

The 'Rohingya' Identity: Arithmetic of the Absurd

Derek Tonkin

9 May 2014

I had it coming to me. Rohingya Bloggers have sought to demolish [my recent presentation](#) of the British experience in Arakan. It is not merely that I am a dolt and a moron, but so too it seems were all those British administrators who sought to depict in gazetteers and censuses the bewildering kaleidoscope of ethnic diversity which they found in the country which Britain had conquered.

[U Kyaw Min](#), who was only released from prison in January 2012, has a brilliant pedigree as a fighter for freedom and democracy, a former member of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament during the dark days of the military regime and currently Chairman of the Democracy and Human Rights Party. [In a recent article](#), after a preliminary skirmish to knock me off balance with a barrage of punches and a swipe at my "attempt to appease his Myanmar friends in his working environment" (I live and work in rural Surrey with no Burmese for miles, apart from a moggy or two), he delivered the coup de grace with these words:

"So called Bengali or Chittagonians in British census were mostly foreigners. Except business related persons and official staffs most of them were seasonal labourers, who did not bring their spouses. These foreigners were also included in British censuses. Professor Dr. Than Tun named them as floating population. Once the working season is over, they returned to their native land. Rohingya has nothing to do with them.....So called Chittagonian immigrants never took permanent settlement, only natives who formerly left Arakan came back and settled in their original places."

Well, that puts me in my place, I suppose. When Deputy Commissioner RB Smart for Akyab District (which then covered the entire northern region of present-day Sittwe and Maungdaw Districts) recorded in [his 1917 Gazetteer for Akyab](#) that: "Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district", he must have been suffering from another bout of malaria which brought on hallucinations. Census Superintendents SG Grantham (for the 1921 Census) and JJ Bennison (for the 1931 Census) must have been in similar physical or mental turmoil when they both failed to realise that reports compiled by census enumerators of hundreds of thousands of Chittagonians and Bengalis now permanently resident in Akyab District were all pure fantasy.

Financial Secretary J Baxter, no doubt likewise afflicted by some incurable Burmese malaise, noted in his [1940 Report on Indian Immigration](#) that in the 1931 Census no less than 82.43% of all 186,327 Chittagonians and 15,586 Bengalis in Akyab District gave Burma as their place of birth, which could only mean, if U Kyaw Min is correct, that as soon as they could walk they must have moved to Chittagong in order to qualify as seasonal labourers in future years in the land of their birth. Somehow, I doubt that this was the case. It is neither rational nor logical. Reason and logic though have little relevance to this debate, which as the dantesque Maung Zarni told the recent London School of Economics conclave on the Rohingya question, is all about deeply passionate research, but for the cause rather than the truth, not any arid dispassionate concern for accuracy based on historical record.

I have searched in vain for census traces of the hundreds of thousands of 'Rohingyas' alleged to have been invisibly resident in British Burma. To be fair, U Kyaw Min agrees with me that no one will find any trace: "True", he says, "quite correct." But he goes on to say: "Then what about some present day Rakhine state ethnic peoples: Mramagyi and Dai-net who are also not found in British censuses?" But, with respect, these two minority groups of a few thousand people only were so tiny that they hardly compared with the hundreds of thousands of Muslims now claiming to be

'Rohingyas'. In any case, U Kyaw Min should know that the "Daingnet" (to give the British spelling) are designated 'F4' under the Suk(Lui) Group in both [the 1921](#) and [1931 Race Tables](#) as resident in Akyab District, and a whole paragraph is devoted to them in RB Smart's Gazetteer, while the Mramagyi, mostly a Bengal-resident minority which migrated from Arakan to Bengal some years before the Burmans arrived in 1785, are the subject of an article by Francis Hamilton in the Edinburgh Journal of Science in 1824. In British Burma it seems likely that they were included in the Census variation "Mranma" or "Myamma" which appear alongside the more normal "Mranma" and "Myanma", with the suffix -gyi added to denote family origin. ¹

I will not take you sentence by sentence through the article by U Kyaw Min, but I have sent him two kindly letters hoping to establish a correspondence. He has yet to respond.

