

On the term “Rohingya”

As most countries in continental Southeast Asia, Burma/Myanmar is home since many centuries to Muslim communities whose ethnic and geographic origins are traced to either China, India, Malaysia and more recently Persia. Since the 1950s, leaders of the Muslim community in Arakan (Rakhine; Western Burma/Myanmar) have raised the claim of being a separate ethnic group within Burma's already highly complex patchwork of ethnicities. By that way the Arakan Muslims set themselves consciously apart from other Indian immigrants who took root in Burma/Myanmar mostly during the British colonial period. This claim has been contested for various reasons. It is clear that the country of origin of most Muslims from Arakan is Bengal. Both the old Muslim community that lived in Arakan before the fall of the kingdom in 1785 and the more recent and much more numerous one that developed during the British colonial period (after 1825) trace their origins overwhelmingly to Bengal. This is not surprising as Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh is the neighbouring country and historical relations have existed for centuries between East Bengal and Arakan. Chittagong, today the second biggest city of Bangladesh, was controlled by the Arakanese kings for over eighty years. The language of the Muslims is derived from Chittagonian Bengali. North-south migrations (and earlier deportations) of the population are the rule rather than the exception, as well for Tibeto-Burman as for Aryan populations.

Unsurprisingly the Muslims were thus often referred to as Bengali Muslims, though they have tended to reject that term, especially after Burma's independence. Until today, many Muslims simply want to be called “Rakhine Muslims” in the same way that Bengali/Bangladeshi migrants to Assam refer to themselves as “Indian Muslims” to mark their adhesion to their new place of residence. But internationally the Muslims of Arakan are better known as Rohingyas. Though not universally accepted by the community, this name has spread with great success since the 1950s. In modern times, it appears first in 1936 with the creation of the *Rohingya Jam'iyyat al Ulama*, the first Muslim association of Arakan. It has since been used by numerous social and political associations to promote the interests of the Muslims in Arakan.

Various fantastic etymologies and myths of origins have flourished. Only a few appear now on the page “Rohingya” of the Wikipedia (accessed 6 August 2012).

“The origin of the term *“Rohingya”* is disputed. Some Rohingya historians like Khalilur Rahman contend that the term Rohingya is derived from [Arabic](#) word 'Rahma' meaning 'mercy'.^[9] They trace the term back to a ship wreck in the 8th century CE. According to them, after the [Arab ship](#) wrecked near Ramree Island, [Arab traders](#) were ordered to be executed by the [Arakanese](#) king. Then, they shouted in their language, 'Rahma'. Hence, these people were called 'Raham'. Gradually it changed from Raham to Rhohang and finally to Rohingyas.^{[9][10]} However, the claim was disputed by Jahiruddin Ahmed and Nazir Ahmed, former president and Secretary of

Arakan Muslim Conference respectively.^[9] They argued that ship wreck Muslims are currently called 'Thambu Kya' Muslims, and currently reside along the Arakan sea shore. If the term Rohingya was indeed derived because of that group of Muslims, "Thambu Kyas" would have been the first group to be known as Rohingyas. According to them, Rohingyas were descendants of inhabitants of Ruha in Afghanistan.^[9] Another historian, MA Chowdhury argued that among the Muslim populations in Myanmar, the term 'Mrohaung' (Old Arakanese Kingdom) was corrupted to Rohang. And thus inhabitants of the region are called Rohingya.^[9]

Burmese historians like Khin Maung Saw have claimed that the term Rohingya has never appeared in history before 1950s.^[11] According to another historian, Dr. Maung Maung, there is no such word as Rohingya in 1824 census survey conducted by the British.^[12] Historian Aye Chan from [Kanda University of International Studies](#) noted that the term Rohingya was created by descendants of Bengalis in 1950s who migrated into Arakan during the Colonial Era. He further argued that the term cannot be found in any historical source in any language before 1950s. However, he stated that it does not mean Muslim communities have not existed in Arakan before 1824.^[13]

However, Arakan history expert Dr. Jacques P. Leider points out that the term *Rooinga* was in fact used in a late 18th century report published by the British [Francis Buchanan-Hamilton](#).^[14] In his 1799 article "A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire," Buchanan-Hamilton stated: "I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the *Burma* Empire, but evidently derived from the language of the *Hindu* nation. The first is that spoken by the *Mohammedans*, who have long settled in *Arakan*, and who call themselves *Rooinga*, or natives of *Arakan*."^[15] Leider also adds that the etymology of the word "does not say anything about politics." He adds that "You use this term for yourself as a political label to give yourself identity in the 20th century. Now how is this term used since the 1950s? It is clear that people who use it want to give this identity to the community that lives there."^[14]

The Buddhist kings in Southeast Asia have claimed over the centuries for prestige reasons a link with the Sakiya dynasty from which the Buddha hailed. The Arakanese like to claim that they are descended from North Indian Aryans. And the Muslims in Arakan pretend that they have an Arab origin which is the noblest descent to figure out next to a claim to be a descendant of the family of the prophet. The fact is that we know nothing about this and that it is highly unlikely. It is as likely or unlikely as for a European to claim that he is a descendant of Charlemagne.

Taking a look at the old history.... It is highly unlikely that any Arab ship crashed on the coast of Arakan in the first millenary and that its crew would have come to settle there. It's a newly invented myth. G.R. Tibbetts' *Study of the Arabic texts containing material on South-East Asia* (Leiden, E.J. Brill) looks both at classic Arab texts from 950 to 1350 and at the navigational texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is no evidence at all for the north-east coast of Bengal. Arab traders went to the Malay world where they traded in spices and where Islam was still spreading while the Portuguese reached the area.

