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**“Theories and Historiography of the Religious Basis of Ethnonyms in Rakhaing (Arakan), Myanmar (Burma)”**

**By**

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Interest in Rakhaing (Arakan), has resurged after a considerable period in which few studies appeared outside of Myanmar (Burma).<sup>1</sup> This newly found interest, at least newly found in terms of foreign scholars, is indicated in the numerous publications which have appeared since the early 1990s and in the holding of the present workshop. One frequently discussed topic that has not yet yielded a satisfactory conclusion, is the association between religious identity and local ethnonyms, which is the subject of the present paper.

“Rakhaing” (Arakanese) used as both an ethnonym and as a geographical and political name for the littoral and the district on the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal, has become inextricably associated in the prevailing scholarly and popular literature with a Buddhist identity. As one Rakhaing scholar, U Tha Hla, has recently explained:

The Rakhaings are Buddhists who have embraced Theravada discipline ... The Buddhist culture forms the main fabric of the society and dominates the attitude of the people. No Rakhaing professes any other religion but Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

Further,

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<sup>1</sup> One of the few works during this period that kept the study of Rakhaing alive was Pamela Gutman, “Ancient Arakan (Burma) With Special Reference to Its Cultural History Between the 5th and 11th Centuries” (Ph.D. Dissertation. Australian National University, 1976). Recently, Gutman has also published idem., *Burma’s Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan*, photography by Zaw Min Yu (Bangkok: Orchid Press. 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Tha Hla, “The Rakhaing,” *Rakhaing Guardian* 1.1 (Spring, 1997): 2

Literally embodiment of Rakhaing is an ethno-religious affiliation. Ethnicity is Mongoloid and religion is Buddhism. Neither race nor faith alone constitutes the unique breed of Rakhaing. Of Mongoloid stock, the Rakhaings sprung from the Tibeto-Burman group along with the Burmese and other Proto-Burmese races who migrated from Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary wedding of ethnonyms with connotations of exclusive religious affiliation is frequently read backwards. When the term presently used as an ethnonym is encountered in earlier historical documents, this religious affiliation is then read, and transposed, backwards in time, providing ‘evidence’ for the existence of some religious identities and excluding others. Thus, understanding Rakhaing’s religious past correctly, requires separating religious from ethnic and other connotations bundled together in contemporary referents.

This approach is also necessary because of the peculiarities of the multi-cultural strands (not quite syncretic) of Rakhaing statecraft. While an entirely separate issue, the Rakhaing reading of political court culture in ways that have made it appear that religious identities were at work created substantial historiographical problems regarding Rakhaing religion. Thus, the Rakhaing borrowing of certain Islamic motifs, including Muslim regnal names, as well as Persian numismatic inscriptional styles (such as the inclusion of the *kalima*) was viewed as evidence of a Muslim presence in the court or of the later, its religious identity.<sup>4</sup> The implications of the possibilities of this interpretation were profound for two reasons. First, those who accepted this view, linked this evidence to a later Rohingya Muslim identity and projected the Rohingya presence in Rakhaing backward in time to the early fifteenth century (and earlier), drawing back a religious identity and more recent ethnonym anachronistically.<sup>5</sup> Numerous stories -- whether or not they are myths remains to be

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bernot, *Les Paysans Arakanais du Pakistan Oriental*, 38; Arthur Phayre, *Coins of Arakan, of Pegu, and of Burma* (London: Trübner & Co. 1882): 2.

<sup>5</sup> As Aye Chan argues “Rohingya historians have written many treatises in which they claim for themselves an indigenous status that is traceable within Arakan State for more than a thousand years.” Aye Chan, “The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar),” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3.2 (Autumn 2005): 396; See also the introduction to Michael W. Charney, “Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries),” (PhD dissertation. University of Michigan. 1999).

seen -- were mobilized to fill in the ‘dark spaces’ across the chronological map were used to demonstrate these early origins and their continuity to the present. As one summary of Rakhaing history from the Rohingya point-of-view explains:

Arakan was a Hindu kingdom in the distant past . . . The Mongolian [Burmese-speaking Rakhaing] invasion of 957 put an end to the Chandra dynasty and Hinduism in Arakan. The Mongols later assimilated with the locals-the Rohingya Muslims and the Magh [Bengalis, according to this account] Buddhists. In the 15th century, a number of Muslim Kings ruled Arakan, which was a golden period in the history of Arakan. During this period, Rohingya Muslims played a dominant role in the political life of Arakan . . . Burmese rule of Arakan [after 1784] was short lived but bloody and brutal. Historically, the Rohingya's association with Arakan is much older. The ancestors of the people, now known as the Rohingyas, came to Arakan more than a thousand years ago. They became [an] integral part of the Arakan [Littoral] socially, politically and economically. On the other hand, the Burmese have always been identified as the plunderers and despoilers.<sup>6</sup>

For the same reasons, some Muslim scholars also delimit the period within which Buddhism predominated in Rakhaing. Ahmed Sharif suggests that Buddhism spread into Rakhaing in the eleventh century with the “infiltration” of Burmese people, culture, and religion, for before this time the historical evidence is unavailable.<sup>7</sup>

Second, those who opposed such suggestions, because of ‘Rohingya’ being a religious as well as an ethnic term, also sought to explain away seeming indications of Islamic culture in the Rakhaing court by presenting their own stories that ought to explain why Muslim titles did not represent Islamic religious affiliation. In doing so, this latter approach attempted to confine strictly the temporal and spatial frameworks within which to view the Rohingya presence in Rakhaing, sometimes stressing that a Muslim population in Rakhaing was a relatively recent development:

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<sup>6</sup> Abdur Razzaq & Mahfuzul Haque, *A Tale of Refugees: Rohingyas in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Centre for Human Rights, 1995), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” in A. B. M. Habibullah (ed.), *Nalini Kanta Bhattasali Commemoration Volume* (Dacca: Dacca Museum, 1966): 352.

[T]here is a danger posed by the increasing Muslim population. The Muslims have entered Arakan mostly during the British times and after [the] independence of Burma.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the Buddhist Rakhaing school paralleled Muslim historiographical efforts to push the presence of their religious identity and community back to a far earlier time than is historically feasible:

Two thousand five hundred years have passed since the time of parinirvana of Gautama Buddha. Throughout the centuries, ever since the introduction of Buddhism, up to the present time, Arakanese have professed Buddhism without a break.<sup>9</sup>

Western scholarship has sometimes followed these two approaches, thus compounding rather than resolving the problem. In more recent times, scholarship has more successfully disassociated understanding Rakhaing royal culture and Islamicate borrowing from the Rohingya issue altogether.<sup>10</sup>

### I. Mugh

Mugh is a referent for the Rakhaing with very early roots. In 1585, Fitch referred to the “Kingdom of Recon and Mogen.”<sup>11</sup> On the basis of this reference, one must reject Sukomal Chaudhuri’s assertion that the Rakhaing came to be known as Mugh in the from the start of the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> In the seventeenth century, references to Mugh do increase rapidly. Portuguese accounts, for example, used Mogo to refer to

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<sup>8</sup> Ashin Siri Okkantha, “History of Buddhism in Arakan” (Ph.D. diss., University of Calcutta, 1990), 177-178.

<sup>9</sup> San Tha Aung, *The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan (An Eastern Border State Beyond Ancient India, East of Vanga and Samatata)* (Rangoon: Ministry of Education, 1977): 108; this is echoed by Aye Kyaw, who observes that “The tradition has it to say that Rakhaing got Buddhism at the time when the Buddha was still alive.” Aye Kyaw, “The Night the Buddha Came,” *Rakhaing Guardian* 1.1 (Spring, 1997): 7.

<sup>10</sup> Alamgir M Serajuddin, “Muslim Influence in Arakan and the Muslim Names of Arakanese Kings: A Reassessment,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 30.1 (June 1986): 17-23, esp. 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Fitch, “An Account of Pegu in 1586-1587,” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 2.2 (Autumn 2004): 168.

