

## chapter 6

# Competing Identities and the Hybridized History of the Rohingyas

*Jacques P. Leider*

The successive waves of violence and aggression involving Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine state of Myanmar<sup>1</sup> in 2012 and 2013 attracted widespread international attention. The communal violence resulted in the death of more than 200 people and the displacement of over 130,000, mostly Muslims, as well as the destruction of housing properties. It highlighted ethno-religious tensions, harsh social problems and long-standing resentment. It also demonstrated, over the last two years, the risks inherent in the political transformation of the country, releasing tensions that had been repressed for decades

<sup>1</sup> The word “Rakhine”, a spelling adopted after 1991, is an ethnonym and can be used as an adjective. Rakhine state is the official name of the state in western Myanmar that is still known in most history books as Arakan. The people of the state are the Rakhine or Arakanese, and they refer to their country as “Rakhine-pray”. For reasons of convenience, as this article mostly deals with history, the name “Arakan” will be used to refer to the former kingdom whose territory extended, at times, far beyond the borders of the current administrative division, to the colonial province, and to the current Rakhine state. UN organizations and international non-government organizations that deal with the situation of the Muslim Rohingyas have established the acronym NRS, that is, Northern Rakhine State, referring to the area where Muslims form the majority population. The majority people of Myanmar will be referred to as “Burmese”.

by the authoritarian regime. Given the lack of in-depth historical, political and social studies, the description of these ethno-religious issues has remained fragmentary; those who have tried to gain a better understanding of the recent communal clashes in Rakhine state have faced difficulty accessing reliable information about the frontier region where ethnically and religiously diverse people have shared a long and complex history. On the other hand, the paucity of authoritative anthropological and historical work has made it relatively easy to present cherished beliefs as truth and political claims as historical facts. Plain explanations of multifaceted contexts have often been taken as sufficient evidence where critical investigation was needed. In the international media, for example, the presentation of the historical background has generally been limited to brief notes on earlier mass flights of Muslims from Arakan to Bangladesh.

This article is an attempt to partly address the scholarly vacuum by drawing attention to the role of history and the writing of history that have been missing in the current representation of the conflict. It supports the argument that today Buddhists and Muslims uphold mutually exclusive sets of identities based on competing claims to the history and geography of the country. The communities do not share a national narrative about Arakan as their homeland, as the role of Muslims is not acknowledged in the Buddhist narrative and the role of the predominantly Buddhist civilization of Arakan is ignored in the Rohingya Muslim retelling of history. While the Buddhist historiographical record goes back to the 15th century, the definition of a specific Muslim identity and the project of writing a history of Muslims (in terms of a separate community called “Rohingyas”) is fairly recent. The investigation in this article deals particularly with the context and origins of the Muslim Rohingya narrative. It stresses the background of Muslim history in Arakan to address the issue of the contested identity of the modern Rohingyas. Buddhist markers of history are not extensively detailed in this article as they already figure prominently in other publications (Leider 2002, 2004, 2005). The peculiar Muslim historical narrative depends to a large extent on the Rakhine Buddhist record of history, while it views Arakan’s history as pre-eminently Muslim in character. The Rohingya writing of history does not simply make an attempt to fit some missing links of Muslim history into a

national plot. It grafts Islamic features on a narrative derived from Buddhist chronicles and appropriates Arakan's pre-colonial history, creating a fertile ground for the discourse of political and historical legitimacy that has underpinned the fundamental Rohingya claim of a separate identity. This process of recreating the historical narrative is described here as a hybridization of the historical narrative.

The first section explores the creation of a specific Muslim identity in the north of Arakan and the emergence of the Rohingya movement. The term "Rohingya", now generally used to refer to Muslims in the north of Rakhine state, denoted at its origins a political movement that emerged during the 1950s and promoted a socio-cultural understanding of Muslims in Arakan as a separate ethnic group fighting for political autonomy.<sup>2</sup> The next section focuses on the use of history as a source of legitimacy by both Buddhists and Muslims. This is followed by a critical examination of Rohingya statements on their origins and leads to a brief review of historical sources on the growth of the Muslim community during the colonial period. The article concludes with a few comments on the need for embedding the discourse on the imagined past within the discussion on political rights and humanitarian issues.

## **The Rohingya Movement and the Creation of an Identity**

The creation of an international border between Pakistan (which gained independence on 14 August 1947) and Burma (independent on 4 January 1948) separated the huge Muslim community of Chittagonians who, with ancient roots in Bengal, had settled in north Arakan.<sup>3</sup> Many of the recent migrants were tempted by the idea of Pakistan as a state for Muslims, but a change of the territorial border was not a political

<sup>2</sup> On the name "Rohingya", see Hamilton 1798 and Leider 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The British census of 1931 distinguishes between the older Muslim community referred to as "Arakan Mahomedans" and the recent migrants called "Chittagonians". The older community formed roughly a sixth of the total Muslim community of Arakan.

option for the leaders of both countries (Irwin 1946; Bhattacharya 1995; Mole 2001; Yegar 2002). To gain independence or at least a separate status for Arakan's Muslim-dominated north was the motive that drove the Mujahid rebellion against the Burmese central government in the after-war context. This guerrilla war took place at a time when the Burmese armed forces were struggling to gain control over the country's peripheral territories. In military terms, the rebels were defeated in 1954, but the conflict dragged on until 1961 when the last Mujahids surrendered (Yegar 2002). The idea of an autonomous Muslim zone in Arakan did not disappear though, as it was espoused, after 1962, by the militant wing of the Rohingya movement. The expression "Rohingya movement" should be understood as the result of a gradual process of the creation of political and cultural formations among the Muslims of northern Arakan since the early 1950s. The term "Rohingya", in its present spelling, cannot be traced in print media before 1960. Its use is strongly associated with the Mujahids. Other terms such as Rwangya, Roewengya and Ruhangya had been in earlier use and were in competition as well. This diversity did not just reflect individual preferences, but represented different groups within the Muslim community. The term "Rwangya", recorded in British diplomatic files in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was used by the older community of pre-colonial period Muslims.<sup>4</sup> As a political crusade for the creation of an autonomous Muslim area, the Rohingya movement gave birth to a succession of militant organizations that have shared core beliefs

