

## ISLAM, ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM, AND THE BURMESE ROHINGYA CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the world's most oppressed people, the Muslim Rohingya of Burma (Myanmar) through the lens of "state symbologies and critical juncture". It further argues the amalgamation of Burmese-Buddhist ethno-nationalism and anti-Muslim hate speech have become elements of Burma's state symbology and components. Colonialism established conditions in which ethno-religious conflict could develop through policies that destroyed the civic religious pluralism characteristic of pre-colonial states. Burmese Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism is responsible for a series of communal conflicts and state repression because it did not recognize Muslims and other minorities as full and equal participants in the post-colonial national project. Therefore, the cycles of violence and the complexities of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations indicate that Burmese political culture has become increasingly violent and genocidal.*

*[Artikel ini menjelaskan mengenai minoritas Muslim di Birma (Myanmar), Muslim Rohingya, yang mengalami tekanan dan kekerasan. Artikel ini hendak meletakkan kekerasan terhadap Muslim Rohingya melalui konsep "state symbologies dan critical juncture". Artikel ini berargumen amalgamasi*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on ethnographic and historical research conducted in Burma between 1980 and 2007 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Smithsonian Institution Special Foreign Currency Fund.



*ethno-nasionalisme Budha di Birma dan kebencian terhadap minoritas Muslim Rohingya menjadi elemen dan komponen penting dalam simbologi politik Birma kontemporer. Kolonialisme menjadi salah satu faktor penyebab lahirnya kondisi di mana konflik etnik-agama memfasilitasi kebijakan politik yang meluluh-lantakkan pluralisme-kewargaan penganut agama di Birma pada masa pra-kolonial. Nasionalisme etnis-agama jelas bertanggung jawab atas berbagai konflik komunal dan represi oleh negara yang berakar pada diskriminasi terhadap minoritas Muslim dan minoritas lainnya dalam bangunan politik Birma pada paska kolonial. Oleh karena itu, lingkaran kekerasan dan kompleksitas relasi antar-etnik dan antar-agama menjelaskan bahwa kultur politik Burma menjadi semakin membahayakan dan mematikan.]*

**Keywords:** *Burma, Islam, Rohingya, Repression, Pluralism, Symbolologies*

## Introduction

The Muslim Rohingya of Burma (Myanmar) have often been described as the world's most oppressed people. A particularly virulent round of state sponsored ethno-religious violence began in 2012 and has continued unabated.<sup>2</sup> It accelerated in November of 2016 there was a new round of state sponsored ethno-religious violence in Burma.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims attempted to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh. Near one million now linger as stateless persons in squalid disease-ridden refugee camps. Others were pushed back or set adrift in unseaworthy boats. Others have sought refuge in Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other countries.<sup>4</sup> These developments continued a pattern of state sponsored ethno-religious violence that began in 1948 when

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<sup>2</sup> J. Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "Myanmar Wants Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya-UN Official," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38091816>, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, Rohingya Emergency <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html>, 2017.

Burma gained independence from Britain.<sup>5</sup> The Burmese government has engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocide while the government of Bangladesh is complicit in these crimes.<sup>6</sup> John Mc Kissick head of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Bangladesh reported that Burmese security forces are: “killing men, shooting them, slaughtering children, raping women, burning and looting houses.” A year earlier in 2015 the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI) described state sponsored violence against the Rohingya as being: “the final stages of genocide.” This report also points to the prevalence of Nazi symbolism and rhetoric in anti-Muslim hate speech. The Rohingya are described as the enemies of Burma in the same way that Nazis described Jews as Germany’s enemies.<sup>7</sup> A subsequent ISCI report in 2018 describes continuing ethnic cleansing and genocide in gruesome detail.<sup>8</sup>

John McKissick, head of the UN refugee agency UNHCR in the Bangladesh, in 2016 observed that to resolve this crisis it is necessary to explore its root causes within Burma.<sup>9</sup> Here I describe the complex, multi-causal nexus that has led to the current political and humanitarian crisis. Put succinctly, colonialism and nationalism disrupted a traditional political-social order in which Muslims were systematically incorporated into precolonial Arakanese and Burmese Buddhist kingdoms. These disruptions began with the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and continued with the incorporation of all of Burma into the British Indian Empire at the conclusion of Third Anglo Burmese War in 1885. These disruptions culminated with the establishment of Burma as a

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<sup>5</sup> J. Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis...*

<sup>6</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, Return or Remain? The Uncertain Future of Rohingya Refugees, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/rohingya-2018>.

