THE ORIGIN OF ISLAMIC RELIGION IN MYANMAR

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, officially The Republic of The Union of Myanmar is one of the Southeast Asia countries. Myanmar is the 40th largest country in the world as well as the second largest country in Southeast Asia. Myanmar is also the 24th most populous country in the world with over 53.9 million people. Myanmar is the pluralist country in which many different ethnic groups with different religions are living together however its majority race is Myanmar; formerly known as Burmese or Barman and majoriy confesses in Buddhism. According to the Myanmar official statistics, the main religions of the country are Buddhist 89.2%, Christianity 5%, Islam 3.8%, Hinduism 0.5%, Spiritualism 1.2% and other 0.2% however the World Factbook of CIA shows Buddhist 89%, Christian 4%, Muslim 4%, Animist 1% and other 2% of the population.

Prehistoric Period

At the prehistoric period, Myanmar had no religion, but they worshiped invisible beings called Nat. They believed that Nat ruled their daily lives. They gradually accomplished under the influence of Aryan immigrants, Kshatriyas from Northern India who introduced the Buddhism, handicrafts and agriculture.

The *Maha Rajaweng* or history of the Burmese kings describes that *Abhi Raja*, the descendant of Northern India left his State and came with an army to the country of the Middle Irrawaddy, is the first Myanmar king. He built the city of *Tagaung* and established himself as a king. His kingdom is famous as *Tagaung Dynasty* and the ruins still exist.

When he died he left two sons, named *Kan Rajagy* and *Kan Rajange*. They disputed the succession to throne. *Kan Rajange* succeeded his father’s kingdom and *Kan Rajagy* collected his followers and went down the Irrawaddy. At the mouth of *Chendweng* River; now known as *Kubo* valley, near a hill called *Kale*, he made his son *Muddusitta* to be a king of there. Then he went towards the south-west, northern part of *Rakhine*, known as *Arakan*. He established his kingdom at *Kyaukpandaung* in B.C 825. According to the Arakanese chronicles, Arakanese claim themselves as the elder brunch of Myanmar called as *Myanmar Gyi* because they derived from the elder brother.

*Kan Rajange* and his thirty one descendants reigned the *Tagaung* Dynasty successively. The *Tagaung* Dynasty, known as the first Myanmar Monarchy was destructed by an invasion of tribes from the east, called *Taruk* and *Taret* means Chinese and Manchu. However the invaders were said to be come from *Yunan* and believe to be Muslim, there is no hint about Muslim at that time.

The last king of *Tagaung* Dynasty fled to the west bank of Irrawaddy, below *Tagaung* and died there. His followers separated into three bodies. One left with his queen and another moved to Kale which was reigned by the descendants of *Muddusitta* and the other went to east, *Shan* State. Then another Indian descendant *Daza Raja* arrived and married with queen, then built a new kingdom where close to *Tagaung*, now known as old *Pagan*. Sixteen kings succeeded this dynasty.

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7 Ibid, 7-9.
The last king *Thado Maha Raja* was dethroned by the invaders who were not clearly mentioned in chronicles. His crown prince, his queen’s brother went down to the river and stay at the hill near *Prome* as a hermit. After king was dethroned, queen gave birth to twin sons who were blind. According to custom, they must be put to death because of unfit to rule. But the queen managed to float with boat in the Irrawaddy River.

While they were floating along the river they got their eyesight and reached to *Prome*. At *Prome*, they met a daughter of hermit and found out that she is their cousin, then elder brother *Maha Thambawa* married with her and built a *Prome Dynasty* at BC 483. He is the founder of *Prome* Dynasty, reigned only six years and was succeeded by his young brother *Sula Thambawa* who reigned for thirty five years. After him, the son of the elder brother ruled the kingdom. At his time, he extended the capital *Prome* about five miles to the eastward and called *Tharekhettra*.

*Tharekhettra Dynasty* was a famous among Myanmar kingdoms and it lasted five hundred and seventy eight years. It came to an end by consolidating of the king of *Thahton*, descendant of Indian, race from *Telingana* and civilized by Buddhist religious teaching, called *Mon Talaing*. *Thahton* king ruled the whole delta of Irrawaddy, *Prome* and southern part of Myanmar, border of Thailand. Although the kingdom was known as *Thuwana Bumi* means Buddhist fame, better known as *Pegu Dynasty* because of its new capital was shifted to *Pegu*.  