<sup>12</sup> Sukomal Chaudhuri, *Contemporary Buddhism in Bangladesh* (Calcutta: Atisha Memorial Publishing Society, 1982): 21.

the population of Rakhaing (1605, c. 1638), the King of Rakhaing (c. 1620, c. 1638), and to Rakhaing language. In 1798, Buchanan referred to the Marma in Southeastern Bengal as Joomea Mugs. In 1835, Foley referred to the Rakhaing people within Rakhaing as Mughs or Magas. Persian accounts also used Mugh to refer to the Rakhaing in the early modern period, as in “the tribe of the Magh” (1590, c. 1641) and the ‘Magh Raja’ (1604, 1638, c. 1641). From the seventeenth century, Bengali sources also used Maghi to refer to the Rakhaing era.<sup>13</sup>

Westerners remained inconsistent in their references into the nineteenth century, using Rakhaing (and its versions) as a political term and as an ethnonym, while also using Mugh as interchangeable with Rakhaing in both usages. Thus, Bernier (1665) referred to the “Kingdom of Rakan, or Mog.”<sup>14</sup> Heath refers to “Muggs or Arrackanners” (1689), Ovington refers to “this Kingdom of Arracan, or Empire of Mogo.” (1696),<sup>15</sup> and one anonymous account of Rakhaing refers to the “Mugs or Aracaners” (1777).<sup>16</sup>

There was a simultaneous trend for using Mugh as an ethnonym together with Rakhaing as a political or geographic term, as indicated in Fitch (1585). This occurred as well in some Persian accounts, as in the *Tuzuk-I-Jahagiri* (c. 1620) which referred to the Maghs, as opposed to state of Arracan.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi* (c. 1641) applied ‘Mag’ to the king and the people of Rakhaing, but “Achrang” and “Rakhang” to the country.<sup>18</sup> This usage was also adopted by British officials in the early part of the nineteenth century, for as Bayfield uses the terms, “Mugs, or native

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<sup>13</sup> Fernão Guerreiro, *Relação Annual das Coisas que Fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas Missões . . . nos Anos de 1600 a 1609*, ed. Artur Viegas (Coimbra: University of Coimbra. 1930): 3.286; Boccarrò, 1.122; Sebastião Manrique, *Itinerario de Sebastião Manrique*, Luís Silveira, ed. (Lisboa: Agência Geral das Colónias, Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1946): 1.89; 1.116, 1.119, 2.9; Francis Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798): His Journey to Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali and Comilla*, edited by Willem van Schendel (Dhaka: University Press Limited. 1992): 32; William Foley, “Journal of a Tour Through the Island of Rambree, with a Geological Sketch of the Country and Brief Account of the Customs, &c. of Its Inhabitants,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 5 (1835): 82, 201; Yule & Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 594; Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, translated from the Persian by M. I. Borah (Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1936): 2.629, 2.710; Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 360.

<sup>14</sup> François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1665-1668* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992): 174.

<sup>15</sup> John Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt, in the Year 1689* (n.p.: for Jacob Tonson, 1696): 568.

<sup>16</sup> William Heath [1689], “The Adventure of Captain William Heath,” *Bengal: Past and Present* 29: 198, Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt*, 1696, 568; Anonymous, “History of the Mugs, 1777,” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1.1 (Spring, 2003): 316.

<sup>17</sup> Jahangir, *Tuzuk-I-Jahagiri (or Memoirs of Jahangir)*, translated by Alexander Rogers & edited by Henry Beveridge (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1909): 1.236.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, 1.419, 2.629, 2.632, 2.710,

inhabitants of Arracan” (1834).<sup>19</sup> The last case can be explained, however, according to the annexation of Rakhaing and its establishment as a British province, which left Rakhaing on both sides of the provincial borders; hence, Rakhaing was used after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) in its strictest geographical and political sense.

The origins of ‘Mugh’ are murky at best and have led to confusion at least since the eighteenth century. In 1696, John Ovington complained that he could not ascertain from “whence they [the kings] derive that Appellation of Moghi.”<sup>20</sup> There are perhaps as many, mutually irreconcilable, theories to explain the origins of Mugh as there are for Rakhaing. Nevertheless, Mugh appears to have been entirely an external ethnonym, applied to the Rakhaing, rather than accepted by them.<sup>21</sup> Hamilton (Buchanan) explained in the late eighteenth century that while the Rakhaing at Calcutta were called ‘Muggs,’ they “are scarcely known by that name in their native country”<sup>22</sup> As Buchanan further explained in 1799:

Arakan, or the kingdom of the Mugs, as we often call it. Whence this name of Mug, given by Europeans to the natives of Arakan, has been derived, I know not; but, as far as I could learn, it is totally unknown to the natives and their neighbours, except such of them as, by their intercourse with us, have learned its use.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, Leyden explained in 1810 that the “term Mugg, these people assured me, is never used by either themselves or by the Hindus, except when speaking the jargon commonly called Hindustani by the Europeans.”<sup>24</sup> Arthur Phayre also admitted that the Rakhaing people themselves “do not know this term.”<sup>25</sup>

Some of the major theories can be identified as follows.

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<sup>19</sup> G. T. Bayfield, “Historical Review of the Political Relations Between the British Government in India and the Empires of Ava,” in R. Boileau Pemberton (ed.) *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1966): xvi.

<sup>20</sup> Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt*, 582.

<sup>21</sup> H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. II. (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891): 28.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Hamilton, “An Account of the Frontier Between Ava and the Part of Bengal Adjacent to the Karnaphuli River (1825),” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1. 2 (Autmun 2003): 14.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Buchanan, “A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire,” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1.1 (Spring 2003): 43.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Yule & Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 594.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur P. Phayre, “Note on the Name Mag or Maga Applied to the Arakanese by the People of Bengal,” in Phayre, *History of Burma*, 47.

### **A. The Magus/Magi Theory**

One theory that became popular in the nineteenth century was that Magha came from the Persian word Magus/Magi for “fire-worshipper.” Yule suggests that Muslim writers mistake Buddhists to be fire-worshippers.<sup>26</sup> In 1834, one anonymous Western account appears to have held the same view: “Mugs, [comes] from Mogo, holy, a word properly applicable to their priests and kings.”<sup>27</sup>

### **B. The Pirate Theory**

Another theory that emerged among Bengali scholars was that Magh came from the Sanskrit word Magdu “meaning a sea-bird and therefore a pirate.”<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Sharif’s recent explanation of this theory, however, suffers from a misunderstanding of the origins and nature of Rakhaing seafaring. Sharif argues that

Before the seventeenth century, Maghs did not practise piracy. They adopted piracy as a profession...when they came in close contact with the Portuguese who allured them to piratical; activities. With Portuguese assistance the Maghs became adept in sea-faring.<sup>29</sup>

After they did so, from the seventeenth century, Magh became associated with raiders and the terms “Magh and Magher Muluk stood for tyrant and tyranny respectively.”<sup>30</sup>

### **C. The Miscegenation Theory**

The miscegenation theory holds that the Mughls are unclean, of mixed race, the results of ‘inter-breeding’ between Rakhaing migrants/refugees and Bengali mothers:

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<sup>26</sup> Yule & Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 594.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, “Monosyllabic Languages of Asia. Notices of the Monosyllabic Languages of South-eastern Asia,” [translated from the German text of Adelung], *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 6 (1834): 105.

<sup>28</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 358.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 358, 360.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

[Phayre]: “a class held in contempt, viz., the descendants of Arakanese settlers on the frontier of Bengal by Bengali mothers.”<sup>31</sup>

[Wilson]: “The People of Bengal contemptuously referred [to] the Rakhaings as Magh which suggests mixed race or unclean beings, a smearing racial slur.”<sup>32</sup>

[Tha Hla]: “the Rakhaing chroniclers pointed out that Magh applies to the descendants of the Rakhaings who married the Bengali wives during the time when parts of Bengal were under the wing of the Rakhaing monarchy...”<sup>33</sup>.

The miscegenation theory centred on a population group who had migrated out of Rakhaing into the Chittagong area in the late eighteenth century. This population, who called themselves the Râjbansi, were Buddhists, but spoke a Chittagong dialect of Bengali. According to prevailing European theories of race and physiognomy in the nineteenth century, they were not Mongolian, which was peculiar since the Rakhaing were viewed as a “people of the Mongoloid race.”<sup>34</sup> The inconsistency between physiognomy and language on the one hand and national origins and religion on the other, led some of the authorities mentioned above to view them as the results of intermarriage. Buchanan provides some interesting information in this regard in 1798:

“[the] people by the Bengalese called Mugs. ... These Mugs, although they speak a dialect of the Burma language, are not the Rakain, who fled from the Burmas. They came into this province some years before the conquest of Arakan, but during the troubles that facilitated that event. Many of the Rakain, who fled from the Violence of the King of Ava, have settled in this island.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Yule & Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 594.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Phayre, “Note on the Name Mag or Maga,” 47.

