

Writing a Rohingya History: Colonial Discourse, Vernacular Literature and Geography

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*By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea,
There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:
'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!'*¹

Introduction

In 1889, Rudyard Kipling, on his long voyage back to England from Calcutta, made a stop at Rangoon, the then capital of the newly acquired province of Burma. Burma was conquered by the British Empire in three Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824-26, 1852-53, and 1885.² Kipling, by his own confession, was in 'love [with] the Burman with the blind favouritism born of first impression'.³ Kipling's love for the Burman and especially the 'almond coloured Burmese girls'⁴ found the ultimate utterance when he composed his love poem 'Mandalay', awestruck with the 'beauties' on the footsteps of the Moulmein pagoda. Kipling's 'Mandalay', published in 1892 as part of *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses*, would singularly come to define Burma as the 'Oriental other', with an unchanging landscape and peace-loving, simple Burmese people.

Thus, the widely translated poem and its later musical adaptations helped reduce Burma to a 'homogenised exotic other'. It is perhaps ironic that the 'beauties' on the steps of the Moulmein pagoda who inspired Kipling in all probability were not 'Burma' girls but 'Mon' girls from Moulmein (present day Mawlamyine, located deep in the heart of the Mon state). The Mon, along with the Karen, Shan, Kachin, Chin, Kayin, Kayah and the Rakhine, are recognised by the post-colonial state of Myanmar as major minority ethnicities of Burma. These ethnicities are not only distinct socio-culturally but also occupy distinct geographic regions. A vast majority of these peoples and their regions were independent and at best vassals to powerful agrarian dynasties of upper-central Burma in the pre-colonial period.⁵ The colonial imagining of Burma re-invented sovereignty in new ways. The period of British rule marked the advent of a rigid 'territorialised state', which accentuated ethnic tensions. The British

colonial state used the Karen, Kachin and Chin minorities as recruits for the colonial army and deployed them to crush majority Burman rebellions like the 1930-31 Saya San rebellion.⁶ The post-colonial state of Myanmar not only continued to follow the colonial framework but also actively promoted a majoritarian policy of Buddhist Burman superiority. This precipitated an acute ethnic conflict and frontier state rebellions particularly by the Shan, Karen and Kachin in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1948.⁷

The task of writing any history of the Rohingyas is complex not only because of their geographical situation in a borderland, Arakan, but also because of the paucity of sources. The most significant contributions in recent years to the historiography of Arakan have been that of Michael Charney and Jacques Leider.⁸ The virtual absence of a pre-existing historiography leaves the historian a lot of advantage of manoeuvrability but often leads to the production of a tentative overview. The other difficulty regarding the construction of Arakanese history, and in general Southeast Asian history, has been the elite framework within which the process of history writing operates. This has been the case because of the over-reliance on colonial sources. However, what is perhaps more worrisome is that the historiography often has a pronounced 'state orientation'. In the case of Malaya, this has been prominently identified by what A. C. Milner calls the framework of 'British Malayan' studies.⁹ The secondary literature is often critical of this state orientation yet fails to escape a narrative where the agency is primarily with the state. In the case of the Rohingyas, the situation is far worse as even the impetus of history-writing remains in the hands of the post-colonial state of Myanmar. The disenfranchisement of the Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar has resulted in the marginalisation of Rohingya voices not only in the national discourse of Myanmar but also internationally. The Rohingyas are today in essence 'state-less' people. Burmese scholars like Maung Tha Hla¹⁰ have argued that the Rohingyas are 'immigrants' from the Indian subcontinent and should

be seen as 'Chittagonians'. This not only negates the independent identity of Arakan in a pre-Burmese early modern period, but also raises serious implications for the political and human rights of a people who are at present perhaps one of the most persecuted in the world.

