

A Detailed Examination of Misinformation in Dr Azeem Ibrahim's Book *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*

The book has attracted criticism from several quarters. One reviewer, the free-lance journalist Julia Wallace, an experienced and compassionate commentator on Rohingya affairs, wrote in the "Mekong Review" February – April 2017:

"Unfortunately, this slim work (141 pages) does not venture deeply inside anywhere. Ibrahim appears to have travelled to Rakhine only briefly, and, despite a couple of interviews with refugees, there is no real evocation of what it is like to be a Rohingya villager subject to travel restrictions, to live inside a camp, to be sick, terrified, persecuted.....

"Instead the book plays the unwinnable game. Ibrahim spends a great deal of time trying to prove things that are - or should be - irrelevant: that the Rohingya might have settled the area before the Rakhines; that they are a coherent and longstanding ethnic group which once dominated the region; that Buchanan's paper is proof of this.

"This may be because the book is clearly aimed at an audience of international 'thought leaders' rather than actual readers who want to learn about the Rohingya. Its goal is not to inform, but to provide a platform for the author's own punditry and to make recommendations to the international community. This approach makes Ibrahim distressingly prone to sweeping, anodyne statements, the kind of thing you might hear at a TED talk or a conference room at Davos.....

"Perhaps because of the global resonance of the term 'genocide', the book places an almost perverse overemphasis on the concept. But in international law, genocide is a relatively narrow crime with specific preconditions; dwelling on this comes at the expense of a more complete evocation of the very serious crimes the Rohingya have clearly suffered.....

"Most crucially, Ibrahim's work suffers from a lack of on-the-ground engagement with the people whose story is ostensibly being told. Where are the plastic chairs, where are the tarpaulins and the perpetually muddy ground of the camps, where are the rice paddy fields that stretch out around them, fenced off for the use of their Rakhine owners.....?"

The book has three sections. The first two chapters set the historical background to 2010. This section has little merit because the presentation is largely based on unsubstantiated, even fabricated historical data. The next two chapters set the scene from 2010 to the present-day, but are nowhere near as eloquent, reliable or informative as reports from UN agencies and human rights organisations. The last three chapters examine what might be done. In this connection I would note that [the presentation to the All Party Parliamentary Groups on 17 January 2017](#) concentrated on the need for a UN Commission of Enquiry which was not a suggested course of action examined in the book.

While the text of this volume indeed has only 141 pages, there are voluminous “Notes” which are little more than references without comment (Pages 151-201) and which in many cases simply confirm the opinions of the author. “References” from Pages 203-222 are a mixture of both bibliography and reference articles. There are five Appendices which add little or nothing to the text. There is a Foreword by an unidentified “Muhammad Yunus”, who is probably not the social entrepreneur and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of that name, but more probably the President of the militant Rohingya Solidarity Organisation who has written a controversial [History of Arakan](#) not listed among the References. There are however no Acknowledgements, which leaves us rather in the dark about who might have helped Dr Ibrahim to write this volume. But not completely, as the anti-colonialist rhetoric in the book points to a particular collaborator. In his review on the back cover, Channel 4 News Broadcast Journalist Jon Snow was sufficiently impressed as to praise the book as “brilliantly researched.”

The essence of the problem is this. Dr Ibrahim and the international Rohingya lobby would convince us that Muslims in Arakan are a pre-1823 “national race”. But this can clearly only be true for the descendants of those individuals and groups who were settled in Arakan prior to the Burmese invasion of 1785, from which date both Muslims and Buddhists either fled to British India, were forcibly deported to the Court of Ava or suffered grievously under the Burmese occupation of Arakan, until the British arrived in 1824.

According to initial [British capitation-tax annual censuses](#) (see Pages 224 and 249 for the 1842 Census figures recorded by an American Baptist missionary, the Rev GS Comstock), the Muslim population at the time accounted for only about one-eighth of the population in Arakan, and this included, by 1842, both Muslim and Buddhist returnees from British India. Their descendants today represent in my very rough estimate only 15% of the total Arakan Muslim population, while the descendants of British-era legal migrants from Bengal represent some 55% and of illegal post-1948 migrants as much as 30%.