<sup>7</sup> Nile Green, “Buddhism, Islam and the Religious economy of Colonial Burma,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> International State Crime Initiative (ISCI), Genocide Achieved, Genocide Continues: Myanmar’s Annihilation of The Rohingya, <http://statecrime.org/data/2018/04/ISCI-Rohingya-Report-II-PUBLISHED-VERSION-revised-compressed.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> BBC, Myanmar wants ethnic cleansing of Rohingya-UN official, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38091816>.

*defacto* Burmese Buddhist ethno-religious nationalist state when it gained independence from Britain in 1948.<sup>10</sup>

Burmese nationalism emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century as a militantly Burmese Buddhist ethno/religious nationalism.<sup>11</sup> It transformed Burmese perceptions of Muslims from valued partners into existential threats to Buddhism and Burmese Buddhist culture. A substantial portion of the Muslim community identified with Burmese anti-colonial nationalism but were rebuffed by Burmese-Buddhist ethno/religious nationalists. Anti-Muslim sentiments intensified after a series of anti-Indian riots in the 1930s. They further intensified after the 1962 military coup that brought General Ne Win to power. Continuation of this trend has many Burmese Buddhists to conclude that anti-Muslim violence is not only justified, but necessary.<sup>12</sup>

Burmese-Buddhist ethno-nationalism and anti-Muslim hate speech have become elements of Burma's state symbology and components of what Sperber terms the "symbolic knowledge" used to understand ethnic and religious others.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Muslim hate speech and malicious rumors propagated by the Burma government and xenophobic elements of the Buddhist *sangha* (monastic order) have contributed significantly to the normalization of sectarian violence. A myth dating to the colonial era that Buddhists are at risk of being overwhelmed by a Muslim demographic tsunami cause by high birth rates is a persistent theme in Buddhist hate speech. A related theme is that Muslim men marry Buddhist women, force them to convert and raise their children as Muslims. I first heard

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<sup>10</sup> Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752–1948* (New York: Springer, 2013/1965); Donald Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (Amsterdam: Springer, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

these rumours in the 1980s. Holt<sup>14</sup> and Kyaw<sup>15</sup> observe that they intensify with successive wave of ethno-religious violence.

The Mandalay based ultranationalist monk Ashin Wiranthu has played a central role in spreading these rumours and encouraging violence against the Rohingya and other Muslims. Time Magazine described him as the “Buddhist Bin Laden.” He and his associates have made effective use of social media to spread hate speech portraying Muslims as existential threats to Burmese Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> That a faction of the *sangha* would encourage and legitimize state sponsored violence is not surprising because in traditional Burmese kingdoms there was always a symbiotic relationship between *sangha* and state.<sup>17</sup> Some Burmese Buddhist claim that violence against Muslim does not have negative *karmic* consequences because it is necessary for the defense of Buddhism.

### Analytic Themes

Four basic principles are necessary for understanding the Rohingya crisis and the precarious position of Muslim and other minorities in contemporary Burma: First, Burma is a post-colonial state with historically and culturally meaningless boundaries. Second, the Burmese government assumes that colonial boundaries reflect historical and cultural realities. Third, the Burmese state is, in Anderson’s terms, “insufficiently imagined.”<sup>18</sup> The essential nation building task of creating an inclusive national identity has failed since the beginning of the nationalist movement in the 1930s. There were no serious efforts to

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<sup>14</sup> J. Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis*...

<sup>15</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar: The 969 Movement and Anti-Muslim Violence,” in M. Crouch (ed.), *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 183–210.

<sup>16</sup> Lehr Peter, *Burma: “You Cannot Sleep Next to a Mad Dog,” Militant Buddhism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> E. Michael Mendelson, *State and Sangha in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

build a trans-ethnic, trans-religious identity in the ways that there were in Indonesia. Fourth, ethnic categories are malleable, changing over time. Ethnic classifications are systems for organizing difference. Ethnic groups are imagined communities in the way that nations are. Ethnogenesis by fusion or fission is an ongoing social phenomena.<sup>19</sup> The Burma government inherited a system of ethnic/racial classification from the British assuming that ethnic groups are biological realities with deep histories and unalterable cultural/behavioural characteristics.<sup>20</sup>

I also rely on concepts of state symbologies and critical juncture as formulated by Liu, Fisher-Onar and Woodward.<sup>21</sup> State symbologies are institutionalized meaning systems including narratives, symbols and rituals that establish legitimacy. Critical junctures are points in time where significant reconfiguration of system parameters is possible, necessary and in some cases inevitable. They range for critical points in the lives of important individuals to cataclysmic events such as conquests and state failures.