<sup>4</sup> The affirmation that Abdul Gaffar had used the term "Rohingya" for the first time in a letter to *The Guardian* monthly in 1951 is wrong because the monthly did not exist at that time. Gaffar came from Buthidaung and was on the Buthidaung Peace Committee in 1942. He became Parliamentary Secretary after the war and was one of five elected Muslim members from Arakan in the Constituent Assembly. I thank Derek Tonkin and Kyaw Minn Htin for sharing insights from their recent research in print media of the 1950s and 1960s. With regard to the use of the name, Kei Nemoto also refers to an official address "presented by a group called the Rohingya Elders of North Arakan to the prime Minister U Nu on his visit to Maungdaw on 10 March, 1950" (quoted by Jilani 1999: 462–3 in Nemoto, 2007: 3, fn. 5). It is also interesting to note that the name "Rohingya" was used in the official speech of Brigadier General Aung Gyi at the surrendering ceremony of the Mujahids, *Submission of Monograph in respect of the fact that local Islam, Inhabitants within Rakhine State, are native race and citizen*, p. 39.

with regard to a separate Muslim identity in Rakhine. The formation of a political consciousness of distinct Muslim interests in northern Arakan probably dates back to the years following the administrative separation of India and Burma in 1937, but the mature expression of this particular identity, which evolved during the 1950s, clearly emerged only with the publication of articles written by Ba Tha, aka Mohammed A. Tahrir, in *The Guardian* in 1960 and 1961 (Ba Tha 1960). Ba Tha (and following him, other Rohingya writers) drew his claims of a separate Muslim ethnic identity in Arakan from historical interpretations that may be described in the entirety of its various forms and arguments as Rohingya ideology. The emergence of the Rohingya movement and its ideology can only be understood in the conditions of Burma's ethnically formatted political landscape. It also has to be understood against the background of a cultural hierarchy where the Muslim civilization was rated as superior to the indigenous Arakanese/Burmese culture, a point that is illustrated further below.

The Panglong Agreement of 12 February 1947, concluded between General Aung San and non-Burmese ethnic representatives, granted political and financial autonomy to frontier areas inhabited predominantly by the ethnic minorities of the Shan, Kachin and Chin. The later creation of separate administrative divisions for the Arakanese (Rakhine), Mon, Karen and Kayah (as defined in the 1974 Constitution) also followed exclusively the lines of ethnic identities. Notwithstanding the criticism of contemporary social studies towards essentialized ethnic categories such as Myanmar's official 135 ethnicities, one has to acknowledge the fact that until today, there never has been any other way to define the Union and conceptualize power-sharing within Burma/Myanmar but by applying such supposedly rigorous ethnic classifications. Ethnic recognition has been a *sine qua non* of political project building.

The Rohingya movement tried to play by this "rule" when it set upon the task to obtain the recognition of an autonomous Muslim zone in northern Arakan covering Maungdaw, Buthidaung and part of Rathedaung township. To reach out for a separate political status, it was necessary to establish the credentials of ethnic distinctiveness. The Rohingya movement could sustain its political ambitions only by gaining recognition as an ethnic group. Religion alone—as was the case for defining Pakistan as a state for Muslims—was not sufficient. The

Muslims in Arakan did not want to be part of a separate Arakan state dominated by the Buddhists, a request that first came under discussion during the parliamentary period. The Buddhist Rakhine, on the other hand, were adamantly opposed to the creation of an exclusively Muslim zone, which meant to them the de facto loss of a part of what they see as their homeland (Jilani 1999 94).

## The Term “Rohingya”

Given the pervasive use of the term “Rohingya” since 2012, it is important to note that it actually took years to gain name recognition, even among the Muslims themselves. As an ethno-religious brand, it has been, until today, a term rivalled in Arakan by the appellation “Arakani Muslim” or “Rakhine Muslim”, which were never well received and even openly rejected by Rakhine Buddhists (Khaing Myo Saung 2012: 173). The quasi-monopoly that the term “Rohingya” enjoys in the media today, did not yet exist in the early 1950s. For example, “Rohingya” does not appear in the key declaration for political autonomy (“Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakani Muslims”) proclaimed at the Muslim Conference in Alethangyaw (Maungdaw) in June 1951 (Maung Tha Hla 2009: 73–4). Among the five elected members to the Constituent Assembly of 1947, four were elected as members of the Jamiat-e-Ulema and one as a member of the Burma Muslim Congress (Jilani 1998: 90). While “Rohingya” was used in the early 1960s for radio transmission in the local language and appeared in the names of a number of religious and cultural organizations, for example the Rangoon University Rohingya Students Organization, the Rohingya Youth League and the United Rohingya Organization of Mayu District, it did not spread widely beyond and there never existed an explicitly named political party in the country using the term after 1988. Nonetheless, it appears in the name of successive militant organizations since the 1960s. Until the early 1990s, “Rohingya” was indeed recognized in most media, not as an ethnic or religious denomination, but as the appellation of insurgents that resisted the Myanmar government and “sought the creation of an independent Muslim state near Bangladesh” (Selth 2003: 15). “Rohingya” became popular after

1995 through English-language reports about the human rights and humanitarian situation in northern Arakan.

The recognition that the term enjoys presently, though very recent, has had a major impact beyond simply giving the international public a greater awareness of the communal strife. Its conventional use by the media and by international organizations puts pressure on *all* the Muslims in Rakhine, especially when they leave the country, to define themselves exclusively as “Rohingyas” for the simple reason that outside of Myanmar, the term has a high value in terms of name recognition. More than that, for Western and Asian media as well as members of international organizations who are in charge of humanitarian missions and more particularly for those who do advocacy, the use of the term “Rohingya” has become a matter of political correctness. Not calling the Muslims “Rohingya” may be considered, by many activists, as the denial of their self-acclaimed ethno-religious identity and, by extension, a virtual rejection of claims on citizenship. Following the events in 2012 and 2013, Rohingya activists themselves have also been pushing Muslims in Rakhine state to define themselves exclusively as “Rohingyas”. The dynamics of name politics has thus become a huge political asset for the movement itself. But linguistic habits will not necessarily change in places where the Muslims from Arakan have been variously named with regard to their known origins. This is true in Burma/Myanmar and Arakan itself where they are officially called “Bengalis” as much as in Saudi Arabia (or even Pakistan), where many refugees from Arakan have lived since the late 1970s and where they are also called “Burmese Muslims”, a name Rohingya bloggers now angrily reject (Ahmed 2010).

### **The Rohingya Movement: Work in Progress or Political Failure?**

Some 60 years after its beginnings, one can describe the Rohingya movement either as a work in progress or as a huge political failure. A negative interpretation could run like this: Rohingya militants have not reached their aim of creating either a Muslim state or an autonomous

zone. After the Mujahids gave up their arms in 1961, the creation of the Mayu Frontier District (1961–4), thanks to General Ne Win, was a partial and temporary realization of their political hopes. Mayu Frontier District was directly administered by the army from Rangoon and the Muslims did not need to cooperate with the Rakhine Buddhists. But the political development of the country after 1962 and the Rohingya movement's own military impotence ruined any prospect of reviving the project of political autonomy. Rohingya militants never threatened the security forces in Arakan (Yegar 2002). Even Rohingyas who joined fundamentalist Islamist organizations in Bangladesh did not cause any trouble within Myanmar, but rather invested their fervour into the jihad elsewhere in Asia.