*Prome/Tharekhettra* people were separated into two groups. One was left under the *Thaton* kingdom and one left to the northern west of *Prome*, near *Pagan* and founded new Dynasty there, called *Pagan Dynasty*. They worship dragons and built temples and monasteries with statues of dragons. Temples and monasteries were led by the priests and they became supreme power upon kings.

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8 Ibid, 16-19.
Muslims seamen however arrived, traded and settled down to coastal regions of Rakine and lower Myanmar at nine century as well as Persian arrived at border of Myanmar and Yunan as early as A.D 860, there was no evidence yet in written history of Myanmar.\(^9\)

The first Muslim arrived at Myanmar was Sayed Mohammad al-Hanafia, one of the sons of Caliph Ali in A.D 680. He first reached to the north of Maungdaw in northern Rakhine with his followers and confronted with native queen Kaya Pari. When he won a battle, queen and her followers converted to Islam and he married the queen. However his arrival to Myanmar is no written evidence, the tombs of Sayed Mohammad al-Hanafia and his wife still exist on the peaks of Mayu Hills, near Maungdaw region.\(^10\)

**Muslim in First Myanmar Empire**

About tenth century AD, Anawrahta became the king of Pagan and he is regarded as the great hero of Myanmar in history. He was recorded as the founder of first Myanmar Empire because he restored the several city states to the one kingdom. He recovered the ancient Tagaung Dynasty which had been conquered by the Shan and Dynasty of Mon Talaing. Since then, the kingdoms of the delta and the adjoining district of the east became subject to Myanmar with intervals of partial independents for several countries. Besides, he is glorified as a great reformer of religions who established Buddhism in the form in which it exists at the present time. He also made friendship with India and China.\(^11\)

The very first Muslim to be mentioned in Myanmar Chronicles called Maha Rajaweng, were the two sons of an Arab merchant named Byat Wi and Byat Ta. They apparently reached to the lower part of Myanmar which was ruled by the Thaton King in AD

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1050, had been saved from their vessel on the shores of Martaban. They were detained as refugees and lived at the Monastery of Thaton Kingdom. They were very strong and brave; Thaton King became afraid of their strength and arranged to kill them. Although the elder brother Byat Wi was killed, the younger brother Byat Ta managed to escape and reached to Pagan of King Anawrahta. Anawrahta loves him dearly because of his brave and kept him near to the king. Byat Ta married with Myanmar women and left two sons named Shwepyin-gyi and Shwepyin-nge. They were noted as king’s grandchildren and became royal horsemen in king’s military. The army of Anawrahta had already boasted Indian units and bodyguards apparently Muslims among them.

The second mention in the chronicles is Yaman Khan (Rahman Khan) from the days of King Sawlu (1077-1088) who succeeded his father Anawrahta to the throne. Anawrahta appointed a Muslim Arab man as a royal teacher for his son, Prince Sawlu at his young age. When Prince Sawlu became a king, he appointed the son of his teacher as well as his childhood friend, Yaman Khan, as a Governor of the City of Pegu.

Yaman Khan soon revolted, took the king to his prisoner and had him put to death. Then, he marched to the capital Pagan to capture the Kingdom, but he was defeated and killed by Kyanzittha, Sawlu’s brother. The core Muslim settlement in the Interior of Myanmar stated from the reign of Kyanzittha, who took many Indian captives in his wars with several kingdoms. Among them, there were many Muslims and he let them settle on the various places throughout his kingdom.

In 1277, Myanmar was exposed by another Muslim force from the east, the armies of Khublai Khan, China. The commander of his armies was the Turkish Muslim, son of the Governor of Yunan. They occupied the upper part of Myanmar and several years later; in

13 Ibid, 9.
14 Ibid, 3.
1285-1287 they attacked Pagan. Pagan Dynasty was brought to an end and Empire had fallen to the pieces.\textsuperscript{15}

This conquest however left no mark upon Myanmar at all, Muslim settlement in Myanmar might be documentarily stated that started from the first Myanmar Empire, King Anawrahta’s period.

