

THE ORIGIN OF ISLAMIC RELIGION IN MYANMAR

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, officially The Republic of The Union of Myanmar is one of the Southeast Asia countries. Myanmar is the 40th largest country in the world¹ as well as the second largest country in Southeast Asia.² Myanmar is also the 24th most populous country in the world with over 53.9 million people.³ Myanmar is the pluralist country; there are many ethnic groups belonging to different religions: Muslims, Hindus and Christians, living together and its majority race is Myanmar (formerly known as Burmese) who are majorly Buddhists. According to the Myanmar official statistics, the main religions of the country are Buddhist 89.2%; Christianity 5%, Islam 3.8%; Hinduism 0.5%; Spiritualism 1.2% and others 0.2%⁴. However the World Factbook of CIA shows Buddhist 89%, Christian 4%, Muslim 4%, animist 1% and other 2% of the population.⁵

1. THE ADVENT OF ISLAM IN MYANMAR

The first and classic written history of Myanmar, which is called *Maha Rajaweng*, has shown that Muslims first arrived in Myanmar around AD 1050. It is believed that the first Muslims were brought as captives of war by some of the early Myanmar kings. Then they were allowed to settle down in the kingdom, and were allowed to serve in the royal army in the kingdom because they were intelligent and strong.⁶ They later got married to Myanmar women and their population gradually increased. When their population increased, the king let them be governed by their own laws and appoint their own judges from within their communities.⁷

¹ Burma. (20.12.201), *The World Factbook*. (Central Intelligence Agency).

<<http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>>.

² Asian Development Bank & Myanmar. (08.0.2010), http://www.adb.org/Documents/Fact_sheets/Mya.Pdf

³ Burma. (20.12.2011), *The World Factbook*. (Central Intelligence Agency).

<<http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>>.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Religion", About Myanmar (Retrieved on 20.12.2011) www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/religion.html

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, Burma (20.12.2011)

⁶ Yegar, Moshae at 2

⁷ Let Ware Nawrattha & Twin Thin Taik-wun. *The Chronicles of Alaungpaya Battle*, (Yangon; Myanmar, 1961) at 12

The second category of Muslims in Myanmar is the Indian Muslims who migrated into Myanmar as a result of colonisation and annexation. When Myanmar was colonized by the British, it was governed by British India and many Indians migrated into Myanmar and settled in several places. Many of these Indians were Muslims and as a result, the Muslim population tremendously increased.⁸ Therefore, Islam and Muslims have a long history in Myanmar although there is no clear evidence of the application of Islamic personal law until the third Myanmar Empire. Nevertheless, Islamic personal law is believed to have been applied in Muslim communities for a long time. Then it has been apparently developed in British colonial rule.⁹

1.1. Prehistoric Period

The early occupiers of what is present-day Myanmar were described by the Europeans as the Birman or Barman or Burmese people.¹⁰ They lived mainly in the hinterland and along the river course of Irrawaddy.¹¹ Before the civilisation era, they had no religion but they worshiped invisible beings called *Nat* and they strongly believe that invisible *Nat* ruled their daily lives.¹² Gradually, they had interactions with and were influenced by the Aryan immigrants and Kshatriyas from Northern India who introduced Buddhism.¹³

Meanwhile, as the history of how Buddhism was introduced into Myanmar is clear to a large extent, the history of introduction of Islam and the advent of Muslims in Myanmar fluctuates. According to a part of Myanmar history, the first sign of the entrance of Muslims in Myanmar was during the reign of king *Bhinnaka*, a descendant of king *Kan Raja Nge*, one of the two sons of king *Abhi Raja*, who was reported to come from northern India to settle in

⁸ Yegar, Moshe at 29-31

⁹ Researcher's experience as a law student and lawyer.

