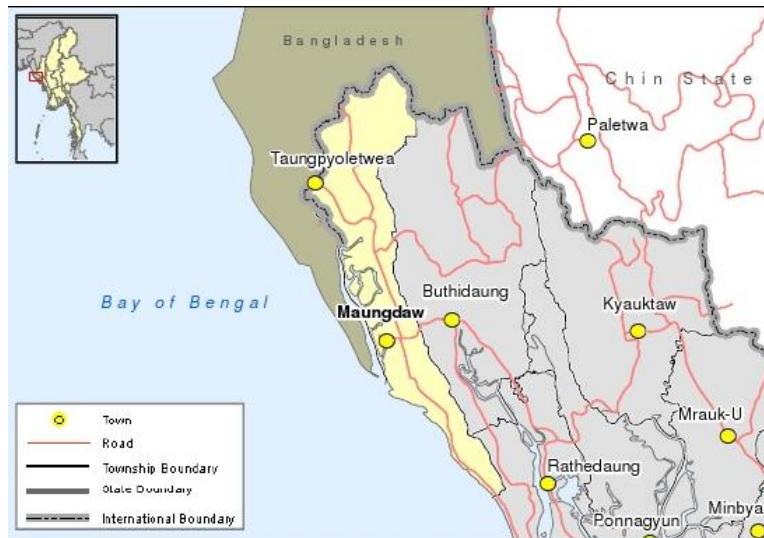


Decoding the Past: The Rohingya Origin Enigma



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Introduction

There has been much debate over the etymology and the origins of the ethnonym *Rohingya*. Since the 1980s local, *Rohingya*, Burmese, and dynastic histories have contributed to a growing plurality of narratives. Yegar (1992) and Berlie (2008) are the only scholarly works to specifically address the Muslim community known as the *Rohingya* in three townships in northern Arakan state – Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung.



There are two schools of thought regarding the historiography of the *Rohingya*; the Migration school, who postulates that the *Rohingya* are illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh (Khin Maung Saw, 1993, 2011; Chan, 2005; Leider, 2005, 2012; Aye Kyaw, 2009; Maung Tha Hla, 2009; Ahmed 2012) and the Indigenous school, who claim that the *Rohingya* are native to Arakan and are descendents of the original Muslim converts on *Ran-byi* (or Ramree) Island (Lewa, 2004, Khin Maung Yin, 2005; Siddiqui, 2005; Chowdhury, 2006; Rozali, 2006; Islam, 2007; Bahar, 2010; Forster, 2011), who have a distinct culture and are a distinct indigenous ethnic group. Whatever the validity of the claims and counterclaims of the Migration theorists and Indigenous theorists, it cannot be denied that a large number of Muslims have resided in the Arakan for hundreds of years.¹

¹ For the purposes of this paper I use the term 'Arakan', which is the preferred description used by *Rohingyas*, but its official title is Rakhine State. Rakhine is the name used by the Buddhist majority to describe themselves.

Compounding the complexity of the study of the historiographical debate is the fact that the *Rohingya* are a preliterate society.² The omnipresent methodological problem associated with the archaeological examination of the *Rohingya* is that since they do not have orthography, they have been unable to document their own history.³ As such, ethno-archaeologists cannot interpret *Rohingya* social or cultural history without artifacts or written texts to study. Thus; it has been left to others to interpret.⁴ Knowledge of both the natural history and human history of Arakan is still very limited. Arakan state's inhospitable topography and challenging climatic conditions has meant that potential heritage sites have received little attention from archaeologists. As late as the late 1970s Arakanese archaeology was still considered to be in its infancy.⁵ Another problem faced by scholars of Arakanese history is that there are few primary sources available that have not already been edited, translated or exploited by previous scholars. Despite the shortage of primary sources many Arakanese chronicles remain untranslated from Burmese to English.⁶ As such, the historiography of the *Rohingya* is rife with speculation and conjecture as the lack of archaeological evidence has made the reconstruction of *Rohingya* historiography difficult.

Given the paucity of archaeological or numismatic evidence to interpret and the unlikelihood that "new" scholarship will shine a light on the origins of the *Rohingya* I will attempt to verify or dismiss the Migration and Indigenous theorists' *Rohingya* origin-theories in this paper.

The "*Rohingya*" Debate: Who were the First *Rohingya*?

Central to understanding why defining who the first *Rohingya* were is familiarity with post-colonial Burmese historiography. The Japanese occupation period (1942-45) brought Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan into conflict as each supported a different side. Muslims stayed loyal to the British while the Buddhists sided with the Japanese. The circumstances didn't change following independence in 1948. A *Mujahid* movement formed in Arakan demanding that Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung become part of East Pakistan.⁷ During the early 1950s and 1960s post-

² The *Rohingya* language does not have an orthography. It is a mixture of Arabic, Urdu, and Persian with some Dutch words; although migration theorists contend that the *Rohingya* language is similar to the Chittagong dialect of Bengali. The *Rohingya* orthography was first written in Arabic script in the sixteenth century. Due to the Burmese occupation of Arakan and the following British colonial rule *Rohingya* orthography was not preserved.

³ Thus, anthropological or social anthropological (ethnographic) research does not provide any meaningful insight to the origin question.

⁴ The *Rohingya* are attested to in the written records of the British.

⁵ U Kan Hla. "Ancient Cities in Burma" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 38, No. 2, May 1979, pp. 95.

⁶ Michael Charney. "Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese" *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn 2005, pp. 978.