### **Burma's Muslim People**

While now dated, Yegar's *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* remains the most basic resource for understanding Islam in Burma.<sup>22</sup> At least one third of the Burmese population consist of ethnic or religious minorities.<sup>23</sup> The number of Muslims in Burma is not clear, partly because the Rohingya, who are the largest Muslim community

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<sup>19</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, "Imagining 'Burma': A Historical Overview," *Asian Ethnicity*, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> James Liu, Fisher-Onar, Norma & Mark Woodward, "Critical junctures? Complexity and the Post-Colonial Nation-state," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Graves (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

were not included in the census of 2014.<sup>24</sup> Estimates range from 2.4 to 5.4 million or 4.5 to 10 percent of the total population.<sup>25</sup> There are at present there are four major groups of Burmese Muslims and numerous smaller ones. Those from a variety of South Asian ethnic backgrounds are referred collectively to as Panthy or Indian Muslims or pejoratively as Kala—a general term for “foreign” South Asians. They use Urdu and Arabic for religious purposes. Indian Muslim is a colonial/post-colonial ethnic category that does not reflect the diversity of South Asian Burmese Muslims. They include ethnic Bengalis, Punjabis, Tamils and others. Each group has distinctive cultural tradition. Zerbadies include descendants of marriages between “foreign” Muslim men and local women and Burmese converts. They are culturally and linguistically indistinguishable from Burmese. They use Burmese and Arabic for religious purposes. They often refer to themselves as Pathi or Burmese Muslims. The Panthy or Haw are Yunanese Chinese Muslims. They use Chinese and Arabic for religious purposes. For centuries, the Haw dominated the mule trade linking China with what are now Burma, Laos and Northern Thailand in much the same way that Arabs, South Asians and later Europeans dominated maritime commerce.<sup>26</sup> There are Malay Muslims known in Burmese as Pashtu in far southern Burma near the Malaysian border. There is a small community of Hadhrami (Yemeni) Sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) in Rangoon.<sup>27</sup>

There is long standing tension between Burmese and Indian Muslims. Indian Muslims often claimed that their Burmese counterparts

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<sup>24</sup> Jane Ferguson, “Who’s Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Lily Naw, “Ulama, State, and Politics in Myanmar,” *Al-Jamiah Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims...*

<sup>27</sup> Syed Alatas, “Hadhramaut and the Hadhrami Diaspora: Problems in Theoretical History,” Freitag, Ulrike (ed.), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statemen in the Indian Ocean 1750s-1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

are less than fully Islamic and even Muslims with Buddhist souls.<sup>28</sup> Burmese Muslims insist that the differences between the two communities are ethnic, not religious and often point to the fact that the religious language of Islam is Arabic, not Urdu. They see themselves as ethnically Burmese.

The Rohingya are an ethnic group located in Arakan (Rakhine State) on the border with what is now Bangladesh. They are also known simply as Arakanese Muslims. They speak a language related to related to, but distinct from, Chittagongian which is spoken in eastern Bangladesh. Apart from religion they are culturally similar to Arakanese Buddhists. Use of the term Rohingya dates to at least the eighteenth century. It became increasingly common for self-designation after the Second World War to distinguish the Rohingya from culturally similar Rakhine or Arakanese Buddhist. Both lay claim to the legacy of the eighteenth-century Arakanese Mrauk U kingdom. They were reimagined as distinct ethnicities in political controversies concerning the future of Arakan. This reimagination was both a reflection of and motivation for political conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Questions about the term Rohingya and the people it refers to are bitterly contested in Burma and among academics.<sup>30</sup> As Galache observes there is an irreconcilable conflict between Burmese and Rohingya historical narratives. The Rohingya consider themselves to be indigenous people and trace their history to the eighteenth-century Arakanese kingdom Marak U.<sup>31</sup> Burmese narratives describe them as illegal immigrants who entered Burma from East Pakistan (Bangladesh)

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<sup>28</sup> Khin Maung Yin, Salience of Ethnicity among Burman Muslims: A Study in Identity Formulation, *Intellectual Discourses*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2005, pp. 168-169.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Charney, *A History*; Jacques Leider, "Rohingya: The Name and It's Living Archive," *HAL: Archives ou Vertes*, 2018; Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*,

<sup>30</sup> Melissa Crouch, "Myanmar's Muslim Mosaic and the Politics of Belonging," *New Mandala*, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Carlos Galache, "Rohingya and National Identities in Burma," *New Mandala*, 2014.



after 1948. Both narratives are politically motivated. The Burmese narrative is clearly false. The Rohingya narrative understates the extent to which Rohingya is an emerging ethnic category and that many people who claim Rohingya identity descend from people who crossed into what is now Burma when the border and even the concept of borders did not exist.<sup>32</sup>

