

The Formation of the Concept of Myanmar Muslims as Indigenous Citizens: Their History and Current Situation

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Introduction

This study explores the awareness of Myanmar's Muslims as indigenous citizens, with a focus on those who identify as Bamar Muslims. Here I use "Myanmar" to refer to a nation state, and the word "Bamar" to signify the Burmese ethnic group or citizens of Myanmar; these terms will be described in detail later. Bamar Muslims began to actively express their awareness of being Bamar Muslims as indigenous citizens around the 1930s, almost at the same time that Burmese nationalism was on the rise. Bamar Muslims continued to raise their voices during the last military regime, yet most Buddhist Burmese did not recognize them as native. Using documents and interviews, this study will explore how the idea of Muslims as indigenous citizens emerged during the colonial period, and how it evolved up through the present time.

Research on Muslims in Myanmar is very limited. As for previous research related to this study, Moshe Yegar's historical investigation⁽¹⁾ on Muslims in Burmese society is among the most prominent scholarship in the field. Yegar examined the presence of the Muslim community in Burma from the eleventh century through 1962, tracking its changes with a particular focus on major organizational activities during and after the colonial period. He described the entire Muslim community while almost disregarding relations

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between Buddhist Burmese and Muslims, and the circumstances of Muslims in Burmese society. In another paper from 1982, he carries out an analysis using almost exactly the same methods as in his earlier work.⁽²⁾ In a paper published in 2002 about the history and current situation of the Rohingya people, he restructures secondary materials to uncover refugee issues and human rights violations. However, he makes no mention whatsoever of the policies or intentions of the Myanmar government, which he holds responsible for causing the problems he discusses.⁽³⁾

J.A. Berlie's recent research⁽⁴⁾ analyzes the "Burmanization" of Muslims. He states that with the exception of Arakan Muslims (Rohingyas), Muslims in Myanmar are legally citizens. Many of them speak Burmese, and their children attend public schools where they become accustomed to Burmese culture via Buddhist ethics taught at school. However, Berlie neither discuss the relationship between Burmanization and a policy of national integration / assimilation, nor does he describe Muslims' current situation in which they face many difficulties despite Burmanization.

In response to the aforementioned studies, the author is interested in the process by which Bamar Muslims identify as indigenous people. While they have officially integrated into the nation state as citizens, most of society considers them to be foreigners and they have faced various challenges. In this reason the claim that they are indigenous Muslims accepted Myanmar culture has not been changed since the self-styled term "Bamar Muslim" emerged during colonial period.

The first part of this paper will provide a broad overview of Muslims in Myanmar and the characteristics of the Bamar Muslim community. The second part will explore how the concept of Bamar Muslims as indigenous citizens evolved by examining the self-written histories of Bamar Muslims. This part also shows the importance of historical education to the new generations. The third section will shed light on how Bamar Muslim organizations explain their strong consciousness of being indigenous people, as well as how they appeal their existence to the Myanmar society. Finally, this paper will review how the concept of Bamar Muslims formed, and how Myanmar society recognizes them.

Before delving further, it will be useful to describe the terms used in this study, namely "Myanmar" and "Bamar" in Burmese, and in English, "Myanmar/Burma" and "Burmese." In the Burmese language, Myanmar and Bamar mean both "ethnic Burmese" in the narrow sense and also "citizens," which includes ethnic Burmese, the majority of the country's population. In most cases, the term Myanmar was used for written form and the term Bamar for spoken form. In the references cited here, both terms have no difference in meaning. The question of which interpretation is more suitable – "ethnic Burmese" or "citizens" – depends on the context when using Myanmar and Bamar. However, in reality, it is not possible to distinguish in many cases.

Then in 1989, the military regime officially changed the English name of the country to Myanmar, and defined "Bamar" as ethnic Burmese, and "Myanmar" as including citizens of all indigenous groups. However, activist groups pushing for democracy, as well as Western countries that support democratic movements, did not accept the arbitrary new name assigned by the government, and continued to use "Burma" and "Burmese." Bamar Muslims interviewed for this study consciously referred to the country as "Myanmar" and

identified as both Bamar Muslims and Myanmar Muslims. The original meaning of Myanmar/Bamar is hard to pin down as signifying ethnic Burmese or all citizens; under the military regime, these terms were defined according to the new meaning, and over time came to indicate one's political opinion.

