

The Misuses of Histories and Historiography by the state in Myanmar: The Case of Rakhine and Rohingya

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Thanks for inviting me to speak. I am not a lawyer but a historian so my talk will be a little different than the others we listened to yesterday. While everyone else is looking for solutions, I am not doing that necessarily. Ultimately, some look to find solutions in holding Myanmar to account through international law. That's what they can do. When I look at Myanmar I am trying to unravel the ways in which religious haters in the country misuse history to legitimate what they do. As Daniel Taylor's talk indicated yesterday this has a real impact because countries, not willing to accept the stories that constitute genocide are partly influenced by the claims made by Myanmar that the Rohingya are foreigners that they are Bengali.

In the half hour that follows, I will give essentially two seemingly different sub-papers that actually must be viewed together before they can be synthesized into a single three dimensional view. First, I am going to discuss what I think is important about the longterm historical background of the current crisis involving Rakhine and Rohingya, because so much is already going around about more recent decades, the citizenship law of 1982, the Tatmadaw, NLD etc, that I do not have to do that here. Second, I will explain why so much of this crisis is built on historical misunderstanding of Rakhine and Rakhine misunderstanding of history and how people picture history and people in it. I will then wrap all of this up in the end with some brief comments about some of the ahistorical things western academics have been doing in accepting one historical narrative that works against the Rohingya and why I think they are wrong.

I. The Historical Background

We have thousands of years of the human past in Rakhine, a lot of archaeological remains, coins, inscriptions in non-Bamar languages that really give us little more than Sanskrit royal names and titles. There is **nothing** that could serve as a historical story you might relate to students or a lay audience until really the fifteenth century. You have historicised stories that are almost certainly apocryphal.

Then, in the early fifteenth century, the Kingdoms of Ava and Pegu tried to establish cultural hegemony over the Indo-Aryan kingdom of Rakhine, importing kings and queens, courtiers, Buddhist monks, and Bamar settlers. You have a local king supposedly flee to the Muslim world, gain protection from the Sultan of Delhi or Bengal, it changes in different traditions, he teaches them various kinds of war tactics and the sultan sends him back with a Muslim army.

In 1430, we then have Rakhine ruler, supposedly the same guy, who comes back ousts the foreign, Bamar and Mon, invaders, establishes a religiously hybrid court, a sultanate from one perspective, a Buddhist court from another, but from inside the court, both at the same time. As the physical geography and climate favoured approaches to living and ruling, interacting, and community building, social mentalities that were flexible and inclusive, that favored the emergence of ethnically and religiously diverse communities, and states that by European standards would be seen as heterodox and a major source of confusion. Thus, we find lots of evidence that Buddhists and Muslims got along quite well. Certainly, this creation myth of sorts identifies Muslims and the Muslim world as the saviour and protector, not the enemy of Rakhine. That latter role is reserved for Myanmar and the Buddhist political world. The Irrawaddy world is something Rakhine needs saving from.

The new Mrauk-U court relied upon a Muslim army to protect it and its first religious building was mosque, the Santikhan mosque, its kings began using Muslim as well as Buddhist titles and issued coins with the Kalima. More importantly, in a population poor area, the court tried

to build up its labour pool by raiding Bengal and bringing back to Rakhine thousands of Bengali Muslims and Bengali soon-to-be Muslims captive every year. Many of these people were planted in villages along the Kaladan River areas close to the concentrations of Muslims in Rakhine we find today, or up until a year and a half ago, where they grew rice and engaged in other kinds of primary agricultural produce cultivation. By the mid-18th century, observers claimed that 75% of the population of Rakhine south of the Naf, because the Mughals had taken the rest of the region in the 1660s, was of Bengali origin.

When Myanmar conquered Rakhine in 1784-85, it would again try to extend Irrawaddy civilization over it as part of their empire-building. The Myanmar court commissioned state histories that placed Rakhine historically within the orbit of greater Myanmar. Myanmar Buddhism was introduced, court literature and local Buddha images were brought back to the Irrawaddy Valley and so too were tens of thousands of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims unhappy with Myanmar rule both fled to British Bengal, the Buddhists settling in the area that became a big refugee camp, which became known as Cox's Bazaar after Hiram Cox. Absent their own court literature, Buddhist monks from Rakhine rewrote from memory and produced new chronicles in opposition to Myanmar rule, but in doing created a Rakhine history only from their particular point of view, not purposely leaving the Rohingya voice out, but not including it either.