### Religious Orientations

Most Burmese Muslims are Sunni and follow the Hanafi legal school. Religious orientations include Barelwi (traditional South Asian Islam), Deobandi (South Asian reformism) and Tablighi Jamaat. There are Sufi orders (*tariqah*) including the Chisti and Naqshbandi and Tariqah Al-Atas (a Burmese branch of the Ba'alawi). Sufism and saint veneration are prominent features of popular Islam as they are throughout South and Southeast Asia. There is a substantial Shia minority and small Ismaili and Ahmadiyah communities.<sup>33</sup>

### The History of Islam in Burma

Muslims first came to what is now Burma in the eighth century. Muslim traders from the Middle East and South Asia settled in coastal regions especially Arakan on the west coast. Arabic, Chinese, and Burmese sources mention Arab and Persian Muslim seafarers and traders in the Irrawaddy delta region, some of whom married local women and established lasting communities. These communities were well established as early as the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Some soldiers and slaves came from lands as distant as Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Many others reached what is now Burma from what are now Bengal, and Chittagong. Some

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<sup>32</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*...

<sup>33</sup> Syed Alatas, "Hadhramaut; Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims*; Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam in Myanmar—Research Notes," *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal*, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*...

were brought to the capitals of Buddhist kingdoms as soldiers, slaves or prisoners of war. Other Muslims reached Burma overland from Yunnan in Southwest China.

Muslims were incorporated into Burmese Buddhist state systems serving as advisers, administrators, and soldiers for precolonial kingdoms. This is an example of what I have described elsewhere (2019) as a sociological form of additive civic pluralism in which religious others are incorporated into a dominant socio-religious order. Muslims were often musketeers, archers, artillerymen and sailors who played critical roles in the military campaigns mounted by Buddhist kings. Muslim soldiers are described as great heroes in Burmese chronicles.<sup>36</sup> Other Muslims were merchants, and in Arakan many became peasant farmers.<sup>37</sup> These arrangements continued until 1885 when the British conquered the last Burmese kingdom of Mandalay.<sup>38</sup> Burmese states and monarchs found these arrangements advantageous because as non-Burmese and non-Buddhists, Muslims administrators and soldiers did not pose a threat to royal authority. They did not have bases of support in the countryside or in elite Buddhist circles. Nor did this form a threat to the monarch's claim to the chief patron of Theravada Buddhism on which royal legitimacy was based.<sup>39</sup> It was also unlikely that Buddhists would have readily accepted Muslim rule because Buddhist monarchs were the chief patrons of the Buddhist *sangha* (monastic order) and shrines.

Muslims and Islamic culture were particularly prominent in Arakan. The kingdom of Mrauk U, which existed from 1430 to 1784, included much of what is now lower (southern) Burma and Bangladesh stretching as far west as Dacca. It was fully incorporated into Muslim and Portuguese

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<sup>36</sup> Pe Maung Tin & Gordon Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (Rangoon: Burma Research Society, 1960).

<sup>37</sup> Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*; Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma...*

<sup>38</sup> Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma...*

<sup>39</sup> E. Michael Mendelson, *State and Sangha in Burma...*

trade networks linking eastern India and Malacca in what is now Malaysia.<sup>40</sup> It was for a time nominally a vassal state of the Bengal Sultanate. The seventeenth-century Portuguese traveller Sebastian Manrique (1585-1669) described Muslim military units and mentions the prominent roles that Muslims played in commerce, politics, and literature and the arts.<sup>41</sup> Mrauk U also supplemented its army with Bengali Muslim mercenaries. Slaves captured on raids in Bengal were employed in agriculture and other trades.<sup>42</sup>

Mrauk U was home to a hybrid Buddhist-Muslim culture influenced by Bengali and Mogul traditions. It was a state based on a religious form of civic pluralism in which other religions as well religious communities were incorporated into the dominant religious order. Arakanese, Arabic and Persian were official languages. Buddhist kings adopted Mogul titles and customs and were patrons of Islamic literature.<sup>43</sup> They ruled Buddhist subjects as *Dhammaraja*, monarchs who ruled in accordance with Buddhist teachings, like the Thai kings Tambiah describes.<sup>44</sup> They ruled Muslim subjects and conducted international relations as Sultans. They conducted Muslim as well as Buddhist rituals.<sup>45</sup> Pir Badr is an example. He is a Muslim saint and patron of seafarers, was venerated by Muslims,

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Charney, "Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rahkaing Under the Early Mrauk-U Kings, c. 1430-1603," *Journal of Burma Studies*, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Collins, *The Land of the Great Image - Being Experiences of Friar Manrique in Arakan* (New York: New Directions, 1958).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Charney, "Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," *PhD Dissertation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Thibaut D' Hubert, "Pirates, Poets, and Merchants: Bengali Language and Literature in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U," *Culture and Circulation*, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>45</sup> Stephan Galen, "Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century AD." *PhD Thesis* (Leiden: Leiden University, 2018).