The lobby however denies that Arakan Muslims today are descendants of a veritable mosaic of Muslim communities, indeed ethnicities, settling in Arakan at different times over several hundred years, in a variety of circumstances. They insist, despite all the historical evidence to the contrary, that Muslims in Arakan are directly descended from 8th Century traders, scholars, clerics and men of fortune from the Middle East who allegedly settled only within the boundaries of present-day Arakan, even though the borders of the old Kingdom of Arakan in its hey-day spread up the coast of the Bay of Bengal as far as Dacca. This is a fanciful historical narrative which neither I nor many other scholars totally sympathetic to the misfortunes of the Rohingya can take seriously.

This narrative, as well as the policies of confrontation advocated by the Rohingya lobby, are of no help at all to today's Rohingya population who are suffering so grievously. The lobby's approach is as counterproductive as the sanctions incompetently and ineffectively applied against the previous military administration only strengthened their hold on power, impoverished the Burmese people generally, enriched the Generals and delayed the transition to a more representative form of government.

Misinterpretation of the 1940 Report on Indian Immigration

A key document quoted by Dr Ibrahim in his book is the [Report on Indian Immigration by Financial Secretary James Baxter](#), occasioned by the anti-Indian and specifically anti-Muslim riots of 1938, completed in October 1940 and published the following year. Dr Ibrahim refers to this Report on Pages 7, 29-30 and 49 of his book, claiming on Page 29 that "Baxter's report involved, for example, reclassifying the 1871 [actually, 1872] Census figures such that the Hindu population in Arakan was identified as Indian in origin (having migrated in search of work under British rule). It also made an effort to distinguish between the various Muslim communities in the province as opposed to simply combining them by religious affiliation."

Pages 4 and 5 of the Baxter report reads:

"There is little objection to assuming that all the Hindus were Indian [throughout Burma] but it is not so true to assume that all the Mohamedans were Indian."

Baxter then explains:

"There was an Arakanese Muslim community settled so long in Akyab District [D.T. - today's Sittwe and Maungdaw Districts combined] that it had for all intents and purposes to be regarded as an indigenous race. There were also a few Mohamedan Kamans in Arakan

and a small but long established Muslim community around Moulmein which could not be regarded as Indian.”

[Moulmein, in its modern spelling of “Mawlamyine”, is of course not in Arakan in Western Burma, but in Tenerassim in Eastern Burma, in modern spelling Tanintharyi.]

Page 7 of Baxter provides a breakdown of the Indian population of Arakan which notes that “the indigenous Mohamedans in the Arakan Division numbered 25,955 at the time of the 1921 Census” - consisting of 23,775 “Arakan Muslim” and 2,180 “Kaman”, according to my analysis from the 1921 Census. This compares with 61,283 immigrant Bengali speaking Muslims – figures which I have taken from the Table on Page 191 of the 1921 Census.

The extent of migration into Arakan during British rule is examined in detail in Chapter VII of Baxter. Dr Ibrahim makes no reference at all to this important Chapter. According to Baxter, immigrant Chittagonians and their descendants numbered 186,327 at the 1931 Census, and other immigrant Bengalis and their descendants 15,585. Indigenous Muslims and their descendants had risen from 25,955 in 1921 to 56,963 [51,612 “Arakan Muslim”, 2,670 “Kaman” and 2,681 “Myedu” – figures taken by me from the Table on Page 245 of Part II of the 1931 Census.] Dr Ibrahim quotes no figures.

On Page 6 of his book Dr Ibrahim notes:

“Shortly after the British conquest, a survey carried out by Charles Paton indicated the population of the province was around 100,000. As with many British censuses of the colonial period, he focused as much on religion as ethnicity and identified that there were 30,000 Muslims split between three ethnic groups, a large community mainly in the north (the Rohingyas); the Kamans (a group descended from Afghan mercenaries who had served the previous dynasty); and “a small but long established Muslim community around Moulmen”.

Paton does not use the terms Rohingya or Kaman at all in his report, and the quotation at the end of the sentence comes, as we have already seen, not from Paton, as implied, but from the Baxter Report of 1940, some 114 years later. We also find the same misspelling by Dr Ibrahim of “Moulmen” for “Moulmein” in Tenerassim, which is irrelevant as Paton’s census was for Arakan only.

