

The Power of the R-Word: Daw Suu's Dilemma

Derek Tonkin - 3 January 2015

I have much sympathy with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ([Mizzima 17 December 2014](#) – The Power of the R-word) over use of a generic designation for the kaleidoscope of Arakan's much troubled, harassed and repressed Muslim communities.

Those who might wish to take a closer look at the history of the R-word could with benefit read the series of articles by the Muslim scholar Ba Tha which appeared in the 'Guardian Magazine' between 1959 and 1965.

Writing in [the May 1960 issue](#), Ba Tha notes that "Arakanese Muslims of Arab descent are called as **Roewenhnyas** which literally means favoured or pitied". In the same article he observes that "Pathans [who entered military service in Arakan] and the then Bengali immigrants intermarried with the Roewenhnyas" and "by such marriages the **Roewengyas** came into being.....Roewengya is a mere corruption of Arakanese original word 'rwa-haung-ga-kyar', Tiger from Old Village." Ba Tha does not however give any historical sources for these two designations, nor say when they were first used or even if they were ever written down prior to independence in 1948. Rowengya also caught the eye of Mohamed Akram Ali who wrote in the [August 1960 issue of the Guardian Magazine](#) on the need for unity among Arakan Muslims.

In another article in [the October 1960 issue](#), Ba Tha summarizes the history of those he describes as the Heins, the Bengalis who were captured in slave raids into Bengal. "The descendants of these captives are known as Heins, which means a low caste.....They are looked down by other people of Arakan who never intermarry nor even interdine [sic] with them because they are of low caste descent." Ba Tha notes however that the Heins "also call themselves Roewengyas". He quotes Deputy Commissioner RB Smart as saying that unlike their ancestors they are indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese themselves because they have lived for centuries together with the latter. They are, therefore dependent on the Chittagonian labourers who help them in their several hard works such as ploughing, reaping and earthwork. "These immigrants", writes Ba Tha, "were not bona fide or permanent residents because they were not an indigenous race of the country. After the working season they would return to their own country."

This does however contradict what Deputy Commissioner RB Smart also reported in the very next sentence [in the Akyab Gazetteer for 1917](#) and from which Ba Tha quoted approvingly above - 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 [northern Arakan]." By way of further contradiction, Ba Tha writes that in the Second World War, these Chittagonians "sacrificed their lives and property, and fought with blood and sweat against their enemies for the freedom of Burma." Their enemies, of course, were not so much the Japanese as the Maghs or Arakanese. But it is difficult to understand how they could have supported the Allied cause and sacrificed their property if they were not living permanently in Arakan at the time. The fact is, of course, that they were.

Variations on the R-word occurred in 1960 in reports in the Guardian Daily. The 3 August issue quoted speakers at a meeting organised by the **Ruhangya** Youth League in Rangoon as opposing separate statehood for Arakan. Ruhangyas, we read, "number about 400,000 in Arakan and altogether about 700,000 all over Burma". We might ask how the descendants of these additional 300,000 Ruhangyas elsewhere in Myanmar fared during the Census held earlier this year. Were they too refused enumeration? Or did they simply avoid confrontation?

1960 was also the year in which **Rohingya** apparently made its first appearance. The 14 August 1960 issue of the Guardian Daily quoted the President of the Rohingya Students Association in Arakan as saying that the local population of Maungdaw and Buthidaung were likewise opposed to separate statehood.

The word Rohingya, in its alternative transcription of **Rohinja** (the 'gy' consonantal cluster is pronounced like a 'j'), was also used by Vice Chief of the General Staff Brigadier Aung Gyi when accepting the surrender of Mujahid rebels in ceremonies in August and November of 1961. Reports (e.g. [in Kei Nemoto's 2013 article on the Rohingya](#)) that Abdul Gaffar, MP for Buthidaung, first used the Rohingya label in an article in the Guardian Daily on 20 August 1951 cannot be true as the Guardian Daily did not begin publication until 1956. Papers from private sources however show that Abdul Gaffar at the time favoured the word **Rwangya**, which is [the only R-word to have been widely used in the period](#) from 1948 to 1955 as the chosen designation of pre-1795 Arakan Muslim residents known to the British, in Burmese, as "Yakhain-kala". This latter is the term used in Superintendent SG Grantham's 1921 Census Report to designate those Heins also described as Rowengyas by Ba Tha, a term unknown to Superintendent Grantham himself, any more than any of the above R-words was ever known to, let alone used by any British official. By the middle of the 1950s, however, Rwangya was the chosen designation not only of the Yakhain-kala, but also of the much more numerous community of those known at the time as "settled Chittagonians".

By 1965 articles penned by Ba Tha were using only the word Rohingya to designate Arakan Muslim settlers, whatever the century of their arrival. Intellectual conformity among the Muslim elite in Arakan (and indeed elsewhere in Myanmar) had been secured. For example, in his article "The Coming of Islam to Arakan" in the March 1965 issue of the Guardian Magazine we read: "The descendants of these early Arab settlers and converts formed a group orthodox to the extreme, retaining Islamic names, faith and culture. This group is known as Rohingyas who later spread all over the Arakan country, mainly Mayu and Akyab districts.....The word Rohingya is derived from the Arabic original word Rahma which means kindness."

Might we perhaps sense that any historical association with Bengal is being quietly expunged and that the aim is to de-Indianize the Rohingya community? The Arakan Muslim politician U Kyaw Min would indeed assure us in [an article published as recently as 11 August 2014](#) that Rohingyas "are not British-time immigrants". [He refers to Roewengya as an alternative designation to Rohingya, just as the Muslim Scholar Khin Maung Yin at the International Islamic University Malaysia referred in 2005 to Rwangya as an alternative to Rohingya in his article "[Salience of Ethnicity](#)".]

But this leads to a unusual dilemma. To bolster their claim to Rohingya antiquity, the international Rohingya lobby have claimed that an isolated reference to **Rooinga**, in a [discussion held in Amarapura in 1795](#) between Muslims transported to the Kingdom of Ava and the polymath Francis Buchanan, was derived from the Bengali word for Arakan. This etymology seems quite likely. The discussion, however, only affirms the Bengali origin of Arakan's Muslims, which fundamentalists seek to deny. The reality is that over 95% of Arakan's Muslims are of Indian, and mainly Bengali origin. To deny their Bengali heritage and ancestry, however they may describe their present ethnicity, is to reject any association with "Rosawn, Rohhawn, Roang, Reng or Rung, for by all these names is Arakan called by the Bengalese" as Francis Buchanan later wrote.

Faced with Roewenhnya, Roewengya, Rwangya, Rawangya, Ruhangya, Rooinga, Rohingya and Rohinja, we might understand why Daw Aung San Suu Kyi might find it difficult to know which one to choose. They are all, in their own way, of uncertain, if not artificial origin and of dubious etymology. This may not be an obstacle to their adoption.

The Muslims of Arakan are a reality, their problems are serious and intractable, they demand an ethnicity - and that is clearly no longer Bengali. If their political and religious leaders urge them to accept self-identification as Rohingyas, what other designation could or should the international community use?

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