

--Text of presentation at the research workshop, "Myanmar's Democratic Transition and the Rohingya Persecution," Oxford University, 11 May 2016

## **State and Society in Arakan since the Fourteenth Century: From Inclusion to Polarisation and Exclusion<sup>1</sup>**

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Thank you for inviting me to talk. I have been asked to provide a brief historical background to today's theme and I am happy to do so. I would like to begin by discussing an immigrant group in Burma and please bear with me for a few moments, before forming any judgments.

There are several things we know about this particular immigrant group. There is **NO EVIDENCE** that they existed before the fourteenth century, or for the language that they used, or for the particular religion that they hold today, or for their particular ethnic culture as it is known today.<sup>2</sup> They appear in Arakan in close association with a foreign court. They are both immigrants and foreigners in the littoral

I am **NOT** referring to the Rohingya, the theme of today's talks, but the Yakhaing Burmese-speakers, the Theravada Buddhists, whose culture, religion, ethnicity, is foreign to the littoral and is predated by the Muslim presence there. Now, having said this, can I step back and argue that I am **NOT** seeking to switch the positions of the Rohingya and the Yakhaing. Instead, I am suggesting that if we apply the same historical method to the Yakhaing that I have seen applied to the historicity of the Rohingya by so much of the "scholarship" on the country in the years since my dissertation,<sup>3</sup> **NO GROUP** in Arakan would pass the test as "indigenous."

The problem is that the history of the Rakhaing Littoral before the fourteenth century and arguably before the fifteenth century is far murkier than a lot of the scholarship would have you believe. What we know is that there was an Indo-Aryan population, speaking in a non-Tibeto-Burman language, writing in an Indic script, building temples and practicing religion that was Hindu-Buddhist along north Indian lines, that was part of the larger

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks to my colleague, Dr. Zarni, and the South Asia Research Cluster, Oxford University, for organizing this event and inviting me to speak.

<sup>2</sup>That is, beyond speculative and artificial reconstructions for tourist or political purposes, particularly when it is clearly Islamophobic.

<sup>3</sup>Michael W. Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan." Ph.D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999).

Bay or Bengal world which was outside of the Irrawaddy world. Then suddenly, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, we have invasions from the Irrawaddy Valley, from the kingdom of Ava and the Kingdom of Pegu, which at the time were engaged in a massive war with each other.<sup>4</sup> And they enter Arakan and place their own kings and queens on the throne and bring in administrators, soldiers, and settlers. And what was there gets transformed by integration with the Irrawaddy Valley, Burmese language appears, Burmese script predominates, Theravada Buddhism appears as a royal cult, Theravada Buddhist monks, and Irrawaddy Valley material culture probably also had its impact.<sup>5</sup>

But even afterward this remained one of many influences and in another murky episode, a new line of indigenous kings, the Mrauk-U Dynasty -- was established in the early fifteenth century, one that saw itself rooted in the Muslim world, one that adopted the *Kalima*, the Muslim confession of faith, that used Persian and Muslim titles, that built mosques as well as pagodas. And this court and culture had space for all, it is not so much syncretic but heterodox, its population not so much homogeneous and exclusivist, but inclusive and heterogeneous, one that is not bigoted but tolerant.<sup>6</sup>

We are blinded to the possibilities of such a place because of the impact of the modern nation state. First, it requires conformity to the contemporary national imaginary, not a partial subscription. For example, although Burma is admitted today as having many ethnic groups, these ethnic groups are essentialized. So that the majority is Theravada Buddhist, Burmese speaking, and Burman, but only in one way, so you can't have different kinds of Theravada Buddhist, Burmese speaking, Burmans, they all have to be a singular type. So whatever is truly Rakhaing, is being viewed, understood, and turned into Yakhaing, losing its regional essence, its independent take on things, and being reworked on an Irrawaddy Valley template, what I have called in the past Irrawaddyization.<sup>7</sup> Now, this is one

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<sup>4</sup>Michael W. Charney, "A Reinvestigation of Konbaung-era Historiography on the Beginnings of the Relationship Between Arakan and Ava (Upper Burma)." *Journal of Asian History* 34.1 (2000): pp. 53-68.

<sup>5</sup>Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan."

<sup>6</sup>Michael W. Charney, "Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rakhaing Under the Early Mrauk-U Kings, c. 1430-1603." *Journal of Burma Studies* 3 (1998): pp. 1-33.

<sup>7</sup>Irrawaddyization is a term I coined in 1999 (published in 2002) in Michael Charney, (2002) 'Beyond State-centered Histories in Western Burma, Missionizing Monks and intra regional Migrants in the Arakan Littoral, c. 1784-1860.' In: Gommans, J., & Leider J. (eds.), *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial*

problem of the modern nation-state for Rakhaing, making things look like the Irrawaddy Burmans. This is not an uncommon problem, because it replicates similar developments in other countries around the globe as part of the development of the nation-state

Second, the nation-state and the expansion of what some have called state space, was also accompanied by the eradication of preexisting *governmentalities* and what I would like to call,<sup>8</sup> if you would allow, *socialmentalities* or *culturalmentalities*. These are approaches to socializing, building local societies and cultures that are in communication with environmental constraints and opportunities. If we look back into the early days of Rakhaing -- and I assert that Rakhaing per se preexisted the Theravada, Burmese speaking, Burman culture that has appropriated the term today -- we again find a people whose culture was directed at inclusion and diversity, the kind necessary to keep a land in a challenging, unforgiving climate populated and this was very challenging indeed.<sup>9</sup> And a very small population, minute by Irrawaddy Valley standards, was built and maintained by attracting Muslims and Hindus, Buddhists of all varieties, and Europeans, giving them space, the court patronizing all of their gods, and developing a court culture that reflected a wide political, cultural, and religious remit.