⁷ Klaus Fleishman. *Arakan: Konfliktregion zwischen Birma und Bangladesh: Vorgeschichte und Folgen des Flüchtlingsstroms von 1978*, Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1981, pp. 64; Donald Eugene Smith. *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965, 278-280.

colonial Burmese historiography has been dominated by Burman neo-nationalists – historians, political scientists and anthropologists – who have developed a selective rendering of history that has sought to eliminate the *Rohingya* from Burmese history.⁸ This generation of Burmese scholars increasingly challenged colonial scholarship, reflecting the objectives of the armed forces (*Tatmaday*) – to legitimize the authority of the military regime with the majority-Buddhist population. An inclusive post-war nationalist ideology was replaced by a xenophobic ethno-religious nationalism based on the racial purity of Burmese and their Buddhist faith.⁹

Since the 1960s and 1970s Burma's military government, the *State Law and Order Restoration Council* (SLORC) and successor, the *State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC) has constructed a national ethnic identity using a narrative of history based on stressing the racial and ethnic solidarity of the Burmese and their resistance to colonial rule to legitimize their rule.¹⁰ Reflecting the xenophobia and distrust of things foreign, the *Tatmaday* promoted indigenous Burmese culture and a nationalistic form of Buddhism to justify its rule as well as legitimize Burmese cultural hegemony. This, in turn, has led a national identity that glorifies the role of the army.¹¹ The *Rohingya*, being Muslims and non-Myanmar, were *persona non grata* and officially declared as foreigners.

Between Myth and History: Indigenous Theory and the Origin of the *Rohingya*

While both Burmese and non-Burmese sources trace the arrival of Islam in Arakan to the eighth century there is no archaeological evidence to support assertion.¹² The majority of Indigenous theorists (Meer, 1935; Ba Tha, 1963; Ni Ni Kyaw, 2004; Khin Maung Yin, 2005; Berlie, 2008; Forster, 2011) use these sources to link the arrival of Islam with the ethnogenesis of the *Rohingya*. They maintain that the *Rohingya* are descendents of the original Muslim inhabitants of Arakan, have resided in Arakan since the eighth century and are a distinct indigenous ethnic group. Indigenous theorists trace the origin of the *Rohingya* to eighth century and claim that the *Rohingya* are descendents of Arab Muslim

⁸ Migration scholars such as Aye Chan, Aye Kyaw, Khin Maung Saw, Maung Maung, Maung Tha Hla and others have attempted to reconstruct the past to justify current political projects (e.g. rewriting the complete history of Burma and the construction of an ethnic national identity based on the racial purity of the Burmese and their Buddhist faith).

⁹ As Burma neared independence in 1946 Aung San had the goal that all ethnic groups should be included in a united Burma. In 1948 the then elected Prime Minister, U Nu, recognized the *Rohingya* as a distinct indigenous ethnic group and one of the Burmese nationalities.

¹⁰ Mikael Gravers. *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1999, pp. 126.

¹¹ Mary P. Callahan. "Cracks in the Edifice? Military-Society Relations in Burma since 1988," In *Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State?* Morten B. Pedersen et al. (eds.), Adelaide: Crawford, 2000, pp. 27.

¹² Aye Chan. "The development of a Muslim enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn 2005; Meer, Sulaiman. M.A.B.I. "Muslims in Burma 1872-1931" In *Buthidhaung Islamic High School Annual Magazine*, March 1935; Arthur P. Phayre. *History of Burma Including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim, and Arakan*, London: Susil Gupta, 1883, pp. 45.

merchants who inadvertently were shipwrecked on *Ran-byi* (or Ramree) Island and intermarried with local women and settled nearby permanently.¹³

Ezzati (2002) suggests a different founding myth. He traces the ethnogenesis of the *Rohingya* to the seventh century CE and claims that the *Rohingya* are the descendents of the followers of Sayed Mohammad Hanifa, one of the sons of Hazarat Ali the fourth Caliph of Islam, and Queen Kaiyapuri.¹⁴ After fleeing the Battle of Karbala he set sail for China. When Sayed Hanifa reached Arabsha Para, north of present-day Maungdaw, he was confronted by Queen Kaiyapuri who ruled the region. Hanifa attacked and defeated Kaiyapuri whose followers converted en masse to Islam. Afterwards Hanifa and his followers settled in the Mayu Range and intermarried with the local population. The descendents would become the basis of the *Rohingya*.¹⁵ Other scholars, most notably Forster (2011) traces the origin myth to the late eighth to early ninth century. He notes that the Arakanese chronicle *Maha-Radza-weng* (*Chronicle of the Kings*) records that during the reign of Mahatoing Tsandaya (788 – 810 CE) in the late eighth century or early ninth century the presence of Muslims in villages along the coast of Arakan.¹⁶ Given the lack of additional archaeological and/or numismatic evidence, is it possible to either verify or dismiss the Indigenous theorist's *Rohingya* foundation myth?

Muslim Trade Networks, the Geology of the Arakan-Bengal Continuum, and the Arrival of Islam in Arakan

Any discussion of the appearance of Islam in Arakan has to begin with the introduction of Islam in Bengal. The early history of the advent and spread of Islam in Bengal is still shrouded in myth and mystery due to the intricate nature of its history.¹⁷ Modern historians disagree on the chronology of the diffusion of Islam in Bengal but evidence suggests Muslim merchants and traders were in contact with Bengal by the eighth century. *Sufi* saints then followed in the footsteps of the merchants and traders and settled around the Bay of Bengal, including Arakan. The evidence can be divided into three categories: archaeological / numismatic evidence, literary sources, and local tradition.

