

## [“The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide” - by Dr Azeem Ibrahim](#)

Derek Tonkin – 26 May 2016

It is commendable that [Dr Ibrahim](#) has been able to find the time during the last two years to take a fresh look at the problems facing the Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine State. At a recent conference at Wolfson College Oxford he explained that he had found such a paucity of information on the subject that he decided he would do his own research and write his own book.

It was the same lack of information which inspired me to do my own research, in order to be better able as an investment advisor to respond to questions from international investors looking tentatively at the Myanmar market after so many years of absence.

The purpose of Dr Ibrahim’s book is to give wider publicity to the Rohingya cause, and in this I wish him well. Dr Ibrahim is not a Burma expert and it would be fooling of me to point out the odd lapse here and there. However, on pages 29 to 32, he takes issue with me on positions I have taken, but it is even so a pleasure to be taken to task in so polite and restrained a manner, so different from the acrimony and ill-temper with which debate on the situation in Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) has only too often in the past been conducted.

In discussing [an October 1940 report by Financial Secretary James Baxter](#) about Indian Immigration in the wake of the anti-Muslim riots of 1938 in Burma, Dr Ibrahim comments on Page 30:

“It is true that Baxter does not use the word ‘Rohingya’ [[as I had noted in an article - No. 14 at this link](#)] but, as we have shown, there are plenty of examples of this name being used both before and during the colonial period.”

My contention is that the examples which Dr Ibrahim provides are all ***without exception*** attributed repetitions in various forms of an article first published in 1799 in Calcutta and in 1801 in London following a diplomatic mission in 1795 to the Kingdom of Ava at Amarapura in Burma. The article, on linguistics, [appeared in “Asiatic Researches” written by Dr Francis Buchanan](#), a member of the delegation. Subsequent articles, including an article in the [Classical Journal 1811](#) and a [German compendium of languages 1815](#), all attribute the source of their information to Buchanan, though in the latter case you need to be alert to: “Wörter von beyden s. Asiatic Researches T.V. pag. 238 sq.” on page 201 which interpreted means: “Words from both languages [Rooinga spoken by Muslims in Arakan and Rossawn by Hindus], see Asiatic [sic] Researches Volume V Pages 238 +”.

The vocabulary reproduced on page 25 of Dr Ibrahim’s book and taken from Page 107 of the [Classical Journal 1811](#) is in fact transcribed word for word from two separate tables [on](#)

[Pages 239 and 229 of Buchanan](#). Where the book has “????” the original has “Rossawn”, the language attributed to the Hindus.

The same is the case with articles which appeared in works of reference and encyclopaedias over the next 50 years. Buchanan was always given as the source on the page itself, in the preface or in the list of authorities. As an example, [you will find at this link](#) what Buchanan wrote in 1801 and what appeared in encyclopaedias published as far apart as 1820 and 1852. Indeed, the fact that for more than 50 years no writer or publisher had anything at all to add to what Buchanan had first written in 1799 only highlights the unique nature of his contribution.

Quite how unique may be judged from the following facts:

1. Throughout the remainder of his life, Buchanan, who was a prolific writer and gazetteer, never used the word “Rooinga” again.
2. Nor at any time did any of his colleagues in the East India Company. It does not appear in any of their official reports or personal reminiscences.
3. When Charles Paton, with his colleague Thomas Paterson who actually carried out the major survey and census in 1825-26 in Arakan reported on Page 29 of Dr Ibrahim’s book, wrote up his report to the Governor-General Lord Amherst, not a single Mussulman village leader in Arakan is recorded as stating that he was a “Rooinga”.
4. When the British administration finally settled down in Arakan, from 1829 onwards annual capitation and land survey censuses were conducted, but not a single “Rooinga” was ever recorded.
5. Likewise, when the decennial full censuses started in 1892, neither in that census nor in the 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 censuses, nor in what has survived of the 1941 census, does the word “Rooinga” appear in any shape or form.
6. More generally, in no document written in the English, Burmese, Rakhine, Persian, Bengali, Hindustani or any other language between 1824 and 1948, the full period of British rule, is any reference to “Rooinga” to be found (apart from the repetitions of Buchanan examined above).

A related issue is Dr Ibrahim’s quotation on [Page 30 from the Baxter report](#):

“There was an Arakanese Muslim community settled so long in Akyab Division [present-day Sittwe and Maungdaw Districts combined] that it had for all intents and purposes to be regarded as an indigenous race. There was also a **few** Mohamedan Kamans in Arakan and a small but long established Muslim community in Moulmein which could not be regarded as Indian.”

Dr Ibrahim comments on this extract:

“I emphasize the word ‘few’ since it is important. The British census [of 1931] is clear that there were three Muslim groups: the Kamans, a group living in Akyab (the

Rohingyas) and a small community at Moulmein. Baxter adds that it would be incorrect to “assume that all.....the Mohamedans were Indian.”

In fact, [the British census of 1931](#) records that there were both indigenous and immigrant Muslim communities in Arakan. Indeed, the Baxter Report is primarily concerned with Indian immigration and the three **indigenous** Muslim groups noted by Dr Ibrahim are included solely for the sake of completion (and there were more than three if you include Zebaidis, Myedu, Chinese Muslims and other smaller pre-1823 Muslim **indigenous** communities in Burma as a whole) The “Rohingyas” - in Buchanan’s description “Rooinga” (though whether that is an ethnic or geographic designation is disputed) - were what the British listed in their censuses as “Arakan Muslims”. [The 1921 census](#) reported on Page 214 that they were known as “Yakaing-kala” in Burmese, the “Kulaw Yakain” on Page 237 of Buchanan.

The immigrant (post 1826) Muslim communities in Arakan, Baxter’s main focus, are listed as Chittagonian and Bengali on [Page 49 of his report](#). These 186,327 **immigrant** Chittagonians and 15,586 **immigrant** Bengalis (1931 census figures) are quite distinct from the 51,612 **indigenous** Rooinga *aka* Rohingya *aka* Yakain-kala *aka* ‘Arakan Muslims’ *aka* [Rwanga after 1948](#). At no time during British rule did these Chittagonian and Bengali immigrants and their descendants claim to be Rooinga, nor did the 1948 Immigration Acts treat them as such, but only separately from indigenous groups. It is only some years after independence that they assumed the mantle of “Rohingya” as the pre-war Yakain-kala/Rooinga community was quietly absorbed by the numerically far superior Chittagonians.

At the end of the day, none of this may matter all that much. Former President Thein Sein [has already declared](#) that immigrants to Arakan during British rule arrived in Myanmar legally, and that accordingly their descendants are entitled to citizenship. If only that could be arranged, most Muslims in Rakhine State would be covered, though the extent of illegal migration since 1948 is hard to assess. At all events, the situation in Rakhine, though volatile and at times tense, is reasonably quiescent these days, with no major outbreaks of communal violence in the State since 2012.

I hope I may meet Dr Ibrahim soon, and discuss other aspects of his book. For the present, though, I feel I should defend the positions I have taken.

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