Paton is again mentioned on Page 29 of the book. “Ostensibly working for the British Colonial Office, he was actually working for Britain’s secret spy agencies.” It is true that Charles Paton,

assisted by another more erudite and gifted Sub-Commissioner Thomas Robertson and Lieutenants Thomerson and Cammelin of the Royal Engineers, submitted a report graded “Secret” to the Governor-General Lord Amherst, from which it is apparent that most of the work was completed not by Paton, but by Robertson, Thomerson and Cammelin, including all the interviews with village chiefs, both Muslim and Buddhist. At the time India was administered by the East India Company, not the Colonial Office, and the only reason for grading the report “Secret” was that it was presented to the Governor-General through Chief Secretary George Swinton, who was Head of both the “Secret” and “Political” Departments. Paton was no more a spy than were Robertson, Thomerson and Cammelin. [Paton’s 1826 report was declassified two years later and published in Asiatic Researches](#), with the excision only of personality notes on village chiefs.

Dr Ibrahim goes on to say (Page 6) that “it is enough to note [that the British census of 1911](#) identified the Buddhists of Arakan (that is the Rakhine) as having a population of 210,000 (compared to 60,000 in 1824 [sic – in fact 1826]) and the Muslims as numbering 155,000.” However, [the Language Table for the 1911 Census](#), consistent with the Tables for Race and Religion in the same Census, records that the total population of Arakan at the time was 839,836, including 322,832 Rakhine Burmese speakers, 239,946 Burmese speakers (that is, Burmans) and 184,743 Bengali speakers. For Akyab District only, the totals are 529,943: 208,527 - 93,480 - 181,509. There was a balance of minority language speakers, while the Muslim Kaman and Myedu spoke Rakhine Burmese, not Bengali, and even among Bengali speakers there was a small minority of Buddhists.

I do not know where Dr Ibrahim’s statistics came from – certainly not the 1911 Census. Burman settlers in Arakan from the Kingdom of Ava, who arrived during or after the 1785 invasion, were Buddhist. In the 1826 Census, which was little more than a rough head-count at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War, they were roughly numbered at 10,000, making a Buddhist population not of 60,000 as Dr Ibrahim states, but of 70,000.

Francis Buchanan 1799 and the Misrepresentation of Later Encyclopaedic Repetitions

Three references are cited by Dr Ibrahim on Pages 24 and 25 of his book as “plentiful evidence for the existence of the Rohingyas in Arakan by the early nineteenth century in a sequence of works published at the time”. This evidence is spurious because all three citations are but encyclopaedic repetitions of the [1799 article by Francis Buchanan](#).

For some reason Dr Ibrahim is unable to decipher (Page 25 Line 4 – “????”) the heading of one column of languages in [an 1811 document](#). The word is however easy to read on Page 107 and is “Rossawn” by which name the Hindus knew Arakan, according to Buchanan. Page 348 of the

same document also reads: “The Rooinga, Rossawn, Banga, Myammau, or Burmah.....from the 5th vol. of the Asiatic Researches, by Dr Buchanan.” The attribution is clear. This is not an independent source.

Dr Ibrahim has also apparently not understood that the name of the author of the [1815 document](#) is not someone called “Vateri”, but Dr. Johann Severin Vater, Professor and Librarian to Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia 1797-1840. Professor Vater classified the Muslim and Hindu languages as “Rooinga” and “Rossawn” respectively, noting in the text, possibly for German readers, that these English transcriptions should be pronounced “Ruīnga” (cp. German Boot [boat] and English boot [*bute]) and “Rusán”. Page 210 reads: “Wörter von beyden – Vocabula utrorumque s. in Asiatic researches T.V.pag. 238 sq.” which translated means: “Words of both languages see Asiatic Researches Volume V pages 238 and following” which takes us to Buchanan. Again, the attribution is clear.

Indeed, these alternative spellings are all but attributed to Buchanan himself by the Scottish orientalist John Leyden. Writing in [Asiatic Researches Volume 10 of 1811](#), Leyden noted on Page 230:

“Dr F Buchanan has also exhibited comparative specimens of two mixed dialects, spoken in *Arakan*; the first termed *Ruīnga*, spoken by the Moslems of the country, and consisting of a mixture of *Arabic*, *Hindi* and *Rukhéng*; the second, termed *Rusán*, used by the *Hindús* of *Arakan*, who adhere to the system of BRAHMA, and formed by a large proportion of corrupted *Sanscrit* and *Bengali*, united to a comparatively small portion of *Rukhéng*.”