However one may describe or appreciate the situation of people of Indian origin in Burma/Myanmar since 1948, nowhere have Muslims fared worse than in Arakan. Over half of all the Indian Muslims who migrated to Burma during the colonial period came from Bengal (*Census of India* 1911: 215). For those who reinvented themselves politically as “Rohingya” after melding with the small local Muslim population in Rakhine, the claim of being and having always been an ethnic group (*lu-myo*) has proved counterproductive for a long time. Rohingya militants have variously cooperated with insurgents in other parts of the country (Selth 2003: 14–22). But the Rohingya militant movement has never gained credibility and acceptance within the larger ethnic front of anti-government organizations. Also, because of its history of political infighting, it apparently did not gain much credibility from Muslim states or international Muslim organizations, even in the most propitious times of insurgent financing flowing from the Middle East. Against this background, the current effusion of generosity and attention by the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Turkish government are all the more surprising and the creation of the Arakan Rohingya Union in Jeddah in 2011, after years of cajoling and advocacy by outsiders, is an extraordinary feat. The claims of the Rohingyas have not been accepted by Muslims elsewhere in Myanmar because the Rohingya brand has probably been perceived not so much as a grassroots movement to establish ethnic credentials but rather as a political project. It is true, on the other hand, that this perception may eventually change in the current circumstances where there is huge



international political and religious pressure to take sides and make a show of solidarity with the Rohingya.

On the other hand, the Rohingya movement has successfully established its own name as the dominant reference for a majority of Muslims in Arakan. The social dynamics, bringing people to define themselves preferably as Muslim Rohingya, play currently in the favour of the Rohingya movement. Still, this does not mean that the Rohingya identity itself has become more transparent. Rohingya ideologists postulate that there have been Rohingyas, as they see them, for centuries and, in describing historical contexts, they tend to systematically replace the term “Muslim” with “Rohingya” once the Muslim presence in Arakan is reviewed. For a historian, this approach is not viable. From Rohingya writings alone it is not possible to derive a uniform description of whom the Rohingya are or who they want to be, as descriptions do not harmonize. Such differences highlight that “Rohingya” is still very much an identity in formation and one has to keep track of a social process that is still undergoing change today. At present, it is noteworthy that the image of the Rohingyas that the outside world has is very different from the image that the leadership of the Rohingya movement has tried to promote.

Since the late 1990s, the Rohingyas have been continuously reported as the most persecuted minority in the world.<sup>5</sup> A Google search for the expression “most persecuted minority” or similar phrases turns out nearly 98 per cent links to the Rohingyas. Rohingya organizations have been able to capitalize on the reiteration of this status of victimhood to increase international pressure on the Government of Myanmar to deal with their claims for validating their citizenship. But it would be cynical to label the encapsulation of Rohingya identity in a condition of constant victimization as a political achievement of recurrent advocacy campaigns. In their publications, Rohingya

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<sup>5</sup> This expression became popular following the Rohingya boat crisis in Thailand in 2009 and was first used in a BBC report by Mike Thompson in 2006, according to Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group. It has been falsely linked to a UN report (e-mail communication of 21 June 2013). A rare social study of the Rohingya refugees is Hering n.d.

ideologists do not and did not intend to describe the Muslims in Arakan as historical victims and refugees, but rather as historical actors.<sup>6</sup> Arakan's history in the 17th century is a history of warfare against the Mughals, not of Muslim persecution (Askari Hasan 1960; Leider 2004: 151–70, 204–29). When one looks back at the last six decades, the history of Rohingya militants within and outside of the country is not void of agency either and it was only slowed down by an increasingly repressive system put in place by the authoritarian Burmese government. The expression of the “eternal plight of the Rohingya”, widely spread in reports after 2012, is not an adequate description of the worsening conditions in the 1990s that should be investigated within Myanmar's political context. The point that should be made clear here is that the priorities of the political agenda of several generations of Rohingyas have been to obtain ethnic recognition and political autonomy for the Muslims in northern Arakan, not to become the poster children of government oppression.

The cultural and historical background that nurtures the roots of Muslim identity in Arakan is totally absent from their representation in the media today. Unfortunately, this lack is at least partly a corollary of a choice made by the leadership of the Rohingya movement. The price of imperatively recreating the Muslims of variously labelled Bengali/Chittagonian/Pakistani origins in Arakan as a distinct ethnic group of Burma/Myanmar has entailed a constant denial of their cultural and historical roots in the wider area of the northeast Bay of Bengal. Obsessively rejecting their most obvious origins and the reality of the migratory flow during the late colonial period, Rohingya leaders have cut off their community—for political reasons—from the rest of the Indian community in Burma/Myanmar, notably those of East Bengali origins, from the wider Muslim community in Burma/Myanmar, and from their sister population in southeast Bangladesh/East Pakistan. The visceral rejection of the Rohingya identity by the Buddhists in Arakan and by many ethnic groups of Myanmar has a lot to do with

<sup>6</sup> The general impression of self-representation of the Rohingya today is mixed. For example, the website <http://www.thestateless.com> [accessed 2 July 2015], focusing on the “stateless Rohingyas”, has, like most Rohingya websites, a history section, but its presentation of the Rohingyas concentrates on an image of victimization.

the distortions and contradictions built into the political DNA of the Rohingya movement. Looking back into recent history, it is difficult to deny that the intellectual bearers of the contemporary Rohingya identity have been the proponents of an individuality that has condemned this Muslim community to a condition of self-isolation.

## History as a Fountain of Legitimacy

The key proposition of those who claim a Rohingya identity is that Muslims in Rakhine have developed a common identity of mixed Asian and Middle East origins since the first millennium and that this identity should be referred to, a posteriori, as uniquely “Rohingya”. Historical evidence, which exists only for the early modern period, shows that there was no single unified Muslim community in the old kingdom, and that the vast majority of both the pre-colonial and the colonial Muslim communities came from Bengal. British documents and statistics clearly establish that there was a migratory flow from Bengal’s Chittagong district to Arakan, notably before World War I, hugely important between 1891 and 1901, and extending until the 1930s (*Census of India* 1911; *Burma Gazetteer Akyab District* 1912; Smart 1917). Little documented and poorly known flows of immigration, considered illegal by the authorities, still took place at the time of the Mujahid rebellion (1947–61) and after Bangladesh’s war of independence in 1971 (Aye Chan 2011). Rohingya writers trivialize the inflow of migrants during the colonial period; deny the later migratory movements; define their community as the sole successors of the old, culturally assimilated Muslim community of Arakan; and emphasize cultural differences with the Muslims of Chittagong.

