

Notes on a series of cultural and historical articles about Arakan written between 1959 and 1966 by Mohammed A Tahir Ba Tha of Buthidaung

U Ba Tha was a Muslim scholar and banker from Buthidaung in Rakhine State who between 1959 and 1966 wrote several articles on the peoples, culture and history of Arakan. He was known to be living in retirement in Yangon in 2014. He examined most of the main sources of migration into Arakan historically, except for the permanent migration from 1870 onwards of agricultural labour from the Chittagong region of Bengal, to which he makes no reference at all, although Chittagonian migrants outnumbered all other Muslim residents of [Arakan by the time of the 1931 Census](#) by at least four to one.

In his contribution “Competing ideologies and the hybridized history of the Rohingyas” to [Metamorphosis September 2015](#), Jacques P Leider, historian and member of the École Française d’Extrême Orient, commented: “Ba Tha (and following him, other Rohingya writers) drew his claims of a separate Muslim ethnic identity in Arakan from historical interpretations which may be described in the entirety of its various forms and arguments as Rohingya ideology”.

I briefly examine below, in historical order from 1959 to 1966, the incidence of the term “Rohingya” in eight of Ba Tha’s articles, six of which appeared in the monthly “Guardian Magazine” between September 1959 and November 1964 and two elsewhere, one in March 1965 and one in April 1966.

These articles, ostensibly on historical and cultural issues, would seem to have been written partly if not primarily with a political purpose, which was to promote the Rohingya ideology to which Jacques P Leider refers.

1. [“Shah Shujah in Arakan”](#) - The Guardian Magazine of September 1959 relates the story of the flight to Arakan of this Indian prince and his subsequent assassination. Ba Tha records that in July 1663 “some Muslims of Arakan” attempted to free his widow and children. “But their attempt was fruitless. The Muslim young men were executed, and in the city [Mrauk-U] there was a general cruel killing of Muslims including Rowengyas, the descendants of Arab merchants and Pathans.” The survivors of Shah Shujah’s retinue were later inducted into the service of the Arakanese King as “Royal Archers”, known as Kaman.

No historical source is given for the word “Rowengyas”. The word appears twice more in the article: “The descendants of the Kamans are called Kamachies who now call themselves Rakhaing Kaman Muslims, whereas the Rowengyas speak an

admixture of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Arakanese and Bengali. This admixture in their dialect came to be adopted as they are a border race, which generally happens with other border races of the Union of Burma. There are more than forty five thousands Kamans and more than five lakh [500,000] Rowengyas in Arakan.” [Note: The 1931 Census listed the total number of Kamans at only 2,686. This Census also lists Arakan-Muslims, Chittagonians, Bengalis, Zerbaidis and Myedus. The designation “Rowengyas” does not appear in this Census.]

There is no reference in the article to “Rohingya”.

2. [“Roewengyas in Arakan”](#) - The Guardian Magazine of May 1960 is an account “about the Muslims who stepped into the soil of Arakan and settled in the country before Shah Shujah took refuge with the Arakanese king Sandathudamma (1652-1684) in 1660”. Ba Tha writes that in the latter part of the eighth century “several merchant ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the crews, said to have been Muslims called Arabs or Moors were sent to Arakan proper, that is, Waithali, and settled in villages..... The Arakanese Muslims of Arab descent are called as Roewenhnyas which literally means favoured or pitied”. He continues: “The Pathans and the then immigrants from Bengal intermarried with the Roewenhnyas, the Arabs descendants. By such intermarriages the Roewengyas came into being. Year by year the Arab descendants so intermarried and intermixed with the Roewengyas that they were indistinguishable from the latter and gradually lost their identity. The word Roewengya is a mere corruption of Arakanese original word ‘Rwa-haug-ga-kyar’, Tiger from Old Village. This word Roewengya literally means brave, because the Pathans who were brave had driven out the occupying Talaing Forces from Arakan whom the Arakanese could not crush.”

It will be noted that there is now a new spelling for “Rowengya” which is “Roewengya” and a particular meaning is attributed to the word. Roewngya is presented as a development from an earlier “Roewenhnya”, but no explanation is given about how or why this development took place. Neither are any sources given.