Buddhists, Chinese and Animists in both Arakan and Bengal.<sup>46</sup> Mrauk U was a cosmopolitan state. It was a node in both the Islamicate civilization that extended from the Moghul Empire to the Malay Peninsula and the Theravada Buddhist civilization encompassing much of what are now Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. The boundaries of colonial and post-colonial states are not relevant for understanding the dynamics, including population movements, of these civilizations.

Despite the incorporation of elements of Islam into its State symbology and Muslims into its administrative systems, Mrauk U is remembered as an exemplary Buddhist polity. Its rulers devoted vastly more resources to patronizing Buddhism and constructing Buddhist shrines and monasteries than they did to supporting Islam.<sup>47</sup> It also possessed, supported pilgrimage to and patronage of one of the most important Buddha images in Burma. The Mahamuni image was the palladium of Mrauk U. It is said to be an exact likeness of the Buddha cast during his lifetime at the request of the mythological Arakanese king Candrasuriya. It is also said to have once had the power to speak, preach sermons and perform miracles.<sup>48</sup>

Mrauk U was an example cosmopolitan, pluralistic, state in which Buddhist and Muslim communities flourished and state symbologies combined Buddhist and Muslim elements. It was conquered by Burmese-Buddhist king Bodawpaya in 1784. Bodawpaya was the most powerful king of the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885). He conducted military expeditions against Siam (Thailand) and Assam.<sup>49</sup> He continued the Mrauk U policy of pluralistic state symbologies. He moved the Mahamuni

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<sup>46</sup> Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Delhi: Sterling Publishing, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Leider, "Relics, Statues, and Predictions: Interpreting an Apocryphal Sermon of Lord Buddha in Arakan," *Asian Ethnology*, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Collins, *The Land*; Juliane Schober, "In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Maha-muni Image," *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

image to its present location in Mandalay and strengthened state control of Buddhism by establishing the offices of *Thathabaign* (prelate) to regulate the Buddhist *sangha* and *Mahadun-wu* to manage royal donations and monastic property.<sup>50</sup> He also incorporated Islam and Hinduism into Burmese state symbology and administration by appointing Sayyid Muhammad Sharif 'Abid Shah Husayni (1776–1814), originally from Aurangabad in India formerly chief of the Muslim community in Mrauk U chief of the Muslim community in Amarapura and bringing Brahmins from both Arakan and Benares in India to officiate at state ceremonies.<sup>51</sup>

Other aspects of Bodawpaya's policy towards conquered territories established social, economic and demographic conditions that contributed directly to ethno-religious conflict in modern Burma. Mrauk U was not so much annexed as destroyed. British reports from the late 18th century indicate that tens of thousands of Buddhists and Muslims were killed in the invasion. Many others fled to Chittagong in British India which is now part of Bangladesh. Tens of thousands more were brought to central Burma as soldiers, artisans, scholars, pagoda slaves or to open vacant lands for agriculture.<sup>52</sup> The depopulation of Arakan was so extensive that when the British East India Company assumed control of the region it found large areas of abandoned rice land. This led to large scale immigration of Muslims from neighbouring Bengal and Buddhists from central Burma.<sup>53</sup> A salient point is that contemporary borders are irrelevant for understanding cultural and political history and

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<sup>50</sup> E. Michael Mendelson, *State and Sangha in Burma...*

<sup>51</sup> Thibaut d'Hubert and Jacques Leider, "Traders and poets at the Mrauk U court: Commerce and cultural links in seventeenth-century Arakan," Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic passageways: The northern Bay of Bengal before colonialism* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> George Harvey, *History of Burma from the Earliest Times to 10 March, 1824: The Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Frank Cass, 1967/1925); Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Charney, *Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged*; Arthur Phayre, "Account of Arakan," *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 1841; Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*.

population movements prior to Pakistani (now Bangladesh) and Burmese independence in the late 1940s.

Burmese cities have been multi-ethnic and multi-religious since at least the seventeenth century. Thant notes that there were Jewish, Armenian and Chinese as well as South Asian and Arabic traders and that the Burmese courts also employed Europeans and their assimilated descendants as soldiers. He observes that there were Roman Catholics of Portuguese descent who had assimilated in most every respect other than religion. Muslims from outside Burma were assimilated in the same way. Both became culturally and linguistically Burmese and retained the religion of their ancestors.<sup>54</sup>

The penultimate Burmese king Mindon (reigned 1853-1878) carried the incorporation of Islam into state symbology and administration further than the other Konbaung kings. When he constructed the new capital Mandalay in 1857 he designated twelve specifically Muslim neighbourhoods. He facilitated the construction of twenty-one mosques, including one inside the palace walls. He personally laid the cornerstone of the palace mosque (Scott O'Connor 1907). He established *Shari'ah* courts, appointed judges and provided *halal* food for Muslim soldiers participating in state ceremonies. He also built a rest house in Mecca for Burmese pilgrims.<sup>55</sup> In summary, pre-colonial Buddhist kingdoms were civically pluralistic in the sense that they incorporated minorities, albeit in subordinate positions.