¹³ Syed Serajul Islam. "State terrorism in Arakan" In *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, Andrew T. H. Tan (ed.), Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007, pp. 327; Ibnul Islam Rozali. "The Rohingyas of Arakan" *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Vol. LIV, No. 1, January-March 2006, pp. 113; Khin Maung Yin. "Salience of Ethnicity among Burman Muslims: A Study in Identity Formation" *Intellectual Discourse*, 2005, Vol. 13, No 2, pp. 164.

¹⁴ Abū al-Faḍl Ezzati. *The Spread of Islam: The Contributing Factors*, London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2002, p. 482.

¹⁵ Mohammed Ashraf Alam. *Historical Background of Arakan, the Souvenir*, Bangladesh: Arakan Historical Society, 1999, pp. 4.

¹⁶ Richard Forster. "Magh Marauders, Portuguese Pirates, White Elephants and Persian Poets: Arakan and Its Bay-of-Bengal Connectivities in the Early Modern Era" *Explorations*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, Spring 2011, pp. 64.

¹⁷ Yousuf Siddique. "The Diffusion of Islam in Bengal and the Articulation of a New Order", *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2008, pp. 1.

Archaeological Evidence	Literary Sources (Writings of Arab Geographers) ¹⁸	Local Tradition (Arakanese Chronicles) ¹⁹
Abbasid Caliphate Silver Coins 1) Dirhem found in Paharpur -issued by Caliph Harun ur - Rashid who reigned from 788 to 809 2) A coin was found in Mainamati, Comilla Persian Inscription(s) at Gadgram 1. Inscriptions detail Muslims role in north Bengal in the second century of the <i>Hijra year</i> ²⁰	Sulaiman al-Tajir, a ninth century Muslim who wrote <i>Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh</i> in about 851 that mentions trade routes via the Arakan Yoma. Ibn Khurdadbih (d. 912) wrote <i>Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik</i> that discusses the trade-route from the Arabian sea coast to the Chinese coast. al-Mas'udi (d. 956) substantiates Ibn Khurdadbih but also claims to have seen textiles produced in Pala. He also records the earliest presence of Muslims in Bengal.	The Arakanese Chronicle <i>Maha-Radza-weng (Chronicle of the Kings)</i> states "In his time (788-801) it is stated that several Ku-la, or foreign ships were wrecked on the island of Ramree and the people in them said to be Musalmans were sent to Arakan proper." According to local tradition Muslim saints settled in Bengal during the Pala Dynasty

Archaeological evidence is the strongest argument for the presence of Muslim merchants in eighth century Bengal. There is numismatic evidence that Muslim merchants were in contact with eastern Bengal during the Abbasid Dynasty. Coins found at two historically important sites, Paharpur and Mainamati, in eastern Bengal provide a strong argument for the presence of Muslim merchants in these localities during the reign of Harun al Rashid (c. 788 AH 172/788CE – 193H/809CE).²¹ A dirhem of Harun al Rashid was found during excavations at Paharpur, northwest of Bogra) in a Pala period Buddhist monastery. In addition, an Abbasid silver dirhem (mint and date illegible; Caliph not cited) coin was found during excavations at Mainamati.

¹⁸ The land Jazirat-al-Rahmi or *Rahma* is mentioned by Arab geographers Sulaiman al-Tajir, Yaqubi and Ibn al Fakih.

¹⁹ Forster, 2011, pp. 64; Arthur P. Phayre, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XII, Part I, 1844, p. 36; *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, Vol. 2, p. 186.

²⁰ The "Hijra year" (in Arabic: هجـرة) refers to the numbering system used in the Islamic calendar. Years are counted since the *Hijra*, which is when the Prophet Mohammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina, which roughly corresponds to July 622 CE.

²¹ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam -- Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988, p. 41; Suniti Bhushan Qanungo. *A History of Chittagong, Vol. 1 (From Ancient Times Down to 1761*, Chittagong: Billah Printers, 1988, pp. 115; Syed Ali Ashraf. *Muslim Traditions in Bengali Literature*, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1983, p. 19;



Mitchiner and Rhodes conclude that the existence of foreign coinage, struck using precious metal not mined locally, proves the existence of trade and that the coins are likely to have arrived in Bangladesh via maritime trade during the latter seventh or early eighth century.²² The fact that coins were found near the coastal areas of Chittagong would seem to indicate that Muslim merchants were trading with the Karas of Harikela (c. 680 – 910), a maritime trading zone that included Arakan, southeast Bengal, northeast Bengal (Sylhet) and south Tripura.²³ The fact that there are two unrelated archaeological finds suggests that trade was sustained over a period of time. This would indicate that Muslim sailors and merchants were familiar with the Bay of Bengal region in the seventh and eighth century.²⁴

The most likely scenario is that contact between Bengal and the Arabian Peninsula began as a result of maritime trade. According to Prange maritime trade connected the Indian Ocean since the earliest days of seafaring.²⁵ Maritime trade not only brought the exchange of material goods but also religious and cultural interaction. The argument for direct and sustained contact between Bengal and the Arabian Peninsula comes into sharper focus when considered in the context of the Indian Ocean trade network. There is evidence to show that the Arab sea-route followed the line of the coast of Bengal and the Muslim sailors and merchants established commercial relations with sea ports stretching from the southern tip of India and up the Bay of Bengal to the ports of Chittagong (Vardhamanapura) and

²² Michael Mitchiner. *The Land of Water: Coinage and History of Bangladesh and Later Arakan circa 300 BC to the present day*, London: Hawkins Publications, 2000, pp. 76; Nicholas G. Rhodes. "Trade in South-East Bengal in the First Millennium CE: The Numismatic Evidence," In *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal before Colonialism*, Rila Mukherjee (ed.), Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, pp. 263.