**Muslim in Second Myanmar Empire**

Since the reign of king Anawrahta, lower Myanmar had been ruled by its own kings however they were accompanied to the Myanmar Empire. After Pagan Empire was fallen, lower Myanmar Dynasty became strong and spread its power to the neighboring kingdoms.

At that time, according to the travelers’ records, a lot of Muslim merchants, traders, sailors and their activities could be found in coastal cities of Myanmar such as Tenasserim (Taninthayee), Mergui (Myeik) and lower part of Myanmar like Bessein (Pathein), Pegu (Bago), Syriam (Thanlyin), Rangoon (Yangon) and Dela (Dala) etc. They controlled the business with their great ability of work and wealth. Then they had become important in the administration of the towns. As Myanmar is a monsoon weather country, at the monsoon season, Muslim ships were anchored and Muslim sailors were settled down in Myanmar ports. Myanmar governors, encouraged them to marry local women, but when they left, they were not allowed to take their wives and children together with them. And they also served in king’s army to raid neighboring Kingdoms. As the years passed; the number of Muslims in Myanmar increased gradually by the mixed marriages and newly arrival of Muslim traders and adventurers.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid, 3.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 4-7.
They formed the original of Myanmar Muslim community in the days of the Myanmar Kingdom, known as *Pathee or kala*. They lived in separate quarters called *kaladan* which king conferred and granted them to live.

Besides, in the reign of *Bayintnaung* (1550-1581) who famous as the second Myanmar Emperor, in his second war against Thailand in 1568-69, he brought his own Muslim artillerymen from India and later he let them settled and married with Myanmar women.17

In the sixteenth century, Muslims prisoners who had been brought from various wars were also settled in Upper Myanmar, near *Myedu*, in the *Shwebo* District by Myanmar Kings. Then, they were allowed to live neighboring districts such *Sagaing, Yamethin, Kyaukse* and they received lands as payment for their services to the king. They have served as musketeers to the palace guard and this service was passed by inheritance.18

The period of Muslim history in Myanmar as well as Muslim sea monopoly in Asia came to an end at the beginning of sixteenth century with the appearance of European sailors in this area.19

**Muslim in Third Myanmar Empire**

King *Alaungpaya*, well known as the founder of third Myanmar Empire and founder of the last Dynasty named *Konbaung*, could restore the power of Myanmar Empire. He conquered *Mon* Dynasty of lower Myanmar, India and *Rakhine*. At the beginning, *Alaungpaya* attacked to *Mon* Dynasty which defended him with Muslim army. When he won the battle, he captured all *Mon* cities and brought Muslim soldiers and Muslim artillery men back to his

17Ibid, 10.
18Ibid, 10-11.
19Ibid, 8.
kingdom, then they were later allowed to serve in his army.\textsuperscript{20} Then he let them settled in the district of \textit{Shwebo} and \textit{Yamethin}. The Muslims of these regions and their descendants are called \textit{Mydu kala} or \textit{Kula byo} and \textit{Pathee}.

At the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, in all the principle cities of Myanmar, there had already been Muslim communities who assimilated into Myanmar surroundings with language, dress and customs although retained their religious.\textsuperscript{21} Muslims obtained their eminence in Myanmar not only in military service but in administration posts also.

At the time of \textit{Padon Min}, known as \textit{Bodaw U Wine} or \textit{Bodawpaya} (1781-1891), one of the successor and son of \textit{Alaungpaya}, a Muslim named \textit{Aabid Shah Husainy} was appointed as a chief justice and at the \textit{Pgan Min}’s period (1846-1853), a Muslim was appointed as a governor of \textit{Amarapura}, capital of kingdom. In the days of the penultimate Myanmar king \textit{Mindon} (1853-1978), there were thousands of Muslims who were soldiers in the king’s army and who held the various administrative posts. Muslims also participated in the fighting of Anglo-Myanmar wars on behalf of Myanmar kings.\textsuperscript{22}