[A contemporary Arakanese source](#) (1961) denied flatly that there was any such Arakanese designation as “Rwa-haug-ga-kyar”. He concluded his article thus:

“In conclusion, let me stress that I am not against those Arakan Muslims who have stayed among us for generations. We will continue to regard them as our kinsmen and brethren. However, we cannot accept those Rohingyas who are trying to create discord among our people. We will not recognise them as

separate indigenous race. But if they prefer they can remain as foreigners the Chittagonians. Appropriate action will have to be taken if they continue to interfere in our political affairs. So let me appeal to these Muslim of Buthidaung and Maungdaw not to meddle in this so called Rohingya affairs as instigated by certain mischievous persons of Chittagonian descents, who besides trying to create Chittagonian Sudetenland, trying to make [take?] our rightful Statehood movement by creating and igniting racial problems.”

Another contemporary source (1963) noted that:

“Locally, those slave Muslims are known as Royanka or Arakanese Muslims. The immigrants of the Chittagonian race find their way into society of local Royanka and gradually they become absorbed within them. Eventually, they also claim to be Royanka, descendants of the Muslim slaves in Arakan. Consequently, the Arakanese are slowly but surely being ousted by the peaceful penetration of the Chittagonians in every walk of life.”

As in the case of the article above, there is no reference to “Rohingya”.

3. “Slave Raids in Bengal” - The Guardian Magazine of October 1960 is an account of the capture of Bengalis by Portuguese and Arakan marauders who were then taken into slavery in Arakan. Ba Tha writes that:

“The descendants of these captives of Bengal are known as Heins which means a low caste.....They also call themselves Roewengyas.... They use Burmese as a written language just as the Roewengyas did with Urdu which, during the British rule, supplanted the ancestral literature of the latter. But, R.B.Smart wrote that among themselves the Heins use the colloquial language of their ancestors. Unlike their ancestors they are indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese because they have lived for centuries together with the latter. They are, therefore, dependent on the Chittagonian labourers who help them in their several hard works such as ploughing, reaping and earthwork. ‘Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part, in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung townships,’ writes R. B. Smart. These immigrants were men who came down only for the working season from Eastern Bengal, but they were not bona-fide or permanent residents because they were not an indigenous race of the country.”

A comparison of this extract with what RB Smart actually wrote [in his 1917 Gazetteer for Akyab District](#) is revealing. The relevant passage in RB Smart's report reads as follows, with the important message which Ba Tha ignores **shown in red**:

"They differ but little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs; in writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors. Long residence in this enervating climate and the example set them by the people among whom they have resided for generations have had the effect of rendering these people almost as indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese themselves. They have so got out of the habit of doing hard manual labour that they are now absolutely dependent on the Chittagonian coolies to help them over the most arduous of their agricultural operations, ploughing, reaping and earthwork. Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part, in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung townships. **Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district. The later settlers, who have not been sapped of their vitality, not only do their own labour but it is not uncommon to find them hurrying on their own operations to enable such as can be spared to proceed elsewhere to add to their earnings by working as agricultural labourers, boatmen or mill coolies.**"

It will be immediately apparent that RB Smart did not say that the Chittagonian immigration into Arakan was "only for the working season" as was generally the case from 1830-1870. He was on the contrary referring to the substantive, well recorded permanent migration of Chittagonians into Arakan and the role which these "later settlers" were playing in the Arakan economy. Ba Tha ignored the general sense of RB Smart's observations, but selected instead a few phrases out of context in order to support his argument that there was no permanent migration from the Chittagong region.

Nowhere does Ba Tha attempt any estimate of the numbers of Bengalis taken as slaves. The evidence suggests that they were the largest community to have moved into Arakan from Bengal at any time, and included both Hindus and Muslims. [Michael Charney](#) suggests the number of ultimate survivors could have been "60,000, probably much higher" from among twice that number taken captive.

As in the case of the two articles above, there is no reference to “Rohingya”.

4. [“Rowengya Fine Arts”](#) - The Guardian Magazine of February 1961 has “Rowengya” in the title, but “Roewengya” is used throughout the text of the article in numerous places. It is of interest to note the extent to which Ba Tha refers to the Bengali origins of calligraphy, painting and music in Arakan.

As in the case of the three articles above, there is no reference to “Rohingya”.