In Article 19 of the [Indo-Burma Agreement of 1941](#), the British Government of Burma recognised that "Indians who are born and bred in Burma, have made their permanent home and regard the future of their families as bound up with its interests are entitled to be regarded as having established a claim, if they wish to make it, to a Burma domicile, and therefore to the benefit of the [Section 144 of the Burma Act 1935](#)", which guaranteed full rights and privileges to any person domiciled in Burma. The Chittagonians and Bengalis of Arakan, who were born in Burma, thus became assured like other qualified Indians of their right to permanent domicile. But the war intervened and what happened after 1942 is another story.

In British eyes, domiciled Chittagonians and Bengalis merited full citizenship in an independent Burma. But it seems to me that the 'Rohingya' of today have only damaged their cause by denying that they have any connection at all with those Chittagonians and Bengalis who became permanent residents of Burma from the early part of the last century, at a time when seasonal labour was, as the 1911 Census recorded, already in serious decline and by 1934 was in the region of only 20,000 annually, according to the Commissioner for Arakan Division.

In any case, if the 'Rohingya' of today are not the 'Chittagonians' of yesterday, what has happened to the more than 200,000 or more Chittagonian/Bengali souls who were permanently resident in Burma in the 1930s? Have they simply disappeared into thin air, as it were, while coincidentally a broadly equal number of persons has emerged from obscurity, indeed total invisibility during British Burma, to take their places as 'Rohingyas', occupying the same townships and village tracts, but claiming to be in no way related to them? Are we, in psychoanalytical terms, face to face with a case of mass hallucinatory reincarnation contrived by the *alter ego* or *doppelgänger* concept?

In support of his remarkable claim, U Kyaw Min quotes from [a book by Anthony Irwin](#) who fought for several months alongside "these Mussulman Arakaners" who, Irwin wrote, "were "generally known as Bengalis or Chittagonians, quite incorrectly.....As a race they have been here for over two hundred years". Captain Irwin was the son of General Noel Irwin, Commander for a time of the 'Eastern Army' in India. He arrived in India having no experience of Burma whatsoever. Irwin's account has been described by the late [British Ambassador and Burma specialist Peter Murray](#) as "grossly overwritten and factually unreliable; many of the adventures he claims to have had happened to other people." No one in British Burma would dispute that there was a group of "Arakan Muslims" who could indeed trace their roots back to the 17th Century and even earlier and who were quite distinct from the Chittagonians and Bengali immigrants to Arakan. It might be that Irwin had seen some of their villages. But there is nothing to confirm Irwin's broad assertion from any recognised British expert on Burma, contemporary or modern-day, all of whom would profoundly disagree with his analysis.

I read that the Myanmar authorities are to make another attempt to include Rakhine Muslims in the current census. I would not expect either side to give way on the issue of principle. It is however

¹ Note added 27 June 2015. [Paragraph 218 of the 1881 Census](#) records that "fifty-nine persons, 56 in Akyab and 3 in Kyoukpyoo, are returned as Rajbansis. The Arakanese call them Mrammagyee. They are of Arakanese extraction...."

suggested that a way out of the dilemma might be found by simply leaving the question on 'Ethnicity' blank. If the Muslims could agree to make this concession, which is in effect giving up the right others have enjoyed to declare their ethnicity, that might resolve the problem for the present and enable the vital statistics of this important group to be available for national planning services. More especially, it would be a significant step towards recognition, notably in the issue of National Registration Cards.

As British Ambassador Andrew Patrick admirably put it in a [recent interview with Mizzima Business Weekly](#): "Generally in the UK, and in Europe, ethnic groups are allowed to call themselves by the name they want to use, whether or not that name has any historic validity. Of course when we use it, that's not to say we're expecting some sort of special status or a recognition of the Rohingya as an ethnic group. That is for the Burmese parliament to decide. What I would say, is that it's obviously very important for that community to have the rights they are entitled to. And the Government has made a commitment to ensure that everyone who is entitled to citizenship under the 1982 law gets that."

I agree entirely. What more need I say?

Derek Tonkin

Editor - 'Network Myanmar'
www.networkmyanmar.org

Heathfields, Berry Lane, Worplesdon, Guildford, Surrey GU3 3PU

Tel + 44 (0)1483 233576 - Mobile + 44 (0)7733 328832 - Email d.tonkin@btinternet.com