¹⁰ Phayre, P. Arthur. Sir, at 2

¹¹ *Ibid.*, at 7

¹² *Ibid.*, at 2

¹³ *Ibid.*

Irrawaddy and established the *Tagaung* dynasty and is reputed as the first king in Myanmar.¹⁴ *Kan Raja Nge* succeeded *Abhi Raja* on the demise of the latter and he was succeeded by several other kings until the reign of *Bhinnaka* when the *Tagaung* dynasty was destroyed by invasions of the people known as *Taruk* and *Taret*, who were believed to be Chinese and Manchu from the east.¹⁵ According to historical evidence left by these invasions, the invaders were considered to be Muslim although there is no hint that they introduced Islam or imposed Islamic personal law on the Myanmar people.

According to another side of Myanmar history, the earliest Muslims in Myanmar arrived as seamen who traded and settled down in the coastal regions of *Rakhine* and lower Myanmar at around the ninth century A.D. as well as the Persians who arrived at the border of Myanmar and likewise the *Yunans* who were believed to be Chinese Muslims who arrived as early as A.D 860.¹⁶ However these facts are handed down as oral history, there was not yet any record in written history of Myanmar verifying their veracity.¹⁷ Yet, another part of the story relates that one *Sayed Mohammad al-Hanafea* who was believed to be one of the descendants of Caliph Ali was the first Muslim to arrive in Myanmar around A.D 680.¹⁸ Mohammad was believed to have attacked Queen *Kaya Pari* in *Maungdaw* and after defeating her in battle, converted her and followers to Islam before marrying her. However, the arrival of *Sayed Mohammad al- Hanafea* to Myanmar is not contained in any written document, though his tombs and his wife's tombs still exist on the peaks of *Mayu* hills near *Maungdaw* region, western part of Myanmar.¹⁹ Except for his tomb, there was no specific record of Islamic religions and Muslims in this period.

¹⁴ Ibid., at 7

¹⁵ Ibid., at 8

¹⁶ Yegar, Moshe at 2

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ezati, Abu al-Fazi, at 481, 482

¹⁹ Ibid.

1.2 Time of the First Myanmar Empire

After passing through several Monarchy states era, at about eleventh century AD, *Anawrahta* became the king of *Pagan* and he recovered the ancient *Tagaung* dynasty which had been conquered by dynasties of *Shan* and *Mon Talaing*. *Anawrahta* was recognized as the first Myanmar Emperor because he merged several city states to one kingdom. Since then, the kingdoms of the delta and the adjoining districts of the east became subject to Myanmar. The Emperor also imported Buddhism into his kingdom from *Mon dynasty* and declared Buddhism as the official religion in his kingdom.²⁰

The arrival of Muslims in this period is registered in history. The very first Muslims to be mentioned in Myanmar chronicles called *Maha Rajaweng*, were the two sons of an Arab merchant named *Byat Wi* and *Byat Ta* who reached the lower part of Myanmar which was ruled by the *Thaton* king in AD 1050.²¹ They were rescued from their vessel on the shores of Martaban and were detained as refugees and imprisoned at the monastery of the *Thaton* Kingdom. Then the *Thaton* king became suspicious that they would want to wrest his power as they were strong and brave therefore he made arrangements to kill them. Although the elder brother, *Byat Wi*, was killed, the younger brother, *Byat Ta*, managed to escape from the king of Thakon to the *Pagan* king *Anawrahta*. *Anawrahta* loved him dearly and kept him near owing to his bravery and strength when he reached to Pagan dynasty. *Byat Ta* married Myanmar women and left two sons named *Shwepyin Gyi* and *Shwepyin Nge* who were cherished as the king's grandchildren and became royal horsemen in the king's military.²² In addition, the army of *Anawrahta* already had some Indian units and bodyguards who were apparently Muslims.²³ There is no manifestation of the Islam and no record of Islamic personal law of this period.