While underscoring what they are *not* (former labour migrants, agricultural settlers and recent illegal immigrants) and what they do not want to be seen as any more (Bengalis), Rohingya intellectuals have positively claimed the legacy of Arakan’s history. The Rohingyas have re-described the country’s past in a selective way, prioritizing the Islamic elements and the presence of Muslims and reinterpreting the gist of political history as an essentially Muslim story. To do so,

Rohingya historians have generally preferred British colonial writings and post-colonial Western scholarship on Arakan's archaeology and history.<sup>7</sup> Even today, and not unlike what one can find elsewhere in contemporary Myanmar, it is not the current state of scholarly research that is considered as authoritative by many, but the first, tentative state of historical scholarship going back to the colonial period.

M. A. Tahir aka Ba Tha's *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma*, written in 1963 at the request of the United Rohingya National League of Myitkyina, is the first modern Rohingya history book. It summarizes Ba Tha's efforts to compile evidence of the history of Muslims in Arakan and interprets them within the political perspectives and ambitions of the Rohingya. The book was written at a time when the self-confidence of the Rohingya movement to establish itself successfully within the ethno-political landscape of Burma was probably at its highest. Remember that the early 1960s marked the flourishing years of the "Mayu Frontier District" in northern Arakan. *A Short History of Rohingyas* was translated into English in 1998 by Jilani and published in Bangladesh<sup>8</sup> It contains the seminal concepts, ideas and interpretations establishing the existence of a historical Rohingya identity. One key assumption of the Rohingya writer is that there has been a historically continuous Muslim presence in Arakan going back to the first millenary. From a scholarly perspective, it is difficult to support this proposition because there is a lack of hard evidence for the earliest period.<sup>9</sup> The regional historical context before the 16th century is subject to various interpretations and though there is more abundant evidence at hand for the early modern period that offers precious insights, it is difficult to write a coherent narrative of Muslim history and society.

<sup>7</sup> They occasionally quote Dr Than Tun, but rarely quote Rakhine Buddhist chroniclers and authors.

<sup>8</sup> One pre-war work on the Muslims written in Urdu is *Tarikh-i-Islam: Arakan aur Burma* by Muhammad Khalilur Rahman (1944). The contents of this book have not yet been accessible to this author. Thibaut d'Hubert (oral communication, Dec. 2012) said that the work reputedly mentions Islamic reformist movements that tried to put an end to syncretic cults practised by Muslims in the pagodas of Mrauk U.

<sup>9</sup> The chronology of the Hindu-Buddhist culture of the first millennium has recently come under further revision.

Citing the presence of Indian traders, literary testimonials, cultural elements of Islamicization in Arakan as well as particular interpretations of stories and legends, Rohingya historiographers have tried to construct a single account of history labelled “Rohingya”. As has been noted above, when anything “Muslim” in Arakan history is qualified in the Rohingya discourse as “Rohingya”, the words “Rohingya” and “Muslim” become dogmatically fused in a single meaning where the connotations of ethnic Muslim plurality, which were typical for the region during the early modern period, are disappearing or become, at least, blurred. The Kaman Muslims of Ramree Island are an exception, as they were officially recorded as a pre-colonial Muslim community of Arakan before the Rohingya movement emerged in the late 1950s. It is only by re-reading historical sources and colonial historiography and replacing the word “Muslim” with “Rohingya” that the Rohingya writers have been able to extrapolate and interpret a record that remains patchy, with the exception of Mrauk U’s political heyday in the 17th century.

Rohingya writers have certainly sharpened the need for outsiders to pay closer attention to the historical Islamic presence within the Buddhist kingdom.<sup>10</sup> They have introduced elements such as the presence of Sufism and the role of Muslim elites at the court that had hitherto not been part of the historical plot. This should have benefited a factually correct and analytical approach to history. Nevertheless, the reading of historical sources has remained partial and tainted by the requirements of establishing “ethnic” credentials. While largely ignoring the architecturally, socially and culturally predominant Buddhist elements, Rohingyas interpret Arakan’s history as having been the history of a predominantly Muslim country. Such a distortion is unhelpful, and what could be an interesting debate on cultural impact and cross-cultural exchange within the coastal region of the northeast Bay of Bengal is superseded by the priorities of an underlying political agenda. Rejecting Rohingya claims and interpretations of history has become tantamount to rejecting (in their eyes) all at once the Muslim

<sup>10</sup> Charney was the first Western scholar to consider seriously the issue of religious identities in Arakan in a historical perspective in his PhD dissertation (1999).

heritage in Arakan and the right of Arakan Muslims to claim citizenship in Myanmar.

Rohingya publications, such as Yunus' *A History of Arakan (Past and Present)* (1994),<sup>11</sup> Jilani's *The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their Quest for Justice* (1999) and *A Cultural History of Rohingya* (2001), Zaw Min Htut's much discussed *The Union of Burma and Ethnic Rohingyas* (in Burmese), published in 2001 in Japan and Abu Aaneen's remarkable, as yet unpublished "Towards Understanding Arakan History (A Study on the Issue of Ethnicity in Arakan, Myanmar)", written in 2002 in Yangon, follow, in pursuit of Ba Tha, to establish the credentials of an ethnic Rohingya Muslim identity and describe Arakan, to various degrees, as an Islamized country.

The hybrid history that grafts Muslim elements on a Hindu-Buddhist matrix should be the subject of a scholarly debate in terms of writing history. Its methodological flaws do not invalidate the endeavour to give a voice to the Muslims in Arakan's history, because no one can deny that Muslims have a right to claim the historical roots of Muslim presence in Arakan as part of their cultural heritage. Still, there are weak points in Rohingya attempts to compose a Muslim history of Arakan that cannot be talked away, such as the interpretation of legendary accounts as records of factual history, reading back into history of contemporary conditions of oppression and, above all, a blind spot regarding the Chittagonian Bengali migration during the colonial period. As has been stated above, Rohingya authors do not historicize the birth of the Rohingya movement itself as a process that emerged from novel political circumstances created by the independence of Pakistan and Burma. Several of these flaws have been examined, sometimes eloquently and patiently, sometimes in a regrettably aggressive way, by Rakhine Buddhist authors during recent years. Rakhine writers adamantly deny the existence of a Rohingya ethnicity, strongly emphasize the fact that the so-called Rohingyas are really descendants of Chittagonian migrants and draw attention to the ongoing illegal immigration from East Pakistan in the aftermath of World War II. Published and unpublished papers and books include

<sup>11</sup> Yunus was head of Rohingya Solidarity Organization.