In this essay, it will therefore be my attempt to historically locate Arakan and the term 'Rohingya' through the haze of colonial discourses and the aid of vernacular ones (in conversation with questions of geography) in order to resurrect both Arakan and the Rohingyas in a pre-Burmese and pre-colonial world. Furthermore, I will attempt to deconstruct the geographic entanglement within the early modern Arakanese state. This entanglement led to the formation of a unique socio-cultural and economic milieu, the product of which are the Rohingyas. Michael Charney has demonstrated that the Arakanese and the Bengalis shared an environmental heritage which he calls the 'Banga-Arakanese environmental continuum'.¹¹ It will be my endeavour to develop this argument further and to show that this shared environmental continuum had two poles which led to a cosmopolitan social milieu in the Arakan court prior to 1784, when it was incorporated within the Burman empire. The poles of this shared environmental milieu are represented by the *entrepôt* of Chittagong and the Arakanese capital of Mrauk-U located in the hinterland. It is after the conquest of Arakan in 1784 by the Burmese empire that gradually there were concerted efforts for the '*Irrawaddy-ization*' or '*Burmanization*' of Arakan.¹² The subsequent British colonisation of Arakan and eventually the whole of Burma led, through the imposition of modern state boundaries, to the permanent rupture of the entanglement across the shared environmental continuum.

Background

The Arakan region in the west of Burma is geographically separated from the Irrawaddy valley by a rugged coastal mountain terrain.¹³ The nineteenth-century British historian H. H. Wilson has suggested that until the tenth century AD, Arakan was part of the Indian world and not the Burmese world.¹⁴ Jonathan Saha has argued that Burma itself should be envisaged as part of South Asia. Despite being governed as an integral part of the Indian Empire for over fifty years, it is commonplace for historians to consider Myanmar/Burma as a distinct entity beyond what is usually taken to be South Asia. This is a heuristic separation indulged in by both scholars of colonial India and colonial Burma and is in part a legacy of the territorial assumptions of Area Studies. Recently, new geographic frameworks – particularly the Indian Ocean and Zomia – have begun to undermine the basis of this artificial division.¹⁵ The earliest of Arakan settlers

were thus of Indo-Aryan stock. The region remained multi-cultural, with Hinduism and Islam being practiced pre-dominantly till 1000 AD. From 1000 AD onwards, the Buddhist Rakhine began to move into Arakan as the Burman kingdom of Pagan expanded and incorporated the neighbouring Mon kingdom in 1100 AD.¹⁶ Arakan regained its independence after the fragmentation of the Pagan Kingdom. Arakan then became the site of the Mrauk-U Kingdom from 1430 to 1785. This polity was intimately connected with the Bengal sultanate. The founder of Mrohaung (capital of Mrauk-U), Buddhist King Naramaikhla, re-conquered Arakan from the Burmese in 1430, with the help of Muslim levies of Ahmed Shah, the Sultan of Gaur.¹⁷ Most of these Muslim levies settled down in northern Arakan near the capital.¹⁸ The Sultanate of Bengal remained closely linked with Arakan (which included Chittagong from 1529 to 1666),¹⁹ in a tributary relationship from 1430 to 1531, as well as through trade. Arakanese slave raids into Bengal, later in association with Portuguese, which continued into the eighteenth century, also maintained contact with Bengal and increased the Muslim population through their forced resettlement near Mrohaung.

The geographical position of Arakan, separated from mainland Burma by the Arakan Mountains, ensured its separate historical trajectory. Isolation from, and peripheral location with respect to, the Burman mainland and regional politics led to the formation of a multi-religious society.²⁰ This topography of Arakan strengthened political, religious and cultural connections in the borderlands with Bengal, especially for the Muslim community, as the two areas were connected by plains and rivers. The Muslim Arakanese were linguistically similar to neighbouring Bengal and were seen as enemies by 'the Buddhists who retained links with the Buddhist Burmans'.²¹

Arakan became a part of the Kingdom of Ava in 1784, but this directly led to a clash with the expanding British Empire in India. Arakan became the first region to be separated from the larger Burman area once again when it was annexed to the British Indian Empire after the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826. Although the rest of Burma would be annexed by the 1880s, in the Burmese national imagination, 1826 forms a cut-off year, the year before which 'pristine Burmese cultural' was unpolluted from British Indian influences. The colonial policy of promoting migration from the Indian sub-continent also led to the notion of a foreign influx in Burma even though most Indian settlers left Burma by the 1960s.²² The colonisation of Burma between 1824 and 1886 was followed by a differential colonial policy of supporting minorities like the Chin, Kachin and Karen in Burma. The colonial state encouraged large scale migration from

India and in fact administered Burma as a part of the Indian Empire till 1937.