²⁰ Phayre, P. Arthur, Sir at p.22- 23

²¹ Yegar, Moshe at 2

²² Ibid., at 2

²³ Ibid., at 9

The second mention of Muslim in the chronicles of Myanmar is *Yaman Khan* (Rahman Khan)²⁴ of the days of King *Sawlu* (1077-1088) who succeeded his father *Anawrahta* to the throne. At the reign of king *Anawrahta*, he appointed a royal teacher who is an Arab Muslim for his son, Prince *Sawlu* at his young age. When Prince *Sawlu* became a king, he appointed the son of his royal teacher as well as his childhood friend *Yaman Khan*, as a Governor of *Pegu* city which was under his territory. *Yaman Khan* soon revolted, took King *Sawlu* as his prisoner and he had him put to death then he marched to the capital *Pagan* to capture the kingdom but he was defeated and killed by *Kyanzittha*, *Sawlu*'s brother.²⁵ After king *Sawlu*'s death, *Kyanzittha* became a king of the Pagan dynasty, the core Muslim settlement in the interior of Myanmar obviously started during his reign. He was well known as the mighty king among neighbouring countries because he used to occupy those countries and he took many captives into his countries from several kingdoms whenever he won the battles. Among them, there were many Muslims and the King let them settle in various places throughout his kingdom.²⁶

In 1277, Myanmar was opposed by another Muslim force from the eastern part of China. They were well known like the armies of *Khublai Khan* which was led by a Turkish Muslim commander, the son of the Governor of *Yunan*, according to records. They occupied the upper part of Myanmar, and they attacked *Pagan* for several years. Later, between 1285 and 1287, the *Pagan* dynasty was brought to an end²⁷ and the First Myanmar Empire fell into pieces. However this conquest left no mark of Islam upon Myanmar at all. Finally, though a lot of Muslims have settled in several part of Myanmar since the first Myanmar Empire, there are still silent on Islam and Islamic personal law in this era.

²⁴ Myanmar used to write "Ra" as "Ya" according to Myanmar consonant. When the time passed pronunciation also changed from "Ra" to "Ya." Then he was noted as a criminal, so "Nga" is being put in front of his name according to the tradition of Myanmar. Therefore his name was well known as Nga Yaman Kan in the history of Myanmar.

²⁵ Yegar, Moshe at 3

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

1.3. Time of the Second Myanmar Empire

Since the reign of king *Anawrahta*, lower Myanmar had been ruled by its own kings however they were annexed to the *Anawrahta*'s Myanmar Empire. When *Pagan* Empire fell, the lower Myanmar dynasty became strong and spread its power to the neighbouring kingdoms, and King *Bayintnaung* (1550-1581), the founder of the second Myanmar Empire is a famous in history of Myanmar.

According to travellers' records, many Muslim merchants, traders, sailors and their activities could be found in coastal cities of Myanmar such as *Tenasserim*(*Taninthayee*), *Mergui* (*Myeik*) and lower part of Myanmar like *Bessein* (*Pathein*), *Pegu* (*Bago*), *Syriam* (*Thanlyin*), *Rangoon* (*Yangon*)and *Dela* (*Dala*) at that time. Businesses of these regions were apparently controlled by Muslims with their remarkable ability for work and wealth-generation. Then, they became influential in the administration of the towns because of their superior business skills and wealth.²⁸ At that time, Muslims were encouraged to marry local women by the governors but they were not allowed to take their wives and children together with them when they sailed back when weather is fine. For this reason, some of them did not go back and some also served in the king's army. As the years passed; the number of Muslims in Myanmar increased gradually by mix-marriages and new arrivals of Muslim traders and adventurers.²⁹

At that time, Muslims of Myanmar were well known as *Pathee* or *Kala* and they lived in separate quarters called *kaladan*³⁰ which means place of foreigners, residence conferred by the king.

