

THE COMING OF ISLAM TO ARAKAN*

(A brief study of Islamic civilization in Arakan)

by

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AT a time when other indigenous races such as Tibeto-Burmans, Tai-Chinese and others were infiltrating into the fertile valleys of Burma, Arab traders who commanded both Eastern and Western waters in those days had also found Arakan a suitable land and the local Chiefs who were very few in number honoured these traders and warriors by giving them high positions and allowing them to intermarry with high families and by such intermarriages and ardent missionary works Islam became so powerful that it became a living force not only in Arakan but also in other parts of Burma.... Many old religious edifices and buildings which are regarded as the legacy of influences of the Islam of those days are still found in Arakan." M.A. Ghaffar¹.

The religion of Islam was preached by Prophet Mohammed (May blessings of Allah be upon Him), son of Abdullah. He was born in Mecca in A.D. 570. His father died before he was born. He was first protected by his grandfather, Abdul Mutalib, after whose death his guardianship was taken over by his paternal uncle Abu Talib who was a great merchant at that time and developed a deep affection for him. As a young boy, twelve years old, Mohammed travelled with his uncle Abu Talib in the merchants' caravan to Syria. At the age of twenty-five he married Khadijah, a wealthy lady of forty years of age. This marriage gave him rank among the notables of Mecca, while his conduct earned for him the surname, Al-Amin, the trustworthy. At the age of forty he got Prophethood at the cave of Hira, the

desert hill not far from Mecca. After preaching the religion of Islam for twenty-three years and at the age of sixty-three in A.D. 632, he disappeared from the eyes of the world in Yathrib, Al-Madinah, a city more than two hundred miles away from Mecca. The teaching of Prophet Mohammed was so strong and so wonderful that within a hundred years after his death Islam was propagated in the West and in the East.

Arakan saw the light of Islam very early in Islamic history through an intimate contact with the Arab warriors, sailors, merchants and missionaries who used to call at the old ports of Arakan. The Arabs were a trade loving nation and for the purpose of commerce, trade and missionary they used to travel from one country to another. In the 8th century A.D. Burma was a ready and good market for the indigenous industries and products, as there was barter system in force and no currency bar, the Arabs found a very good harbour along the coast lines of Arakan for the purpose of trade. The Arabs being traders were expert in sea-piloting and commanded both the Western and the Eastern waters. The Arabs who were masters of the Eastern seas from the 8th to the 16th century not only heard of Arakan and Delta Region of Burma but also visited them.² During this period Arab influence was very strong and they controlled the maritime trade between Persian Gulf and China including Arakan. At that time Burma was known to them as Arakan and Lower Burma.³ They named Arakan and Lower Burma as Rahma.⁴ Their 9th century writings mention its products such as cotton, yaktails, velvet, snuffs, wood, aloes, rhinoceros and precious metals—gold and silver.⁵

During the reign of Maha Sandra who ascended the throne of Waithali in A. D. 788 several merchant ships were wrecked on Ramree Island. The crews were Arabs. They were sent to Arakan Proper and settled in villages.⁶ They intermarried and intermixed with the indigenous races of Arakan who changed their religion and became Muslims. They had discarded their seafaring lives and turned to agriculture. They built mosques and started missionary works.

Mohammed Hanif one of the warriors and missionaries of Arabia who came to Arakan in about A. D. 680 defeated Koyapuri, the beautiful queen of the cannibals living in the dense forests of North Arakan. Converting her and her subjects to Islam, he sought her hand in marriage.⁷ Amir Hamza converted king Gaulongyi whose territory was known as Kalapanzin Valley in Buthidaung township. He also conquered Arakan,⁸ but the Hindus regained their kingdom because their immigrants from Bengal were greater in number.

The Persians followed the footsteps of the Arabs. They also brought with them the religion of Islam and by intermarriages with those Arab settlers and through wilful conversion Islam became a living force in Arakan.

The culture of Islam has many facets and different prominent sides which come in different circumstances. In Arakan these Arabs and Persian missionaries came across a civilization which was a complete and exact opposition of Islam in many respects. Before the 10th century A. D. Arakan

* This article is based on the book "THE LOYAL ROHINGYAS" by the same author, but in the different pen name of M.A. Tahir Ba Tha. This book is awaiting publication.

¹ M.A. Ghaffar. My Activities in Parliament and Outside. Part II. p. 27 & 28.

² G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 10

³ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶ H. R. Spearman, *British Burma Gazetteer*, VOL: II, p. 7: and R.B. Smart, *Burma Gazetteer Akyab District*, VOL: A. p. 19.