²³ Harikela was a geographical entity in ancient Bengal, the identification of which has been a matter of controversy among scholars. Seventh century Indian writers mention an eastern Indian country called Harikela. Yijing, the seventh century Chinese Buddhist monk defined Harikela's position as 'the eastern limit of eastern India'. Unfortunately, neither Yijing nor anybody else has given any details about its exact geographical location. B. N. Mukherjee's research shows that Harikela was situated in the area near Chittagong.

²⁴ Rozali 2006; pp. 111.

²⁵ Sebastian R. Prange. "Like Banners on the Sea: Muslim Trade Networks and Islamization in Malabar and Maritime Southeast Asia" In *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia*, A. Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea (eds.), Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, pp. 26.

Vikrampur (Munshigani).²⁶ There is, however, little consensus of the regularity of these voyages. Raschke and Wheeler contend that the voyages occurred on an irregular basis.²⁷

Literary sources corroborate the numismatic evidence that Muslim merchants had direct contact with Bengal via trade. Huq and Karim use Bengali court literature to trace the arrival of Islam in Bengal and Arakan to the eighth century;

*Islam began to spread to the eastern bank of the Meghna to Arakan since the eighth and ninth centuries AD, long before the establishment of the Muslim kingdom in the frontier region ...*²⁸

Various Arab geographers specifically mention the land *Jazirat-al-Rahmi* or *Rahma* in their writings. This may have been a reference to the kingdom of *Raham* (God blessed land). Abu'l Ibn Khurdadbi, a ninth century geographer and author of *Kitāb al Masālik w'al Mamālik* (*The Book of Roads and Kingdoms*) states that *Jazirat-al-Rahmi* came after Sarandip (Sri Lanka) and included descriptions of animals he observed.²⁹ He also provided a description of the route from India to China. Sulaiman al-Tajir, a ninth century Muslim merchant and geographer records the presence of permanent Muslim trading communities along the Bengal coast from the mouth of Meghna to Cox Bazaar in *Akhbar al-Sin wa'l-Hind* and refers to the Bengal coast as *Ruhmi*.

*These three states (Jurz, Balhara, and Tafak) border on a kingdom called Ruhmi, which is at war with that of Jurz ... Trade is carried on by means of Kauris, which are the current money of the country. They have gold and silver, and the stuff called samara of which madabs are made. The stripped bushan or karkadam is found in this country.*³⁰

Of particular interest to Sulaiman were muslin (fine cotton cloth) and aloe wood. Scholars are divided on if Sulaiman did indeed visit Ruhmi but there seems to be no doubt that Sulaiman's description of Ruhmi can be attributed to Bengal.³¹ Ali al-Mas'ūdī, a tenth century historian and geographer, is the first to record Muslims living in Bengal.³² al-Mas'ūdī describes "The kingdom of Rahma extends both along the sea and the continent. It is bounded by the inland state

²⁶ Rila Mukherjee. *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2006, pp. 25; Muhammad Abdur Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal, Vol. I (1201-1576)*, Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1963, p.37.

²⁷ M. G. Raschke. "New studies in Roman commerce with the East" In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt* II 9.2, 1978, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978, pp. 604-681.

²⁸ Muhammad Enamul Hug and Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad. *Bengali Literature in the Kings' Court of Arakan, 1600 – 1700 AD*, Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons, 1935, pp. ??

²⁹ Arshad Islam. "Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before European Dominance in South and Southeast Asia: A Historical Study," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Vol. LVIII, No. 2, 2008, pp. 16.

³⁰ Henry Miers Elliot and John Dowson. *History of India as told by its own Historians: The Muhammadan Period, Vol. 1*, London: Trübner and Co., 1867, pp. 5

³¹ Abdul Karim. *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538) 2nd ed.*, Chittagong: Baitush Sharaf Islamic Research Institute, 1985, pp. 29.

³² Richard M. Eaton. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 11.

called the kingdom of Kaman.”³³ Kaman is a variant form of Kamrup thus Rahma can be identified with Bengal. His depiction of Southeast Asia stands out for its degree of accuracy and lucidity. Mas’ūdī questioned a wide variety of people whom he met on his travels. Merchants, seamen, scholars and travelers provided him with geographical and historical information, rejecting geographical information and knowledge obtained second-hand.³⁴ The fact that the literary sources support the archaeological evidence would seem to indicate that by the eighth or ninth centuries Arab geographers had direct knowledge of Bengal coastline. This would seem to confirm the thesis that Islam was present in Bengal by the eighth century.