<sup>35</sup> Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, 47.



In the 1780s, after the Burman conquest of Rakhaing, one Muslim account even created two separate countries, one called Rakhaing and the other called Mugh:

And between the south and east of Bengal, is situate a large tract called Arkhang (Arracan); Chittagong adjoins it...Their religion is distinct from Islam and Hinduism [14/15...And bordering on this tract is the country of Mag. The inhabitants are so many animals dressed up in human forms. Their religion and law are all unsound...And the pronunciations of their language are similar to those of the people of Tibet.<sup>36</sup>

The advantage of the miscegenation theory is that it would be reconcilable with the fact that Mugh was an external ethnonym. However, even some of the chief adherents of this theory ultimately rejected it. In 1883, Phayre explained that he had made a mistake in assuming that the Rājibansi were of mixed race and had after further research and reconsideration had come to an altogether different conclusion, discussed under the Buddhist refugee theory further below.<sup>37</sup>

#### **D. The Regional Theory**

Phayre's ultimate rejection of the miscegenation theory raised another dimension to the use of Mugh, whether it really did refer, or was intended to refer, to a sub-group of Rakhaing, or that was used to refer to the Buddhist or non-Muslim population of Southeastern Bengal. Phayre argued that it was intended to refer only to one small ethnic group, but had been extended to the Rakhaing as a whole because "an ethnological error which has caused confusion among Europeans on the subject."<sup>38</sup>

Willem van Schendel explains that Mugh is a "general term for people living to the east of the Bengal" and includes Rakhaing, Borua, Burman, Kuki, Marma, Mru, etc.<sup>39</sup> Ahmed Sharif specifies that Mugh is applied as a blanket term, but specifically for Buddhists: "'Magh' is used by the Chittagong people to mean the follower of Buddha in general, and all Buddhists whether living in Chittagong or

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<sup>36</sup> Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin* (A History of Bengal), (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 1903): 14-15.

<sup>37</sup> Phayre, "Note on the Name Mag or Maga," 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 48

<sup>39</sup> Schendel's notes to Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, 202.

Arakan or in other parts of the world are termed ‘Magh.’<sup>40</sup> This does not appear to be correct, at least not until after the late eighteenth century. A Buchanan found in his travels in Bengal, the Manipuris, known to the Burmans as Kathee (Kathi), were known as ‘Muggaloos’ by the Bengalis. Again, this led, as Buchanan complained, to the creation by Rennel of a country that really was not there. As Buchanan explained:

Muggaloos...Europeans have applied to the country [Manipur], turning it at the same time into Meckley. Kathee is the name given to this people by the Burmas, which we also have taken for the name of the country, and corrupted into Cussay. Mr. Rennel having from Bengal obtained information of Meckley, and from Ava having heard of Cussay, never conceived that they were the same, and, accordingly, in his map of industan, has laid down two kingdoms, Cussay and Meckley, for which, indeed, he had sufficient room, as by Captain Baker’s account he had been induced to place Ava much too far to the east.<sup>41</sup>

As mentioned in this account, Bengalis referred to Manipur, a Hindu, not a Muslim country, using a variation of Mugh as well.

If we consider that European and Muslim usage of Mugh was restricted to the period when Rakhaing kings ruled the northern Rakhaing littoral, it may be tentatively be suggested that Mugh was a Bengali term whose use by Bengalis for the Rakhaing in the northern Rakhaing littoral (Southeastern Bengal) was extended to the Rakhaing as a whole as a result Rakhaing’s incorporation of the northern littoral from the sixteenth century until the mid-seventeenth century. Nevertheless, this theory merely identifies the external source of the term. It does not help us to understand why the term emerged among the Bengalis in the first place or why the term was borrowed by Europeans from the sixteenth century to refer specifically to the Rakhaing and not to other population groups, kings, or countries in the region.

## **E. The Magadha Theories**

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<sup>40</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 359.

<sup>41</sup> Buchanan, “Comparative Vocabulary,” 48.

Another theory, or family of theories, for the origin of Magh is the Magadha thesis and it holds the greatest currency with scholars.<sup>42</sup> There are four main sub-theories in this family.

### **E.1. The Magadha Inheritance Theory**

The Magadha Inheritance Theory was first proposed by Dr. J. Leyden in his “On the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations” (1811). It had sweeping importance in influencing later theories of the Magadha school, but in itself was weakened by a poor understanding of the region’s history. Leyden asserted that the Rakhaing (Rukhéng) were the original inhabitants of the area. However, they were known as Mugs or as Mauga because the area had “in ancient times [formed] a part of the empire of Magadha ... and being from their situation more immediately connected with India.”<sup>43</sup>

### **E.2. The Magadha Refugee Theory**

A second sub-theory holds that the Arakanese were, or derived their name from, refugees of the Magadha who arrived as a result of Muslim expansion. According to Tibetan sources, after Muslim invaders destroyed Buddhist monasteries and “massacred” Buddhist monks in Magadha, Buddhist refugees fled to Rakhaing and Eastern Bengal.<sup>44</sup>

After rejecting the miscegnation theory, Phayre argued that the Râjbansi were not Rakhaing per se, but descendants of immigrants from Magadha into Arakan and hence “the name given to them by the people of Bengal correctly designates their race of the country from which they came.”<sup>45</sup> The “tribe” adopted the name Râjbansi, Phayre explained, because of the simultaneous move of a foreign dynasty from Bihar to Rakhaing, as discussed below under the kingly theory, out of a “desire to assert their importance as belonging to the same race as the kings of Arakan.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 358.

<sup>43</sup> J. Leyden, “On the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations,” *Asiatic Researches* 10 (1811): 158-289.

<sup>44</sup> Debala Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh: A Study of Buddhist Images from District Chittagong* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982): 27.

<sup>45</sup> Phayre, “Note on the Name Mag or Maga,” 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

### **E.3. The Magadha Dynastic Theory**

Another variant of the Magadha theory is that the Rakhaing are known as Mugh because the Rakhaing royal family claimed descent from the Buddhist land of Magadha.<sup>47</sup> Arthur Phayre appears to have simultaneously accepted both the refugee theory and the kingly theory, viewing two different kinds of migrations reinforcing the same external identification. In Phayre's view, it was probably the case that a foreign dynasty came to Rakhaing from Southern Bihar, although, Phayre asserted, Rakhaing chroniclers have attempted to conceal this fact. As Phayre further explained: "The former existence in Southern Bihar of princes having the race name of Maga is an undoubted fact ... and that a dynasty of this race reigned in Arakan may be considered to be true."<sup>48</sup>

Ahmed Sharif appears to accept this sub-theory and draws upon evidence from Bengali writers in Rakhaing in the seventeenth century. As he explains, the poet Qazi Aulat (fl. 1622-1638) refers to a Rakhaing ruler as being both a Buddhist and a member of the Magadha Dynasty, even referring to the kingdom as "Magadha Rajya." Moreover, seventeenth century Bengali writers, Ahmed Sharif asserts, referred to the Rakhaing language as "Magadha."<sup>49</sup> However, Tha Hla argues that the Rakhaing chronicles do not substantiate this theory.<sup>50</sup>

### **E.4. The Magadha Prestige Theory**

A fourth sub-theory accepts Magadhi migration, but holds that indigenous Buddhists attempted to affiliate themselves with the Magadhi immigrants to increase their prestige because the Magadhi were purportedly "the kinsmen of Lord Buddha."<sup>51</sup>

## **II. Rakhaing (Arakan/Arakanese)**

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<sup>47</sup> Sharif, "On Arakan and the Arakanese," 358, citing Haq & Sahityavisarad, *Arakan Rajasabhay Banta Sahitya*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Phayre, "Note on the Name Mag or Maga Applied to the Arakanese by the People of Bengal," 47-48; See also Tha Hla, "The Rakhaing," 2.

<sup>49</sup> Sharif, "On Arakan and the Arakanese," 359.

<sup>50</sup> The Hla, "The Rakhaing," 2.

<sup>51</sup> Sharif, "On Arakan and the Arakanese," 358-359.

The contemporary name for Western Myanmar is Rakhaing, known to Westerners as Arakan. While this reference has remained standard throughout the early modern period and after, its origins are poorly documented. A number of theories have been suggested, frequently by non-Rakhaing. As a result, many of these explanations privilege other cultures or states at the expense of the indigenous population.