As explained above, when describing colonial period, this study will use "ethnic Burmese" in the narrow sense, with "Burma" signifying the territory of British Burma. "Burmese" will also be used as Burmese citizens and in the case when it is not possible to distinguish between ethnic Burmese and Burmese citizens. When describing contemporary issues, the author will use the term "Myanmar" signifying a nation-state, "Myanmar citizens" as the people living there, "ethnic Burmese" in the narrow sense. In all sentences "Bamar" will be used when describing "Bamar Muslims", when the word Bamar is included in the name of organizations, and when "Bamar" refers to both ethnicity and religion.

I . Muslims in Myanmar and Bamar Muslims

As mentioned before, Bamar Muslim is a self-defined term, and also indicates indigenous people who practice Islam while respecting Myanmar traditions and customs. They started to identify as Bamar Muslims in the late colonial period. Even today, they call themselves Bamar Muslims (or Myanmar Muslims) in conversation, while they usually use other terms in their publications, such as "indigenous Muslim" (*Tainyindha Issalam Badha Win*) or "indigenous Muslim citizen" (*Tainyindha Nainngandha Issalam Badha Win*).⁽⁵⁾

Approximately 89% of the country's population is Buddhist, and Buddhists comprise 98% of all ethnic Burmese.⁽⁶⁾ Instances exist where Bamar only means the Burmese ethnic group, and there are also many situations where it signifies belief in Buddhism as well as the ethnic group. Similarly, Myanmar culture, which Bamar Muslims respect, is based on the Buddhist and ethnic Burmese cultures. Many Myanmar people believe that Muslims practice foreign customs due to their religion and ethnic origins, even if they claim to be indigenous; furthermore, their lifestyle is considered to be incompatible with Myanmar culture, namely based on Burmese and Buddhist culture. This can cause numerous difficulties in Muslims' everyday lives, even though most of them are legal citizens of Myanmar, integrated into the nation state.

According to the 1983 census, 3.9% (approximately 1,300,000 people) of the country's population was Muslim at the time.⁽⁷⁾ A separate government publication in 1993 revealed that same figure as 3.79% (1,620,233 people).⁽⁸⁾ However, when talking about the Muslim population in Myanmar, it is difficult to say whether government statistics and actual numbers correspond. When considering interviews with Muslims and those who used to be connected to Myanmar's junta, along with factors such as Muslim almanacs published by the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia & the Pacific (RISEAP),⁽⁹⁾ the country's Muslim population is 10% at the very least. The latest census was held at the end of March 2014, but the results are not yet available.

Many Muslims descend from Indian migrants who arrived in Burma during the colonial period and people born from marriages between Muslims and Burmese Buddhists

(or Buddhists of other ethnic groups). Some descend from Muslims who settled in the country as merchants, or were taken as captives during the era of Burmese dynasties. According to an Islamic association,⁽¹⁰⁾ there are roughly four groups of Muslims in Myanmar:

- (1) The first is the Rohingyas and the Kamans. While Rohingyas claim that they are one of the indigenous ethnic groups in the country, Myanmar government doesn't use the term "Rohingya" but "Bengali" and states that many Bengalis are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Kamans are included in the officially recognized 135 indigenous groups. Due to their religion, which they share with the Rohingyas, they have been facing many challenges since the riots in Rakhine state in June 2012.
- (2) The second group is the Panthays, who came from China.
- (3) The third group is the Pashu, who descend from Malaysian Muslims.
- (4) The fourth group is "other" Muslims, many of whom descend from Indians and have mixed heritage; they comprise over half of all Muslims in Myanmar and live throughout the country.

Most Rohingyas and Kamans live in Rakhine State. Over time, the first and last groups came to represent over 90% of all Muslims in Myanmar. Panthays and Pashus are quite small minorities. Most Muslims in Myanmar follow the Sunni branch of Islam, and the relationship between the faith's two major denominations (Sunni and Shia) is strong and healthy.

The Bamar Muslims belong to the last group. As described in the first part of this chapter, Bamar Muslims self-identify as such, accept Myanmar/Bamar culture, and share all characteristics with Burmese except religion. Bamar Muslims are not concerned about the time period when their ancestors migrated to Myanmar, or about having mixed heritage with ethnic Burmese or other indigenous groups.