⁷ M. K. Rahman, *Burma Muslims*, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid. p. 24.

was an Indian land, the inhabitants of which were Hindus similar to those of Bengal.⁹ These Hindus had highly developed the thoughtful and reflective arts. But doubtless to say that caste system as in India took place in them under which life had little to offer to the lower classes. The power of Brahmans had become cruel and unjust. They upheld the better ideals in religion and the rules of caste became more and more strict and severe. The religion of the new school became the exclusive control of the Brahmans. They widened the gap between the lower and the higher classes. The knowledge to be acquired and the profession to be adapted in human life were determined by the caste system. The society of the inferior classes was under the injustice of the higher classes who shut all doors of learning against the lower classes. They also barred the way which led the lower classes to a higher life.

All these distinctions are unknown to Islam. It gave the liberty, equality, and opportunity for social, economic and development to the people who were suffering from caste system, and it came as a revelation from on high. Its missionaries like Mohammed Hanif, Amir Hamza, Badar Shah, Babajee Shah, Haidar Ali Shah, Nurullah Shah, Afzal Shah, Gulmul Shah, Sikandar Shah, Kalasee Meah Shah, Hussain Shah, etc. in Arakan were men of zeal who brought the gospel of the unity of Allah to the neglected people, and it also brought the noblest idea of the brotherhood of human beings. It also offered a free entrance into a new social organization to the people who had willingly changed their religion and became Muslims. The prince and the peasant pray together in the same place of worship. They can sit in the same ranks. There is no difference of positions in the House of Allah. There is no other institution in the world, which has the same influence in levelling out all distinctions of colour, race, caste, creed, wealth, poverty and rank, and making people realise that all humanity is one.

After the 10th century A.D. the religion of Islam spread at full speed

⁹ D. G. E. Hall, *Burma*, p. 57.

all over Arakan and it had dotted the coast from Assam to Malaya with curious mosques known as Badarmokans.¹⁰ There is still a Badarmokan revered by all communities in Akyab. 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 districts¹¹ being more fertile lands than any other parts of Arakan. The word "Rohingya" is derived from the Arabic original word Rahma which means kindness.

There is another important section of Muslim known as Kamans, the descendants of the followers of Shah Shujah who took refuge in Arakan with the Arakanese king Sandathudamma (1652-1684) in 1660. These Kamans are scattered all over Arakan but mainly in Akyab, Ramree and Sandoway. The word Kaman is a Persian word which means archers.

In 1429 Arakan was invaded by Wali Khan, the commander in chief of twenty thousand Pathan Force of Nazir Shah of Bengal (at that time Bengal was under the Sultans of Gour), and he made Narameikhla, the exiled king of Arakan who took shelter in Bengal and remained there for more than twenty-six years, to be the king of Arakan. But later joining with a discontented Arakanese chief Anandathien, Wali Khan kept Narameikhla in restraint¹² and ruled over the country for one year and made it an Islamic kingdom. He sent some of the Pathan soldiers to the frontiers such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Akyab, Ramree and Sandoway for offensive and defensive purposes, and adopted Persian and court language, and appointed Qazis (administrators) for Islamic administration. Since then the Qazi system was in force in Arakan. Some of the famous Qazis of Arakan were Daulat Qazi, Nala Qazi, Gua Qazi, Shujah Qazi, Abdul Karim Qazi, Mohammed Hussain Qazi, Usman Qazi, Abdul Jabbar Qazi, Moulvi Abdul Ghafoor Qazi,

Mohammed Yusoof Qazi, Moulvi Raushan Ali Qazi, Noor Mohammed Qazi,¹³ and Zainud Ahmed Qazi who was the grandfather of my father.

However Narameikhla escaped from the restraint and ran away to Bengal and with the assistance of another force under the command of Sandikhan sent by Nazir Shah Narameikhla was reinstated in 1430 on the rightful throne of Arakan.¹⁴ He placed this Pathan force in the neighbourhood of the capital and on the frontiers of Arakan and on the various strategical points on the banks of Lemyo, Mingan, Kaladan, Mayu, Kalapanzin and Naaf Rivers for offensive and defensive measures.¹⁵ With this force Nazir Shah also sent two Chief Ministers by the name of Sattar Khan and Razu Magni.¹⁶ Since then Arakan became the vassal of Sultans of Gour for one hundred years¹⁷ and the Arakanese had to learn the history of Islam and Muslim rulers of India and westwards beyond who were Mongolian Muslims while the rulers of Further India including Arakan and Burma were Mongolian Buddhists. It took the Arakanese a hundred years from 1430 to 1530 to learn the doctrine from the Mongolian Muslims. For that hundred years Arakanese kings paid tribute to the Sultans of Gour and learnt history and politics and they were graduated in their Muslim studies during the reign of Minbin (1531-1553).¹⁸ Many high ranking positions such as those of ministers,¹⁹ generals,²⁰ doctors²¹ etc were held by the Rohingyas and the Kamans. This help of the Sultan Nazir Shah to Narameikhla, however, paved the way for the Muslims to strengthen their footholds and ties on Arakan. The Arabs and the Persians settled down there between the 7th and 16th century, and the Pathans and the Moghuls between the 15th and the

¹³ *Burma Muslims*, p. 102.