After 1937, the British administered the frontier regions including Arakan as a direct 'Scheduled Excluded' region outside 'Ministerial Burma'.²³ The region of 'Ministerial Burma' was pre-dominantly Buddhist Burman in population. In fact, the bedrock of Burmese nationalism can be traced back to this region. On the other hand, the 'Scheduled Excluded Areas' were in the periphery and inhabited by ethnically and religiously different minorities such as the Chin, Karen, Kachin and the Arakanese. This distinction was so acute that even during the Japanese occupation of Burma, the Burma Independent Army (BIA), which was dominated by ethnic Buddhist Burmans, actively co-operated with the Japanese whereas the ethnic minorities supported the British.²⁴ The pseudo-independent Burma established by the Japanese in 1943 effectively destroyed the dual government (separate modes of governance for the Burman and the minorities) of the British administration.²⁵ This led to a government in the post-colonial period which treated the minority regions as units attached to the larger Burman heartland. In the immediate aftermath of independence, all the minority regions rebelled and had to be put down with military force. While the Panglong Conference in 1947, led by Aung Sang, is credited with the creation of the Union of Burma and partially halting the ethnic rebellions, it did not include the Arakanese people while most other ethnic communities were represented.

Therefore, the question which is of prime importance is whether the present day Rohingyas are an immigrant community as imagined in Burman Buddhist national philosophy or were they present in Arakan even before the advent of British rule. It is quite clear from various

colonial sources that Muslims and even the Rohingyas were integral to Arakan.

Locating the 'Rohingyas' in Colonial Discourse and Beyond

As early as 1799, Francis Buchanan published 'A Comparative Vocabulary of Some the Languages Spoken in Burma Empire' in the fifth volume of the *Asiatic Researches*, where he mentioned the Rohingyas. Buchanan wrote:

*The proper natives of Arakan call themselves Yakin, which is also commonly given to them by the Burmas...by the Bengal Hindus, at least by such of them as have been settled in Arakan, the country is called Rossaum...or the kingdom of the Mugs, as we often call it... The Mahommedans settled at Arakan, call the country Rovingaw; the Persians call it Rekan.*²⁶

Buchanan clearly mentions the term *Rooinga* and identify them as natives of Arakan. He wrote:

*I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire, but evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation. The first is that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan. The second dialect is that spoken by the Hindus of Arakan. I procured it from a Brahmen and his attendants, who had been brought to Amarapura by the king's eldest son, on his return from the conquest of Arakan. They call themselves Rossawn, and, for what reason I do not know, wanted to persuade me that theirs was the common language of Arakan. Both these tribes, by the real natives of Arakan, are called Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan.*²⁷

The *Classical Journal* for September 1811, in its seventh volume, in turn recognised 'Rooinga' as a language spoken in the 'Burmah Empire' in its compilation of 'Numbers

The Numeral Three in Various Languages of the Burmah Empire²⁸

<i>Rooinga</i>	<i>Rossawn</i>	<i>Banga</i>	<i>Myammau or Burmah</i>	<i>A few Christians in Siam or Tainay</i>	<i>Taiyay</i>	<i>Tailong</i>
1 awg	Aik	Ak	Teet	Noong	Noo	aning
2 doo	Doo	De	hueet	So	Sang	soung
3 teen	Teen	Teen	thonm	Sam	Sam	Sam
4 tehair	Tsar	Sa-ree	Lay	See	Shee	Shee
5 pan-so-ce	Paus	Pas	Ngaw	Haw	Haaw	Haw
6 saw	Tso	Tsoe	kiaouk	Hoe	Houk	Hook
7 sat	Sat	Hat	kuhneet	Kyaet	Sayt	Seet
8 aw-toa	As-to	Awt	sheet	Payt	Payt	Paet
9 no-naw	No	No	Ko	Ka-wo	Kaw	Kan
10 dus-so-a	Dos	Dos	Tazay	Sect	Sheet	Ship

in 200 Tongues'. The above table is a reproduction of the original in the *Classical Journal*, Vol. VII.