Shwe Zan's "Study of Muslim Infiltration into Rakhine State" (1988), Khin Maung Saw's "The 'Rohingyas', Who Are They? The Origin of the Name 'Rohingya'" (1993), Aye Chan's "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)" (2004), Maung Tha Hla's *Rohingya Hoax* (2009) and Saya Khaing Myo Saung's detailed and highly informed compendium *The Bad Colonial Heritage of Arakan and the Expansion of the Bengali Muslims of Chittagong* (in Burmese, 2012). Rakhine writing has often provoked Rohingya answers in return (Islam 2011).

Rakhine Buddhists have traditionally looked upon what they consider as their own land, Rakhine-pray (*Rakhuin prañ*), as the foremost Buddhist land, because they believe that Lord Buddha in his times visited the country and let King Candasuriya make a statue of the Buddha called Mahamuni, described in the texts as Buddha's younger brother. This statue has been the paragon of the kingdom for several centuries, until it was relocated by the Myanmar conquerors to Amarapura in 1785. Apocryphal stories in Arakan tell about the Buddha visiting various places within Arakan, indicating the presence of relics that he had left there during earlier animal or human existences. It is the sacred geography and the Buddhicized nature of the land that make the country so special to its Buddhist inhabitants (Leider 2009). The indigenous historical discourse as we find it in literary traditions is similarly impregnated by Buddhist cosmology, the foundational legend of the Mahamuni and the traditions regarding successive royal dynasties and capital cities. Though foreigners have played a huge role in Arakan's political history and despite the fact that the Rakhine kings in the 16th and 17th centuries controlled predominantly Muslim territories in southeast Bengal, the administrative, military and economic roles of Christian Portuguese and mixed blood, of Hindus and of Muslims have been largely ignored in the indigenous, and by extension national, discourse on Arakan and the state's Buddhist identity.

History counts for Buddhists and Muslims alike and it is a field where battles are fought to establish the credibility of ethno-religious narratives. In the eyes of both communities, "history" does not only define their acclaimed cultural, religious and ethnic identity, but also establishes their rights to claim the land as their own. What they perceive as their history is thus undeniably something close to the minds and



hearts of many people on both sides of the divide. Muslim Rohingyas and Buddhist Rakhine, unlike other ethnic groups in Myanmar, have been known for creating historical societies and are keen on organizing historical seminars to convey their political points rather than, say, publishing legal reports or human-rights briefings. Educated members of both communities have confronted each other's ideas and beliefs and engaged in a struggle to gain the moral high ground and establish their truth.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, the international community has totally ignored this historical and cultural debate since the 1950s. As noted above, both communities tend to write each other out of history or to minimize the importance of the opposing party in history. One may thus take due note of one of the few points where the narratives of some writers are similar. This is the negative appreciation of the Burmese conquest of 1785 and its consequences. Buddhist nationalists have often described the 40 years of Burmese rule (1785–1825) as a genocidal attempt to eradicate the Rakhine, while in the view of some Rohingyas, King Bodawphaya's policies nearly put an end to their own Muslim civilization: "The fall of Mrauk-U was a mortal blow to the Rohingyas for everything that was materially and culturally Islamic was razed to the ground", writes Jilani (2001: 69).<sup>13</sup> It is not clear if the Muslim anti-Burmese stance is based on a separate Muslim oral tradition, the notoriously anti-Konbaung strain of British colonial writers, or a late adaptation of the written Rakhine Buddhist tradition.

## Narratives of Origins

Rohingya writers have proposed different explanations of their ethnic and religious origins. These explanations share three characteristics: they stress a mixed heritage, state a Muslim connection to Arakan going

<sup>12</sup> Websites reflect the passion for historical articles avidly collected. Recent examples of seminars are the Rohingya Historical Seminar in Saudi Arabia (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwExQK-COA0> [accessed 2 July 2015]) on 29 Apr. 2013 and the Rakhine History Seminar at Mahidol University, Bangkok, 9 Mar. 2013, organized by Buddhist students.

<sup>13</sup> Abu's praise of Bodawphaya's appointments of religious judges sounds a strikingly different note (Abu 2002: 84–5).



back to the first millennium and make a constant effort to minimize or deny their connection to Bengal and its population. Rohingya authors sometimes turn received wisdom upside down, and to support their arguments have made statements that are not only counterintuitive but outside of the domain of scholarly examination. Ba Tha, for example, states that the Rohingyas were once “in absolute majority in the whole of Arakan” and that 50 per cent of Chittagong’s Muslim population comprised descendants of Rohingyas who fled Arakan after 1785 (Ba Tha 1999 [1963]: 42–3).

It has always been prestigious among Muslims in Southeast Asia to state Arab and Persian origins as linked to a very early presence of Islam. But early Middle Eastern travelogues do not mention Arakan (Tibbetts 1979). It is a legendary account of shipwrecked sailors, referred to as *kala*, that has been interpreted in the required sense. *Kala*, a word used for centuries in Myanmar and Arakan, denotes Indians in general and Muslims in particular, but more broadly foreigners from the West, so that it has come to be interpreted by Rohingyas as denoting Arabs or Persians. But the shipwreck story in itself has no claim to be historical because there is very little verifiable information in any part of the Rakhine chronicles that deals with early history. In the case of the shipwreck, the date now generally quoted by Rohingya authors, matching with AD 788 and interpreted as the date of the arrival of Islam, is also the year when Vesali, one of Arakan’s early urban sites, was allegedly founded. On grounds that have nothing to do with archaeology, wrecked ships or Islam, that date had already been criticized by Candamalankara with regard to the rule of a king who may eventually have reigned a century later. Rakhine dynastic lists linked to a succession of “capitals” are desperately messy and inconclusive (Candamalalankara 1931: 270–88 *passim*). As for the earliest arrival of Islam in Arakan, any debate hinges on, and cannot be isolated from, the discussion of the expansion of Islam in the Bay of Bengal in general (Eaton 1993).

The most popular view of Rohingya ancestry has been the mixed-origins theory, which states that “the Rohingyas trace their origin to Arabs, Moors, Turks, Persians, Moghuls, Pathans and Bangalees” (Ba Tha 1999 [1963]: 43). This higgledy-piggledy theory seems to simply add up a series of “great” suggestive names, some of which

are problematic by themselves due to multiple meanings and usages. The term “Moors”, for example, is an exonym. It was first used by Europeans to refer to Muslims of both Arab and Asian descent, and later by the Dutch to denote Bengali Muslims. It challenges the imagination to establish any meaningful ethnic connection between the “Mughals”, referring theoretically to people of Turco-Mongol ancestry, and Arakan, unless one focuses on the singular episode of Bengal governor Shah Shuja’s exile in Arakan in 1660–1. “Pathan”, being the Hindustani pronunciation of Pashtun, refers broadly to Afghans, a more likely bet for Muslim ancestry in Arakan. After they fled from Bengal following the Mughal conquest, Pathan warriors were among the first mercenaries of the Rakhine kings to fight against the advance of the Mughal expansion towards the east.