On the other hand there was Chinese Muslim community, known as \textit{Panthay} who came from the \textit{Yunan} District, western China bordering in Myanmar. The majority of them reached to Myanmar as a traders, muleteers and refugees after the collapse of \textit{Panthay} revolt against the Chinese Emperors in 1856-1873. They settled in the different places in Shan area, east part of Myanmar. They came into Myanmar until \textit{Yunan} was taken by the Chinese communists and apparently stopped altogether only in 1950.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20}Let Ware Nawrattha & Twin-thin Taik-wun, \textit{The Chronicles of Alaungpaya’s Battle} (Yangon: Myanmar, 1961), 77, 98, 99.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid, 46.
Muslim in Rakhine Region

Whenever the power of Myanmar Empire was apparently growth, Myanmar kings enlarged his Empire by conquering the neighboring kingdoms and did subordinate states of Myanmar. In AD 1404, Narameikhla who ruled the Arakan or Rakhine region was forced to flee from the Myanmar to Gaur, capital of Bengal Sultanate. He was welcomed by Bengal Sultan Ahmed Shah, served as an officer in king’s army. In 1430 Narameikhla requested to Nadir Shah who succeeded to Ahmed Shah to help to regain his throne. Nadir Shah granted an army under the command of a general Veli Khan and conquered back the throne.

Then Narameikhla founded a new capital at Mrohaung or Mrauk U, Myauk U of today. As return, Muslims soldiers who came with Narameikhla from Bengal were granted to settle in a village near Myauk U and built the Sandikhan mosque which still exists today. Started from AD1430, Rakhine was influenced by Muslims and Muslims played a decisive role in the history of Rakhine kingdom. The Rakhine kingdom was closely connected with the Muslim territories to the west. After the death of Narameikhla, Rakhine started expending northward and regularly raid to Bengal. 24

Administrative method and Court ceremonies of Rakhine Kingdom followed the custom of Gaur and Delhi Sultanates. There are a lot of outstanding posts held by Muslims although the kingdom was Buddhist. 25 In 16th century, Portuguese helped the Rakhine kingdom to raid on Bengal and captured the Muslims as captives. Then they had to serve in the Rakhine army, usually as the king’s bodyguard.

In AD 1658, The Mogul prince, elder son of Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan, dethroned his father and declared himself Emperor. The second son of Shah Jahan named Shah Shuja was defeated and fled together with his family and followers to the Rakhine. King of Rakhine welcomed them and permitted to live near Myauk U with the condition of surrender

25Yegar Moshe, the Muslim of Burma: A Study of Minority Group, 19.
their weapons. 26Shah Shuja and his followers were soon murdered by Rakhine King but no one knows the true cause.

Then, his soldiers who escaped from massacre were later admitted to the king’s bodyguard as a special archers unit called Kaman or Kamanci. When the king of Mogul Empire, the elder brother of Shah Shuja heard the death of his brother and royal family, became angry and put to an end to the Portuguese- Rakhine pirate on the east Bengal coast, their navies and settlement on the Bengal land. Rakhine army units were also attacked by the local Muslims, descendants of the Muslim slaves who had been settled on the land. 27

As a result the Rakhine kingdom was put up to the end. In 1684, the Rakhine king died and marked as the beginning of the kingdom which Muslim Kaman units took part in the conclusive roles. They were being reinforced by the Afghan mercenaries from northern India. The political rule of Rakhine kingdom was totally in their hands from 1666 until 1710. In 1710, the Arakanese King who succeeded to the former king took over the power over them and most of them exiled to Ramaree, Yan Bye of today and settled there and villages near Akyab, nowadays of Sittwe and still bear the name as Kaman. 28

In 1785, Rakhine was conquered by the Myanmar king and was annexed to Myanmar Empire. Myanmar army was formed by Muslims called “Myedu” and they were posted to Sandoway, Thandwai of today, as Myanmar standing army. Their descendants are still living there and cannot be differentiated with Rakhine and Myanmar except by their religions. 29

Today Muslims in Rakhine region, who are descendants of Kaman and Myaedu, called themselves Rohinga or Rohinja. 30

27Harvey G.E, History of Burma: From the Earliest Time to 10 March 1924, the Beginning of the English Conquest (London: Longmans, 1925), 147.
28Hall D.G.E, A History of South-East Asia, 341.
30Yegar Moshe, the Muslim of Burma: A Study of Minority Group, 25.
Muslim in British Colony Era