Thereafter, a lot of Muslim communities existed in Myanmar and some of them had served in the Myanmar army. Therefore, the kingdom of *Bayintnaung* was boasted of among neighbouring countries because of his army which had many Muslim soldiers. In addition, the

²⁸ Ibid., at 4

²⁹ Ibid., at 4-7

³⁰ the place of Muslims which was given by the King

king brought his own artillerymen from India during the second war against Thailand in 1568-69, then, they were soon granted the right to settle and marry Myanmar women inside his Empire.³¹ Similarly, Muslims prisoners who had been brought from various wars were also permitted to settle in Upper Myanmar, near *Myedu* in the *Shwebo* District by Myanmar kings in the sixteenth century. Before long, they were allowed to live in neighbouring districts such as *Sagaing*, *Yamethin* and *Kyaukse* as they received lands as payment for their services to the king because they had served like musketeers to the palace guard and this service was passed to their descendants like an inheritance according to the royal decree.³²

The period of Muslim history in Myanmar as well as Muslim sea monopoly in Asia had come to an end at the beginning of the sixteenth century with the appearance of European sailors and this area was monopolized by those Europeans.³³ As mentioned above, there is no doubt that Muslims had settled in Myanmar and had spread all over the whole country in the second Myanmar Empire but there is no record how they practised Islam and observed Islamic personal law.

1.4. Time of Third Myanmar Empire

The Second Myanmar Empire fell after the conquest by King *Alaungpaya*, who was mentioned as the founder of the third Myanmar Empire in history because he restored the power of Myanmar Empire, defeating the Mon dynasty of lower Myanmar, India and Rakhine; and found the *Konbaung* dynasty which was well known as the last dynasty of Myanmar.

At the beginning, *Alaungpaya* had attacked the Mon dynasty where Muslims armies had defended on behalf of the King of Mon. When *Alaungpaya* won the battle, the whole Mon dynasty was captured, Muslim soldiers and Muslim artillery men of this kingdom were brought

³¹ Yegar, Moshe at 10

³² *Ibid.*, at 10-11

³³ *Ibid.*, at 8

back to *Kongbaung* dynasty. Thereafter Muslims were allowed to settle in the district of *Shwebo* and *Yamethin* which were governed under the Myanmar Empire and they were later authorized to serve in the Myanmar army.³⁴ In consequence, the population of Muslims in Myanmar apparently increased and Muslims of these regions and their descendants are called *Mydu kala* or *Kula byo* or *Pathee*.³⁵

Muslims in Myanmar were distributed in small groups and they were allowed to settle in several villages of the Myanmar kingdom to prevent the formation of a strong Muslim force which might threaten the integrity of the kingdom. Therefore, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, there had already been several Muslim communities who assimilated into Myanmar surroundings with language, dress and customs in all the principal cities of Myanmar by obtaining their eminence not only in military service but also in administrative posts.³⁶

During the third Myanmar Empire, in the reign of *Padon Min* who was known as *Bodawpaya* (1781-1891), one of the successors and son of *Alaungpaya*, the Muslim was appointed as a chief justice. Also at the time of King *Pgan Min* (1846-1853), the governor of *Amarapura*, the capital of kingdom was filled with Muslims. Besides, in the days of the penultimate Myanmar king *Mindon* (1853-1978), there were thousands of Muslims who were granted various administrative posts in the kingdom like soldiers and officers. They lived in separate quarters bestowed by the kings and there were Muslim officials, bearing the title of *Kalawun*,³⁷ appointed by the king to administrate them. They had been living absorbed into their surroundings with language, custom and dress, except they had retained their religion everywhere in the Empire.³⁸ Whenever the British invaded Myanmar, Muslims in Myanmar

³⁴ Let Ware Nawrattha & Twin-thin Taik-wun, *The Chronicles of Alaungpaya Battle*, (Yangon; Myanmar, 1961) at 77, 98, 99

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Yegar, Moshe at 11-13

³⁷ Minister of foreign dwellings

³⁸ Yegar, Moshe at 12

had also participated; in every Anglo-Myanmar war on behalf of Myanmar kings throughout history.³⁹

On the other parts of Myanmar, the Chinese Muslim community coming from the *Yunan* district, in the western part of China, bordering Myanmar had gradually come into the country. They were known as *Panthay* and set up in different places in the eastern part of Myanmar called *Shan* State. The majority of them had reached Myanmar as traders, muleteers and refugees following the collapse of *Panthay* revolution against Chinese emperors in 1856-1873 and their arrival had been apparently stopped only in 1950 when *Yunan* was controlled by the Chinese communists.⁴⁰

Therefore, it can be noted that, Islam appeared overtly and Islamic personal law has been properly applied in the third Myanmar Empire. However the application of Islamic personal law had been silent after the reign of king *Bodawpaya*, it was understood that the Islamic personal law to be applied in Muslim communities of Myanmar.