The Bamar Muslims are a minority in the last group. The ancestors of those who used to be called "Indian Muslims" arrived in Burma during the colonial period and maintained Indian languages, cultures, and customs. They became more dominant than the Bamar Muslims, who have lived in the country since the time of the Burmese dynasties and became indigenous. Today, in addition to wide cultural differences, both groups interpret and practice Islam in distinct ways, which can be seen in their clothing and religious worship at mosques, while their identity can change according to their surroundings. The majority keep their Indian culture but were born in Myanmar and speak Burmese. Most are legally citizens in Myanmar, just like Bamar Muslims.

II. The History of the Bamar Muslims and Their Claim of Indigenesness

2.1. Two History Books – The Origins of the Bamar Muslims' Claim

Bamar Muslims' claim of being indigenous stems from history books written in the 1930s by Bamar Muslims themselves. The historical materials on Bamar Muslims that the author obtained include the following two books written during the colonial period. The first is the "Old Biography of the Bamar Muslims," written in 1939 by Hbo Chey⁽¹¹⁾. The

second is the “Summary of the History of the Bamar Muslims,”⁽¹²⁾ which Hbo Chey references in his book, and which the author estimate was written in the 1930s by Mya, based on its contents.⁽¹³⁾ By observing the titles of these books, one can assume that “Bamar Muslim” was already in use at the time they were written. Both books contain arguments as to why Bamar Muslims refer to themselves as such.

Mya explains that Bamar Muslims identify as Burmese because they have lived among Burmese Buddhists for a long time, and because successive generations of Burmese kings conferred rights upon Bamar Muslims that were equal to those granted to Burmese Buddhists.⁽¹⁴⁾ Both Mya and Hbo Chey paint a similar portrait of the interactions with Burmese kings. Both authors present quotes from other sources, such as Burmese dynastic histories and accounts of Burma by non-Burmese (mostly by Europeans), which demonstrate contact between Muslims and the various Burmese dynasties, and show how Muslims adopted Burmese culture. Both Mya and Hbo Chey are at pains to point out that the relationship between Muslims and the kings of Burma is not simply a fabricated story. In addition, Mya explains:

[The colonial government] spread the one-sided notion that only Buddhist Burmese ethnic groups were considered Burmese. Regardless of how much Bamar Muslims — who are born in Burma, live in Burma, dress in Burmese fashion, speak Burmese languages and spend their entire lives in Burma — claim to be Burmese, they are called *Padi*, *Kalar*, *Zei* (*Zerbadi*) and [people with] mixed blood. But all of these labels are completely mistaken.⁽¹⁵⁾

Notwithstanding whether or not the colonial government actually tried to disseminate the notion of otherness, as Mya attests, these ways of thinking became widespread by the 1930s. Because of this, it is thought that Bamar Muslims ended up identifying not only as Bamar, but more precisely as Bamar “who happened to be Muslim.” Furthermore, the claim of being Bamar shows an attempt by Bamar Muslims to distinguish themselves from foreign (almost exclusively Indian) Muslims living in Burma, who had refused to adopt Burmese customs. Bamar Muslims often referred on their history books that they did not prefer to be called *Kalar or Zerbadi*, which were the terms used to describe the mixed blood children of the foreign Muslims and Burmese.

It is clear that Bamar Muslims were directing their claims at the colonial authorities as well as Burmese society; they wanted society to regard them as Bamar Muslims who — apart from their Islamic faith — lived just as other Burmese Buddhists. Their assertions also mark the beginning of an effort to set themselves apart from Indian Muslims who had not adopted Burmese customs. This had a particularly profound impact upon the study of Urdu as a part of Islamic education. Unlike the educational organizations established by Indian Muslims, Bamar Muslims had set up the All Burma Burmese Muslim Educational Organization as early as 1927.⁽¹⁶⁾ Bamar Muslims felt greatly threatened by the obligation to learn Urdu, used by many Muslims who came from India. Communicating in Urdu would cause Burmese society to view Bamar Muslims as Indian.

Hbo Chey explores Muslim education in his “Old Biography of the Bamar Muslims.”