There are different local traditions that locate Muslims in Arakan in the eighth century. The first is the Arakanese Chronicle *Maha-Radza-weng (Chronicle of the Kings)* supplies evidence of a Muslim presence in Arakan in the eighth century during the reign of King Ma-ba-toing Tsan-da-ya (788 – 810). It states that:

*several Ku-la, or foreign ships were wrecked on the island of Ramree
and the people in them said to be Musalmans were sent to Arakan proper.*

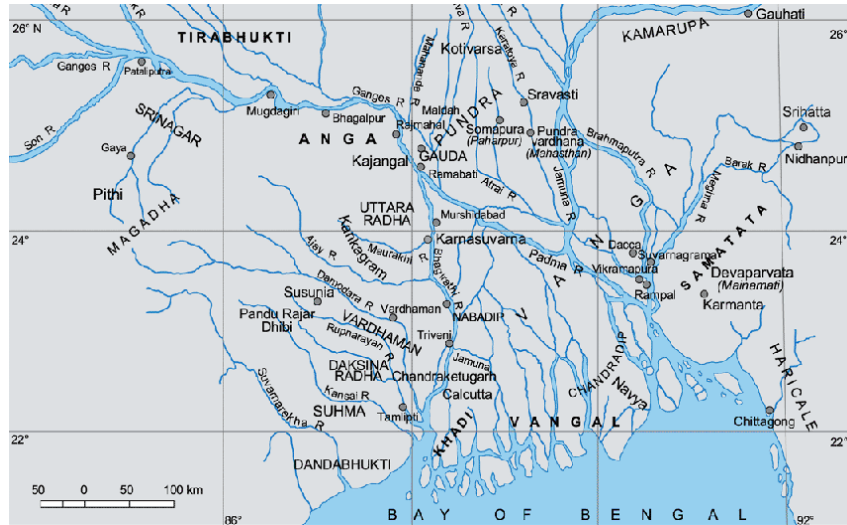
Another local tradition is that Muslim *Sūfī* saints and their followers settled down in Arakan during the time of Hindu kings.³⁵ There are several places in Arakan associated with *Sūfī* saints. The shrines of Babazi Sha Monayem of Ambari and Pir Badr Sha (Badr-Al-din Allamah) are located near Akyab. It can thus be reasonably concluded that the *Sūfī* saints followed the merchants and traders.

Central to understanding of the likelihood that Islam arrived in Arakan at some time in the eighth century CE is the Bay of Bengal trade network and the geography of the Arakan-Bengal continuum. The southeastern Bengal delta is physically indistinguishable from the Arakanese coast as they are linked by numerous intersecting rivers and shallow coastal waters.

³³ Nalini Kanta Bhattacharya. *Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal*, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1922, pp. 143-149.

³⁴ Tarif Khalidi. *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas’ūdī*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975, pp. 3, 5.

³⁵ Rahim, 1963, pp. 47.



In fact, it is impossible to define a clear boundary between southeast Bengal (ancient *Herikala*) and northern Arakan.³⁶ The Arakan-Bengal continuum formed a homogeneous area within the trade networks of the Bay of Bengal.³⁷ The seven rivers that bisect the Arakan-Bengal littoral: the Naf, Mayu, Kaladan, Lemro, Ann, Tangup and Sandoway, are tidal and are navigable year round. These distributaries provided transportation corridors that linked sea-ports with inland river traffic.

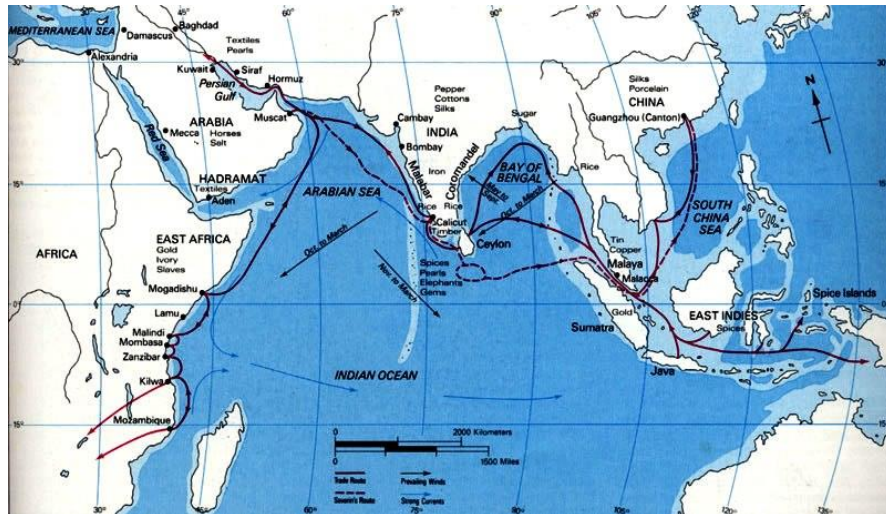
Arab sources give the impression that direct trade with Arakan across the Bay of Bengal was the result of ships blown off course rather than intentional navigation.³⁸ Whatever the case it seems Arab ship captains were familiar with the coast of Arakan and that Muslim traders were not a novelty in Arakan.³⁹ While the identity of the first Muslim merchants is not clear, it is clear there was a trade route passed from Yemen and the Swahili Coast across to the Malibar Coast and then on to the Bay of Bengal by the eighth century.

³⁶ Tilman Frasch "Coastal Peripheries during the Pagan Period," In *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring the Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200 – 1800*, Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider (eds.), Amsterdam: KITLV Press, 2002, pp. 67-68

³⁷ Rila Mukherjee. ed. "Bengal and the Northern Bay of Bengal" In *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, pp. 4

³⁸ Frasch, 2002, pp. 72.

³⁹ Thomas Suarez. *Early Mapping of Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Periplus, 1999, pp. 51.



Indigenous scholars use archaeological records, the references in the geographical records of Arab geographers and merchants that chronicle the presence of Muslim settlements and travels to and from Burma and *The Arakanese Chronicle Maha-Radza-weng (Chronicle of the Kings)* to support their theory of the ethnogenesis of the *Rohingya*.