1.5. Islam in the Rakhine Region

Myanmar kings enlarged their Empires by conquering many of their neighbouring kingdoms such as Rakhine, Mon, Manipur and Thailand. Rakhine is one of the regional kingdoms that formed part of the historic empire and now Union of Myanmar. Although, Rakhine was frequently occupied by Myanmar kings, it has however been ruled as a semi-autonomous kingdom. But Myanmar kings ruled these places like subordinate states under Myanmar Empire because these regions were not controlled by the Myanmar army. Therefore, the Islam of the Rakhine region will be presented separately including all eras.

³⁹ Ibid., at 10-11

⁴⁰ Ibid., at 46

Firstly, in 1404, king *Narameikhla* who ruled the *Arakan* or Rakhine region was forced to flee to Gaur, the capital of Bengal Sultanate which had been ruled by a Muslim since 1203 AD because the king of the first Myanmar Empire invaded it.⁴¹ *Narameikhla* was welcomed by Bengal Sultan Ahmed Shah and he served as an officer in the king's army when he reached Bengal. Long after, in 1430, *Narameikhla* requested Nadir Shah who succeeded to the place of Sultan Ahmed Shah, to help to regain his throne in Rakhine and Nadir Shah granted an army under the command of a general *Veli Khan* to try to re-conquer.⁴²

When the throne was got back, *Narameikhla* founded a new kingdom and moved the capital of the kingdom to *Mrohaung* or *Mrauk U*, well known as *Myauk U* nowadays. In return, Muslim soldiers who came from Bengal together with *Narameikhla* and helped to get back the throne were allowed to settle in a village near *Myauk U* and built the *Sandikhan* mosque which exists till today as the king's reward.⁴³ Therefore, it was mentioned in the history of Rakhine that the influence of Muslims on this kingdom started from this period because Muslims played a decisive role, and the Rakhine kingdom has been closely connected with the Muslim territories to the west since then.

After the death of *Narameikhla*, Rakhine started to expand its territory to the north and regularly raided Bengal.⁴⁴ Therefore, the administrative methods and Court ceremonies of Rakhine kingdom had elements of the custom of Gaur and Delhi sultanates and there were a lot of outstanding posts held by Muslims although the kingdom was Buddhist.⁴⁵ Besides, in the 16th century, Portuguese had helped the Rakhine kingdom to raid Bengal. The Muslims of Bengal had been captured and were forced to serve in the Rakhine army, as the king's bodyguards.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid., at 18

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Majumdar, R.C, Hindu Colonies in the Far East, (Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers, 1944) at 201- 212.

⁴⁵ Yegar, Moshe at 19

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Moreover in 1658, the Mogul Prince, elder son of Mogul Emperor *Shah Jahan* had dethroned his father and declared himself as Emperor. The second son of *Shah Jahan* named *Shah Shuja* had fled together with his family and followers to the Rakhine because he had been defeated by his elder brother. The king of Rakhine welcomed them and permitted them to live near *Myauk U*.⁴⁷ The family of *Shah Shuja* and some of his followers were soon murdered by the Rakhine king although no one knows the true cause, and some soldiers who escaped the massacre were later admitted to the king's bodyguard as a special archery unit called *Kaman* or *Kamanci*.⁴⁸ When the Emperor of the Mogul Empire, the elder brother of *Shah Shuja* heard of the death of his brother and the royal family, was upset and the Portuguese-Rakhine pirates on the east Bengal coast, their navies and settlement on Bengal land were put to an end. At the same time, Rakhine army units were also attacked by local Muslims, descendants of the Muslim slaves who had been settled on the land and the Rakhine kingdom was put up to an end, as a result.⁴⁹