Hbo Chey does not have anything in particular to say on the subject of movements in Indian Muslim education. However, his opinions on education are the same as Mya's in that he does not list Urdu as one of the subjects considered important for Bamar Muslims to study. Regarding proper education for Bamar Muslims, Hbo Chey writes that because Bamar Muslims have little schooling, they lack both political and economic power; they must therefore work to improve education.⁽¹⁷⁾ Even though Hbo Chey does not directly touch upon Islamic education administered by Indian Muslims, he keenly felt a need for the Bamar Muslims to achieve at least the same level of accomplishments as Indian Muslims, especially in education.

Hbo Chey approaches the term “Bamar Muslim” from a different angle than the example Mya gave above. Hbo Chey maintains that while Muslims are, and have been, called a wide variety of names depending upon location and historical epoch, all of these names – Islam, Muslim, Mohammedan, *Padi*, *Zerbadi*, *Kalar*, and *Kalar Thein* – are either “undesirable” or “unsuitable.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Hbo Chey is not claiming that it is a mistake to group Indian Muslims together with Bamar Muslims. Rather, he emphasizes that none of the names used for Muslims — be they *Padi*, *Zerbadi*, *Kalar* or any other term — are suitable for referring to Bamar Muslims. Hbo Chey goes on to give the following reason for why Bamar Muslims refer to themselves as such:

Just as Muslims born and raised in Arabia are known as Arab Muslims, and Muslims born and raised in Egypt are known as Egyptian Muslims [the rest of the clause is omitted], could there be any plausible reason why we Muslims, who were born in Burma and who are rooted in Burmese soil, should not be called either Myanmar Muslims or Bamar Muslims? [The rest of the paragraph is omitted.]

We must remember that religion and ethnicity are separate matters. [Portions of the paragraph are omitted.] We must always remember that, even though we are different religions, we must come together as an ethnic group and form a united front as one nation in order to bring prosperity to our native land of Burma.⁽¹⁹⁾

In addition to his explanations on the appropriateness of the term “Bamar Muslims,” we can also see Hbo Chey's thoughts on ethnicity and religion. While Mya wrote that “[The colonial authorities] are disseminating the one-sided notion that only Buddhist Burmese are true Burmese,” it appears that Hbo Chey was also aware of the vague distinction made between religion and ethnicity in Burmese society at that time, and that folk groupings parading as ethnic groups also included elements of religion.

While Mya makes no particular reference to the political situation in Burma when he wrote his book, Hbo Chey comments on the election of ethnic representatives to the legislature then in session. He says that an application submitted to guarantee an electoral quota for Bamar Muslims was not successful because their population was unknown.⁽²⁰⁾ There was a movement to petition for a separate “Burma Moslem” category in the 1921 census report.⁽²¹⁾ However, this classification was not recognized on the grounds that a child born from an Indian Muslim father and a Burmese Buddhist mother would subsequently fall

under the category of *Zerbadi*, even if that child grew up to become a Buddhist or a Christian.

In the subsequent census report from 1931, it is again written that *Zerbadis* cannot be called Burma Moslems because *Zerbadi* includes Christians and Buddhists, in addition to adherents of the Muslim faith.⁽²²⁾ Thus the number of Bamar Muslims remained unknown. The census report contains no details as to whether those who sought a “Burma Moslem” category desired to cross out *Zerbadi* and write in “Burma Moslem,” or if they desired a new category in addition to *Zerbadi*, namely, “Burma Moslem.” According to Hbo Chey, the result was that no data on Burma Moslems existed for the 1931 census. However, he said it would be greatly appreciated if an effort could be made to “include a population list in the 1941 census exclusively for Bamar Muslims.”⁽²³⁾ Hbo Chey estimates that Bamar Muslims numbered around 600,000 at the time, and predicts they could have obtained at least five or six representative election rights.⁽²⁴⁾ It is very possible that Bamar Muslims wanted to confirm their own place in society by acquiring representative rights as an officially recognized ethnic group.

As mentioned previously, the Bamar Muslims’ claims of being indigenous first appeared around the 1930s. History books show that Bamar Muslims had adopted Burmese culture and identified as Bamar. They argued that *Kalar*, *Zerbadi*, and other terms were inappropriate to describe them, and that Bamar Muslim is suitable for Muslims born and brought up in Burma.