At the time of Konbaung Dynasty, British invaded Myanmar three times. After the first Anglo-Myanmar war (1824-1826), Tenasserim (Taninthayee) and Rakhine had been annexed to the British India and Indian immigrant reached to these parts of Myanmar. The second Anglo-Myanmar war was held in 1852 and till to part of Pegu was again occupied by the British. Total conquest of Myanmar after the third war (1885), a whole country was governed as the province of Indian Empire and tremendous Indians moved into Myanmar not only as immigrant but as residents moving from one district to another within the land. The traders and shopkeepers as well as workers and officers in government service in Yangon and in the most of towns and villages in Myanmar were almost always Indians, mainly Muslims. From 1891 onward, the most Yangon’s new inhabitants were Indians, half or even more of them were Muslims.31

As the immigrant population increased, there were problems between native Myanmar and Indian Muslims mainly because of businesses and mixed marriages. The most important result of the inter-marriage between Indian Muslim men and Myanmar Buddhist women was the creation of new class of half-breeds called Zerbadees and their community increased greatly and rapidly.32 But they were not been accepted as a part of Myanmar and they were convinced as semi foreigners.

The Muslim immigrants came and settled in Myanmar from all parts of India but they maintain their ties and organized each other according to their natives, languages and sects. Indian immigrant arrived Myanmar yearly with high rate however not all of them stay inside

31 Yegar Moshe, the Muslim of Burma: A Study of Minority Group, 29-31.
32 Ibid. 33-35
the country. Early in the twentieth century, Indian associations were started to be formed in Yangon and soon to other towns. As a result, separate Indian Muslim associations were appeared in Myanmar like Cholia Muslim Association, Surathi Muslim Association etc. but they found only for the religious affairs and community’s affairs.

**Muslim in Pro-independent and after Independent**

As the wake of the Indian community organizations in Myanmar, Myanmar Muslim community also founded the several organizations. The Burma Muslim Society (BMS) formed on December 12, 1909 however many Indian Muslims were enrolled, it was described as a Myanmar-Muslims or Zerbadees or Indian Myanmar. It performed not only for the religious affairs but for status of Myanmar Muslim also.

This was the only organization of Myanmar Muslims for many years. The BMS demanded the protection for the interests of Myanmar Muslims and separate representation on the legislative Council, especially. On January 26, 1929, BMS submitted its memorandum to the Royal Statutory Commission (Simon Commission) stated that Myanmar Muslims were the descendants of immigrant merchants, soldiers and others who had settled in Myanmar for hundreds years ago. They therefore have the same rights as descendants of any other racial group, to be considered as true Myanmar although not same religions.

In 1920’s-1930’s Myanmar nationalist movements led to separation of Myanmar from India. In 1937, Myanmar was separated from India. BMS however urged for the Myanmar Muslim to get the minority rights, in the Government of Myanmar Act which was passed by the British Parliament in 1935 and effective on 1937, the Muslims were not granted separate representation. BMS then called to all Muslims residing permanently in Myanmar to register as “Myanmar Muslim” but the Government did not accept this category and Myanmar

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Muslims were listed as “Zerbadee”, “Arakan Muslim”, “Kamans” and “Myaedu” under the category of “Myanmar-Indian Races” once again.\textsuperscript{35}

The second Myanmar Muslim organization named General Council of Burmese Muslim Associations (GCBMA) was established in 1936 in the city of Pyinmana. They although cooperated with the Myanmar nationalist movement, they also emphasized to being Myanmar. After the Second World War the General Council was recognized and very active for several years.\textsuperscript{36}

At the World War II, British withdrew from Myanmar and Japanese entered into Myanmar. At the time of Japanese conquest, there was no other development between Myanmar Muslims and immigrant Indian Muslims. After World War II several Muslim organizations renewed their activities and tried to get their rights.