And this **ENTIRE** littoral, not just the half lying south of the Naf River is Rakhaing. This *socialmentality* was eradicated sometime after the Burman conquest in 1784/85. What many of those writing about the history of the region in recent years do not tell you is that most of the Burmese-language historical sources in Rakhaing were written after the Burman conquest. So, when something is not found in European or Persian language sources, that is when it comes from a Burmese language chronicle, it relates Rakhaing's *socialmentality* as it stood after 1785. And we find that with

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*Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800*. KITLV Press, pp. 213-224. I used Irrawaddyization to refer to the process in which regional Theravada Buddhist culture was "reformed" to look like Buddhism as defined by the norms and teachings of the Irrawaddy Valley, Burma proper. This has included the reconstruction of Buddhist temples to look like those of Pagan. The process, going back to the 1780s, has led some Arakanese Buddhists to forget that they have a great heritage that is independent of that of Pagan-originated Burma. That culture once held that it was Arakan that fostered the growth of Pagan and not vice versa. [The term has since been used by other scholars. See, for example, Stephane Dovert, \*Les Rohingyas de Birmanie\* \(edite sous le pseudonyme de Gabriel Defert. \*Aux lieux d'être, Mondes contemporains\*, 2007: p. 108.](#)

<sup>8</sup>On governmentalities, see Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michael Foucault* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991): pp. 87-104.

<sup>9</sup>Vide Chapter 1 of my dissertation.

each new chronicle that the coverage of pre-1785 Rakhaing makes the latter look more and more like the Irrawaddy Valley Burma and British India. The Rakhaing look increasingly like Theravada Buddhist, Burmese-speaking Burmans are supposed to look, what we might call Yakhaing rather than Rakhaing. And those who look different are portrayed increasingly as troublesome outsiders. The Rohingya go from fellow villagers to Mohammedans, to Bengalis, to Bengali marauders. And the presence of the Yakhaing culture is stretched back into the immeasurable depths of the past.

And it is this effort, the remaking of Rakhaing into a nativist **Yakhaing Imaginary** that is behind the recasting that continues today. Archaeological sites, texts, and other sources are being remade or expunged to develop a historical record that emphasizes an unchallenged cultural and religious homogeneity to the region — Arakan as part of a greater Myanmar. This is an imaginary that has eased Arakan's integration into the Myanmar nation-state but has simultaneously undermined Arakanese society itself and miscast an area of movement, inclusion, and immigration into one of stasis, exclusion, and closure. This is an imaginary that claims that the term Rohingya is a postwar invention by Muslim separatists, but in fact it is not.<sup>10</sup>

I should stress that when we look at the beginning of this process at some of the only reliable documentation from the period, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as Francis Buchanan's diary and other writings, we find that he says quite clearly: "the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan... call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan."<sup>11</sup>

There has been a lot of effort to cover this up or reject it, but there is no getting around this. You have a source from that time period, whose account was published in a journal from that time, in which the author writes that the Muslims of the Burman Empire call themselves Rohingya or natives of Arakan. This is as crystal clear as a historical source can get, 1799, Rohingya was a term used by the Muslims that meant to them the natives of Arakan. There is no genuine controversy over what this term means, what it meant, when it was said, it did not come from the 1940s or the 1950s, it was not an invention of political provocateurs. Any attempt to dismiss this kind of evidence works to obscure the truth, not reveal it. No good historiography would suggest otherwise.

By the way, this was something I had found and actually republished in the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* back in 2003. It has been up online

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<sup>10</sup> This claim that Rohingya is a postwar invention is, quite frankly, **patently absurd**.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Buchanan. "A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire." *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1799): 219-240 republished in the SBBR. *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1.1 (Spring 2003) ISSN 1479-8484

ever since in free to download PDF and there is no excuse, no excuse for anyone, anywhere, legitimately disputing the historicity of Rohingya, depriving an ethnic minority of their own self-referents. The main point is that we have had Rohingya as long as we have had Rakhaing perhaps and certainly longer than we have had the Irrawaddy Valley replicants, the Yakhaing.

This short presentation has tried to highlight some of the major elements of this change, from a religious and culturally heterogeneous immigrant society on the crossroads of Bengal and Burma to one that has been misimagined by some as a sort of Theravada Buddhist Burman nativist bastion on the frontiers of the Muslim world.

I do stress my point is not to undermine Rakhaing Buddhists, but to point to the shared immigrant nature of the entire population of the littoral, the shared and relative recentness to the emergence of the Rakhaing and Rohingya ethnic and religious communalism of today. I would sincerely like to remind them of the true Rakhaing past and its inclusive and heterogeneous orientations. And of the historical harmony that existed before the emergence of the modern nation-state, a process begun by the way with British rule in 1824 and not from 1948. I also wish to highlight the historicity of the term Rohingya, as legitimate and older than the Yakhaing identity proffered today by those who would seek to undermine a region's unique culture and history.