5. [“A Short History of Rohingya and Kamans in Burma”](#) was first published in Burmese in December 1963. The text at reference is a translation by AFK Jilani [available online](#). For the first time, Ba Tha refers to “Rohingya”, and in these words:

“The term Rohingya is derived from the word Rohai or Roshangee, a terminology perverted to Rohingya. Rohai and Roshangee are terms denoting the Muslim people inhabiting in the old Arakan (Rohan/Roshang/ Roang). It is probably the corruption of Arabic term Raham (blessing) or Raham Borri meaning the land of God's blessings. The word Rahma to Rahmi-Rahmia-Rahingya to Rohingya, which denotes honest, dutiful, pitiful or kind hearted to others.

“But there is another historical definition of Rohingya. That is Rohingya which derived from the Magh language "Rwa-haung-gya-kyia". The Magh used to call the Pathan army of General Wali Khan and General Sandi Khan, who came to restore the throne to Naramaikhia, as "Rwa-haung-gya-kyia"- which was changed time to time - as Rwahingyia - Rohingya-which denotes as brave as tiger. As the Pathans army defeated the Mon-Talaing army, the Rakhine Maghs used to call the Pathan as brave as tiger. They mixed with the Arab descendants for centuries and become Rohingyas.”

The designations used in the four previous articles are gone - Rowengya, Roewengya and Roewenhnya. In their place has come “Rohingya”, promoted I suspect through the influence of the militant Mujahid rebels who surrendered in July and October 1961. This was the designation [used indulgently by Vice-Chief of Defence Staff Brigadier Aung Gyi](#) on their surrender.

6. [“The Early Hindus and Tibetan-Burmans in Arakan”](#) - The Guardian Magazine of November 1964 has only two references to “Rohingya”: (a) “(Islam was propagated

since 7th Century AD in this part of the world by the Arabs who intermarried with the early Hindus. By such mixed marriages Rohingya came into being)", and (b) "In conclusion, though after the 10th Century AD Arakan was predominantly or professedly a Buddhist country, Islam was strong there with a fairly strong admixture of Rohingyas as a result of intermarriage with Muslims."

I sense a reluctance on the part of Ba Tha even to admit the possibility that Rakhine Buddhists might have been the dominant community in the former Kingdom of Arakan. His use of the term "professedly" is clearly designed to challenge this possibility.

7. "[The Coming of Islam to Arakan](#)" -The Guardian Magazine of March 1965. By now "Rohingya" is confirmed as the only acceptable designation in this article which generally repeats Ba Tha's ideological interpretation of Arakan's history.
8. "[Muslims in Arakan \(Burma\)](#)" – The Islamic Review (Woking UK) is a reprint in April 1966 of the article at No. 6 - "The Coming of Islam to Arakan", with two exceptions. Firstly, the brief history of Islam in the second paragraph is replaced by a short paragraph about how Islam came to Arakan. Secondly, the two final paragraphs are deleted. These are somewhat enigmatic in the original and read:

"Islamic civilization is world acceptance and it shows greater interest in many things and it introduces far reaching conditions of the souls of the soil.

"In the fields of cultural activity, one finds a new life and a new spirit. New avenues and vistas are opening up before the eyes of writers, painters and artists as well as industrialists and social workers. When we look back to the past we see the darkness disappearing in the rays of light that are flooding the new born Socialist Country."

A footnote to the article states that it is based on the book "The Loyal Rohingyas" by Ba Tha, though a comparison of the text shows that it reproduces over 95% of the text of the article in "The Guardian" of May 1965. [[AFK Jilani has referred](#) to an unpublished work "The Faithful Rohingyas".] It is also keeps the reference to radio broadcasts in the Rohingya language by the Burma Broadcasting Service which in fact came to an end on 30 October 1965.

The reference to the “rays of light flooding the new born Socialist Country” is presumably a compliment to General Ne Win whose March 1962 coup led to the establishment of the Burma Socialist Programme Party based on the East European Soviet Bloc model.

Concluding Remarks

My assessment of Ba Tha’s intentions is that from 1959 to 1961 he and his associates mostly based in Rangoon were still in the process of formulating their political ideology. This was however followed by a gap of well over two years before his writings opted in favour of “Rohingya” in place of the Rohengya/Roehengya of the earlier years.

It is likely that these two years were marked by intense discussion and debate among the Muslim political and religious intelligentsia in both Rangoon and Arakan. In the wake of the Mujahid surrender in 1961, these years saw the launching of the political struggle on the basis of the “Rohingya” designation now agreed by the Muslim elite.

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7 March 2017