

Misunderstandings of ethnic identities in Rakhine as fixed and biological are leading to policy errors by the Government of Myanmar and NGOs on the ground in Rakhine (Professor Michael W. Charney, 4 July 2018)

Introduction to the problem

Since 1962, military governments and the current government of Myanmar have promoted a national identity built on an exclusivist, Bamar, ethno-nationalism defined around unscientific, nineteenth century Orientalist notions of race. On the basis of these ideas codified in the 1982 citizenship laws which did not include Rohingya as a *Taingyinthá* (national race), the Rohingya have been stripped of citizenship or realistic hopes of citizenship. These moves were paralleled by attempts by the Tatmadaw in 1978, 1990-91, and 2017 to force the Rohingya permanently out of Rakhine into Bangladesh as part of what might best be called the 'western wall' project. The underlying idea is that Rakhine was a vulnerable space on the Burma frontier through which influences held to be foreign by Bamar Buddhist ultranationalists, such as Islam, would corrupt Burma and Burmese Buddhism. Rohingya were treated incorrectly as evidence of mass illegal immigration rather than the historical influence of Islam and Bengali material culture in a land that was at the overlap of two cultural zones. The August 2017 expulsion of 750,000 Rohingya as the final part of the Tatmadaw western wall project is what Tatmadaw commander General Min Aung Hlaing has characterised as his "final solution" to the "problem." Despite agreements and promises made, Myanmar is unlikely to take back the overwhelming majority of Rohingya refugees without significant international pressure.

A Religiously and Ethnically Inclusive history

In Southeast Asia, work by Lieberman, Scott, and others has demonstrated that ethnic and religious identities in Burma, historically, also reflect the political circumstances of their time and can be chosen or forced upon someone depending on the situation. In the Irrawaddy Valley, identifying oneself as Burman or Mon in the 1740s and 1750s depended not upon one's language or culture but on whether they were subject to or allied with the court at Ava (Burmans) or the court at Pegu (Mon) during their war with each other (1740-1756). Many Burmans today are the descendants of Manipuri, Thai, and Lao captives carried into the Irrawaddy valley by wars of conquest. Likewise, research in DNA in the region although equivocal in many ways suggests that centuries of aggression by

various precolonial Burmese states has had a major genetic impact on populations in Yunnan, Thailand, India, and Bangladesh. At the same time, centuries of slave-raiding by the Rakhine court at Mrauk-U meant that by the 18th century, 75% of the population of Rakhine, regardless of religion, was of Bengali origin.

Genetic or regional origin was unrelated to religious conversion. Theravada Buddhism and Islam were introduced to Rakhine in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries on a significant scale in the royal capital. Over the course of the next few hundred years, both Islam and Buddhism spread to Bengali captive communities and to free villages in the southern part of the kingdom. The same families probably included branches that were Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim, and extended family networks extended across the Naf River. Language and material culture probably extended over Buddhist and Muslim families on the basis of geography, anyone living in northern Rakhine more influenced by Bengal and anyone in southern Rakhine influenced by the Irrawaddy Valley, Rohingya speakers in the north and Burmese speakers in the south. We know that many of the prominent Buddhist Rakhine of the colonial period and some Rakhine Buddhist leaders today came from families that were based at Cox's Bazaar before the British conquest of Rakhine in 1824-26.

On the ground, in everyday life, most Rakhine and Rohingya probably did not care very much about these ethnic identities that were so discrete and absolute on paper, but covered communities that were intermarried over the course of the five centuries of history that they shared. Families included Burmese and Rohingya speakers, extended up and down the coast from Chittagong to Akyab (Sittwe) and down to Sandoway.

Divisions Between Communities

Ethno-religious communalism in Rakhine is of very recent origin. Religious affiliation had made a transition to community identity in the colonial period when the court and its officials was no longer around to manage local communities and local headmen had become agents of a distant and indifferent colonial state.