Thus, it is quite evident that in the early nineteenth-century, even before the British conquest of Arakan, a distinct group called the 'Rooinga' (Rohingyas) separate from the 'Rossawn' (Rakhine) existed in the region. The present argument posed by Burmese scholars like Maung Tha Hla²⁹ that the Rohingyas are 'immigrants' and 'Chittagonians' needs to be seriously questioned.

The present day ethnic conflict resulting in the genocide of the Rohingyas needs to be understood as part of modern state formation. The British colonial state aided in this process of state formation through the production of colonial discourse which fixed often fluid ethnic categories. These tools were deployed early on. As early as 1824, the British were able to raise a levy among the Arakanese Muslims in their fight against the Burma Kingdom.³⁰ This is because the Burmese conquest of Arakan in 1784 was deeply resented. After the British conquest of Arakan in 1824, it was separately administered under the direct supervision of the Governor-General of India. Arakan however, was soon transferred to the Government of Bengal, and in 1828, the Superintendent of Arakan was made subordinate to the Commissioner of Chittagong.³¹ Close affinity with Bengal was once again re-enforced.

It is however important to understand that the colonial state differentiated the native Muslim population of Arakan from the influx that may have happened from Chittagong. This distinction was so acutely played out that the British administration even as late as 1921 made a clear distinction between 'normal civil population' and 'adventitious population'. In the census report of 1921, '4985' males and '3775' females were marked as 'normal civil Mahomedan' population of the Arakan division.³² On the other hand, '8613' males and only '14' females were registered as 'adventitious Mahomedan' population in the Arakan division.³³ The skewed sex ratio of the adventitious Mahomedan population is supportive of the fact that these men were immigrants from Bengal, as historically migration under various forms of indenture was a largely male affair.

A closer examination of the colonial sources will reveal a plethora of evidence of 'native Muslim population' in Arakan, sometimes distinctively identifiable as 'Rohingyas'. The creation of 'ethnicities' through the census making process is a well-studied phenomenon. The classic work of Charles Hirschman on ethnicity formation in Malaysia gives a sound theoretical framework for the same. Charles Hirschman, in his valuable works on the mentalities of colonial census-makers in the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and their successor state of Malaysia, has demonstrated

how identity-categories in the censuses from the late nineteenth-century till after the Second World War reflected a change in colonial perception about 'native' identity over time. Hirschman primarily concludes that gradually race becomes the important criterion over religion. In the aftermath of Indian independence, the disparate race-categories for the natives of the Indian sub-continent were retained in essence but re-classified as 'Indian' or 'Pakistani'.³⁴ In the case of the Rohingyas, it is an amalgamation of prioritising 'religion' and 'language' over a common cultural milieu, which they might have shared with the Buddhist Arakanese or the Rakhines.

At the heart of the present day ethnic conflict is the historical trajectory of the development of religion and politics in this region separate from the rest of Burma. There is even evidence to suggest that the Muslim Arakanese, under the leadership of U Hla Tun Pru, organised rallies in Rangoon in order to demand 'Arakanistan' on 16th May, 1947, just before the impending declaration of independence in 1948.³⁵ In May 1946, Muslim Arakanese asked for Jinnah's assistance in the annexing of the region to Pakistan. Two months later, the North Arakan Muslim League was founded in Akyab (renamed Sittwe) and it too demanded annexation to Pakistan.³⁶ Even after independence, at the end of 1954, the '*mujahid*' problem of Arakan remained acute. The situation abated only with the arrest of the *mujahid* leader Cassim, a fisherman in Chittagong, by the then East Pakistani authorities.³⁷ The Arakanese aspiration for a separate state often found expression in the form of what was dismissed by the colonial state as 'acts of dacoits'. In a secret telegram sent on 7th October, 1946, by the Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma, the Governor expressed the 'serious situation' in Akyab created by the Sein Da gang. The Governor noted that the town of Pyapon in Arakan was 'attacked second night by one hundred dacoits in uniform who posted pickets and engaged Battalion HQ, making it impossible for troops to protect the town as planned'.³⁸ It is amply clear that in this situation, these were no ordinary dacoits but in fact armed rebels. In a similar telegram on 11th October, 1946, Sir Hubert Rance, the Governor of Burma, informed Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for Burma, that the 'situation at Saw in Arakan was deteriorating'. He went on to describe the town to be 'in a state of siege'.³⁹ It is thus evident that *mujahid* groups like Force 136, Force U, Force V and SeinDa's gang were waging armed rebellions even before independence.