2.2. History Classes in Islamic Courses: Education for a New Generation

This section focuses on the history classes given by Bamar Muslim organizations. The characteristics of education for a new generation of Bamar Muslims will be explored, in addition to their position in Myanmar based on the points emphasized in history classes, and historical contact between Myanmar community and the Bamar Muslims. The organizations mentioned here will be described in the next chapter.

The Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC), the Myanmar Muslim National Affairs Organization (MMNAO), and the Islamic Centre of Myanmar use their own textbooks in their respective Islamic courses to teach history. They have common idea that because Muslims cannot state their views freely in Myanmar, it is necessary to study history in order to determine the community’s future goals.

The MMNAO’s textbook starts with the history of Myanmar for the reason that “It is impossible to know about the development of Islam without learning about the history of the Islamic world. In the same way, by understanding the history of Islam in Myanmar, for the first time we can consider how contemporary indigenous Muslims live and what they should aspire to in the future.”⁽²⁵⁾

The IRAC’s textbook states that the Koran obligates Muslims to learn about, consider, and critique past events, to behave correctly so that they can live wholesome lives, and covers the history of indigenous Muslims currently living in Myanmar.⁽²⁶⁾ The need for education about the Bamar Muslim community’s history is stated as follows : “We must be both proper Muslims and proper indigenous peoples. [Omission.] If we do not know about our own history, then it is not easy for us to become good indigenous peoples.”⁽²⁷⁾ Not only

do they have to become “proper Muslims” but also “proper indigenous peoples,” which clearly shows a strong awareness of living in Myanmar as Bamar Muslims.

The history of Myanmar’s dynasties in textbooks largely consists of the same content. Some sections of the history books that Bamar Muslims wrote in the 1930s (mentioned previously) are also found in the classroom.

The conditions under which Islam entered Myanmar are more or less as follows: (1) Some Persian or Arab ships became shipwrecked and the people on board came to live in Burma; (2) Persian or Arab merchants opened a mercantile establishment and settled in Burma for trade; (3) Muslims from abroad came to Burma, which was a paradise on earth to them. They did not intend to spread Islam as missionary organizations.

In Myanmar’s royal period, Muslims supported the kings through appointments as ministers, lieutenants, infantry officers and messengers. Myanmar’s Kings trusted Muslims, officially appointed them as guards at palace and went out under their escort. When there was a need to wage war, those skilled in the art of warfare came to work as brave troops. Successive kings built mosques or gifted land for mosques. King Mindon had built accommodation facilities for those making a pilgrimage to Mecca called Daung Zayat.⁽²⁸⁾

Bamar Muslims often say that kings and Muslims were on friendly terms during the royal period due to the gift of accommodation facilities for those making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Moreover textbooks mention a number of mosques were built by the kings in the country during the royal period, and show that successive monarchs respected other religions as well as Buddhism.

In terms of contemporary history after colonization ended, each classroom textbook uses citations from the publications on Myanmar’s history, in addition to newspaper and magazine articles which were published during and after the colonial period. The historical matters from the colonial period to independence are written in textbooks as follows:

- In 1909, the Burma Moslem Society was established, which was modelled on the Young Men’s Buddhist Association established in 1906 as the first nationalistic association.
- In 1915, Indian Muslims established the Muslim Educational Conference and made Urdu compulsory at *madrasahs*. Bamar Muslims who opposed this set up a separate educational conference and discussed on Islamic study in Burmese.
- Patriotic Bamar Muslims participated in the 1920 and 1936 university student strikes.
- An Anti-Indian riot (an anti-Muslim riot in fact) occurred in 1938. The riot was caused by a book in which a Muslim defamed Buddhism.
- Starting in the 1930s, Bamar Muslims were involved in the patriotic activities of the *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burmans Association). Many of them also participated in the Muslim Awakening Organization⁽²⁹⁾ established in 1938 in order to let Burmese people recognize them as Bamar Muslims and to make sure of their population.
- The following historical figures and many other Bamar Muslims are portrayed as

having taken part in the nationalist political organizations of that time period: U Razak (assassinated along with General Aung San), U Khin Maung Lat (who became a minister in the 1950s), U Pe Khin (who successively held the ambassador's posts), and Daw Saw Shwe (president of a Bamar Muslim women's organization).