British rule also transformed the Rakhine people by essentializing the Rakhine Buddhists as indigenous sons of the soil and Muslims as foreign immigrants. Nineteenth-century Orientalist

scholarship conflated notions of ethnicity with those of nation. Ethnicity in this older view incorporated cultural, linguistic, behavioural patterns, and a shared history that were essentially organic and fixed and, in political terms, formed the foundation of the nation. In colonial eyes and records, people fell into one or another category with particular and static linguistic, cultural, and racial features.

Over the following decades, the British identified the Rohingya as a singular ethnic category wrongly as a foreign presence peculiar to the time of their acquisition of the colony in 1826. The British Census for India from 1871 identified local Muslims by their language, which they grouped together with Bengali, divided the Rohingya into two parts, those that spoke predominantly Rohingya became Bengali speakers, Indians, and immigrants and those who spoke predominantly one or another dialect of Rakhine became Rakhine speakers, Burmese, and indigenous. Religious membership was then applied to each group, the first included within the category Muslims and the latter as Buddhists.

Buddhist monks from Southern Rakhine seem to have played a leading role in claiming an exclusively Buddhist past for Rakhine. Particularly from the 1820s and 1830s Buddhist monks tried to produce histories for the Rakhine Buddhists who returned to Rakhine from Bangladesh in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) that claimed for them an exclusive Buddhist past, that de-emphasized elements of Islam, Bengali culture, and non-Burmese languages that had characterised much of early modern Rakhine. When, popular political and related anxiety between communities was artificially developed in the political anti-colonial fervour of the 1920s, Sandamalinkaya collated these histories into a Rakhine Buddhist chronicle of chronicles that saw mass circulation via a modern printing press.

The 1930s saw a flurry of available identities in the region. Different futures, alternative political imaginaries, were invented, debated, argued for, and written about. Rakhine Buddhists were sometimes Burmese nationalists, unitary nationalists, or regionalists and so too were the Rohingya, but some, in both camps, also sought religious alliance with co-religionists in Sri Lanka (the Buddhists) or Bengal and India (the Muslims). The Japanese support for unbridled Burmese Buddhist nationalism in their invasion of Burma in 1942 saw the attack and massacre by some Barmars of Muslim villagers in Rakhine and retaliatory attacks on Burmese speaking Buddhist villagers by

Muslims, fostering greater tension between both communities.

The years between 1948 and 1962 saw an eclipse of religious communal problems in Rakhine. The Rohingya successfully resisted separatists who favoured union with Pakistan in the early 1950s, anxiety between the communities subsided if it did not disappear altogether, and the Burmese government recognised the Rohingya as Burmese indigenous ethnics, as nationals, and as citizens. This would change from 1962.

The Current Debate and Political Impasse

Current anthropology understands ethnicities in cultural and dynamic terms and increasingly abandoned any association with human biology or notions of race. Particularly, from the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic membership was something that people chose to be part of, sometimes for a lifetime and sometimes alternatively depending upon different contexts. Ethnic identities themselves are not static and organic in nature, but artificial, constructed, and in their contemporary manifestations quite recent in time. People have varying degrees of subscription to them.

A few Western scholars (Leider, De Mersan) and private individuals (Tonkin) having relied upon colonial records for understanding the Rohingya, unfortunately misinterpreted ethnic identities in ways that reflect nineteenth century Orientalist notions and not contemporary understandings. Burmese scholars rely similarly on the state of anthropology from the 1930s. Both sources have misunderstood indigeneity in Rakhine as synonymous with a static Rakhine Buddhist ethnic identity. These views lend undue legitimacy to the Tatmadaw's actions in Rakhine and the Myanmar government's policies against the Rohingya.

Recommendations

1. The Rohingya should be considered and treated as being as indigenous as any other group to the Rakhine region of Myanmar.
2. The Rohingya must be returned to their ancestral homeland in Rakhine, Myanmar completely in a dignified manner, one that respects their historical claims to the region.
3. Until current outdated understandings of ethnicity have changed in the Myanmar military and government, Rohingya safety necessitates a protected homeland within Rakhine, Myanmar.