¹⁴ Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 78.

¹⁵ *Burma Muslims*, p. 104 & 105.

¹⁶ Sayadaw U Nyana, *Danyawaddi Razawinhit*, p. 172.

¹⁷ *Burma*, p. 31, 32, 57, 58.

¹⁸ The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of Burma Research Society Journal, p. 491-493.

¹⁹ *Burma Muslims*, p. 47 & 48.

²⁰ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 129 & 215; and

U Myo Min, *Old Burma*, p. 47 & 48.

²¹ *The Land of the Great Image*,

p. 203.

¹⁰ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 137.

¹¹ *Burma Muslims*, p. 27 & 28.

¹² Arthur P. Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 78.

17th century;²² and other Muslims from India during the Myauk-U dynasty.

The Pathan force built historical edifices such as mosques of which Sandikhan Mosque²³ of Kawalaung near Myohaung still exists. They started missionary works as the Arabs and the Persians though they were soldiers. Islam became stronger than before and many Arakanese became Muslims²⁴ and the children of mixed marriages between the Europeans and the Arakanese women were brought up to be Muslims while they were left in Arakan by their European fathers who smuggled their mothers out of Arakan hidden in large Martaban jars as the foreigners residing in Arakan and even the visitors to the country were prohibited to take with them their wives and the children of such mixed marriages when they left the country though they were allowed to make temporary alliances with the Arakanese women.²⁵ Arakanese kings kept Muslim titles in addition to their own names such as Min Khari (1433-1459) as Ali Khan, Ba Saw Pyu (1459-1482) as Kalima Shah, Minbin (1531-1553) as Zabeek Shah, Min Phalaung (1571-1593) as Sikandar Shah etc. and they even issued medallions and coins bearing the Kalima, the Muslim confession of faith in Persian script.²⁶ The Myauk-U coinage which played an important part in the history of Arakan was designed on the model of the Muslim coinage which had opposite characteristics. It is of an inscriptional design. It does not contain a portrait figure which the Waithali coins of Arakan contain.²⁷ Arakanese women adopted Purdah system.²⁸ The court ceremonials were also Moghul style and many terms apparently current at the Royal Court of Arakan were Persian in form²⁹ while Persian literature was in

force in Arakan. Inscriptions were inscribed in Arabic and Persian languages which are still found in Arakan. Some of them are displayed in the Myohaung National Museum. The relics and ruins of the architects of the Rohingyas and the Kamans are still found with inscriptions in Arabic and Persian languages which are the tangible evidence of the Muslim domination over Arakan in different period of the history of the country. There are still many villages in Mayu and Akyab districts bearing Arabic name side by side with those of Arakanese and to quote a few instances in Arabic Nurullah village (Tetchaung Ywa), Arabshah village (Hlapaw Ywa), Hanifah Tanki (Maunghnama Ywa), Bandar village (Baundwet Ywa). Nine out of ten villages of Akyab town itself are bearing Muslim names such as Barsarah, Nazir Para, Kathit Para, Amla Para, Mauleik Para etc. and several roads are also bearing Muslim names such as Kadansi Road, Kadir Road, Mauleik Road, etc. Even the name of the Present Akyab itself is a Persian name given by the Prince Shah Shujah which means Ek-aab, one water or one island.³⁰ In fact the very name Arakan is a corruption of Arabic original word Al-recon meaning the foundation of Islam in Burma, given by Ibne Batuta.³¹

During the later part of the 17th and the earlier part of the 18th centuries the influence of the Pathan Cavalry Escorts and Eunuch Swordsmen and the Kamans was so much that they made and unmade ten kings at their will between 1684 and 1710, whose reigns averaged two and a half years each. In 1692 they burnt the palace and hunted upon the country for twenty six years.³² They carried swords, bows, arrows and flambeaus with them whenever and wherever they went. If any one of them took sword in anger at an Arakan village the villagers ran away in flight.³³