A Trickle to a Stream?: Migration Theory and the Origin of the *Rohingya*

The absence of archaeological evidence regarding the *Rohingya* in Arakan has led Migration theorists (Khin Maung Saw, 1993; Aye Chan, 2005; Weng, 2009) to maintain that the *Rohingya* are the descendents of Chittagonian Bengali Muslims who migrated from British India to the three townships of northern Arakan – Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung during and after colonial rule as British India as they are closely related in ethnicity, language and culture to the Bengalis in the Chittagong region of Bangladesh.⁴⁰ Aye Chan (2005) argues that the historically porous border region between Burma, Bangladesh and India allowed for the unchecked movement of Muslim laborers – both agricultural and industrial – to Burma in search of work as the British encouraged large scale Bengali immigration to Arakan. By the twentieth century Bengal and Arakan were integrated into one system of interconnected migrations.⁴¹ Given the lack of analysis of colonial documents, can the Migration theorist's *Rohingya* foundation myths be verified or dismissed?

⁴⁰ British India, Chittagong and Arakan were part of the same political entity.

⁴¹ Dirk Hoerder. "Migrations and Belongings," In *A World Connecting, 1870 – 1945*, Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 524.

Intercolonial Migrations

Migration theorists use a disciplined and systematic textual analysis of Arakanese, Bengali, Burmese, Portuguese, and Dutch historiography in order to substantiate their claim that there has never been a *Rohingya* race or ethnic group in as well as a textual analysis of British colonial and post-colonial documents to argue that the *Rohingya* arrived in Arakan at various times during or after the British colonial period and are thus ineligible for Burmese citizenship. Migration theorists use the *Census Reports* of 1871, 1901, and 1911 to show the increase in Muslim population of Arakan. They argue that migrant families would group together by faith and caste thus accounting for the population increase.

Ethnic Groups and Population of Arakan (1871-1911)			
Year (Census)	1871	1901	1911
Ethnic Groups ('Races')			
Muslims	58,000	155,000	178,000
'Arakanese Burmese'	174,000	266,000	300,000
Shan	300	8,060	
'Hill Tribes'	38,000	36,000	34,000
Others	600	1,300	1,000
Total	270,000	458,380	513,060

Source: ⁴² R. B. Smart.

The census shows that the Muslim population of Arakan grew 168% between 1871 and 1901 or at a rate of 5.57% annually.⁴³ This contrasts with a population growth rate of 1.00% to 1.20% per annum in Burma. Burmese growth rates are comparable to the growth rates of the neighboring countries of the Philippines (1.23%), Siam (0.2 – 0.95%), Ceylon (1.15%) and the Indian sub-continent (0.43%).⁴⁴ Taken in this context, the Census Reports seem to validate the Migration theorist's contention that many of the Muslims recorded by the census statistics were transient agricultural

⁴² R. B. Smart. *Burma Gazetteer: Akyab District, Vol. A*, Rangoon: Government Press, 1957.

$$PR = \frac{155000 - 58000}{58000} \times 100 = 5.57\%$$

⁴³ , where PR = Yearly Percent Rate.

⁴⁴ Judith L. Richell. *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2006, pp. 17; D. B. Grigg. *Population Growth and Agrarian Change: An Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 238.

laborers and traders from British India, who migrated to Arakan, and in particular around the capital of Akyab.⁴⁵ The categorization of Muslims of Arakan by British administrators further complicates the issue. British officials classified the immigrants as either Chittagonian or Mahomedan and considered as 'bonafide residents'.⁴⁶

The Dual Etymology of '*Rohingya*'

In order to corroborate the validity of the *Rohingya* origin myth Indigenous theorists employ an etymological analysis to trace the origin of the term *Rohingya*. Chowdhury (1995) and Bahar (2010) contend that the term *Rohingya* is derived from the Arabic word *Rahm* meaning "mercy" and has its origins with the [unintended] arrival Arab traders on shores of Ramree Island in the eighth century.⁴⁷ The myth tells of an Arab ship that wrecked off the Burmese coast and the survivors asked for "*rahm*" (mercy) of the local king. Over time *Raham* changed to *Rhohang* and eventually to *Rohingya*. There is an alternate etymology of *Rohingya* that traces the etymology to Afghanistan or Pakistan. Jahiruddin Alam and Nazir Alam of the Arakan Muslim Conference claim that the term *Rohingya* is actually used to describe the *Ruha* people who migrated from Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Another version of the *Rohingya* etymology is that the '*roh*' in *Rohingya* means 'mountain' in Sanskrit and that the region of mountains in northwest India was known as Roh (Ahmed, 2012). The Persian geographer Rashid al-Din Fadhl-allah Hamadanī (1247–1318) records the first use of *Raham* in this work, *Jami al-Tawarikh* (Rahman 2007; Huq and Karim, 1935). Nonetheless, it is apparent that based on etymological evidence one cannot dismiss Indigenous theorists theory of the origin of the *Rohingya*. It is likely a localization of "Rohang" which is what Muslim merchants and geographers called the Arakanese coast.