The antecedent of the Rohingya identity therefore must be located in the pre-colonial era, where the dynamics of a shared environmental continuum across Bengal and Arakan led to the formation of a people, today trapped by the divide of modern nation-state boundaries.

Chittagong and Mrauk-U: The *entrepôt* and hinterland entanglement

*Chittagong was now in the domain of Arakan, Gobindamanikya (King of Tripura) in his exile was welcomed by the king of Arakan when he arrived in Chittagong. The king of Arakan expressed his desire to help him recover his throne...Near the village of Rajakul, Gobindamanikya began to reside in the fort of the Mags with the permission of the Arakanese king...Selfishness, anger, greed, jealousy were the common traits among the Mag children. In spite of staying with their parents these Mag children do not receive a good education. That is why in the fort of the Mags prevails the anarchy of the Mags.*⁴⁰

Rajarshi, one of Tagore's most popular novels (first published in 1939), captures the interconnectedness of the Bengali and Arakanese milieu. In *Rajarshi*, as presented in the above section, the fluidity of space in the confluence of Arakan, Chittagong and Tripura is evident. It is also evident that for Tagore, the Bengali language functions as an enlightening cultural influence. Therefore it is natural that the protagonist of *Rajarshi*, the scholarly exiled king of Tripura Gobindamanikya, takes it upon himself to educate the children of the Mags. The implicit message therefore is that though the Mags are rulers of Chittagong, they are still inferior to the Bengalis. Not only in Tagore but socio-culturally too the Mags in Bengal are seen to be marauders without cultural sophistication. Hence the phrase '*magermuluk*', meaning total lawlessness, is prevalent even today in Bengal. Tagore, drawing from the *Rajmala*, the chronicles of the Manikya dynasty of Tripura, composed not one but three works on Arakan. Tagore's short story *Dalia* is based on the exile of Shah Shuja, the defeated brother of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.⁴¹ Shah Shuja, after his defeat in the hands of Aurangzeb, lost the *subedari* (governorship) of Bengal and fled to Arakan. However, there remains ambiguity about the fate of Shah Shuja. According to some versions, he was betrayed and murdered by the Arakanese king, Candasudhammaraja (1652-1684), while in other accounts it is said that he fled to Manipur. It is nonetheless clear that the Mughal-Arakan relationship was far more cordial.⁴²

Tagore, on the other hand, tried to weave the possibility of love between Dalai, the Arakanese prince, and Jhulikha, Shah Shuja's daughter. Tagore perhaps foresaw a shadow of communal disharmony in the legend about Shah Shuja and therefore probably felt the necessity to create an alternative.⁴³ Tagore in his other short story *Mukut* (first published in 1908),⁴⁴ portrays the regional patriotism of Arakan, whereby the Arakanese king refuses to submit to the prince of Tripura.

The appearance of Arakan in the Bengali cultural milieu does not however start with Tagore. In fact, it has a long history going back to the seventeenth century. The Arakanese Muslims and the Bengali language come to

play an important role in the early modern state formation in the Arakan littoral. The support and proximity of the Bengal Sultanate was a significant but not sufficient reason for the heightened role of Islamic idioms and the use of the Bengali language in the Arakanese court, the rulers of which were Buddhists.