Evidence for the use of Rakhaing to discuss the kingdom and the court go back quite early. Pamela Gutman points to a mid-eleventh century inscription on the Shitthaung pillar, as the earliest indigenous reference, as it includes “Arekadésa, the land of Areka, which was probably the name for Arakan at the time.”<sup>52</sup> According to G. H. Luce, it appears in lists of slave names in Pagan inscriptions as early as 1299 A.D.<sup>53</sup> An inscription from Maha-hti-taung-bo, dated 1366 CE, refers to the King of Rakhaing and to the Rakhaing country (pyi).<sup>54</sup> An inscription from the Sakdawya pagoda near Nyaung-goukka village in Sagaing district, dated 1407, refers to the Rakhaing queen and the Rakhaing country.<sup>55</sup> The Sagaing Htupayôn pagoda inscription (1442) also refers to Rakhaing.<sup>56</sup> A *parabaik* of 1603 calls the Rakhaing king the Rakhaing *bayin*.<sup>57</sup>

These early indigenous references to Rakhaing are complemented by the earliest European accounts, including Nicolò de’ Conti of Venice in c. 1430.

And after that, sayling a whole moneth by sea, he came unto the entring of the river Nican, and sayling uppon it sixe dayes, he came unto the Citie also name Nican, and he went from thence seaventeene dayes journey throughe deserte mountaynes, and plaine countrey, the fifteene days of which the people of that countrey cal Clava, and sayling up this river a

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<sup>52</sup> Gutman, “Ancient Arakan (Burma),” 2.

<sup>53</sup> G. H. Luce, “Note on the People’s of Burma in the 12th-13th Century A.D.,” *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42.1 (June 1959): 60. Lucien Bernot later makes a similar observation in *Les Paysans Arakanais du Pakistan Oriental. L’Histoire, le Monde Végétal et l’Organisation Sociale des Réfugiés Marma (Mog)* (Paris: Mouton & Co. 1967): 1.36.

<sup>54</sup> *She Haung Myanma Kyauksa Mya* (Rangoon: Department of Archaeology, Government of Burma. 1972-1987): 356.

<sup>55</sup> *She Haung Myanma Kyauksa Mya*, 229. Duroiselle, number 41.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Gutman, “Ancient Arakan (Burma),” 3.

<sup>57</sup> “Parabaik number 30,” [unpublished bark parabeik] AMs, 1603, Henry Burney Parabeiks Collection, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London, Great Britain.

month, he came unto a famous great Citie called Ava, being 15 miles in compasse.<sup>58</sup>

“Nican” in this version of the account is actually transliterated as Racha and Rachan in earlier editions, as noted by Kennon Breazeale. Further, Mansel Longworth Dames confirms that the original Latin text uses *Rachani*.<sup>59</sup> Other early modern foreign accounts also used variations of Rakhaing. Sri Lankan Buddhists referred to Rakhaing as Rakkangapura in the fifteenth century and as Rakhan and Rakkanga in the seventeenth century.<sup>60</sup> Persian accounts use variations of Rakhaing as well: Arkhang (1598), state of Arracan (c. 1620), Rekheng (1777), Rekan (1799), Rechan (1834).<sup>61</sup>

After De’ Conti, European sources followed the “Rachan” trajectory. In 1515, Tomé Pires used Raçam to refer to the kingdom.<sup>62</sup> In 1518, Duarte Barbosa referred to Racanguy, romanized in the translation to Aracangil, although other variations were used in other editions, including Ere Can Guy and Daran Canguy.<sup>63</sup> By the late sixteenth century, Western works, such as Petra Vino’s Latin geography (1597) referred to Rakhaing as Aracan.<sup>64</sup> However, the spelling, or transliteration, deviated from one European language to another and within languages, depending upon the level of education of the observer. In 1611, a German translation of Sebastião Gonsalves y Tibao’s account of Bengal used Arracam.<sup>65</sup> Antonio Bocarro, like earlier

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<sup>58</sup> Nicolò de’ Conti, “Early Fifteenth Century Travels in the East,” edited by Kennon Breazeale, *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 2. 2 (Autumn 2004): 112.

<sup>59</sup> See original text and Kennon Breazeale’s notes in Conti, “Early Fifteenth Century Travels,” 112; Mansel Longworth Dames’ notes to Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants* (London: Hakluyt Society. 1921): 150 n.2.

<sup>60</sup> Ashin Siri Okkantha, “History of Buddhism in Arakan” (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Calcutta. 1990): 24; Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 354; P. E. E. Fernando, “The Rakkhanga—Sannas—Cumikava and the Date of the Arrival of Arakanese Monks in Ceylon,” *University of Ceylon Review* 17.1 & 2 (1959): 42.

<sup>61</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 354; Jahangir, *Tuzuk-I-Jahagiri*, 1.236; Anonymous, “History of the Mugs, 1777,” 316; Buchanan, “A Comparative Vocabulary,” 43; Anonymous, “Monosyllabic Languages of Asia,” 105.

<sup>62</sup> Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512-1515*, translated by Armandao Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944): 1.89.

<sup>63</sup> Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 150, n. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 354.

<sup>65</sup> Sebastien Gonzales, *Newe Relation* (Augsburg: Christomo Daber. 1611): 1.

Portuguese, referred to the *estão de Arracão* (1620).<sup>66</sup> In 1640, Schouten referred to the *Koninckrijck Arakan*.<sup>67</sup>

Westerners sometimes referred to the Rakhaing as ‘Arakanese,’ that is, using the political and geographical term as an ethnonym. Schouten (1640) referred, for example, to the *Arakanders*.<sup>68</sup> Portuguese and Italian sources refer to variations of *Arracão* (trans. *Arracan*), including [Kingdom of] *Arracão* (1603), *Aracão* and *Rei de Arracão* (1605), and *Aracao* (1708).<sup>69</sup> In English documents we find *Arrakan* (1683), *King of Aracan* and *Rechanners* (1687), *King of Racan* (1687), *Arrackan*, *Arackan*, and *Raccaners* (1689); *Arraccan* (1700, 1704), *Araccan* (1701), *Racke[en]* and *Rackan* (1706, 1707, 1708), “*King of Arackan*” and *Arackaner* (c. 1720), *Arracan* (1767), “*kingdom of Arrakan, (Aracan)*” (1834), *Rakheins* (1835).<sup>70</sup>

There are a number of competing theories to explain the use of Rakhaing. Some of the main ones are:

### A. The Arabic Theory

The Arabic theory was first proposed by Mansel Longworth Dames in his notes to the Hakluyt edition of Duarte Barbosa’s 1518 travel account. Unlike the other theories discussed below, he offered no insight into the origin of Rakhaing per se. However, he did attempt to offer an explanation, admittedly conjectural, for the change from Rakhaing into the Arakan of Muslim and European accounts. In doing so, he

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<sup>66</sup> Antonio Bocarro, *Década 13 da História da Índia* (Lisboa: Academia Real das Ciências de Lisboa, 1876): 1.115.

<sup>67</sup> Wouter Schouten, *Oost-Indische Voyagie* [1640], 102.

<sup>68</sup> Schouten, *Oost-Indische Voyagie* [1640], 116.

<sup>69</sup> Guerreiro, *Relação Annual*, 1.44, 1.45, 4.133; Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor, Or Mogul India, 1653-1708*, translated by William Irvine (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., n.d.): 3. 78.

<sup>70</sup> *Records of Fort St. George: Masulipatam Consultation Book of 1682-83* (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1916): 40; General Letter to Fort St. George [dated] London, 6 June 1687, 50; *RFSG: Despatches from England, 1686-1692*. vols. 8-10. Madras: Super. Govt. Press, 1929, 79; Heath, “The Adventure of Captain William Heath,” 169, 182, 197; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1700*, vol. 29 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1922): 54; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1701*, vol. 30 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1922): 31; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1704*, vol. 33 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1928): 4, 38; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1706*, vol. 36 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1929): 31; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1706*, vol. 36 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1929): 77; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1707*, vol. 37-38 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1929): 60; *RFSG: Diary and Consultation Book of 1708*, vol. 39 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1929): 14; Hamilton, “An Account of the Frontier Between Ava and the Part of Bengal Adjacent to the Karnaphuli River (1825),” 15; William Turner, “Extract of a Letter Dated Nagore, 7th July 1761,” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1.1 (Spring 2003): 1.227; Anonymous, “Monosyllabic Languages of Asia,” 105; Foley, “Journal of a Tour,” 1835, 201.

inadvertently provided a theory for the transference of the term Rakhaing to the outside world, suggesting as intermediaries Arab sailors. As he explained:

How the name was changed into Arracão or Aracan is not clear, but it seems possible that some such form as Al-Rakān (pronounced Ar-Rakān) with the Arabic article may have been used by Arab sailors and passed into common circulation.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, this theory favours the early identification of the Rakhaing as “Rakhaing,” but fails to explain how Rakhaing emerged in the first place.