Bamar Muslims seem to intend to share those historical matters as their own history; their claims of being indigenous and being Bamar Muslims, and active participation in the struggle for independence. This history is the foundation for their assertion that they are the same citizens like any other people of Myanmar.

Regarding conditions from 1940s to 1960s, including the independence from British in 1948, few historical accounts were found in their textbooks. After independence, Bamar Muslims seem not to be involved in the country's history or political issues. Their history in the textbooks stopped in the 1940s.

This chapter investigated in detail the content of history classes given by Bamar Muslim organizations, all of which believe it is necessary to study history in order to determine the community's future aspirations. By demonstrating the friendly relations between kings and Bamar Muslims up through the royal period, the community has positioned itself as part of Burmese society. By showing that many Bamar Muslims participated as nationalists in the struggle for independence during the colonial period, the community is placed in the great political movements of Myanmar history.

III. Contemporary Bamar Muslim Consciousness as Indigenous Citizens

Bamar Muslims in the colonial period asserted that they were the same as other Burmese in every way except for religion; this awareness has persisted in modern times. Three Bamar Muslim organizations, which were also mentioned in the previous chapter, were interviewed for this chapter: the Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC) established in 1956 (after the dissolution of the Burma Muslim Congress which was the largest organization of Bamar Muslims), the Myanmar Muslim National Affairs Organization (MMNAO) established in 1988, and the Islamic Centre of Myanmar established in 1964. In addition, this chapter will examine how Bamar Muslims express their identity based on interviews in Yangon and internal documents published by various groups.

By looking at IRAC's Basic Principles, it is clear that this organization sees its members as "indigenous Muslim citizens who believe in Islam."⁽³⁰⁾ This statement shows a strong sense of citizenship and being indigenous — which encompasses the indigenous peoples recognized by the government. Although Bamar Muslims haven't been officially recognized as indigenous, they identify as native people who have accepted Burmese culture.

IRAC's principles also promote mutual understanding and friendship between fellow indigenous groups that follow religions other than Islam.⁽³¹⁾ When solving problems relating to Islam, IRAC not only emphasizes Islamic teachings, but also considers the country's situation and traditional culture.⁽³²⁾ Thus, IRAC expresses a positive intention for the community it represents to live in Myanmar as Bamar Muslims while interacting with non-

Muslims and promoting mutual understanding.

MMNAO stressed that it aims to carry out both religious and non-religious activities. The organization's founding objectives include strengthening a sense of patriotism and citizenship among Bamar Muslims, and friendship between the country's various ethnic groups and religions.⁽³³⁾ MMNAO shares the aim same as IRAC: to build bonds with non-Muslim citizens and foster a sense of being citizens in Myanmar. MMNAO also intends to encourage respect for Bamar Muslims among the people in Myanmar by carrying out social activities and volunteering.

In the Burmese language, the name of MMNAO, "Myanmar Muslim National Affairs Organization" refers to the community it represents as "Myanmar Muslims." The word "Myanmar" refers to all citizens residing in the Union of Myanmar as the same as the interpretation of military government in 1989, and "Myanmar Muslim" signifies "those who practice Islam out of all Myanmar's citizens, including the various ethnic groups."⁽³⁴⁾ Like IRAC, MMNAO does not represent itself as only Muslim.

The Islamic Centre of Myanmar was founded on the basis of "learning Islam in Burmese rather than Urdu."⁽³⁵⁾ Some Muslims could not understand the Urdu used in Friday prayers; thus the Islamic Centre aimed to have Burmese Muslims learn in their own language. It has given high priority for Bamar Muslims to use Burmese (and not Urdu) in Islamic education since the time of the colonial period. It is important to note that the Islamic Centre discourages the style of worship usually found in mosques where people simply listen to sermons; rather, the Islamic Centre promotes creating a place where both men and women can freely ask questions and debate on their religious teaching and practice. IRAC and MMNAO also advocate for all Muslims, regardless of gender, to be able to participate in Islamic courses in the same place (but often separate, for example, men on the right and women on the left).