For Islam in Bengal, the classic study is now Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Eaton explains that Bengal is the only Indian region that massively and eagerly embraced Islam. Quote: "Bengalis today comprise the second largest Muslim ethnic population in the world, after the Arabs." (p.2).

The expansion of Islam in the Chittagong area took much longer and it is poorly known in detail. When we speculate about the likelihood of Muslims from Bengal arriving, or say settling in Arakan, we should keep in mind that a Muslim ruler in Chittagong is first ascertained only in 1371. The 17th or 18th century legend of the founder of Mrauk-U in 1430, Man Saw Mwan, connects his rise to the help of mercenaries from Bengal. The political context in Bengal makes such a story improbable. A cultural influence of the sultanate of Bengal on the fledgling kingdom of Mrauk U is perceptible in the fifteenth century (coinage). The first clear indication of a Muslim trader in Arakan is the Persian inscription of 1495 (now in the Museum of Archaeology in Mrauk U). As far as it has been deciphered, it is a pass given by the king to ensure a trader safe trading. After 1530, the Arakanese kings expanded their realm towards the north fighting Hindu and Muslim lords with or without the help of Portuguese captains. Chittagong, predominantly Muslim, was controlled by the Arakanese after 1580 until 1666. Some kings used trilingual coins to embrace as sovereigns people of various origins.

While the Muslim subjects of the Arakan king in the Chittagong area flourished, Bengalis from the regions north of Chittagong and coastal Bengal were deported by the thousands to be resettled in Arakan as craftsmen, labourers or artists... or they were sold off to the VOC for their Java plantations.

Rohingya.... the name. - From a scientific point of view, it is easy to understand that the name "Rohingya" is derived from the classic name of Arakan, i.e. Rakhanga, in a similar way as Roshanga, the Bengali name of Arakan. Though it is not difficult to explain this derivation in linguistic terms, more colourful explanations flourish.

Dr Thibaut d'Hubert (assistant professor for Bangla language and Bengal Studies in the South Asian Languages and Civilizations department, University of Chicago) writes:

"The rules of historical linguistics of the Indo-aryan languages allow to easily explain the derivation Rakhanga > Rohingya. The passage from [kh] to [h] is the rule in the passage from Sanskrit to Prakrit, which allows us to derive Rohingya from Rakhanga, (Rakhanga > *Rahanga > (short "a" becomes "o" in bengali) *Rohangga > (introduction of [y]# to indicate the gemination which induces an alternative pronunciation " -gya" and influences the vowel [a] which becomes [i]) thence " Rohingya".

The word Roshang(a) [final a is optional] is widely spread since the beginning of Bengali literature in the Chittagong region, i.e. since the early 17th century till the end of the 18th c. Its association with the paradigm Rakhanga>Rohingya is obvious. The [s] is phonologically associated with aspirated [kh] (as in Braj and other Hindustani dialects) and becomes [h] in North-east Bengali dialects and Assamese. S-kh-h are thus situated along the same phonetic paradigm within Indo-aryan languages."

Rakkhanga (or Rakhanga) itself is a sanskritized form of Rakhaing. In Sri Lankan sources on Arakan, we find Rakkhangapura.

Rakkhanga and Rakhine/Rakhaing also have been the object of yet inconclusive etymological speculations. The name has for example been associated with the presence of rakshas, demons of the Hindu mythology.

The word "Rohingya" (under the form "Rooinga") appears a single time in a precolonial English text (BUCHANAN, Francis 1799. "A comparative vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burma Empire" *Asiatick Researches or Transactions of the Society instituted in Bengal for inquiring into the History and Antiquities the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*, volume V, p. 219-240.)

These are the relevant passages:

p. 223

The proper natives of *Arakan*, call themselves *Yakain*, which name is also commonly given to them by the *Burmas*. By the people of *Pegu* they are named *Tukain*. By the *Bengal Hindus*, at least by such of them as have been settled in *Arakan*, the country is called *Roffawn*, from whence, I suppose, Mr. RENNELL has been induced to make a country named *Roshawn* occupy part of his map, not conceiving that it would be *Arakan*, or the kingdom of the *Mugs*, as we often call it. Whence this name of *Mug*, given by *Europeans* to the natives of *Arakan*, has been derived, I know not; but, as far as I could learn, it is totally unknown to the natives and their neighbours, except such of them as by their intercourse with us have learned its use. The *Mahommedans* settled at *Arakan*, call the country *Rovingaw*, the *Persians* call it *Rekan*.

p. 237

I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the *Burma* empire, but evidently derived from the language of the *Hindu* nation.

The first is that spoken by the *Mohammedans*, who have been long settled in *Arakan*, and who call themselves *Rooinga*, or natives of *Arakan*.

The second dialect is that spoken by the *Hindus* of *Arakan*. I procured it from a *Bráhmen* and his attendants, who had been brought to *Amarapura* by the king's eldest son, on his return from the conquest of *Arakan*. They called themselves *Rossawn*, and, for what reason I do not know, wanted to persuade me that theirs was the common language of *Arakan*. Both these tribes, by the real natives of *Arakan*, are called *Kulaw Yakin*, or stranger *Arakan*.

The term "Kulaw", a word pronounced "Kala" in Burmese and referring to Western foreigners in general, to Indians and specifically Indian Muslims in particular. The term is old as it is common in the royal chronicles; it used to be neutral, but is now pejorative. The same word is also used in Northern Thai dialects. The term "Rossawn" is Roshang, the Bengali word for Arakan.