, rallied *against* the Rohingyas, identifying them as illegal immigrants with no ties to the country; that as Muslims they were a threat to Buddhism; that they were harbingers of terror; that they were simply aesthetically unpleasant: 'they are not like us; we cannot accept them', is a refrain I often hear from Burmese acquaintances.

The heretofore marginal issue became central, and hence it became necessary to interpret the physical violence and its attendant discursive attacks: was this a perhaps-unconscious method for Burmese citizens to form a cynical inter-class collective 'in-group'? Indeed, as half a century of military rule gave way to a new, more 'open' society, the

violence seemed to establish the definitions and limits of that society: at last something that the majority Burmans and Burma's 135 'official' ethnic minorities could agree on. *Those people over there are imposters, we here – despite our differences – are sons of the soil, the only legitimate claimants to the spoils that will come now that Burma is opening up.*

The sporadic natural resource-driven economic growth may be creating a scramble for access to those resources, making intra-polity divisions more salient, a gate-keeping strategy where limited jobs or distributed rents are disbursed to co-religionists or co-ethnics. It may be no coincidence that the Rohingyas are situated where Muslim and Buddhist Asia meet: at the source of the massive Shwe gas pipeline and accompanying Special Economic Zone. Blog posts such as the following index this economic anxiety explicitly: 'How can such an impoverished country offer great opportunities like Australia, UK, USA and Canada to stateless people? Again, Rohingyas may account for nearly 800,000 which will surely be a burden for one of the world's poorest countries like Burma'.¹

All of this is so far a pretty typical – and typically violent and ugly – story of nation-building in the context of late development, even with the added prurient appeal of the violence coming at the hands of ostensibly peace-loving monks, as Stanley Tambiah (1992) demonstrated in *Buddhism betrayed*.

1. Won Thar Nu, 'In Response to Francis Wade' 29 June 2012, <http://terrorist2012.blogspot.com/2012/06/in-response-to-francis-wade.html> (accessed 19 June 2013).

2. Maung Zarni, 'The official evidence of Rohingya ethnic ID and citizenship' 1 August 2012, <http://www.maungzarni.com/2012/08/the-official-evidence-of-rohingya.html>.