The Islamic Centre also holds summer seminars for Islamic education. A textbook of summer seminar says that one of the aims of those classes is to develop students' ability in order to explain Islam to the country's non-Muslim peoples.⁽³⁶⁾ The seminar surely intends Bamar Muslims to acquire such skills for living in a country that has very little understanding of religions besides Buddhism. In that textbook you can also find their idea that the students attending the course will be able to add as a supplement to wide ideology of religion, to understand Islam from the basic, and to have ability to answer the criticism against Islam. This "wide ideology of religion" also shows their strategy that they will teach both Islam and modern subjects and bring up the impartial Muslims.

It is clear from these organizations' activities that (1) they are deeply aware that Bamar Muslims, in addition to following Islam, are the citizens and indigenous to Myanmar; and (2) the people in Myanmar does not recognize them, regardless of whether they identify as Burmese or indigenous. Under the last military regime, it was difficult for them to freely express their identity as Bamar Muslims to the majority of Buddhist Burmese. Despite this challenge, they made efforts to raise public awareness of their existence, for example by publishing newspaper articles.

Islamic organizations have not had a strong relationship with the government except by officially registering and applying for permission to run activities, such as classes and

ceremonies. However, there were instances where members of the government — especially the Minister of Religious Affairs — were invited to events, such as religious celebrations, and delivered congratulatory speeches. Along with inviting the Minister of Religious Affairs (attended by the department head in some cases) to ceremonies to mark the birth of the prophet Mohammed, associations that serve Bamar Muslims engaged in publicity activities by announcing events in state-run newspapers and a weekly private newspaper such as the *Myanmar Times*. Here is an actual example of a newspaper article:

Headline: “Prime Minister Gives Congratulatory Speech at Ceremony to Mark the Birth of the Prophet Mohammed”

Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt spoke to Muslims living in Myanmar in his congratulatory speech at a recent ceremony to mark the birth of the prophet Mohammed. He urged cooperation in order to build a successful seven-step road map to civilian rule.

Brig. General Thura Myint Maung, the Minister of Religious Affairs and representative for Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt, read the speech. He stated that people of all religions in Myanmar have been able to practice their faiths freely since historical times, and are accustomed to living together in harmony. He expressed his wish that Muslims will also be able to follow the teachings of their own religion, benefitting the nation through spreading loving kindness. [The rest of the article is omitted.]⁽³⁷⁾

Such speeches by government officials show that Bamar Muslims’ activities are being officially accepted. The article includes a statement from a Bamar Muslim:

Some Muslims say they are part of a Muslim ethnic group (*Muslim Lumyo* in Burmese), which only complicates ethnic problems. While those who follow Islam are called Muslims, there is no Muslim ethnic group. These kinds of statements harm the solidarity of Myanmar’s indigenous peoples. The prophet Mohammed states that all human beings are members of a worldwide family, and destroying indigenous peoples’ solidarity goes against his teachings.⁽³⁸⁾

These publicity activities were part of an endeavour to teach as many people in Myanmar as possible about Bamar Muslims. This kind of activities still continues but they have to face much more difficulties because of the widespread anti-Islam or anti-Muslim feelings which were raised after a rape case and followed riots between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya (Bengali) Muslims in 2012.

Conclusion

Two history books written in the 1930s were used for this study, and describe the Bamar Muslims' claims of citizenship in the late colonial period. This study also relied on some references and interviews with contemporary Bamar Muslim organizations to shed light on how the community appeals its existence to Myanmar.

Burmese society was already aware of "Bamar" ethnicity during the colonial period, but this concept of ethnicity differed from how the Bamar Muslims viewed themselves. In Burmese society, "Bamar" means ethnic Burmese, Burmese culture, and Buddhism. However, the Bamar Muslim community's concept of "Bamar" does not include the element of religion, based on their explanation that they are "followers of Islam, yet Burmese." Thus, Bamar Muslims base their claim of being Bamar on the fact that they have adopted Burmese culture. Scholars believe this difference in the notion of ethnicity exists because the concept of citizens in the nation state after independence contains religion, which does not appear in laws or public documents.