When the Rakhine king died in 1684, it marked the beginning of the kingdom in which Muslim *Kaman* units took part in the conclusive roles in this region and the Muslim units were reinforced by Afghan mercenaries from northern India. Therefore, the political rule and administration of the Rakhine kingdom were totally in the hands of Muslims between 1666 and 1710 AD. But the power of Muslims was taken over by the Arakanese king who succeeded the former king in 1710 AD. Most Muslims were exiled to *Ramaree* and other villages near *Akyab* which is known as *Sittwe* now, and still bears the name *Kaman*.⁵⁰

In addition, Rakhine was conquered again by the Myanmar king and it was annexed to Myanmar Empire again in 1785 AD. The Myanmar army which comprised of Muslims called

⁴⁷ Hall, D.G.E., *A History of South-East Asia*, (London: Macmillan, 1958) at 338-339

⁴⁸ Harvey, G.E., *History of Burma: From the Earliest Time to 10 March 1924, the Beginning of the English Conquest*, (London: Longmans, 1925) at 147

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Hall, D.G.E at 341.

Myaedu was posted to *Sandoway*, *Thandwai* of today, as Myanmar's standing army when Myanmar won the Rakhine kingdom. Descendants of these Muslims have been living in this region through the years and they cannot be differentiated from Rakhine and Myanmar except by religion.⁵¹ Nowadays all Rakhine Muslims, who are descendants of *Kaman* and *Myaedu* are assimilated with the native people and call themselves *Rohinga* or *Rohinja*.⁵²

Finally, it may be concluded that evidence of Islam in the Rakhine region has appeared since 15th century A.D however there is no recorded evidence of Islamic personal law except perhaps in the observances.

1.6. Islam in Myanmar during the Colonial period

At the time of the *Konbaung* dynasty, the British invaded Myanmar three times. The southern and western parts of Myanmar which include *Tenasserim* and *Rakhine* were annexed to British India after the first Anglo-Myanmar war in 1824-1826. Then Indian immigrants gradually reached parts of Myanmar. The second Anglo-Myanmar war took place in 1852 and all the delta region of Myanmar up to the part of *Pegu* was again occupied by the British and Indian immigrants; Muslims were thus brought into Myanmar. The total conquest of Myanmar took place in 1885 after the third Anglo-Myanmar war, and the whole of Myanmar was governed as a province of British-India Empire. As a result, many Indians moved into Myanmar, not only as immigrants but also as residents moving from one district to another inside the land. Not only Yangon, but many other towns and villages in Myanmar were inhabited by Indians, mainly Muslims.⁵³

When Indian immigrant increased, there were problems between native Myanmar and Indian Muslims, mainly because of business monopoly and mixed-marriages. The most

⁵¹ Tydd, W.B., *Sandoway District Gazetteer*, Vol. A, (Rangoon, 1912) at 19

⁵² Yegar, Moshe at 25

⁵³ *Ibid.*, at 29-31

important result of the interfaith marriages between Indian Muslim men and Myanmar Buddhist women was the creation of a new class of mixed- race people, called *Zerbadees* and their community increased greatly and rapidly.⁵⁴ However, as they were only half-blood Myanmar, they were not accepted as a part of Myanmar nationality, and they have been treated as semi foreigners by the native people.⁵⁵ Besides, Indian immigrants, coming from all parts of India arrived yearly in large numbers although not all of them settled in the country.

As a result of the above events, some Muslim immigrants settled in Myanmar, and they maintained their ties and organized themselves according to their native places in India languages and Muslim schools of law. Early in the twentieth century, Indian associations including Indian Muslims associations were formed in Yangon and later were formed in other parts of Myanmar. As a result, separate Indian Muslim associations appeared in Myanmar like *Cholia* Muslim Association, *Surathi* Muslim Association but they gathered only for religious purposes and community's affairs.⁵⁶ Therefore, there is no doubt that the population of Muslims has apparently increased and Islam has developed in Myanmar in the British colonial era.