### **B. The Silver Theory**

The silver theory was first proposed by Henry Yule in 1882. He argues that Ptolemy referred to Rakhaing as Argyrê (silver) because of silver mines there. Arthur Phayre suggests a modification of this theory. As there are no records of silver in Arakan, the name cannot mean silver. Nevertheless, Argyrê may really be a “corruption” of Rakhaing. As Rakhaing is an ancient term, Phayre suggests, it “would have been heard by the voyagers from whom Ptolemy derived his information.”<sup>72</sup> This theory is untenable in its current form, as the linguistic ‘leap of faith’ from Ra-khaing to Argyre is a considerable one and lacks any convincing evidence.

### **C. The Acculturation Theory**

The earliest references to Rakhaing come from inscriptions in the Irrawaddy Valley. The Rakhaing and the Burmans share a language and a culture, but the reasons for these common features of their civilizations cannot be explained satisfactorily. One popular theory is that the Rakhaing are themselves Burmans, who migrated into the Rakhaing Littoral as the vanguard of a larger migration of Burmans that then halted in the Upper Irrawaddy Valley. This migration is said to have occurred in the tenth century. A related theory is that Abhi-raja (the first king), a refugee king from northern India and a descendant of King Mahathamada (the first human king of the

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<sup>71</sup> Barbossa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 150.

<sup>72</sup> Arthur P. Phayre, *History of Burma* (London: Trübner, 1883): 42.



world), established Tagoung in Upper Burma and then migrated to Western Burma, where he married a local princess and established a new line of kings, which in many ways has resonances, personalized, of the migration theory. The Abhiraja myth, eventually accepted by both Burman and Rakhaing as a common origin myth, was subject to manipulation by both in order to claim for their own kings the place of being the ‘elder’ branch.<sup>73</sup>

The competition between Rakhaing and Burman writers for superiority in their relationship is reflected in other accounts. One story from an early, though undated, Rakhaing account claims that Rakhaing kings were responsible for creating the Burmans and the Lower Burmans, by acculturating hill tribes to their own culture,<sup>74</sup> while another story, included in ù Kalà’s c. 1730 *Great Chronicle* attributes the origins of the Rakhaing people, and the term ‘Rakhaing,’ to the Pagan period as follows:

The king [of Pagan, Alaungsithu] ordered generals Nga Yeidain and Nga Rannain to march with many horses and elephants against the Sak king, Kadoun, who was unfaithful to two things—the royal obeisance and the royal oath. When they arrived at Nga-sei, they defeated the Sak king, Kadoun-kyo, and sent war captives as tribute [to Alaungsithu]. The great king [Alaung-sithu], with his soldiers and commanders, went up to Lan-pya and forced the prisoners who had been taken to construct villages in this place. Because they had ‘forced’ and ‘placed’ [kain] all who had been ‘taken’ [ra], it is called “ra-khine” up to the present day.<sup>75</sup>

Since Rakhaing does not appear in inscriptions before this time and an invasion (and conquest) of Rakhaing by Alaungsithu is supported in some of the earliest Rakhaing chronicles, it is difficult to disprove this theory. However, epigraphic or other contemporary evidence to support it have not yet emerged.<sup>76</sup> The most important

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<sup>73</sup> This is discussed in Michael W. Charney, “Centralizing Historical Tradition in Precolonial Burma: The Abhiraja/Dhajaraja Myth in Early Kôn-baung Historical Texts,” *South East Asia Research* 10.2 (2002): 185-215.

<sup>74</sup> Sithu-gammani-thinkyan, “Rakhine Ra-zawin,” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 2297] AMs, 1886 [circa 1870s], National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar.

<sup>75</sup> ù Kalà, *Maha-ya-zawin-kyi*, U Khin Soes, ed. (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1961): 1.228-229.

<sup>76</sup> Luce appears to reject the chronicle account of Alaung-sithu’s conquest as unsubstantiated by contemporary evidence. Luce, “Note on the Peoples of Burma,” 60.

problem is that it has not yet been found in texts that can be reliably dated to a period earlier than 1730 and thus must tentatively be rejected, pending the careful identification of earlier sources.

#### **D. The Demon Theory**

A fourth theory is that the Bengalis and Beharese applied to the people of Rakhaing the Sanskrit word Raksa, meaning “monster or demon.” This theory holds that Rakhaing was originally populated by “a race of primitive people” who ate only meat and the hills inhabited by these people were called “Raksa-Tunga, a corruption of which is Rakhaing Tamgyi.”<sup>77</sup> Phayre offered a similar view in 1844:

The word Rakhaing appears to be a corruption of Rek-khaik, derived from the Pali word Yek-kha, which in its popular signification, means a monster, half man, half beast, which like the Cretan Minotaur, devoured human flesh.<sup>78</sup>

Thus Sanskrit and Pali equivalents for the Burmese Bilu gave the area the name Yakkhapura.<sup>79</sup> In 1835, Foley called the Rakhaing the ‘Rukkhein’ as well and refers to the country as ‘Rukkhein-preh.’ As he explains,

Arakan, known in past times as Rekhá-pura; and so called from its having been the abode of the ‘Rakhus;’ a fabulous monster, said to devour the inhabitants. The scene of this monster’s alleged depredations seems to have been in the neighbourhood of what is now termed ‘Fort of Arracan!’ (Mrou-u-mu, built...in the year of Gautama 1150, and in the common era...A.D. 1430.) On the extirpation of this monster, Arracan was termed ‘Rukkhein-preh,’ or ‘Rukkhein-táing,’ the country of the Rukkheins; an appellation equally common to the

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<sup>77</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 353, 355. He also cites M. E. Haq and A. K. Sahityavisarad, *Arakan Rajasabhay Bamta Sahitya* (1935), 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> Arthur P. Phayre, “On the History of Arakan.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 13 (1844): 24.

<sup>79</sup> Aye Kyaw, “The Night the Buddha Came,” 8.

natives of Arracan with that of Mugh, or Mogh; the Burmahs substituting the letter Y, for R, call them ‘Yukkhein.’<sup>80</sup>

Phayre, discussing certain stories involving conflicts between humans and *bhilus* (ogres) included in Nga Mi's chronicle, explained in one case: “This legend perhaps refers to the warfare the Burman race had to wage against the aborigines, the present savage hill tribes, who already possessed the country when they themselves entered it, and who probably long after struggled for independence . . .”<sup>81</sup> A variant of this theory is that the name Rekkha-pura, “a corruption of Raksapura” was given to the Rakhaing by “early Buddhist missionaries.”<sup>82</sup>

This theory may be correct for foreign applications of Rakhaing, as it fits an intellectual framework through which Indians viewed the Rakhaing littoral. As one tradition is recorded:

The Meghna is the great river which in older days formed the last limit of the wanderings of the Aryans. The story runs that when in their wanderings the Pandavas reached its banks, Bhim, the most adventurous of those heroes, was sent across to explore the country on the further side and on his return address his elder brother, Yudhisthira, in such intemperate language that the latter turned his back forever on a land which could so pervert a man of gentile breeding. The country east of the Meghna has therefore been called by the orthodox Hindus a Pandava barjita desh, a land of utter barbarism.<sup>83</sup>

This perspective may have been adopted by the Portuguese who visited Bengal first, as reflected in the 1572 poem by the Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões:

The *Realm* of ARRACAN, *That* of PEGU

Behold, with *Monsters* first inhabited!

*Monsters*, which from a strange commixion grew:

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<sup>80</sup> Foley, “Journal of a Tour,” 200.

<sup>81</sup> See Arthur Phayre, “On the History of Arakan,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 13 (1844): 33.

<sup>82</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 354.

<sup>83</sup> *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Noakhali* (Dacca: Superintendent, Bangladesh Government Press, 1977): 5.