Migration theorists attempt to substantiate their version of the origin of the etymology of *Rohingya*. There is yet to be a consensus among Migration theorists on the origins of the *Rohingya* ethnonym but the most radical rendering of migration theory historiography claims that there has never been [the] ethnonym *Rohingya*. Khin (1993), Chan (2005) and Maung Tha Hla (2009) note that the term *Rohingya* was not included in the 1824 census conducted by the British.⁴⁹ Chan (2005), Khin (2011), Leider (2005, 2012) trace the origins of the ethnonym *Rohingya* to the 1950s. Khin claims that the term *Rohingya* was unknown prior to the 1950s and invented by the *Red Flag Communists* to please the

⁴⁵ Aye Chan. 1994, pp. 1.

⁴⁶ Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti). "Myth and History of Bengali Identity in Arakan," In *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring the Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200 – 1800*, Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider (eds.), Amsterdam: KITLV Press, 2002, pp. 199.

⁴⁷ Khalilur Rahman. *Tarik-i-Islam Arakan and Burma*, 2007. (Urdu version) Quoted by Abdul Haque Chowdhury.

⁴⁸ Akbar Ahmed. "The Rohingya: Myanmar's outcasts," *Al Jazeera English*, January 12, 2012; Rozali, Ibnul, 2006, pp. 112.

⁴⁹ Maung Tha Hla. *Rohingya hoax*, New York: Buddhist Rakhaing Cultural Association, 2009.

Mujahid rebels whom they wanted to work with.⁵⁰ Chan argues that the term *Rohingya* was created in 1951 by a *Rohingya* MP from the Akyab North constituency, Abdul Gaffar, in his article “The Sudeten Muslims” in the *Guardian Daily*, an English newspaper in Burma, to describe the Muslims from northwestern Arakan who were the descendents of immigrants from Chittagong who had migrated into Arakan during the British colonial period.⁵¹

In an effort to support the migration thesis that the *Rohingya* are not indigenous to Arakan Chan (2005) and Khin (2011) categorize Muslims residing in Arakan into four categories: 1) the Chittagonian Bengalis living on the Mayo Frontier; 2) the descendents of the Muslim community of Arakan during the Mrauk-U Period (1430-1784) currently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktow townships; 3) descendents of the Arab mercenaries from Ramree Island; and 4) Muslims from the Myedo area of Upper Burma that remained in Arakan following the Burmese conquest in 1784.⁵² In an interview with *The Irrawaddy* Aye Kyaw (1994) asserts that the term *Rohingya* first appeared during the 1960s and derived from the Arakanese word, *Lwintja*, which means leaves falling.⁵³ He supports his theory by employing a textual analysis of the Arakanese and Burmese chronicles as well as Western scholarship to substantiate his hypothesis.⁵⁴

Analysis

The scholarly study of the origins of the *Rohingya* is fraught with the following difficulties. A paucity of new archaeological and/or historical evidence, xenophobic Burmese academic literature, and the proliferation of blogs all contribute to the complexity of the *Rohingya*. Complicating the issue is a spatial problem – the *Rohingya*’s geographical location – spans the porous borderland between the Indo-European and Tibeto-Burmese linguistics worlds as well as the frontier between Islam and Buddhism. The etymology of *Rohingya* is an acknowledgement of their connection to their distant Muslim past predates the British colonial occupation as evidenced by the works of Buchanon (1799) and Valpy (1811). Complicating the issue is that during the colonial period Muslims in Arakan were referred to in many different ways; Muslims, Mohamaden, Chittagonians or Bengalis, Rooinga, Rossawn thus obfuscating the etymological origins of *Rohingya*.

⁵⁰ Khin Maung Saw. “The ‘Rohingyas’, Who are they? The origin of the name ‘Rohingya’”. In Uta Gärtner and Jens Lorenz, (eds.), *Tradition and modernity in Myanmar*, Proceedings of an International Conference held in Berlin from May 7th to May 9th, 1993, pp. 89.

⁵¹ Aye Chan. 2005, pp. 397.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 397.

⁵³ Aye Kyaw. “An Historian Looks at Rohingya” *The Irrawaddy*, 1994.

⁵⁴ Among the sources he uses to substantiate his claim are: Col. Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell. *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary or Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, Calcutta: Rupa and Co. 1990; John F. Cady. *A History of Modern Burma*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958; R. B. Smart. *Burma Gazetteer: Akyab District, Vol. A*, Rangoon: Government Press, 1957

The “*Rohingya Issue*” is a manifestation of the conceptual construct of the post-colonial identity. With ethnic identity central to the *Tatmadaw* efforts to prove its political legitimacy, Muslim leaders in Rakhine State have adopted a similar tact. They have promoted the use of the term ‘*Rohingya*’ to describe themselves as part of their assertion of rights along ethnic lines. The first formal acknowledgement of the ethnonym *Rohingya* dates to 10 March 1950 in an official address by a group of elders from North Arakan to Prime Minister U Nu on his visit to Maungdaw.⁵⁵

The underlying tension between Indigenous theorists and Migration theorists is not of scholarly opinion but of the role of the scholar’s own culture and nation. Much of the literature is marred by ideological bias, ranging from omissions and misinterpretations to misquotations. While no study can be totally free of bias, the degree of bias exhibited in the writings of both sets of scholars is shocking. The propagation of blogs has further polarized the debate about the origins of the *Rohingya*. The sheer proliferation of political blogs has reinforced reader’s beliefs without providing scholarly evidence as bloggers seek to present themselves as professionally objective and/or methodologically sound. While high levels of political participation are considered a vital element to a healthy democracy,⁵⁶ the blogs exemplify the political divide about the *Rohingya*. This had led to pro-*Rohingya* blogs have been hacked by anti-*Rohingya* activists.