1.7. Pre-independence and Post-Independence period

After years passed, Myanmar Muslim community had also founded several organizations because in the wake of the Indian community organizations in Myanmar. Among these, the Burma Muslim Society (BMS) which was formed on December 12, 1909 has remained the only organization of Myanmar Muslims for many years. It was formed to represent Myanmar Muslims but many Indian Muslims enrolled and it was described as a Myanmar-Muslims or

⁵⁴ Ibid. 33-35

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Zerbadees or Indian Myanmar. It was formed not only for religious purposes but also for political ones, especially to voice the position of Myanmar Muslims on political issues.⁵⁷

The BMS had demanded the protection of Myanmar Muslims, especially to get separate representation on the Legislative Council. On January 26, 1929, BMS submitted its memorandum to the Royal Statutory Commission which was known as Simon Commission stating that Myanmar Muslims were the descendants of immigrant merchants, soldiers and others who had settled in Myanmar for hundreds of years ago, therefore they had the same rights as descendants of any other racial group, to be considered as true Myanmar even though not practising the same religion.⁵⁸

In 1920-1930, Myanmar nationalist movements had led to separation of Myanmar from India. As the result of this movement, Myanmar was separated from India in 1937. BMS however urged Myanmar Muslim to get the minority rights. Muslims had not been granted separate representation in the Government of Myanmar Act which was passed by the British Parliament in 1935 and came into effect in 1937. Then, BMS called on all Muslims residing permanently in Myanmar to register as “Myanmar Muslim” but the government did not accept this category and Myanmar Muslims were listed as “*Zerbadee*” or “*Arakan Muslim*” or “*Kamans*” or “*Myaedu*” under the category of “Myanmar-Indian Races”.⁵⁹

The General Council of Burmese Muslim Associations (GCBMA) was the second Myanmar Muslim organization which established in 1936 in the city of *Pyinmana*. GCBMA had participated in the Myanmar nationalist movement although it had emphasized that Muslims should get a minority rights in Myanmar. After the Second World War the GCBMA had been well known in the country and was very active for several years.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Burma Moslem Society, Silver Jubilee Number 1904- 1934, (Rangoon: Rangoon Daily News Press, 1935) at 17

⁵⁸ Burma Muslim Society, Annual Report for the year 1927-28-29, (Rangoon, 1929) at 20

⁵⁹ Yegar, Moshe at 60-64

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, at 65

During World War II, the British withdrew from Myanmar and Japan had entered Myanmar. But at the time of the Japanese conquest, there was no other development regarding either Myanmar Muslims or immigrant Indian Muslims. After World War II, several Muslim organizations renewed their activities and tried to get their rights. During the Japanese occupation, leaders of the Myanmar national movement had organized the Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League⁶¹ and it had led to the independence of Myanmar. At the same time, a new Muslim organization called the Burma Muslim Congress (BMC) had been founded by Myanmar Muslims who were active in the Myanmar national movement during the World War II and had joined the AFPFL. *U Razak*, an active member of the Myanmar national movement and member of AFPFL was elected as the President of the Congress⁶² but the AFPFL leaders refused to recognize the Muslims as a national minority.⁶³

During the World War II, Britain fought out Japan from Myanmar and Myanmar was colonized again by British then was finally granted independence in 1948. After independence, Myanmar was going forward as a Parliament Democracy country and Muslims got seats in the parliament at that time. But the dissolution of BMC was announced on the last day of September, 1956 by the pressure of Prime Minister *U Nu*. Two years prior to this announcement, *U Khin Maung Latt @ Abdul Latif*, one of the AFPFL leaders and Minister of Education founded another organization called Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC)⁶⁴ in 1954, intending to attend to purely religious matters and he had acted as the President. The foundation of IRAC attempt renewed to cement the unity of all Muslim splinters within the country, but it did not achieve it.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Here in after the Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League will be referred as AFPFL