Such ill effects oft *Solitude* hath bred.  
*Here* (though a barb'rous misbegotten Crew)  
Into her way was erring *Nature* led  
By an invention rare, which a *Queen* fram'd,  
To cure the *Sin*, that is not to be nam'd.<sup>84</sup>

Rakhaing chronicles also include in the coverage of its early history numerous stories of local kings who fought Bilus who were said to have dominated the littoral.<sup>85</sup>

The theory does not provide evidence of the actual transference of such a term. It is true that indigenous chronicles, including that by Sithugammanni-thingyan, refer to “great Rakhaing country called Rakhapura.”<sup>86</sup> However, the etymology of Rakhapura itself has been questioned by Aye Kyaw:

This theory does not make sense semantically. In both Sanskrit and Pali, the Burmese Bilu is equated with Yasasa and Yakkha respectively. Rakhaing distinctly and clearly articulate the phonetic values of r and y; thus there has been a guideline in Burmese literature that, if you do not know the correct way of spelling regarding r and y, you better ask Rakhaing. In view of this, the name Yakkhapura cannot be right.<sup>87</sup>

### **E. The Communal Theory**

Recent Rakhaing scholars have argued that another Pali term serves as the root of Rakhapura. Both Aye Kyaw and Tha Hla, for example, argue that Rakhaing comes from the Pali Rakhita/Rakhetta,

(Tha Hla) “which connotes beings or tribe characterized by heredity of preserving homogeneity and safeguarding against exotism and exogamy. The intense nationalism and modern xenophobia complemented with the

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<sup>84</sup> Luís Vaz de Camões, “The Lusiad, or, Portugals Historicall Poem,” translated by Richard Fanshawe (1655), *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 2.2 (Autumn 2004): 164.

<sup>85</sup> Sithu-gammani-thinkyaw, “Rakhine Ra-zawin,” 2.1

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.

<sup>87</sup> Aye Kyaw, “The Night the Buddha Came,” 8.

prevailing practice of endogamy lend support to the etymology of Rakhaing.”<sup>88</sup>

(Aye Kyaw) “which means ‘capable of taking care of one’s race and able to observe the Buddhist moral precepts.’ In other words, Rakhaing are the people who are not only capable of taking care of their Rakhaing people but also able to observe the Buddhist moral precepts.”<sup>89</sup>

This argument seems to be derived from one offered by Ashin Sri Okkantha in his dissertation (1990) from Calcutta University. Okkantha suggested that the original root of Rakhaing could have been “the Sanskrit Rakshin or Arakshin” and thereafter corrupted into the Pali words Rakkha or Arakkha, meaning “guarding or protecting.”<sup>90</sup> Okkantha’s view, however, was more generalized and he incorporated the demon theory, suggesting that the communal theory refers to the arrival of Buddhism giving protection to Rakhaing immigrants from the original inhabitants of the land.<sup>91</sup> The major problem with this theory is, as with many others, that there is no contemporary evidence to support it.

## **F. The Provincial and Lac Theories**

Two other theories have been discussed in the literature, but evidence remains meager for both and they rely on etymological logic rather than documented occurrences. The Hla describes the “two and a half” theory as follows:

The Europeans adopted the vernacular name and called Rakhaing Arakan which is the corruption of the Bengali version Ahrra Kan: Ahrra implies two and a half, and Kan is for province, meaning the land of two and a half provinces compared to relatively larger Eastern Bengal, known as Charra Kan, the land of four provinces.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The Hla, “The Rakhaing,” 1.

<sup>89</sup> Aye Kyaw, “The Night the Buddha Came,” 6.

<sup>90</sup> Ashin Siri Okkantha, Ashin Siri, “History of Buddhism in Arakan,” (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Calcutta, 1990): 23.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>92</sup> The Hla, “The Rakhaing,” 2.

The other theory is that Rakhaing comes from the Sanskrit word for lak (*raksa*). As Aye Kyaw explains: “Worth-noting is that in the first centuries of the Christian era, Rakhaing was a major source of lac and is still the product of the hill tribes even today.”<sup>93</sup> Pamela Gutman offers this theory as one of several possibilities and goes deeper into the etymology of the term. As she explains Rakhaing might be connected with the Tamil word for shellac, “arrakam,” especially since the country was an important source of this commodity. Ptolemy, Gutman suggests, may have equated the “Tamil arrakan of Kannada aragu with Argyre,” and applied the term to what became Rakhaing.<sup>94</sup>

### G. The “Pillars of Islam” Theory

To explain the emergence of “Arakan,” Yunus developed the ‘Pillar of Islam’ theory. Arakan, he explained, meant the same thing in both Arabic and Persian, being the plural form of ‘Rukn’ or ‘pillar.’ Yunus suggested that since the “five pillars of Islam” was an important part of the Islamic faith, ‘Arakan’ must signify “the land of Islam or peace.” To fit this theory into the Rakhaing historical context, Yunus, following Quanungo, explains that “almost certain is the fact that the name Arakan became popular after the Muslim conquest of the country in 1430 C.E.” and that since Rakhaing kings used the Persian language, they may have been the likely contributors of the term. Yunus also suggested that Rakhaing and Arakanese were not synonymous; instead, Buddhist Rakhaing were actually Mughhs, unlike the Arakanese Muslims.<sup>95</sup>

Yunus also attempted to explain why –since Arakan and not Rakhaing was, in his view, the original name of the country and the population – Rakhaing itself emerged. Rakhaing, he argued, was derivative of Roang/Recon. Buddhist Mughhs who had been marauding Lower Bengali waters over the course of the early modern period created a reputation for Mugh that shamed their descendants, so they began to call themselves Rakhaing.<sup>96</sup>

This theory fails on a number of counts. First, as mentioned, Rakhaing is mentioned far earlier than any of the references for Roang and Mugh, thus making his

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<sup>93</sup> Aye Kyaw, “The Night the Buddha Came,” 8.

<sup>94</sup> Gutman, “Ancient Arakan (Burma),” 1-2.

<sup>95</sup> Mohammed Yunus, *A History of Arakan: Past & Present* (N.p.: 1994): 4-5, 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

explanation of the shift from Mugh to a derivation of Roang (Rakhaing) untenable. Second, linguistically, the second segment of Ra-khaing is not ‘kan’ as in Arakan, but Khaing, as the earliest inscriptions demonstrate. Third, Yunus’ claim that “Arakan” did not become popular until after 1430, does not hold up to historical scrutiny.

### III. Rosang-Rohingya

Rohingya is a controversial ethnonym because, as with Magh, it has taken on religious connotations, in this case referring to Muslim Rakhaing. As a result of communal antagonisms, the roots of which have been examined in depth elsewhere, two claims have been made in Burmese literature. First, Rohingya scholars claim that Rakhaing was originally known as Rosanga and that the early modern Rakhaing state was a Muslim sultanate; hence Rohingya has always been the ethnonym for the indigenous population. Second, Buddhist Rakhaing claim that Rohingya, in reaction to the first claim, is a creation of the colonial period. Both of these claims are incorrect. The question remains, how long have the Rohingya referred to Muslim Rakhaing, or, at the very least, what are the roots of Rohingya?

The earliest recorded use of an ethnonym immediately recognizable as Rohingya is an observation by Francis Buchanan in 1799. As he explains, a dialect that was derived from Hindi “... is that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have long been settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Roinga, or natives of Arakan.”<sup>97</sup>

The derivation of Rohingya from Roinga is very clear. Buchanan’s explanation (1798) that Rakhaing was known to the Bengalis as “Rossawn, Rohhawn, Roang, Reng, or Rung”<sup>98</sup> raises an interesting problem because it ties it to the Bengali term for Rossanga. Thus, Rohingya may be a term that had been used by both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis living in Rakhaing since the sixteenth century, either as resident traders in the capital or as war captives resettled in the Kaladan River Valley. Indeed, As Buchanan (1799) explained of some Brahmin informants from Rakhaing, “They call themselves Rossawn.”<sup>99</sup> This observation was repeated over three decades later in an anonymous Western account (‘Rassaun’).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Buchanan, “A Comparative Vocabulary,” 55.

<sup>98</sup> Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, 31.

<sup>99</sup> Buchanan, “A Comparative Vocabulary,” 55.

<sup>100</sup> Anonymous, “Monosyllabic Languages of Asia,” 105.