Other Rohingya writers have stated that the Rohingyas are descendants of the Hindu-Buddhist civilization of Vesali who converted to Islam. To demonstrate a genealogical link, they referred to the closeness of their own language with the language of the eighth-century Chandra dynasty inscriptions. Both are indeed Indo-Aryan languages, given that the language of the inscriptions is Sanskrit and the language spoken by the Muslims of north Arakan a dialect of Chittagonian Bengali. The incorporation of epigraphical and archaeological findings into the Rohingya narrative mirrors the perception of Vesali as a site of great antiquity in the representation of the past by Rakhine Buddhists as well. The Vesali period as a whole is undeniably a key building block of Arakan’s historical identity and a number of prominent finds, such as statues and coins, have become emblematic, even iconic, reflections of national pride. By claiming that the people of Vesali were ancestors of the Rohingyas, the Rohingya interpretation asserts that the forefathers of the Muslims of today lived in Arakan before the Buddhist Rakhine, who are ethno-linguistically Tibeto-Burmans, migrated to the country.

The most recent expression of Rohingya identity combines the two theories into a single one:

Rohingya were descendents of Indo-Aryan converted to Islam in 8<sup>th</sup> century and the racial admixture of Arab (788AD–810AD) plus Persian (700AD–1500AD) plus Bengali (1400AD–1736AD) plus Mogul (1600AD). So Rohingyas is one of ethnic group of the union

of Myanmar mostly living in Rakhine State and were not immigrants during the British rule (NDPD 2012:2).

One sees that information of a very general nature, or about which one can merely speculate, is extrapolated to fit into a rigorous chronological framework. The Bengali demographic input is only acknowledged until the mid-18th century, but not for the colonial period for which it is best known.

The national mythology of the Rohingyas also lays claim to links with various prestigious Muslim elite groups that flourished at the court and in the administrative system during Mrauk U's golden age. The undeniable historical role of this elite can surely be invoked within a history of Muslims in Arakan, but the genealogical links with the contemporary majority of Muslims are tenuous.<sup>14</sup> Today the Muslims in Arakan are a rural population of agriculturists with a tiny middle class of traders and professionals. The historical sources suggest a simple and relatively clear picture. The origins of most Muslims in Arakan go back to communities of deported Bengalis that were resettled by the Rakhine kings in the Kaladan Valley between the 16th and 18th centuries (Leider 2004; van Galen 2008). Among the tens of thousands of Rakhine who fled Arakan for Bengal due to Burmese fiscal oppression and forced labour at the end of the 18th century, there were also Muslims, but one cannot guess at their percentage. They assimilated more easily than the Rakhine within the society in the Chittagong district where they had earlier come from (Van Schendel 1992: 31). Many may have returned to Arakan after the British occupation in 1825, but there are no statistical sources about the return of either Buddhists or Muslims. British sources note a steady and increasing flow of Bengalis from Chittagong to Arakan after 1825, because salaries and revenues were markedly higher here. Immigration, both temporary and durable,

<sup>14</sup> Among the yet little-known facets of Muslim life in pre-colonial and early colonial Arakan, the study of the educated Muslim class who lived in Mrauk U is a desideratum. Educated, literate, bilingual Muslims very probably played a key role in providing information about Arakan to the British in the early colonial period. The old Mrauk U elites, Buddhists or Muslims, were worn down by the political decline of the kingdom in the 18th century. The ruling Rakhine court elite was finally uprooted and deported by the Burmese rulers after 1785.

reached a peak during the last decade of the 19th century, and continued until the 1930s. To illustrate the point above, discuss the percentage of Muslims in the general population and appreciate the problem of evaluating demographic growth, one has to turn to the 19th- and early 20th-century sources.

The first important British writer on Arakan was Arthur P. Phayre. He may also be called, even today, one of the best informed ones, having learned the language, held an administrative position in Arakan from 1841–6 and been appointed commissioner of Arakan from 1849–52. He did not only treat Arakan's history separately from the history of the rest of the country in his *History of Burma* (1883), but he had a huge impact on indigenous historiography itself as he initiated the writing of the most important Rakhine chronicle, the *Nga Mi Razawan* (1846). But, somewhat unfortunately, it is not Nga Mi's writing itself that has been the most influential, but Phayre's interpretation of it and particularly the selection of episodes that he deemed reliable and that henceforth gained a status of being history as it was. As a matter of fact, then, one should not be less critical of Phayre than of other authors. Nevertheless, Phayre should still be considered a dependable writer. When he presented the inhabitants of the country in his *Account of Arakan* (1841), Phayre stated that the “*Kolas* or *Moosulmans*” formed 15 per cent of the total population.

This is a more trustworthy indication than the one in Paton's earlier report, published in 1828, that puts their percentage at 30 per cent. Paton simply repeats an estimation made by Robertson in 1826, at a time when the British had still a very imperfect knowledge of the country (Robertson 1853: 33; Paton 1828). In 1841, the British had more detailed statistics at hand. Comstock's contemporary but slightly confusing figures from the 1840s can be quite well reconciled with Phayre's 15 per cent (Comstock 1847: 224, 228, 255). But there is still room for debate about the number and percentage of the Muslims in Arakan before the Chittagonian immigration of the late 19th century, because scholars still have an imperfect idea of Arakan's total population at the moment of the Myanmar conquest and the volume of later emigration and return. The sources diverge and suggest widely differing interpretations. Take the following information found in an orally informed English report of 1777. It states that three-quarters of

Arakan's entire population comprised deported Bengalis or descendants of deported Bengalis (Leider 1999). The population census of 1869, on the other hand, indicates that of a total population of 447,957, 24,637 were classified as "Mahomedans", meaning that Muslims amounted to a mere 5 per cent of the total population (British Burma/ Foreign Department 1871). While it is reasonable to assume a greater fallacy for the earlier records, one may wonder, keeping in mind Phayre's percentage, if the Muslim population in Arakan had been declining or if such huge differences were due to different ways of classifying the people.