⁶² Razak. A, "The Burman Muslim Organization: An Account of the Formation of the All Burman Muslim Congress at Pinyinmana", *U Razak of Burma: A Teacher, a leader, a Martyr*, (Bankok, 2007) at 17-19

⁶³ Yegar, Moshe at 73

⁶⁴ Here in after Islamic Religious Affairs Council will be referred as IRAC

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, at 79-81

In 1958, some Muslims who did not accept the dissolution of BMC, changed BMC's name to the *Pathi* Congress and retained its name and aims. Then they joined the forces of a pro-communist body called the National United Front,⁶⁶ which was disbanded in 1960. The *Pathi* Congress renewed the old demand that the Muslim community should be granted the status of a national minority.⁶⁷ Then, another organization the Burma Muslim Organization (BMO)⁶⁸ had its first general conference in Yangon on December, 1960. It was been founded by U Rashid, one of the national movement's members intending to deal with both religious and political matters. After that the Muslim Central Trust Fund was established by the BMO members in 1952.⁶⁹

Muslim political organization had been formed in the colonial period; Muslim religious organizations had been founded in Myanmar, as well. The first Muslim religious organization in Myanmar was the *Jamaiyyat al-Ulma*, Province of Myanmar, formed in 1922 as a branch of *India Jamaiyyat al-Ulma*. Though this organization was founded prior to the BMS, it was established by the Indian Muslims and only for the religious purpose. Therefore, Myanmar Muslims did not participate at all in it and the organization changed its name to *Jamaiyyat al-Ulma al-Islam*, Burma, on the eve of Myanmar's independence. In the meantime, *U Razak* founded a parallel religious organization in Upper Myanmar in 1946 called *Jamaiyyat al-'Ulma'*, Burma which was organized by Myanmar Muslims and *Haji Ghazi Mohamad Hashim* was elected as its president.

In the period following independence in 1948, most of the Indians had become Myanmar citizens and the two religious organizations united into a single body called *Jamaiyyat al-'Ulma'*, Burma as *U Razak* wished. Several years later, in 1958 *Haji Ghazi Mohammad Hashim* resigned from this group and most of the Myanmar Muslims left together

⁶⁶ Here in after the National United Front will be referred as NUF.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, at 80

⁶⁸ Here in after Burma Muslim Organization will be referred as BMO.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, at 80-83

with him although Indian Muslims and some Myanmar Muslims who graduated from India religious schools remained in this organization, retaining Indian Muslim culture till today. On the other hand, the IRAC has organized a new religious organization called *Mu'atamar al-Ulma* or the Congress of Religious Elders under the presidency of *Haji Ghazi Mohammad Hashim*. This organization was later known as IRAC. Thereafter, some religious organizations were founded by several groups of Muslims in Myanmar, however, these organizations are not politically acting for the aims of protecting the political rights of Myanmar Muslims anymore. They only focus on declarations of *Fatwas*.⁷⁰

On March 2nd 1962, General *Ne Win* seized power and became the leader of the country until 1988. In 1964, this government nationalized the businesses owned by the foreigners, most of whom were Indian Muslims. Most of them went back to India because they were allowed to go. Since then, there has been no new arrival of Muslim immigrant from foreign countries. On September 18, 1988, the military seized the sovereign power of the country and that time, a new Muslim organization was established in Myanmar called the National League of Myanmar Muslims. Therefore there are only five organizations which have been recognized by the government, although there are so many Muslims religious organizations performing religious and social functions only for Muslims of Myanmar but not for the status and rights of Muslims in Myanmar.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Muslims of Myanmar are unlikely to form with the Muslims of other neighbouring countries. They had been living in and serving the country since over hundred years ago, they have nevertheless been considered politically as foreigners. Besides Muslims of Myanmar have been divided into several groups because of their places of origin, for various

⁷⁰ Ibid., at 89-94

reasons they were granted the right to live in different regions insides Myanmar since the days of Monarchy.