Even in Buchanan's time, the debate over local ethnonyms and "native" culture had begun to take shape. This is indicated in part by Buchanan's complaint that his Brahmin informants had attempted to make him believe that theirs was the common tongue of the country. More specifically, Buchanan found that the Rakhaing, whom he called the "real natives of Arakan," called both the Muslim and the Hindu Rohingya "Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Yakain."<sup>101</sup>

The use of 'Roinga,' 'Rossawn,' or as Buchanan found elsewhere, 'Rovingaw,' can be traced to the seventeenth century to "Rosanga," but the derivation of Rosanga itself is debated. At times, Rosanga has even been misunderstood as referring to a country entirely separate from Rakhaing, as Buchanan noted in 1799: "Mr. Rennell has been induced to make a country named Roshawn occupy part of his map, not conceiving that it would be Arakan..."<sup>102</sup>

### **A. The "Blessings" Theory**

Three main theories have been offered for the origin of Rohingya. First, Yunus holds that 'Rohingya,' as a term, emerged prior to the ninth century, long before the use of Arakan, which he incorrectly attributes, as discussed, to the fifteenth century. Yunus explains that Roang/Rohang/Roshang is probably derived from the Arabic 'Raham,' or "blessings," thus meaning "the land of God's blessings." One example of the evidence available for the use of this term is provided, Yunus claims, in a work by Rashiduddin attributed to 1310, which refers to Rakhaing as Rahan (Rohang).<sup>103</sup> This theory, however, has the burden, not yet undertaken, of demonstrating that Rahan refers definitely to Rakhaing and, second, that Raham and Rahan can be accepted as the same word.

### **B. The Mro-haung Theory**

The most recent view regarding the emergence of Rosanga, one that the present author takes to be immediately implausible, is that Rosanga is derived from Mro-haung, or "old city," as Mrauk-U, the former capital, is now known. Ahmed Sharif,

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<sup>101</sup> Buchanan, "A Comparative Vocabulary," 55.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>103</sup> Yunus, *History of Arakan*, 7-11.



the chief proponent of this theory, examined seventeenth century Bengali poetry in Mrauk-U and Chittagong and found that these poets referred to Mrauk-U as Rosanga Sahar (Rosanga City), as well as referring to the Rakhaing as Rosanga, and Rakhaing as Rosanga des (the country of Rosanga). Abdul Karim Khondakar, the eighteenth century poet, also referred to the Rakhaing as Moraung, the Rakhaing king as Moranga Rai, and Mrauk-U as Rosanga Sahar.<sup>104</sup> Thus, Ahmed Sharif charts the emergence of Rosanga as follows:

Morohaung>Rohaung> (H>S) Rosang/Rosanga.

On this basis, Ahmed Sharif asserts that Rosanga is definitely not derivative of Rakhaing. Further, he explains, that the term first emerged among the population of Chittagong and Ramu when they were ruled by Rakhaing. Rather than refer to the country, they referred to the capital, leading to Rosang/Rosanga becoming “a popular name” for Rakhaing.<sup>105</sup>

This theory can be questioned on several grounds. First, the evidence is internally contradictory, because both Rakhaing and Mrauk-U were referred to as Rosanga, which would not necessarily favor Mrauk-U itself as the root of the term. Second, deriving Rosanga from Mro-haung is difficult to demonstrate etymologically. Third, and more importantly, Ahmed Sahrif anachronistically applies a much later name for Mrauk-U, Mrohaung to the early fifteenth century.<sup>106</sup> As mentioned earlier, the earliest Western accounts refer to Mrauk-U being called Rakhaing just as the country was, and indigenous chronicles refer to the capital as Mrauk-U. Mro-haung, did not emerge as a name for the royal city until after the Burman conquest in 1784/85 at the earliest. Armandao Cortesão made the same error in his translation of Tomé Pires’ 1515 account, providing Myo-haung in the translated text, when the original term in the text used for the city was Mayajerij and Malagery or Maiarani in other versions, the etymology of which he could not explain.<sup>107</sup> Thus, arguing that Rosanga is derivative of the name for the royal city cannot be correct.

### **C. The Raksa/Rakhainga Tunga Theory**

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<sup>104</sup> Cited in Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 356-357.

<sup>105</sup> Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 356-358.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 355-356.

<sup>107</sup> Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 1.96, no. 1.

A third theory, an older one from the Bengali school, but dismissed by Ahmed Sharif, is that Rosanga is derivative of Raksa Tunga. As this theory charts the etymological change:

Raksa Tunga> Rakhaing> Rahainga> (H>S) Rasanga> Rosanga

Or

Rakhainga> Rakhainga> Rakhanga> Rohanga> Rosanga.<sup>108</sup>

The first strand of this theory may be accepted tentatively ignored, because it involves a completely separate debate, discussed above. The second strand appears more logical and to its benefit, derives from a historical root verified by both contemporary indigenous and foreign accounts. This may not demonstrate completely the emergence of Rosanga, but it is the most logical explanation available thus far.

#### IV. Mranma

The last ethnonym is the most intriguing, but suffers from the poorest availability of documentation (for the pre-eighteenth century period) among the four different ethnic terms discussed in this paper. In the late eighteenth century, Europeans and indigenous sources begin referring to some Rakhaing speakers, in both Rakhaing and Southeastern Bengal, using different variations of Myanma (Mranma, Ma-ra-ma, Marma). This assertion depends upon whether or not the section of the “Rakhine Min-ra-za-gri Arei-daw sa-dàn” that refers to the seven kinds of Mranmas, including the Rakhaing, can be clearly attributed to 1608, 1775, or 1784.<sup>109</sup> The origins of the term Mranma itself do not concern us here and are subject to an entirely different debate

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<sup>108</sup> Huq. Sahityavisarad, *Arakan Rajasabhay Bamla Sahitya*, 2-3, and S. N. Ghosal in his introduction to *Sati Mayna-Lor-Chandrani*, 5, both cited in Sharif, “On Arakan and the Arakanese,” 357.

<sup>109</sup> “Rakhine Min-ra-za-gri Arei-daw sa-dàn.” [Palm-leaf manuscript, number 1632] AMs, 1784 [1775], National Library, Ministry of Culture, Yangon, Union of Myanmar, section e, pt. 1, f. 34a.

concerning the origins of the Burmans.<sup>110</sup> The present section focuses solely on its intersection with Rakhaing referents.

Explanations for the phenomenon of a common ethnonym, shared by both the Rakhaing and the Burmans generally, followed a single trajectory, evolving into progressive versions of the same single comprehensive theory of the identity of the Rakhaing by the early 1840s, rather than witnessing the emergence of competing theories. In large part, this was because it followed a paradigm that connected nation with language that was emerging in Europe about the same time under the rubric of philology. Buchanan was among the first to take down ethnographic notes on the people today known as the Marma.<sup>111</sup> In his own time (c. 1790s), this population was called by the Bengalis the Joomeas (from Jum) or Joomea Mugs. At least one group (settled near Ramu) referred to themselves as the Kyaungsa “or the sons of the Rivulet...” while another group referred to themselves as “Taung-sa ...or the Sons of the Hill,” not as an ethnonym but as a referent in the context of their ecology. Buchanan noted that their language was a Rakhaing dialect and close to Burman. More importantly, Buchanan was informed by members of this population that their “proper name ... is Mă-ră-ma” and that his nation “are Ma-ra-ma-gre or Great Burmas” and that this was how they were known by the Burmans.<sup>112</sup>

### **A. The Early Racial Progenitor Theory**

The racial progenitor theory began to develop among European scholars into the early nineteenth century. In 1799, Captain John Towers attributed Ma-ra-ma solely to the Rakhaing, suggesting for the Burmans the ethnonym Brăim-mas.<sup>113</sup> In 1811, the philologist Leyden went further. He argued that, on the basis of language and popular historical views, the Rakhaing were the progenitors of the “proper Barma tribes.” First, he explained, the Rakhaing language was less corrupted than that of the Burmans and the purer form must be the earlier form. Second, citing traditions such as those mentioned by Buchanan, Leyden asserted that the Burmans accepted that they owed their origins to the Rakhaing, thus explaining the appellation of Ma-ra-ma-gre,

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<sup>110</sup> For an early summary, see Taw Sein Ko, “Whence did the Burmese Come?” In *Burmese Sketches* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1913): 1-4.

<sup>111</sup> See Willem Schendel’s notes in Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, 25, 201.

<sup>112</sup> Buchanan, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798)*, 33, 59, 67, 69, 87, 89, 93.