Phayre also wrote, like several authors before and after him, that the Muslims of Arakan were of "Bengalee descent" and that it appears that their ancestors were sent as slaves to Arakan when the Rakhine kings had possessions in Bengal (Paton 1828; Phayre 1841; Comstock 1847; Tickell 1854; Robinson 1871).<sup>15</sup> There is overwhelming historical evidence, first from Portuguese, but mainly from Dutch sources, to confirm this, because the Dutch were heavily involved in the slave trade in the Bay of Bengal in the 17th century (van Galen 2008). Both English and Bengali sources confirm that the raids and deportations continued well into the 18th century though the power of the Rakhine kings had been declining (Ghosh 1960). Rohingya authors shy away from portraying the history of Muslims in Arakan as a history of deported and resettled masses. Still, deportation was a well-known aspect of Arakan's territorial expansion and political rise, and typical of royal policies in Southeast Asia to supplement limited manpower. Many Muslim members of the court elite of Mrauk U in the 17th century who were palace guards, administrators, royal servants, eunuchs or poets, had also been captured and deported, and while they enjoyed a life among the elite were nonetheless prisoners in a golden cage (d'Hubert

<sup>15</sup> "They were not Mughls converted to the Mahomedan faith, but bona fide Musulmans whose ancestors had been imported into the province from Bengal. They are supposed to have been brought away as slaves during the time when Arracan was an independent kingdom. ... Many of the Mugh Mussulmans still retain the language and habits of their forefathers; many have to all intents and purposes identified themselves with the natives of the soil; but all have adopted the style of dress and some of the habits of the country" (Robinson 1871: 79).

2010; d'Hubert and Leider 2011). References to this small pre-colonial elite carry a whiff of undeniable prestige, but they are, as noted above, relatively useless in explaining the development of Muslim society in north Arakan in the 20th century. The question of origins is rather simpler when it comes to the Kaman Muslims on Ramree Island. The Kamans trace their historical origins to the several hundred followers, bodyguards and servants of Shah Shuja when he had to take refuge in Arakan in 1660.<sup>16</sup>

A brief comment has to be made regarding Indian Muslim traders. They undoubtedly played a dominant role in Arakan's coastal and maritime trade. They competed with Portuguese traders for favours at the Rakhine court in the 16th and 17th centuries, and what little information is at hand suggests that they both preceded and outlived their European competitors. But their trade never reached a hugely important volume when set within the context of the trading network of the Bay of Bengal sources. In the early modern period, Muslim merchants who traded with Arakan came from Surat, Pulicat, Masulipatam and Bengal. Wouter van Schouten, a Dutch physician who left some very detailed descriptions of Arakan around 1660, writes that very few of these traders had been born in the country (Schouten 1727: 94, 258). This would exclude the existence of an important local Muslim business establishment, but not the presence of a modest trading community.<sup>17</sup>

Rohingya Muslims do not claim to have Rakhine or Burmese ancestry, most probably because it would not carry the same prestige for an Islamic audience as laying claim to Arab ancestry. Rakhine Buddhists generally deny, with great fervour, that their "national race" has been tainted with Indian blood. Enriquez noted that "fortunately they do not intermarry much with the Chittagonians", but the *Census of India* concluded that half of the increase of the number of Muslims in Burma between 1901 and 1911 was due to intermarriage (*Census*

<sup>16</sup> Shah Shuja was killed a few months after his arrival when his men set fire to the royal palace, but a plot to dethrone the king of Arakan failed. According to an oral tradition, the survivors of the repressed revolt were resettled in Ramree.

<sup>17</sup> One may recall that the first piece of hard evidence for the presence of a foreign trader living in Arakan is the Warittaung Phaya stone inscription (A. 39) of *sakkaraj* 757 (AD 1495) written in Persian.

of India 1911: 99; Enriquez 1922: 59). One has to bear in mind that whatever is known about the coexistence and social interaction of rural Muslims and Buddhists relates only to the recent, but not to the distant past, when social interaction could have been different.

## Cultural Hierarchies and the Interpretation of History

The interpretation of Arakan's history as having essentially been the history of a Muslim land is probably the most controversial part of the Muslim reading of Rakhine history.

Islamic influence grew in Arakan to the extent of establishing a Muslim vassal state beginning in 1430 AD. Muslim's rule and influence in Arakan lasted for more than 350 years until it was invaded and occupied by Burmans in 1784 AD (Ba Tha 1999 [1963]: 2).

Arakan's religious architecture, indigenous literature and foreign accounts form a solid body of historical evidence that demonstrate Arakan's predominantly Buddhist character. The majority of the population identified with the Pali canonical tradition and shared multiple beliefs and practices with Buddhists in continental Southeast Asia (Shwe Zan 1995; de Mersan 2005). The development of this interpretation cannot be separated from the regime of cultural hierarchies that prevailed during the colonial period. The Mughals had seen their own Muslim civilization as superior to that of non-believers in Southeast Asia's Buddhist kingdoms (Sarkar 1907; Nathan 1936). The British transposed the perception of India's superior cultures into their interpretation of Burma's archaeology and history. Before the colonizing West brought modernity during the Industrial Age, a process denoted as Indianization had fertilized the Southeast Asian ground to enable the emergence of urban civilizations such as the Pyu cities, Pegu, Pagan and its successors. In the *Census of India*, we read that:

both the Burmese and the Talaings [Mon] owe their evolution from a number of small, wild, scattered, disunited and nomadic tribes into large and cohesive kingdoms to their contact with Indian colonists who had settled in numerous small colonies in the valley of the Irrawaddy (*Census of India* 1911: 74).



The paradigm of the superior civilizational influence flowing from the West has dominated historical interpretations of Southeast Asia and Burma, but more particularly of Arakan as it bordered on Bengal. It was also seen as particularly valid regarding the cultural impact of Islam. Collis, a British judge and prolific writer, interpreted Arakan's history, drawing on this paradigmatic approach. In his well-known article "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay (A Study of Coinage and Foreign Relations)", Collis explains that the kingdom was great when it came under the influence of Muslim India, although it declined once Burma's eastern influence prevailed. The choice of the article for re-publication in the Burma Research Society's *Fiftieth Anniversary Publication* in 1960 is an indication that Collis's ideas were still seen as relevant and enjoyed authority in post-colonial Burma (Collis 1960 [1925]).

The colonial understanding of history was also infused with the idea that races were rising and fading. Under the imperial rule of the British, the superior Indians were once more promised a dominant role. The *Census of India* displays the view that British administrators had of the future of the Burmese "race":

In view of the prevailing tendency to assume that the Burmese as a race are doomed by the modern incursions of Indians into the province, it seems necessary to emphasise the fact that the existence of the Burmese as a powerful and widespread race is due to Indian immigration (*Census of India* 1911; 74–5).