Mrauk-U, in its geopolitical situation, was basically only the Dhanawati plain intersected by the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro river systems. The functioning of Mrauk-U as an *entrepôt* was however not autonomous in spite of being on the coast. It depended on the political situation beyond the Arakan Yoma (Arakan Range). The long distance ruby trade for instance shifted into Arakan only when a state of war existed between the Central and Lower Burmese polities.⁴⁵ This rendered the region as a hinterland suitable for the cultivation of rice and cotton. It is in this context that Chittagong began to play an important role. The period between the late sixteenth and middle of the seventeenth century saw the incorporation of Chittagong as the premier *entrepôt* of the Arakanese kingdom. In recent years, the *entrepôt* nature of Chittagong has been well articulated by scholars like David Ludden, who has suggested that Chittagong not only serviced Bengal and Arakan but also linked all the way up to Sylhet.⁴⁶ This is perhaps not the first case in the past where an expanding agrarian kingdom based in the hinterland incorporates a coastal *entrepôt*. The dynamism of a coastal *entrepôt* does not limit itself to the city itself but also transforms the interior. In the period 1595-1659, the revenue demand in the region around Chittagong increased to 117 per cent and the revenue system in the region continued to follow the Arakanese standards even into the nineteenth century. Therefore, the influence of the Arakanese agrarian system in Chittagong is beyond doubt.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the growing importance of Chittagong as an *entrepôt* forced the Arakanese rulers to adopt and provide patronage to the urban elites of Chittagong, who were primarily Bengali Muslims. This entanglement of Chittagong and Mrauk-U led to a unique court culture in Arakan.

The kingdom of Arakan patronised Muslim Bengali poets from the eastern parts of Bengal. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti) traces the presence of Maradan Donagazi and Alaol in the Arakan court.⁴⁸ Alaol composed his version of the *Padmavat* in the Arakan court, which he identifies as the Rosung court. The Arakan kingdom remained a vassal of the Sultanate of Bengal till 1531. However, even after that, the Buddhist Mrauk-U dynasty fashioned themselves as Sultans and maintained Islamic idioms in governance.⁴⁹ The adoption of Islamic idioms in governance was by no means unique in Arakan. Phillip B. Wagoner has done a similar study to show the adoption of Islamic idioms in the kingdom

of Vijayanagar in south India.⁵⁰ Harvey notes that even as early as 1430, when Naramekhla re-conquered Arakan, his 'Mahomedan followers built the Sandihkan mosque at Mrohaung (Mrauk-U), and it was under him that a court bard, Adumnyo, wrote the historic song *Yahkaingminthami-egyin*'.⁵¹ Harvey further notes that:

*Thereafter it is common for the kings [Arakanese], though Buddhists, to use Mahomedan designations in addition to their own names, and even to issue medallions bearing the kalmia, the Mahomedan confession of faith, in Persian script; doubtless at first, about this time, the kings had these medallions struck for them in Bengal, but later they struck their own.*⁵²

The control of Chittagong also enabled the Arakanese to be a 'race of competent seamen'.⁵³ Thus the Arakanese acquired the much feared reputation as Mags in Bengal. The term Mag finds reference not only in the Bengali phrase '*magermuluk*', meaning 'land of lawlessness', but also in various kinds of Bengali literature. Tagore identifies the Mags as Buddhists in the novel *Rajarshi* when Raghupati, the Hindu priest, draws a distinction between the Hindus and the Mags in the context of animal sacrifice. Kunal Chakrabarti and Shubhra Chakrabarti in their *Historical Dictionary of the Bengalis* describe the Mags as:

*Seafaring men from Arakan (roughly corresponding to the present Rakhine State of Myanmar, located to the southeast of Chittagong, Bangladesh) and usually associated with piracy. The Mags were excellent sailors, and in the 17th century, they, along with the Portuguese pirates, were employed by the king of Arakan to raid the rich neighbouring states of Bengal which they looted and ravaged. Shaista Khan, the Mughal governor of Bengal, and Pratapaditya, one of the BaroBhuiyans, temporarily subjugated these pirates. But it is only after 1784, when Myanmar defeated Arakan, that the Mags were brought under control. Later, they migrated in large numbers to Chittagong and to the island of Sandwip in Bangladesh. The Mags are Buddhist by religion. The expression magermulluk in Bengali, denotes complete lawlessness, and is derived from the memory of the terror they unleashed on the coastal areas of southeast Bengal in the 17th and 18th centuries.*⁵⁴

