

A Note on the 1872 British Census of Burma

Derek Tonkin – 1 November 2014

I attach Pages 16 and 30 of the main report of the [1872 British Census in Burma](#) and Pages 8 and 16 of Appendix 1 which cover the Arakan Division. The full report is available at the British Library in London - both the original publication and on microfilm. The file reference is IOR/M/4/1222. Burma was at the time a Province of India.

This was the first ever Census conducted by the British in Burma, after the Second Anglo-Burmese War. However, from 1829 onwards after the First Anglo-Burmese War, population counts were conducted annually in Arakan. The 1872 population count was, it is reported in the Census, consistent with the Census results.

Pages 16 and 30 of the main report are of interest because they confirm that Muslims were settled in Arakan “for many generations”. Arakanese Mussulmans “are descendants, partly of voluntary immigrants at different periods from the neighbouring provinces of Chittagong, and partly of captives carried off in the wars between the Burmese and their neighbours. There are some 64,000 of them in Arakan, differing from the Arakanese but little, except in their religion and their social customs which their religion directs”. Similar statements about the indigenous origins of those Muslims known locally as “Yakhaing-kala” are to be found in all subsequent British Censuses (1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931).

The 1872 Census was originally scheduled for late November 1871 (no doubt to coincide with the Census in Britain itself) but was held over until August 1872 in order not to clash with harvest time when so many villagers were working away from home and “the country is full of a temporary population”. The Census is accordingly important as a count of persons who were in large majority permanently resident.

Page 8 of the Appendix shows, surprisingly, that the 64,313 Muslims resident in Arakan formed only 13.28% of the total population of the Division at the time, compared with 364,023 Buddhists, Arakanese and Burman, reflecting 75.15% of the total population. In 1872 Buddhists accordingly outnumbered Muslims in Arakan by a ratio of approximately 5.66 to 1. (In [the 1983 Census](#) 1,425,093 Buddhists enumerated compared with 583,944 Muslims, or a ratio of 2.44 to 1.) Page 16 of the Appendix shows that 63,861 of the 64,313 were recorded as “Sheiks”. It was recognised in subsequent Censuses that this ‘tribal’ enumeration served little purpose. By 1921, the ethno-linguistic classification of some 140 groups had been introduced, and descendants of most indigenous Muslims in Arakan were then recorded as “Arakan Mohamedans” (“Yakhaing-kala” in Burmese), alongside other ethno-linguistic Muslim groups, some also indigenous like the Kaman and Myedu, but others mostly later (post-1870) immigrants, such as the Chittagonian and Bengali. These ethno-linguistic groups were no doubt the basis of the 135 ethnic groups of present-day Myanmar. The Myedu are today no longer recorded. Neither are the Yakhaing-kala, still known after 1948 to some Arakanese as “Rwangya-kala” to differentiate them from other “kala” or persons of Indian origin.

“Rohingya” only emerged in the late 1950s. The original records of reported “Rohingya” designations in the early 1950s are not at present available to consult and are more likely in fact to reflect the earlier known and recognised designation “Rwangya” than the later political label “Rohingya”. Access though is required to national archives in Yangon in order to establish the facts from original publications and journals. Meanwhile, references by UN organisations and member states to “Rohingya” should be interpreted with caution as there is no nationally or internationally agreed definition of which Muslim residents in Myanmar actually comprise this contested community.

In a single sentence in his manuscript "[Short Record of Arakan](#)" completed in 1826 Sub-Commissioner Charles Paton reported that:

Quote

The population of Arracan and its dependencies Ramree, Cheduba and Sandaway does not at present exceed 100,000 souls, may be classed as follows:

Mughhs six tenths)	
Musselman three tenths)	Total 100,000 souls
Burmese one tenth)	

Unquote

This was clearly no more than a rough guess at what the total population might have been after the conclusion of hostilities in 1826, and following the deportations of 1785 in the wake of the Burman invasion and the subsequent depopulation generally of Arakan. Paton's observations were written following an extended tour of Arakan, but are scarcely reliable as a serious count of the Muslim population. [A marginal manuscript note on the Paton report asks: "What was the population at the time of its greatest prosperity?" There are other illegible marginal manuscript notes.]

Writing a few years later, the [Rev G.S. Comstock](#), a long-time resident American Baptist missionary, reported that in 1842 the population of Arakan was estimated at 250,000. "Of these, about 167,000 are Mughhs, 40,000 are Burmese, 20,000 are Musselmans, 10,000 are Kyens, 5,000 are Bengalese, 3,000 are Toungmaroos, 2,000 are Kemees, 1,250 are Karens and the remainder are of various races, in smaller numbers." Including the (presumably Muslim) Bengalese, this puts the 25,000 Muslims at only 10% of the total population in Arakan at the time, but is broadly consistent with the results of the 1872 Census thirty years later.

This note is circulated for information only. It in no way reflects on the legitimate claim to Myanmar citizenship of the greater majority of the Muslim population of Rakhine State, whatever their historical origins.

(Derek Tonkin is a retired British diplomat and is currently an Advisor to Bagan Capital Limited)