Against the background of such views, it is not surprising that in the early 20th century, the British authorities did not see the growing immigration of Chittagonians to Arakan as a problem that had to be managed by the state. Enriquez reflects on the possible consequences of Chittagonian immigration in one of his travel narratives:

In the north-east portion of Akyab in the Buthidaung Sub-division, the population now consists chiefly of permanent Chittagonian settlers. Large numbers of Chittagonians also spread over the country temporarily for the ploughing and reaping seasons. The Arakanese now tend to concentrate in the Sub-division of Kyauktaw. Some people think they must necessarily be submerged in time. Others believe that they will hold their own (Enriquez 1922: 59).



Ten years prior to Enriquez writing, an opinion prevailed that the Rakhine Buddhists were not only at risk but would eventually vanish. The author of the *Census of India* stoically saw the Rakhine as disappearing “off the face of Burma” and predicted the extinction of the Rakhine due to Bengali immigration: “If the present tendencies continue, the existence of the Arakan as a separate branch of the Burma racial group will cease in the ordinary course of time” (*Census of India* 1911: 190, 257). Smart summarized, in 1917, that “since 1879, immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and ... Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants”. As the Rakhine were perceived as “indolent and extravagant” by the British rulers, things were seen as simply going their natural way (Smart 1917: 87). The issue of Indian immigration became a matter of urgency for the government only after the anti-Indian riots of July 1938 (Maung Htin Aung 1967: 273–4; Baxter 1941; Aung Thwin 2013: 218–9). Collis and Bhattacharya may have found, in the rapidly increasing percentage of Bengali Muslims in Arakan, a confirmation of their historical interpretations of Arakan’s history. In his 1927 article “Bengali Influence in Arakan”, Bhattacharya concludes that Arakan had “essentially been ruled by a Bengali dynasty” because since the 15th century, the “Arakanese kings though Buddhist in religion, became somewhat Mahomedanised in their ideas”.

After King Man Saw Mwan’s supposed stay at the sultan’s court in Bengal in the early 15th century, a legend widely considered as a historical fact following its formulation by the chronicler Nga Mi, “a mosque was built ... and the court was modelled on Gaur and Delhi, eunuchs and slaves taking their place as in a Mahomedan Capital”, Bhattacharya wrote suggestively (1927: 141–2, 144). The academic discussion on the cultural impact of Islamic Bengal on pre-colonial Arakan was later picked up by Bengali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi historians and produced more nuanced statements, but it has not been immune to the problem of cultural valuations alluded to here (Siddiq Khan 1936–7; Habibullah 1945; Sharif 1966; Tarafdar 1966; Ali 1967; Serrajuddin 1986; Qanungo 1988). Following van Galen’s exploration of 17th-century Dutch sources and d’Hubert’s detailed philological work on the poetry of Alaol, scholars today have a more sophisticated understanding of the economic, political and cultural relations between

Bengal and Arakan (van Galen 2008; d'Hubert 2010). The cliché-like approaches of the colonial period can thus be revisited and questioned in the light of a more complex perception of the Rakhine kingdom where the ruling Rakhine Buddhist class was dependent on a multitude of Indian Muslim administrators and servants, Luso-Asian Christian mercenaries, and traders and Bengali Hindu ritualists to maintain a difficult balance to defend their own religious culture, heritage and values.

### **The Task of Historians for Those in Need of History**

How does current academic research on Arakan's history and culture relate to an investigation of competing identities and the hybridized history of the Rohingyas? History is an inspiration and holds societies together, but it has no lessons to teach, because people in the present have to face the challenges of today in view of the world they want to build for tomorrow. Those who pretend to take inspiration only from the past find themselves soon imprisoned in doctrinaire fundamentalism. Historical research, on the other hand, can offer guidance and unique insights into where people come from and how they identify themselves in time and space. The further study of history is necessary because it leads to the formulation of new questions and, hopefully, to more transparent discussions. As this article has purported to show, it is old-fashioned history that functions as a quarry in building identities and legitimacy in Arakan. Nonetheless, readings of the past by different communities transform history into a discursive battlefield where each party wants to gain control of the high ground of a morally comforting narrative. Can historians act professionally as referees in such debates? The point to be noted is that historians are neither moral judges nor do they even preach particular values. Their task is simply to shed some light where there is darkness and to lift, as much as sources allow, veils that cover the unknown. To those who project their present troubles into the past, the historian demonstrates the confusing otherness of the distant past. He must tell those who see race, nation and religion as unique pillars of identity, to keep a critical distance from essentialized categories. Historical experiences are fluid and so is their interpretation.

Mixed societies call for rules of coexistence. Beyond the narratives that sustain belief, trust and identity within a community, it is only within the realm of political negotiation, practising the art of what is possible and with due respect for legal standards, that such rules can be formulated. While historical debates are a necessary and eminently useful social practice, the narratives themselves do not necessarily provide the models for political action. Can competing narratives be mediated?

The hybridized history of the Rohingyas is an attempt to unify the plurality of Muslims in Arakan in a single narrative to demonstrate the existence of a distinctive Rohingya identity. Taking the existence of the Rohingya historical narrative seriously, this investigation has shown that the Rohingya movement produced a uniting historical discourse within just a few years of its emergence to imitate and compete with the dominant nationalist Buddhist discourse on Arakan, and provide ideological support to the political project of an autonomous Muslim zone in northern Arakan. The construction of this project has been influenced by colonial conditions of ethno-cultural hierarchization and mirrors the exclusiveness of the Rakhine Buddhist discourse. The particular Rohingya historical discourse is a source of validating Muslim identities so as to create social cohesion and heroic engagements, and also to motivate the political struggle. It is subject to criticism and may be rejected as a relative “truth” that tries to fit within “glocal” conversations. Still, it is the articulation of a group’s social identity, and missing its social force and political relevance would be a mistake. While Rohingya writers have imagined the Muslim past of Arakan in glowing colours, just as Buddhists who take pride in the history of Rakhine-pray, the Muslim community to be imagined in the present is still more virtual than real, an intrinsically national project overshadowed by the imperatives of global media reporting that has narrowed its perception to a status of victimhood.

In the current context of human misery, citizenship discussions, radicalization and calls for the government to reinforce the security apparatus and to manage interracial relations, the mediation of disparate historical narratives may appear to be an issue of minor relevance. For this author, it is not. It is indeed a major social and political challenge within the transformational process of contemporary Myanmar. Even

if ideally the Myanmar government will put all the perpetrators of the 2012 and 2013 violence into jail, even if human-rights principles will be duly respected by reformed security forces and a peace-making dialogue will be instituted in Arakan, at the present moment, there will still be no shared ground for the communities to coexist in the same house named Arakan. The issue of competing historical narratives may seem odd and abstruse to outsiders, but the disparate stories from which Buddhists and Muslims draw their identities condition political visions that are largely opposite. The planning of Rakhine state's future looks bleak unless there can at least be a more widely spread awareness of the relevance of what people have been taught or led to think about themselves and others.