At the Japanese time, the leaders of the Myanmar national movement organized the Anti-Fascist Peoples’ Freedom League (AFPFL) and it leaded to be an independent Myanmar. The Myanmar Muslim Congress (BMC) was a new Muslim organization founded at the time of AFPFL by Myanmar Muslims who had been active in Myanmar national movement in the WWII and thereafter. This Congress decided to join the AFPFL. \textit{U Razak}, an active member in the Myanmar national movement and in AFPFL, was elected President of the Congress.\textsuperscript{37} But the AFPFL leadership refused to recognize the Muslims as a national minority.\textsuperscript{38}

After WWII, British fought out Japan from Myanmar and occupied Myanmar again. Finally, Myanmar was granted Independence in 1948 and was going forward as Parliament Democracy Country; Muslims then got seats in the Parliament.

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\textsuperscript{35}Yegar Moshe, \textit{the Muslim of Burma: A Study of Minority Group}, 60-64.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid. 65


\textsuperscript{38}Yegar Moshe, \textit{the Muslim of Burma: A Study of Minority Group}, 73.
On the last day of September, 1956 BMC announced its dissolution by the pressure of Prime Minister U Nu. Two years prior to this (1954), U Khin Maung Latt (Abdul Latif), one of the AFPFL leaders and Minister of Education founded another organization for purely religious purpose called Islamic Religious Affairs Council; he acted its president. It attempted to renew and cement the unity of all Muslim splinters within the country, but didn’t achieve.\(^{39}\)

Those who did not accept the dissolution of BMC, they retained its name and aims. In 1958, the new BMC joined forced with a pro-communist body, the National United Front (NUF), but broke away in 1960 and changed its name to the Pathi Congress. The Pathi renewed the old demand that the Muslim community be granted the status of recognized national minority.\(^{40}\)

The other organization, Burma Muslim Organization (BMO) was founded by U Rashid, one of the national movement members and its first general conference in Yangon was held in December, 1960. Members of BMO established the Muslim Central Trust Fund in 1952.\(^{41}\)

The first Muslim religious organization was found in Myanmar in 1922, named “\textit{Jam ‘iyyat al-Ulama}”, Province of Myanmar which was the brunch of India “\textit{Jam ‘iyyat al-Ulama}”. This organization was established only by the Indian Muslims and Myanmar Muslims did not participate at all. On the eve of Burma’s independence, the organization changed its name to “\textit{Jam ‘iyyat al- ‘Ulama’ al-Islam, Burma}”.

At the meantime, U Razak founded a parallel organization in Upper Myanmar called “\textit{Jam ‘iyyat al- ‘Ulama’, Burma}” in 1946 and \textit{Haji Ghazi MohamadHashim} was elected as its president. This was formed by Myanmar Muslims.


\(^{40}\)Ibid, 80

\(^{41}\)Ibid, 80-83.
In 1948, following Independence, most of the Indians became Myanmar citizens, and the two organizations united into a single body called “Jam ‘iyyat al-‘Ulama’, Burma” as U Razak wished. Several years later, in 1958 Haji Ghazi Mohammad Hashim resigned from this group and most of the Myanmar Muslims left together with him. Indian Muslim and Myanmar Muslims who graduated from India religious schools have been existing in this organization with Indian Muslim culture till today.

On the other hand, the Islamic Council of Religious Affairs organized new religious organization called “Mu’atamar al-‘Ulama’”, (the Congress of Religious Elders) under the presidency of Haji Ghazi Mohammad Hashim. But these organizations were not acted for the aims of Myanmar Muslims rights anymore and busy themselves with declarations of Fatwas.42

On March 2nd, 1962, General Ne Win seized the power and became the leader of the country. He officially reigned until 1988. In 1964, his government nationalized the business which owned by the foreigners most of them are Indian Muslims. Then they were allowed to go back India and the most of Indian Muslims went back. After this circumstance, there was no more new Muslim immigrant from foreign countries.

On September 18, 1988, military seized again the power of country and that time newly Muslim organization was established in Myanmar called the National League of Myanmar Muslim (Ma Aa Pha). Nowadays there are so much Muslims organizations although there are only five organizations recognized by the government. Those organizations are performing for religious and social only not for status and rights of Muslims in Myanmar.

In conclusion, the origin of the Burmese Muslims is unlikely with other neighboring countries. They however have been living in the land since over hundred years ago, unfortunately they are recognized as foreigners in political view so far.

42Ibid, 89-94.