This is what we know from many different sources, but much of this is gradually erased by a new kind of source that emerges after this period, the Bamar-language chronicle of conquest and domination and the Rakhine-Bamar language chronicles of fear and insecurity. Histories are written for particular reasons—and when a great many are written with varying narratives it is a sign that something important is at stake. No one ever asks why the Rakhine were putting together so many histories in the late 18th century—why they were trying to legitimize their historical presence. The Rohingya were like many borderlands peoples an oral and not text-based society and, they had little to complain about, because the main cultural and religious tension at the time was between Bamars and the Rakhine Buddhists—it was intra-Buddhist take that was at stake not any threat from Islam. Muslims were not the chief concern of the Bamars in the late 18th century when they occupied Rakhine. There was no denying their presence—Rakhine of that time had mosques and coins with Muslim motifs. Again, most of the population was believed by the British of the time to have clearly been 75% of Bengali origin. The foundational languages of the area were clearly Indo-Aryan. By contrast, the Buddhist past in Rakhine was in doubt, being under challenge by the Myanmar court. Not needing to compete, the Rohingya did not.

The relics of decades of Rakhine Buddhist insecurity—numerous chronicles that are mutually irreconcilable in which they admitted that their kingdom was founded by a refugee prince coming from India protected by a Muslim army were evidence that the Rakhine desperately wanted to create evidence that they had always been in the region, back to the time of Buddha. Now they claimed that with the presence of so many different chronicles that they did not “know” about an earlier Muslim presence, but they knew, they knew, generations of Rakhine Buddhists have always known. But, over generations, even the most basic truths of one's origins are forgotten (after all, how many of you know who your own great, great grandparents were?).

This is hugely important. It is impossible for us today—lay reader, professional historian, Rohingya or Rakhine-- to provide a historical background to Rakhine without engaging vigorously with the politicised historical narratives that have been in production since the 1780s. Any background provided from whatever angle must be political because every source is a political artefact. So many gaps appear in the documentary record and so many contradictions exist in the “historical” narratives produced by local monks and courtiers from the 1780s there was plenty of space for compilers to act as composers and to fill these with ideas and beliefs of their own time. In other words, we read in chronicles descriptions of the history of Mrauk-U in the 15th century, we are not reading primary sources on that period. We are instead entering the imaginaries of Buddhist monks who lived geographically and temporally far away in Sandoway in the early 19th century. And their perspectives were built on a different society that had spent 40 years under Myanmar rule.

We also have to keep in mind that the Rakhine area we refer to today is not what it was then, but Rakhine has historically been all of the coast eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. So, one problem is that while the Rohingya are real, and they or their forbears were in Rakhine as long as the Buddhist Rakhine were, and are just as indigenous, the terminologies we are must rely upon to discuss them and their history have been subject to significant efforts to engineer them into foreigners.

This contemporary Buddhist monopoly on history might have been balanced out with Rohingya voices if not for another accident of history, the replacement of Myanmar rule with British rule in 1826. The British decided on the basis of orientalist scholarship by Sir Arthur Phayre that Rakhine should be categorised as have one native language, one native race, and one native religion, despite its huge diversity. Although from a Western point of view, you can only be one or the other, local indigenous families probably moved many times back and forth between different ethnic categories, from Rohingya to Rakhine and even to Bamar and back again, depending on the period, the context, and to whom they married. So when Phayre read the Bamar-language chronicles he accepted them as genuine and authoritative and rejected the coins and all the other evidence of Muslim culture and religion as anomalies. Phayre was thus blinded to the fact that Rakhine had been at least since the 15th century a Muslim and a Buddhist land, with a Muslim and a Buddhist court, and that historically, Bamars, Bamar-speakers, Theravada Buddhists from the Irrawaddy Valley were migrating into Rakhine at the same time as Muslim, Bengali-speakers. As Myanmar was gradually annexed by India, Muslims in Myanmar were treated officially as foreigners and not categorised by their local names. So the Rohingya not being recorded in the British colonial censuses of from the 1860s as Rohingya or not was a political choice by a state, not by the Rohingya.

One of the greatest shifts in thinking though was introduced by Buddhist nationalism. Political monks who had accepted Irrawaddy based ordination in Mandalay-dominated sects and local laypeople eager to have greater political clout pulled a historical sleight of hand and turned tables. The Myanmar state, the greatest cultural and religious threat to Rakhine Buddhist regionalism was made an ally. And the Muslims, those who were there before Buddhist immigration and those who indigenised later over time alongside new waves of Buddhist immigration, now became the Other—no longer wanted and the enemy. And the Myanmar state started to eradicate the physical evidence of the Rohingya and tried to Irrawaddy-ize the region in their image, no longer in the image of southern Rakhine Buddhist culture, but now in the image of the Irrawaddy Valley.