There are more mundane examples of civic pluralism in contemporary Mandalay where I lived in the early 1980s. These involve Buddhist attempts to work around the prohibition against killing by forming symbiotic relationships with Muslims and Chinese. Few Burmese Buddhist are vegetarians and maintain that eating meat is not a religious problem if you do not kill the animal. Muslims butcher cattle and goats.

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Charney, *Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged*.

<sup>55</sup> Kazumasa Ishikawa, "The Foreign Presence in Mandalay during the Konbaung Period: A Review of the Urban Area," *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, 2014.

Chinese butcher pigs. Both butcher chickens and other birds.

Mandalay was also based on religious additive civic pluralism in the sense that Muslims and elements of Islam were incorporated into royal and popular ritual. Theravada Buddhist states include non-Buddhist spirit cults and rituals because *nibbana* (*nirvana*) oriented and monastic Buddhism is not sufficiently concerned with practical religion.<sup>56</sup> In Burma, there are thirty-seven *nat* (spirit lords) each of which governs a particular territory.<sup>57</sup> Some of these lords are indigenous, other Burmese transformations of Hindu *deva* (divinities). There are annual festivals (*nat pwe*) for each of them. Two of the most popular in contemporary Burma are the Taungbyon brothers Shwe Byin Gyi and Shwe Byin Lay, Muslim soldiers known for great valour and magical powers.<sup>58</sup> They were executed for not contributing to the construction of a pagoda, and were transformed into spirit lords. It is forbidden to eat pork at their festival because they were Muslims.

### Islam and the Colonial State

The fall of Mandalay to the British in 1885 and the subsequent establishment of direct British rule was a critical juncture that led to a reformulation of what Green calls the “religious economy of colonial Burma.”<sup>59</sup> Relationships between Burmese Muslims and the Buddhist majority were, however, shaped by the colonial experience even prior to

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<sup>56</sup> Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>57</sup> F.K. Lehman, “Freedom and Bondage in Traditional Burma and Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1984; Judith Becker, “Burmese Spirit Worship: Music as a Medium for the Transformation of Self,” Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard, Mads Walther-Hansen, and Martin Knakkergaard (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination*, Vol. 1, at <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190460167.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190460167-e-13>.

<sup>58</sup> Pe Maung Tin and Gordon Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (Rangoon: Burma Research Society, 1960).

<sup>59</sup> Nile Green, “Buddhism, Islam and the Religious economy of Colonial Burma,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2015.



the annexation of the Konbaung state. The Second Anglo Burmese War (1853) led to British annexation of Lower Burma and the establishment of Rangoon as its capital and principle port. The fact that Lower Burma was then a province of British India led to unrestricted immigration of both Hindus and Muslims from Bengal and other parts of British India. The size of the Muslim population grew rapidly, especially in Rangoon. There were 416 Muslims in the city in 1872 and 41,846 in 1901. By the early twentieth century Rangoon was as much an Indian as a Burmese city. In the 1920s people of South Asian origin constituted the majority of the population. This created an atmosphere in which Burmese felt like strangers in what they saw as their native land.<sup>60</sup> The Muslim and Hindu populations of Arakan also increased substantially. In Arakan the census of 1931 distinguished between Arakanese Muslims whose families were long-term residents and more recent immigrants from Chittagong (in what is now Bangladesh) who comprised approximately 63 percent of the total Muslim population.<sup>61</sup>

British India became the model for the emerging Burmese colonial state. By the mid-nineteenth century British India had settled on a policy of religious neutrality. In 1849 Governor General Dalhousie issued a proclamation stating: "The British Government will ... not permit any man to interfere with others in the observance of such forms and customs as their respective religions may enjoin or permit."<sup>62</sup>

While framed in terms of liberal tolerance, this policy had at least three pragmatic goals: to avoid entanglement in religious disputes; dispel fears that the British Raj was an existential threat to Indian religions and to escape from pressure exerted by British Christian missionary societies to support their activities that fuelled these fears. An unintended consequence was the collapse of civic pluralism and the growth of

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*.

<sup>61</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*.