<sup>113</sup> John Towers, “Observations on the Alphabetical System of the Language of Awă and Rac’hain,” *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1799): 143.

which he romanizes as Barmá kyí. Leyden also asserted that the “national name” of the Rakhaing “race” was Ma-rum-ma (presumably from which the Myanmas or Burmans also received their name) and developed a theory to explain its etymology. As Leyden argues, Ma-rum-ma was a “corruption of Maha-Vurma” or great Vurma, and that Vurma was an “epithet generally assumed by the tribes of Ksahtriya extraction.”<sup>114</sup>

## **B. The Phayre Synthesis**

Arthur Phayre brought these ideas together, along with a new interpretation of Rakhaing, for the first time in 1841. Phayre argued that the Rakhaing-tha and the Kyaung-tha, whose chief observable bond consisted of a shared (or similar) language within the greater Ma-ra-ma group and religion (Buddhism), were “of the same race.” Their true national name, Phayre explained, was ‘Myan-má’ and that Rakhaing-tha, like Kyaungtha, was merely a local appellation. The Rakhaing-tha were those Mranma who lived within the central littoral, known as Rakhaing, and the Kyaungtha were Mranma who lived along the banks of mountain streams. He could not explain why the two branches of the same race had become separated. The Rohingyas, or Muslims, known as the the ‘Kolas’ were “of an entirely different race ... they being of Bengalee descent.” Further, again accepting the relationship between language and national origins, Phayre asserted that the language that the Muslim Rakhaings spoke (Bengali) was “the language of their ancestors.”<sup>115</sup>

Phayre’s synthesis allowed him to reorient many of the terms connected with the Rakhaing in ways that suited their connectivity with the Burmans. First, other ethnic groups, including hill tribes such as the Khumi and the Chin were not included within the Mranma family. Second, Rakhaing was detached in terms of its origins from the Mranmas and made a place name which one branch of the Mranmas adopted when they moved into the littoral. Indeed, now Rakhaing could more clearly be seen as being derivative of Sanskrit and Pali words for demon, attributed by Buddhists who recorded early conflicts between the first or second wave of Mranma immigrants into the littoral. In other words, ‘raksa’ had not been originally attributed to the Mranma

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<sup>114</sup> Leyden, “On the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations,” 222, 231.

<sup>115</sup> Arthur P. Phayre, “Account of Arakan,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 117 (1841): 681.

later known as the Rakhaing-tha, but instead to the “primitive tribes” whom the Mranma immigrants fought and displaced as they resettled into the littoral.<sup>116</sup>

Phayre now constructed a large Mranma migration in which the Khumis and Chins were the forerunners, pushed further along, or out of the wave, by other Mranmas. As Phayre observed:

The Khyengs [Chins] and Kú-mís are probably an offshoot of the Myan-má race, who left their original seat earlier than the tribes who inhabit the Kola-dan, represented themselves as being driven further south each succeeding year, in consequence of the encroachments of the fiercer tribes beyond them. These encroachments still proceed.<sup>117</sup>

Phayre further developed the theory by 1882 to explain (1) the lack of evidence for a Rakhaing sharing of the Mranma ethnonym with the Burmans and (2) for the emergence of Mugh as an ethnonym as well. According to Phayre’s 1882 revision, Rakhaing, Mranma, and Mugh were all foreign words. Although a Mongoloid migration had brought early Mranmas to Rakhaing, they did not begin to call themselves Rakhaing until they converted, like the population of the Irrawaddy Valley, to Buddhism. Prior to that, they had been called Rek-khaik (after Rakshasa) by Indian Buddhist missionaries. Then, after converting to Buddhism, the Rakhaing adopted Mranma as their national name, in consonance with their ‘racial bonds’ to the Burmans, but “they have not disdained to retain the word Ra-khaing as a local designation.” Mugh was then applied to them by later Buddhist missionaries from Magadha, from whose Maga royal line, Indian princes came to rule them.<sup>118</sup> Phayre’s synthesis not only offered an explanation for many of the disagreements between different theories, but also resonated with the kinds of creation myths and migrations found in the indigenous chronicles.

Phayre’s argument has proven to be the most logical one, but again, more evidence was (and is) needed. To Phayre’s credit, he understood, at least in rudimentary form, that ethnic and ethnonyms were not primordial, but flexible and could not be understood outside of the context in which they were socially and

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<sup>116</sup> Phayre, “Account of Arakan,” 684-685; Phayre, “On the History of Arakan,” 25.

<sup>117</sup> Phayre, “Account of Arakan,” 684.

<sup>118</sup> Phayre, *Coins of Arakan, of Pegu, and of Burma*, 3.

historically situated. However, the details of his model are in need of revision. His reliance on chronicle descriptions of primitives and royal migrations at face value rather than as metaphors for historical developments led him to synthesize rather than reconsider existing theories. The problem of understanding “Mugh,” for example, would have been partially resolved by examining with greater scrutiny the Abhiraja myth and its emergence as has been done elsewhere, thus calling for an explanation other than the migration of Indian princes known as Maga. As Mugh, according to the available evidence, does not antedate in its association with the Rakhaing in the fifteenth century, it could be more convincingly argued that Mugh, in general agreement with Schendel, was a blanket Bengali term for the non-Bengali population of the northern Rakhaing littoral, derived from Magadha, not requiring an explanation internal to Rakhaing for its emergence.

Second, Phayre’s favour of a religious connection with Rakhaing ethnonyms reflected in part the Western assumption of the essential connected nature of religion and ethnic terms. It also reflected the religious landscape of Rakhaing during his own time, when increased Muslim immigration from the northern Rakhaing littoral provoked competition for local resources with Buddhist villagers. Thus, in Phayre’s mind, Rakhaing must have been attributed to the Rakhaing by Buddhist missionaries, even though as originally a Sanskrit term, in his estimation, its attribution could have been drawn from a less circumspect grouping of potential culprits. Moreover, Phayre does not explain why the Rakhaing adoption of Mranma, demonstrable only in the late early modern period, as their ‘national name’ occurred after their conversion to Buddhism and not before.

## **Conclusion**

Several immediate conclusions can be drawn, some etymological and others historical. First, Rohingya seems to have been derived from Rakhaing, although it remains unclear from whence Rakhaing originally was derived. Second, Mugh and its various versions appears to have always been an external term not for the Rakhaing per se, but more specifically for the Buddhist population of the northern Rakhaing littoral. Third, Ma-ra-ma remains an interesting, but thus far murky ethnonym, difficult to trace prior to the Burman conquest in 1784/1785.

Regarding the history of Buddhism in Rakhaing, and its historiography, the debate concerning privileged origins will likely go on for some time, as long as history remains a tool of modern religious communalism. Nevertheless, in so far as the historical record is concerned, the shared origins of Rakhaing and Rohingya indicate that Rakhaing has not always been solely an ethnonym of Buddhist Rakhaing, but rather one that has come to be peculiarly associated with Buddhism as a result of linguistic change over many centuries, change that produced the term ‘Rohingya.’ The question remains of whether Rosanga, as a term, emerged within Bengal, in reference to Rakhaing, and was then carried into Rakhaing by Bengali poets, captives, or traders and then emerged as the Rohingya ethnonym of Muslim Rakhaing or if it instead emerged internally, among Rakhaing Muslims and was then adopted by the Bengalis as a result of religious, literary, or commercial intercourse. It can be asserted, however, that one claim of the Buddhist school in Rakhaing historiography, that Rohingya was an invention of the colonial period, is contradicted by the evidence.

These conclusions only suggest the historicity of ethnonyms, not of ethnicities per se. It is probably the case, however much contemporary Rohingya or Rakhaing might resist the thought, that Rohingya and Rakhaing were not mutually exclusive ethnonyms. Rakhaing’s topography may have led to Rohingya and Rakhaing emerging as separate versions of the same term in different geographical contexts that came, in the eighteenth century to be associated closely with the predominant religious makeup of the local area concerned. Along the same lines, it may indeed have been socially situated in ways other than those involving religion prior to the eighteenth century. There may also have been other local referents that escaped the notice of court-centred chroniclers or centrally-based monastic writers. This would agree with the classic study by Kris Lehman of ethnic categories in Burma, “Ethnic Categories & Theory of Social Systems.” Lehman suggests that ethnicities are roles in a system of other roles, that one has many available ethnicities to choose from, and that one’s “ethnicity” changes as one interacts with different people in different contexts.<sup>119</sup> However, as contended in contemporary Rakhaing and Rohingya

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<sup>119</sup> F. K. Lehman, “Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems,” in Peter Kunststadter (ed.), *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): 105-107, 110-111.

literature, this pre-contemporary fluidity has evaded the parameters of the debate on ethnonyms.

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