II. The Historians' craft and the State of the Field of Rakhine studies

Historians and political scientists who seem to value access to a country more than historical questioning took Rakhine and Bamar Buddhist chronicles and historical claims at face value and wrote materials that validated a much of the Rakhine Buddhist fiction that resulted. And I don't mean this to be insulting by calling it fiction, because I believe that at some level, all history is fiction, imagined, and constructed, because it has to be. We can't talk about the subject until we have imagined it, until we have made a discursive construct that allows us to have something to have a history about. And this has been the nature of debate—this group of scholars pander to religious communalists claiming only things Muslim are fiction and anything Buddhist is fact, because Buddhists hold the power. And these scholars, without admitting what all historians know or should know, is that the Buddhist Rakhine historical record is a political invention, created to oppose the Bamars and then mobilised against the Muslims. If we are to really understand Rakhine, we need to consider everything that has been written, chronicles and secondary literature, as works of fiction that need to be heavily contextualised—we deal with the history of intellectual invention, not the history of dna, a history of indigeneity. In my opinion, any historian who claims that Buddhist Rakhine are the indigenous population of Rakhine is performing professional malpractice and is either so profoundly stupid as to not understand the nature of the historian's craft or maliciously indifferent to the responsibilities that come with calling oneself a historian.

As I have stressed, history is a project of intellectual invention, a *creative process* that makes use of facts and constructions in a new way that is meant to explain why something has happened. I have no doubt that people often genuinely believe what they argue historically, unaware of the creative process of which they are a part. It is in our nature to invent when we tell and then believe when we have told. It's not that we have more facts that make us more confident that we know the past but the flurry of images the visual images increasingly since the end of the 19th century that accompanied the rise of modern history as a discipline. Before, everyone imagined the past as a series of events coloured in by their own imagination. So, for a few thousand years, Julius Caesar could be a million different people, even during the centuries after Shakespeare brought a version of Caesar to life. The still camera and then the motion picture camera started to bring an end to all of that. We could not imagine an Abraham Lincoln to look any other than he was depicted in well circulated photographs. And it was a constant introduction to the same episodes about Lincoln that made us all feel the same Lincoln. But it was the photograph that made him seem as real as a memory from our own childhoods. We then find it increasingly difficult to think of Lincoln any other way, a Lincoln has been locked into our brains. I can definitely say I knew the Lincoln of Steven Spielberg's movie long before it was ever made. I knew the Hitler in Downfall long before that movie was made. I did not know the Django in the Quentin Tarantino movie. Media can be an ugly or an empowering, liberating tool in shaping our historical imaginaries.

How did most Barmars in their mindscape imagine the Rohingya? Most Barmars had never seen a Rohingya when they coloured them in they used what had been depicted as Muslims. Terrorists. Rapists. Invaders. They have only the extremists now, particularly those in control of Myanmar state media, who give them images to fill in the colors. These fictions make the history they have been given in scrawls more real. When these Bamar color in the Buddhist narrative of Rakhine they not see the Rakhine as they are but as they are imagined to be in Mandalay. They are imagined to look at dress and speak and act like other Barmars. But some of us who know Rohingya personally know they do not. This is why memes are so powerful and so dangerous when maliciously distributed among people who do not have actual exposure to a people or evidence of their past. It is an easy thing to take the dates and chronologies and fill in the gaps to form a history of a continual threat to Myanmar Buddhism by the Muslims. All you need is a facebook account.

But I would propose going further when the Barmars look at the Rohingya they imagine them through the history of colonialism. For Barmars the Muslim in Rakhine must be coterminous with the beginning and end of colonial rule. That history. British history. British Indian History. Something that exists between 1824 and 1948. And the Rohingya because they are not in this view part of colonial Muslim group must be something later. Whatever they are they must be post-1948 and neither Bamar nor colonial. The Rohingya suffer in these histories in two ways because as Muslims in Myanmar they are doomed in some conversations as being colonial and in other conversations they are doomed as Rohingya. And, again, as Rohingya they were not included in Bamar or Rakhine chronicles and are thus ahistorical.

Both elements of Bamar constructions of these people are in fact wrong. It is not the chronicle that is evidence. The chronicle is the fiction. The data in them we do not know directly. It is the documentary – written or oral -- fragment that we can longer read or hear directly that is the evidence. And we can never use chronicles as evidence **but only as Buddhist Rakhine thinking about** evidence. By the way, this is true of later colonial-era censuses as well—they are not really evidence of any thing, aside from an example of **British thinking about evidence**. I have to say that astonishingly, as historians we have *pretended* our work is a science when it is not. We are after history as understandings of the past than the past at large. The closest we get at to what actually happened is if we accept our findings to be a kind of archaeology of the past and as we must always fill in the gaps with the guesswork that is history we must always accept that history never provides answers only questions, it is not revelatory only creative in nature, and never justifies the politics of the present however much it is claimed to do so. This is why I stress that history must never be surrendered to those who would use it to do so and it should be the primary objective of any historian to reject the contemporary political abuse of history, just as much today in Myanmar in

2019 as it was in Europe of the 1930s, and the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s.

Thank you for your attention and your time.