By examining at the documents, materials, and classroom textbooks published by Bamar Muslim organizations, it is clear that Bamar Muslims are actively choosing to live in Myanmar as citizens. They often describe themselves with terms such as Muslims who are "indigenous peoples" or "indigenous citizens." The founding objectives of Bamar Muslim organizations not only emphasize matters relating to Islam, but also friendship with non-Muslim citizens.

Bamar Muslims recognize that by studying the past, they can consider their present situation and determine their future goals. By demonstrating an interest in the politics, society and culture of Myanmar in the context of their ancestors, they have placed themselves in the flow of Burmese history. They realized that they could teach their community how to live wholesome lives as both Muslims and indigenous citizens by examining history.

Although contemporary Bamar Muslims are officially citizens in Myanmar and have a strong identity as indigenous people, they are extremely marginalized. Based on the observations of Bamar Muslim organizations, it is clear that despite hardship, Bamar Muslims are striving for Myanmar society to recognize their existence, and are actively positioning themselves as native citizens.

In addition to these analyses, the current situation of Muslims in Myanmar society requires careful attention. After the transition from military rule to a democratic government, Bamar Muslims expected that they would be guaranteed human rights and would not experience discrimination because of their faith. However, a year after democracy began, riots erupted between the Rakhine people and Rohingyas (Bengali Muslims) from June-July 2012, and an anti-Muslim movement emerged after the riots. The Muslim community often feels that present circumstances are much worse than they were under the military regime. They feel a sense of crisis, and believe that democracy and freedom of speech were allowed in Myanmar to attack Muslims. While anti-Muslim sentiment has spread in Myanmar, research must be continued to understand how Bamar Muslims carry out their activities and appeal their existence as indigenous people to the people in Myanmar.

Notes

- (1) Yegar, Moshe, *The Muslims of Burma - A Study of a Minority Group*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1972.
- (2) Yegar, Moshe, "The Muslims of Burma," in R. Israeli (ed.), *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major*, London: Curzon Press, 1982, pp.102-139.
- (3) Yegar, Moshe, "Part One: The Muslims of Arakan," *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002, pp.17-70.
- (4) Berlie, J. A., *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 2008.
- (5) Some arguments emerged in the 2014 census on the ethnic designation for Bamar Muslims. Some recommend choosing "other" for race and to fill in the blank with *Pathi*. Some preferred "Bamar Muslim" and others recommend "Bamar" for race. The researchers also found arguments on ethnic designation for some other indigenous groups in the 2014 census.
- (6) Immigration and Manpower Department, *Burma 1983 Population Census*, Rangoon: The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, 1986, part two, pp. 55-58.
- (7) *ibid.*, pp. 55-58.
- (8) Kakweyi Wungyihtana, *Thathana Yaunwa Htunzebo [Golden Light of Religion]*, Yangon, 1997, p. 68.
- (9) The Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, *Muslim Almanac: Asia and Pacific*, Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd., 1996.
- (10) Islamic Religious Affairs Council HQ, interviewed on 22 December 2003.
- (11) Hbo Chey, Hsaya, *Bama Mutsalin do i Sheihaun Atoukpati* [the Old Biography of Bamar Muslims], Sagain Myo: Mya Than Sa Pounhneiktaik, 1939.
- (12) Mya (1), Asoya Sheinei U, *Bama Mutsalin Thamain Akyinchouk* [The Old Biography of Bamar Muslims], Mandalay, n.d.
- (13) The book obtained by the author is a reprinted version, with a forward written by Mya's daughter. In the forward, she describes the period from 1929 until 1936 as such: "The Summary on the History of Bamar Muslims was written and distributed for free." It is not clear in which year it was reprinted.
- (14) Mya (1), *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- (15) *ibid.*, p. 90.
- (16) *ibid.*, pp. 88-89.
- (17) Hbo Chey, *op. cit.*, p.102.
- (18) *ibid.*, p.10.
- (19) *ibid.*, pp.13-15.
- (20) *ibid.*, p.106.
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- (35) The descriptions about the Islamic Centre are based on my research interview to the Convenor on 20 April 2004 and 22 November 2005.
- (36) Iksalam Damma Beikman, *Nwe Yathi Iksalam Yeya Pochahmu Asiasin. Ahtettanhsin Iksalam Thinkhansa* [Islamic Course in Summer, Higher Education Level Textbook] 1, Yangon, 2003, p. (Forward)
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