The spoken language of the Rohingyas is an admixture of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali and Arakanese. This admixture in their dialect came to be adopted as they are a border race and which generally happens with all other border races of the Union. Their language is quite different as in the case of other indigenous races of the Union of Burma, and has continued to draw inspiration from Islam. Their ancestors used Arabic scripts in their literature. Their literature and culture have developed on individual lines mainly influenced by Islamic traditions. During the subsequent centuries their literature was continuously enriched by their poets and writers. Their literary books written in Arabic script were saturated with Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali words and phraseology and could be easily understood by the people who knew Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali. These books are still found in Arakan. One of them is in my possession. During the Myauk-U dynasty one of the most important duties of the Muslim ministers in the Royal Court of Arakan was to choose the best Muslim titles for the Arakanese kings while they were ascending the throne and encouraged the Rohingya poets and writers to write literary books for the improvement of education and culture of the Rohingyas. Some of the famous Muslim ministers in the Royal Court of Arakan were Sulaiman, Mujallis, Syed Mosa and Asharaf Khan.³⁴ Magan, the Prime Minister of Sandathudamma (1652-1684) was also a Muslim.³⁵ The people of Arakan spoke highly of him because of his cleverness and he had no partiality, and neither took part in Shah Shujah's revolt nor supported him. The Rohingya poets and writers were also encouraged by the Arakanese kings during the Myauk-U dynasty. The greatest personalities among the poets of this time were the court poets Daulat Qazi and Syed Shah Alawal in the Royal Court of Arakan. Daulat Qazi was skilful at mixing one language with another. He was well versed in many languages including Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. It was his scholarship and poetic genius that did much to raise the Rohingya language and literature and poets in

²² Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb* Vol: II, p. 287.

²³ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 139 & 140.

²⁴ U Kyi, *Essentials of Burmese History*, p. 130.

²⁵ The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of BRSJ, p. 72.

²⁶ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 139 & 140.

²⁷ The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of BRSJ, p. 485-491.

²⁸ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 137.

²⁹ Old Burma, p. 73-79.

³⁰ *The Burma Daily* dated the 22nd March, 1959.

³¹ M. K. Rahman, *Burma Muslims*. This is an article published in the Rangoon University Muslim Students Association annual magazine 1952-53.

³² Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 148.

³³ *Burma Muslims*, p. 134.

³⁴ *Burma Muslims*, p. 47 & 48.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 47 & 48.

Baramashya is a musical item. It is very difficult to sing. Mohammed Inu Meah of Rowangyadaung village is the popular singer of Baramashya. He generally sings at mid-night when the village is quiet and calm. At night in the calmness of the village he sings so sweetly that most of the villagers get up from their beds to listen.

Today Rohingya modern songs and music can be heard over the radio three times a week broadcast by the Burma Broadcasting Service (BBS), Rangoon. The popular singers are Syed Amed and Abu Shama and their parties of Maung-daw.

In art and painting Rohingyas have sought inspiration from Islamic civilization and have developed their own traditions. The pictures of birds and animals, the interest in landscapes, and all the calligraphic curves are Rohingya painting in Arakan which are all in miniature forms and in floral designs which testify to the glory of the Islamic civilization in Arakan.

The descendants and the heirs of those who once enriched Islamic civilization in Arakan are today in Mayu district, the predominated Rohingya area in Arakan. Therefore the cultural heritage of Northern Arakan cannot be limited to what flowered within its scope all that was noble and beautiful in Islamic civilization.

Islamic civilization is world acceptance and it shows greater interest in many things and it introduces far reaching conditions of the souls of the soil.

In the fields of cultural activity, one finds a new life and a new spirit. New avenues and vistas are opening up before the eyes of writers, painters and artists as well as industrialists and social workers. When we look back to the past we see the darkness disappearing in the rays of light that are flooding the new born Socialist Country.

Lokaniti

ON THE SAGE

(x)

The learned man, unquestioned, remains
silent as the great drum; when questioned
his speech is as the incessant rain.

The foolish man speaks at all times,
whether questioned or not.

(xi)

Knowledge may rest on palmyra leaves, 1
and one's riches may be loaned to others; but when
the need for them arises, such knowledge may not
be counted as one's knowledge and such riches
may not be counted as one's riches.

(xii)

The depth of a pond may be judged by the lotus-stalk;
The quality of a man's kin may be judged by his principles;
The state of a man's learning may be judged by his utterance;
The fertility of a plot may be judged by its weeds.

1. The leaf of the corypha palm on which missives were
inscribed by means of pointed brass styli.

(From *The Lokaniti*—translated and annotated
by U Sein Tu, Ph. D. (Harvard)).