While the *Arakanese Chronicles* suggest that a few Arab merchants were shipwrecked on Ramree Island and resettled in the vicinity, no evidence has been found of the settlement. The documented presence of Muslims just north of the Arakan-Bengal continuum in the eighth century does not conclusively link the *Rohingya* with the descendants of the initial Muslim inhabitants mentioned in the *Arakanese Chronicles*, the lack of archaeological or literary evidence does not dismiss this possibility.

The Migration theorists claim that “*Rohingya*” is a recent invention can be dismissed as categorically false. In 1799, Francis Buchanan, a surgeon with the British East India Company, traveled to Burma and met members of a Muslim ethnic group “who have long settled in Arakan [Rakhine], and who call themselves “*Rooinga*” or natives of Arakan.⁵⁷ *The Classical Journal* uses Buchanan’s reference of “*Rooinga*” in the compilation of “A Chart of 10 Numerals in 200 Tongues”.⁵⁸ This would seem to indicate the use of the ethnonym recognizable as *Rohingya* was used by Muslims

⁵⁵ A. F. K. Jilani. *The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their Quest for Justice*, Ahmed Jilani, 1999, pp. 462-463.

⁵⁶ Theda Skocpol. *Diminished Democracy*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003; Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

⁵⁷ Francis Buchanan. “A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire” *Asiatic Researches* 5, 1799, pp. 55.

⁵⁸ A. J. Valpy. *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 4, Vol. 44, 1811, pp. 348.

who had settled in Arakan in the later eighteenth century. Charney (2005a) states that the derivation of *Rohingya* from *Roinga* is very clear. *Roinga* can be traced to the seventeenth century to *Rosanga*.⁵⁹

There is an element of truth in both of the origin myths but the politicization of identity in Arakan has made the study of the *Rohingya* difficult. Whatever the validity of the claims and counterclaims by Migration theorists and Indigenous theorists there is historical evidence to support the theory that there was a Muslim population residing in Arakan since the eighth century.

One Ummah, Different Communities

There are dozens of categories of Muslims beside the *Rohingya* including sub-divisions among the Muslims of Indian origin; the *Chulia* from Tamil Nadu, the *Kaka* from Malabar, the *Pathan* from northwest India and Pakistan and the *Sulti*. Ancient communities such as the *Kaman* who are the descendants of Afghan, Persian and Mughal mercenaries who served Arakanese kings from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and were exiled to Ramree Island are recognized by the Burmese government. *Zerbadees* are descended from Indian Muslim men and Burman Buddhist women and are considered a separate ethnic group. Whatever the extent of the historical *Rohingya* population, there was significant migration from Chittagong to Rakhine during and after the colonial period that self-identified themselves as.

⁵⁹ Michael W. Charney. Buddhism in Arakan: Theories and Historiography of the Religious Basis of Ethnonyms," Paper presented at the *Arakan History Conference*, Bangkok: Thailand, 2005, pp.

Chronology

710	Arakanese receive Islam from the first Arab Muslim merchants to reach Arakan. ⁶⁰
788-809	Dirhem found in Paharpur – issued by Caliph Harun ur-Rashid who reigned from 788 to 809.
788-810	According to the Arakanese chronicle <i>Maha-Radza-weng</i> there were Muslim villages during the reign of King Mahatoing Tsandaya.
851	Sulaiman al-Tajir wrote <i>Silsilat-ut-Tawarikh</i> around 851 that mentions trade routes via the Arakan Yoma.
1247-1318	The Persian geographer Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhl-allāh Hamadānī records the first use of <i>Raham</i> in this work, <i>Jami al-Tawarikh</i> .
1799	Francis Buchanon notes use of the term <i>Rooinga</i> . ⁶¹
1824	<i>Rohingya</i> omitted from the census conducted by the British.
1871	The <i>Census Report</i> records 58,000 Muslims in Arakan.
1901	The <i>Census Report</i> records 155,000 Muslims in Arakan – an increase of 168% since 1871.
1911	The <i>Census Report</i> records 178,000 Muslims in Arakan.
1942-1945	An estimated 40,000 <i>Rohingya</i> fled to Chittagong after repeated attacks by Japanese and Burmese forces.
1948	Burma becomes an independent nation.
1950	U Nu uses the ethnonym <i>Rohingya</i> in an official address to a group of elders during a visit to Maungdaw.
1951	Abdul Gaffae used <i>Rohingya</i> to describe the Muslims from northwestern Arakan who were descendents from immigrants from Chittagong.
1962	Burma's military government deny the <i>Rohingya</i> are an indigenous ethnic group.
1978	An estimated 200,000 <i>Rohingya</i> flee Burma into Bangladesh following Operation <i>Naga Min</i> (Dragon King). ⁶²
1991-1992	Burmese authorities trigger an exodus of some 250,000 <i>Rohingya</i> across the border into Bangladesh.
2002	<i>Rohingya</i> population is estimated between 700,000 and 1,500,000 ⁶³

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⁶⁰ Meer, 1935, Khin Maung Yin. 2005, pp. 64.

⁶¹ Buchanon. 1799, pp. 55.

⁶² ; Mathieson, David Scott. "Plight of the Damned: Burma's Rohingya," *Global Asia*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2009, pp. 88; Amnesty International. *Myanmar – Ethnic Minorities: Targets of Repression*, London: Amnesty International, 2001.

⁶³ M. Smith. *Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change*, London: Minority Rights Group International, 2002, pp. 18.

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