<sup>62</sup> Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion* (London: Boydell Press, 2012).



sectarian identities and organizations. These were factors contributing to the emergence of ethno-religious nationalisms. Colonial policy also contributed to the development of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim voluntary associations and the beginning of Buddhist monastic political activism. It also contributed to the rise to ethno-religious conflict because the colonial did not regulate religion other than to respond to riots with police power.<sup>63</sup>

### Ethno-Religious Conflict

There have been sporadic outbreaks of Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Rangoon, Mandalay and other cities since the 1930s. Often seemingly minor incidents such as commercial and labour disputes, religious insults and concerns about Muslim men marrying or raping Buddhist women spark riots in which Buddhist mobs, often led by monks, burn Muslim homes and shops.<sup>64</sup> When ethno-religious tensions are high Id al-Adha (the Muslim feast of sacrifice) enhances them as for Muslims this is a religious obligation while for Buddhists it is “murdering the little goats.” These patterns are similar to those described by Tambiah in his account of communal conflict in India.<sup>65</sup> Anti-Indian/Muslim riots in Rangoon in the early 1930s contributed to the British decision to separate Burma from the rest of British India in 1937.<sup>66</sup> This was a critical juncture that led to the formal demarcation of the boundaries between what became Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. It did nothing to calm ethno-religious tension. It created a sense of concern among Muslims and other minorities about the growing power of Burmese ethno-religious

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Myint-U. Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*.

<sup>64</sup> Renaud Egretreau, “Burma (Myanmar) 1930-2007.” In: *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence*, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> George Harvey, *British Rule in Burma (1824-1942)* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946).

nationalists in the newly established British Burma. Some Burmese nationalists opposed separation because they feared it would slow the course of reform.<sup>67</sup>

The outbreak of the Second World and its immediate aftermath further complicated communal relationships. Many thousands of people fled across the border into Bengal and Assam in India. Burmese nationalist leaders including future prime minister Aung San initially sided with the Japanese. Many switched sides as the war drew to a close. Minorities, including the Rohingya, fought on the British side.<sup>68</sup> These political conflicts contributed to the deterioration of Buddhist/Muslim relationship and outbreaks of armed conflict and ethnic cleansing by both Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan. Any sense of shared Arakanese identity vanished as Buddhists and Muslims migrated/were driven into different sections of Arakan. After the war, many thousands of people sought to return to their homes in Burma. The Rohingya and other Muslim minorities sought either autonomy within the proposed Union of Burma or independence.<sup>69</sup>

### **Burmese Independence, Ethnic Insurgency and the Rohingya Crisis**

The Union of Burma was established in 1948 as a democratic, secular, multi-ethnic confederation within the 1937 boundaries of British Burma. Under pressure from Burmese nationalists and in their own rush to disband their Indian empire the British failed to take steps to ensure the political and cultural rights of ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); George Harvey, *British Rule in Burma*; George Harvey, *British Rule in Burma*.

<sup>68</sup> Aye Chan, "The Creation of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)." *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, 2005; John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*.

<sup>69</sup> Moshe Yegar. *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

The outcome of this critical juncture was that Burma became a failed state almost as soon as the British flag was lowered for the last time. There has been a nearly constant series of ethnic rebellions that has endured for more than seventy years. The fact that Buddhist (Mon and Shan) and Christian (Chin, Kachin and Karen) as well as Muslim (Rohingya) minorities found Burmese hegemony to be unacceptable indicates that ethnicity, not religion was the cultural factor driving insurgency.<sup>71</sup> Despite its name, the Mujahideen rebellion in Arakan that began in 1948 and continued until the mid-1950s was religious only in the sense that the Rohingya rebels were Muslims. Like other ethnic rebellions it aimed at either regional autonomy or Independence.<sup>72</sup>

Under Prime Minister U Nu Burma drifted steadily away from its secular origins. U Nu was a devout politically naive Buddhist who could not understand how minorities could be threatened by a state based on Buddhist principles. He genuinely believed that he could use Buddhist ritual to build national unity.<sup>73</sup> Still, he and other Burmese leaders accepted the Rohingya as indigenous people and established the semi-autonomous Mayu Frontier Administration in Rohingya majority parts of Arakan.<sup>74</sup> Under his guidance Burma was redefined as a Buddhist state in 1961 which further antagonized Christian and Muslim minorities.<sup>75</sup>

A military coup brought the ruthless, xenophobic General Ne Win to power in 1962. He ruled Burma with an iron fist until 1988. He was replaced by the State Law and Order Council which was, if

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<sup>71</sup> Josef Silverstein, "Civil War and Rebellion in Burma," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1990, pp. 114-13; Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed, 1999).

<sup>72</sup> Moshe Yegar. *Between Integration and Secession*.