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- René Girard's theory of the scapegoat seems to apply perfectly: it is not difference that inspires communal violence, but rather *sameness*, or rather the dissolution of previously-reified boundaries. In Burma, different ethnic groups were kept conceptually and often physically apart through a military policy (and a colonial policy before it) of divide-and-rule. Somewhat paradoxically, now that Burma is becoming freer, people are actually being forced together: whereas before, the military effected a system of hierarchical relationships that placed the majority Burmans on top and all ethnic minorities below (Walton 2013), 'democracy' ostensibly dissolves those distinctions. This emerging system – still inchoate and undefined – compels people to make their own decisions about participation in the political community, a situation which allows for new forms of improvisation.
- Regarding this improvisation, anthropologist Jennifer Leehey pointed out to me something noteworthy about the violence. As it has continued, its linguistic expression has morphed: the Rohingya have increasingly been stripped of that name; more and more they have become only 'Bengalis'. And so, killing in the name of Buddhism, killing in the name of the legitimate nation, this rhetoric is trying to kill *the name* Rohingya itself. For while the 'Rooinga' were recognized already in 1799 well before the First Anglo-Burmese War, and the Burmese state has recognized them on numerous occasions in the past,² the 2013 government report examining the violence, referred to the Rohingya in every instance as 'Bengalis' (Stout 2013), and security forces have forced Rohingya to refer to *themselves* that way (Ferrie 2013).
- Maung Zarni quotes a Rakhine activist who declaims, 'How can [the violence against Rohingya] be ethnic cleansing? They are not an ethnic group?' (Zarni 2013). Here, those who are killed are arguably not even killed *as* an identity group, but rather as so much detritus falling outside of a group, and hence outside of the political community entirely.
- ***
- This sort of linguistic violence allows us to perceive Burmese language ideology as privileging performatives of the Austinian type (Austin 1962). While Austin showed that ultimately the tidy division between performative and constative speech acts dissolves in practice in every occasion, the perception of many speakers remains – especially in the Western liberal tradition – that most speech exists to communicate information and intentions.
- Burmese speakers may not share this assumption. Leehey (2010) and Houtman (1999) have respectively identified the long trajectory of performatives in Burmese state practice, showing how the military-state used enunciatory declarations to perform certain truths into or out of reality: Burma became Myanmar, currency became worthless, previous heroes became villains. While, as Butler (1997) demonstrates, performatives do not always 'work' – Burmese people were continually un-fooled by much state propaganda, for instance – real material changes *did* often emerge out of military-state declarations. As a result, Burmese people have been compelled to be constantly attuned to the power of language to potentially alter reality. What may be occurring now in the context of the Rohingya is that Burmese people are grasping this power themselves, deploying it to change their world.
- In this context of improvisational speech, the initial anger directed solely at Rohingya has overflowed, unleashing a violence that seems uncontainable: Buddhist mobs have begun to torch property and murder scores of Muslims in numerous places in central Burma. Amazingly, the victims – despite lacking any plausible connection with Bangladesh – are now being called Bengalis as well (Wade 2013).
- While Selth (2004) argued a decade ago that 'Burman Muslims and Chinese Muslims have largely been assimilated' into Burmese society, that sense of belonging seems to now be eroding; those who have assimilated are being re-inscribed with alterity. As Leehey told me recently, 'previously settled ethnic categories (like "Burmese Muslim") have been destabilized'.
- This immanent progression may be occurring because of the instability within scapegoating based on performative declarations, one that derives from the constant mutability over the barriers between inside and outside that scapegoating ostensibly desires to establish. In other words, once one group is identified as 'not part of' Burma, or 'incompatible' with 'our traditions', what constitutes a putatively authentic Burmese citizen or tradition is put into question, even potentially undermined. *What does an authentic Burmese subject look like, really?* It is here that scapegoating exceeds capture and continues to flow to (produce) other 'Others': from Rohingya to *all* Muslims, from Rohingya to *all* dark-skinned people... and beyond: *What about the 'wild Wa' – they are really just Chinese aren't they? They certainly don't belong. What about Christians? Don't they have a long history in Burma of trying to convert we Burmese?*
- ***
- So how is uncontainable violence contained? Perhaps *containing* is the wrong approach. Butler argues that, 'Instead of obliterating the possibility of response... the threat [contained in a speech act] may well be countered by a different kind of performative act' (Butler 1997: 12). Expanding from this observation, we might contend that performatives must be contested with alternative performatives.
- In the Burmese case, racism cannot simply be silenced or displaced. Unfortunately this has been the approach of many elites, such as opposition Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein. They have mostly either said nothing or endorsed empty platitudes about needing 'the rule of law' and immigration rules (Prasse-Freeman 2013a; 2013b). But in the specific Burmese language ideology context, where performatives are critical for constructing political realities, these may be interpreted effectively as silences, or even implicit endorsements of the violence.
- Instead of deflections, narratives of exclusion must be contested with *positive* articulations of what political belonging in Burma should look like. Instead of allowing Burma to tear itself apart, Burmese leaders and citizens need to create reasons why they should live together, given that despite the arbitrariness of nation-state borders, they are sociological realities that have real meaning for millions of people, Burmese included.
- I have argued that a positive politics that mines the daily struggles shared by millions of Burmese in different situations, from different ethnicities, can create an identity that enjoins all in a shared project (Prasse-Freeman 2012). This 'politics of the daily' must be infused with a recognition of how difference in the context of Burma's society and institutions has led to degraded life outcomes and opportunities for many in many different ways. Such an approach takes unique experiences seriously, avoiding flattening difference into a narrative about mutual trauma.
- Given that nationalisms are always founded on the violences of erasure and hierarchy, incorporation of non-majorities is difficult in the absence of meta-narratives and accompanying institutions that *also* produce and facilitate a vision of a shared political community. In a way, this is the problem of all progressive politics and is at the heart of anthropology: engaging difference without on the one hand reifying it, and on the other, eradicating it.
- In keeping with the performatives mentioned above, this will mean Burma's democrats should articulate – early and often – a distilled declaration of these politics: Anyone who has struggled through Burma's past, and is committed to being a part of its future, is a legitimate participant in its present. ●