The reference to Mags can also be traced to colonial surveys. Francis Hamilton, in 'An Account of the Frontier Between Ava and the Part of Bengal Adjacent to the Karnaphuli River', makes references to the Muggs. This article by Hamilton, also known as Francis Buchanan (!), first appeared in the *The Edinburgh Journal of Science*, Vol. 3, 1825. Despite its relatively late dating, Hamilton's understanding of the area and the people was not substantially different from those found in his earlier diaries during his travels in the area in 1798.⁵⁵ Hamilton described the Mags as follows:

East from Korilliyapahar, is a fine valley called Rumagniya, which extends north and south from Kamaphuli...it contains some small hills, it is well cultivated by the Bengalese peasants; and some parts

*still belongs, as the whole did formerly, to the hereditary chief of the tribe called Muggs at Calcutta, where they are much employed by the Christians as cooks, their habits fitting them for preparing our impure diet, which neither Hindu nor Muhammedan can approach without disgust...The people called Muggs, at Calcutta, are scarcely known by that name in their native country. By the Bengalese, they are commonly called Chakma or Sagma, or, in ridicule, Dubades (two tongued), because they have in general forgotten their original language, which is the same with that of Arakan or Roang, as they call it, and have attained a very imperfect knowledge of the Bengalese... The national religion of the Muggs is the same with that of Arakan (Rakhain), that is to say, they follow the sect of Maha Muni among the Bouddhists. The chief priest assumes the same title, Paun-do-giri, with the spiritual guide of the king of Ava...the books which I saw such using, were in the Bengalese character, and except a few words, they understood no other language.*⁵⁶

Thus it is quite clear that the Mags were Buddhists and not Muslims. It is however also evident from the above and also from the discussion in the earlier section on the Bengali cultural milieu of Arakan, that Bengali was a trans-community language and a language of prestige in the region, used by Mags (Rakhine Buddhists), Muslims and Hindus alike. It is also interesting that Arakan is referred to as Rosung or Roang by Alaol and is the Bengali term for the region. This shows that there was a considerable flow of people and ideas between the *entrepôt* and the hinterland. If Bengali Muslim urban elites moved to the hinterland in search of state patronage, the Arakanese Buddhists moved closer to the *entrepôt* for piracy and marauding. Thus, the environmental continuum, as suggested by Charney, also facilitated a dialogue across the Banga-Arakan divide. It is in this entanglement that perhaps the search for a Rohingya history can be made.

Conclusion

The history of the Rohingyas therefore is not one that starts with colonial migration, though traces of their existence are evident in the colonial discourse. The colonial obsession with 'census making' and 'categories' clearly disrupted the fluidity of their identity. The imposition of modern state boundaries undermined the geographic continuum at the edge of the Bay of Bengal. The entanglement of *entrepôt* and hinterland within the Arakanese polity meant that it not only fundamentally affected forms of 'governmentality'⁵⁷ through the adoption of Bengali, Persian and Islamic idioms but also affected the socio-economic structure of the polity. In this case, marauding and piracy became legitimate forms of state revenue. The environmental Banga-Arakanese continuum provided the space for the entanglement of *entrepôt* and hinterland to play out and create a heterodox socio-cultural milieu. This milieu was however disrupted

with the loss of the 'entanglement' when Chittagong was lost by the Arakanese in 1666. A further disruption occurred when Arakan itself was incorporated within a bigger agrarian Burmese empire in 1784 and the deliberate 'Irrawady-ization' policies of the Burmese state. In the colonial era post-1825, there was a renewal of the entanglement when Arakan and subsequently Burma were incorporated within British India. However, developments post-1937, with the separation of colonial Burma from British India, and again in the post-colonial period, led to the imposition of cartographic boundaries without consideration to the environmental continuum. This resulted in the separation and displacement of communities. The ugliest manifestation of which can be seen in the form of the Rohingya crisis at present. There is however no doubt that even the odious apparatus of a modern state cannot impose completely opaque and non-porous boundaries. The entanglement, though weakened, continues to exist even today. The only viable solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in the revival of the entanglement across the Banga-Arakan environmental continuum.

Notes

1. Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *The Collected Verse of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1907), 285.
2. M. W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.
3. Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches, Vol. 1* (Sussex: Macmillan & Co., 1938), 208.
4. *Ibid.*, 208.
5. See W. J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).
6. J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 111.
7. See H. Tinker, *The Union of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 34-63.
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