<sup>73</sup> Fransch Tilman, *The Relic and the Rule of Righteousness: Reflections on U Nu's Dhammavijaya* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>74</sup> Zarni, Maung. 2020. "The Official Evidence of the Rohingya Ethnic Identity and Citizenship which the Burmese Ethno- and Genocidists Don't Want You to See." *Rohingya Blogger*.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

anything, even more brutal, in the wake of pro-democracy protests. Ne Win instituted the “Burmese way to socialism,” nationalized much of the economy and closed Burma to the outside world, leaving its people mired in abject poverty.<sup>76</sup> When I lived in Burma in the 1980s the black-market economy was the economy. Ne Win was also an extreme ethno-nationalist. Rodgers notes that he intended to purge Burma of Muslims, Karens (most of whom are Christians) and other ethnic peoples.<sup>77</sup> His government expelled hundreds of thousands of ethnic South Asians and severely repressed Burmese Chinese.<sup>78</sup> Ne Win’s ethno-nationalism was based on two mythological propositions. The first is that prior to the advent of colonialism “national races” lived in harmony in a cultural/political entity coterminous with the 1937 boundaries of British Burma. The second was that economic difficulties and political discord are the products of foreign influences.<sup>79</sup>

Ethnic cleansing began with Operation King Dragon in 1978 during which approximately 200,000 were driven across the border with Bangladesh.<sup>80</sup> The Citizenship Law of 1982 provided a legal basis for ethnic cleansing. It denied citizenship to people who are not members of ethnic groups “permanently residing” in Burma prior to the outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese war in 1824. This criterion was based on a list of 135 “national races” compiled by Ne Win and his associates based on a survey conducted by British authorities after the war that did not include the Rohingya. Other provisions stripped Rohingya who

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*.

<sup>77</sup> Benedict Rogers, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (Random House, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Maureen Aung-Thwin, Thant Myint-U, and Thant Myint-U. “The Burmese Ways to Socialism.” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1992, pp. 67-75.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Charney, “A History of Modern Burma”; Nick Cheesman, “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2017, pp. 461-483.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991).

had citizenship papers based on 1948 legislation of their rights.<sup>81</sup> It established a legal basis for the xenophobic, Islamophobic position that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali immigrants and legitimized repression and ethnic cleansing.<sup>82</sup> Severe repression at varying levels on intensity has continued ever since.

Burma has undergone gradual and partial democratic transition since 2008.<sup>83</sup> Limited democratization and economic liberalization have done nothing to alleviate the Rohingya crisis. Aung San Su Kyi, founder of the National League for Democracy has been *defacto* Prime Minister since 2016. She was once hailed as a champion of human rights and democracy but has proven unwilling to end or even condemn ethnic cleansing and genocide in Arakan and has routinely placated the military and Buddhist extremists.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusions

Colonialism established conditions in which ethno-religious conflict could develop through policies that destroyed the civic religious pluralism characteristic of pre-colonial states. Burmese Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism is more directly responsible for conflict and repression because it did not recognize Muslims and other minorities as full and equal participants in the post-colonial national project. General Ne Win was more directly responsible because he used the brutality of

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<sup>81</sup> Melissa Crouch, "States of Legal Denial: How the State in Myanmar Uses Law to Exclude the Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2019; Mahbubul Haque, "Rohingya Ethnic Muslim Minority and the 1982 Citizenship Law in Burma," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 2017; Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal*, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Maudood Ilahi, "The Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Historical Perspectives and Consequences," Rogge John (ed.), *Refugees: A Third World Dilemma* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987).

<sup>83</sup> Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*.

<sup>84</sup> Christian Fink, "Myanmar in 2018: The Rohingya Crisis Continues," *Asian Survey*, 2019; Ronan Lee, "A politician, not an icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's silence on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2014.

his military regime to turn xenophobic ideologies into social realities. The partial democratic transition of 1989 and subsequent reforms did little, if anything, to diminish Burmese Buddhist chauvinism and the perception that Islam is an existential threat to Theravada Buddhism and Burmese culture. For Aung San Su Kyi and the National League for Democracy reforms are only for Burmese Buddhists. Her 2019 defense of the Burmese government against genocide charges at the International Court of Justice in The Hague and her refusal to use the word Rohingya because of government assertions that they do not exist as an ethnic group<sup>85</sup> makes her at least complicit with genocide and other crimes against humanity. In her defense she stated that Western critics of the Burmese government she stated that what much of the international community recognizes and genocide is merely “cycles of inter-communal violence going back to the 1940s” and described critics of her government for not understanding the complex history of ethnic relations in Burma. In an ironic sense, she is correct. However, the better one understands these cycles of violence and the complexities of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations it clearer it becomes that Burmese political culture has become increasingly violent and genocidal.

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<sup>85</sup> Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations,” *The New York Times*, 11 December 2019 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html>.

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