As regards the reproduction on Page 143 of the frontispiece of [an encyclopaedic study by Henry Bell in 1852](#) of the Burman Empire, even on this frontispiece there is an attribution to “Dr Buchanan” and the text on Arakan is identical to an [encyclopaedic study by Walter Hamilton in 1820](#). In both the 1820 and 1852 articles, which summarise the linguistic data in Buchanan, full attribution is paid to Buchanan. Some of the phrases used are taken from Pages 223 and 237 of Buchanan. During the 32 years between the 1820 and 1852 encyclopaedic publications, not a single change in the wording was made. No one had anything to add to what Buchanan had already written.

I can offer no obvious explanation of why Dr Ibrahim decided not to confirm Buchanan as the source of his three references. He either knew this perfectly well, but decided to conceal it. Or he accepted materials without checking their content.

I also do not know why Dr Ibrahim should feel he needs to prove that the name *Rooinga* was current during the 19th Century as an ethnicity when, in my analysis, the word only means “Arakaner” (from “Rohang” or “Arakan” in Bengali with the family taxonomic suffix -gya). When the British arrived in Arakan in 1824, local Muslims called themselves what they were, namely Muslims, and you would not have expected them to say that they were *Rooinga* or “Arakaners” any more than the locals in New Zealand would feel that they need to tell new arrivals that they are New Zealanders. To local Buddhists, the quasi-indigenous Muslims have been known for centuries as “Arakan Strangers”, recorded both by Buchanan and by the British colonial authorities. There is no doubt about who these *Rooinga* were, and they were assuredly not the Chittagonians and Bengalis who later settled in Arakan during British rule, as Dr Ibrahim implies.

The British initially designated all Muslims in Arakan simply as “Mohamedans”, but by the 1921 Census had decided on the name “Arakan-Mohamedans” as a race category; this became “Arakan-Muslim” in the 1931 Census.

The 1921 Census had this to say about the [Arakan-Mohamedans in Paragraph 159](#):

“The Arakan-Mahomedans are practically confined to Akyab district and are properly the descendants of Arakanese women who have married Chittagonian Mahomedans. It is said that the descendants of a Chittagonian who has permanently settled in Akyab district always refuse to be called Chittagonian and desire to be called Arakan-Mahomedans; but as permanent settlement seems to imply marriage to an Arakanese woman this is quite in accordance with the description given. Although so closely connected with Chittagonians racially, the Arakan-Mahomedans do not associate with them at all; they consequently marry almost solely among themselves and have become recognised locally as a distinct race.

“The Arakanese Buddhists asked the Deputy Commissioner there not to let the Arakan-Mahomedans be included under *Arakanese* in the census. The instruction issued to enumerators with reference to Arakan-Mahomedans was that this race-name (in Burmese *Yakaing-kala*) should be recorded for those Mahomedans who were domiciled in Burma and had adopted a certain mode of dress which is neither Arakanese nor Indian and who call themselves and are generally called by others *Yakaing-kala*.”

It is evident that the term “Kulaw-Yakain” which Buchanan had heard in 1795 is the “Yakaing-kala” of the 1921 Census. The *Rooinga* met by Buchanan at Amarapura outside Arakan are the Arakan-Muslims of the era of British rule. They are to be differentiated from the Chittagonian and other Bengali migrants of the 19th and 20th Centuries whose numbers eventually exceeded those of the *Rooinga* aka Arakan-Muslims by over four to one by the time of the 1931 Census.

Misrepresentations of Fact

Some of the more unfortunate misrepresentations of both current and historical fact include:

1. Inside flysheet - first sentence: "According to the United Nations, the Rohingyas of Myanmar are amongst the most persecuted minorities in the world."
Fact: the United Nations has never made any such pronouncement. This judgement, with the exception of the first five words, may well be true. But quite clearly the only UN individual or body capable of making such a sweeping assessment would have to be either the UN Secretary-General himself, or one of the UN bodies by way of Resolution, such as the Security Council, General Assembly, or Human Rights Council. This has not happened.¹
2. Page 2 - Dr Ibrahim claims that the "NLD's electoral support comes almost entirely from the ethnically Burman community."
Fact: At the November 2015 Elections, the NLD trounced almost all the ethnic parties, apart from the Arakan National Party and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy. ["We were hit by an NLD tsunami" declared the Sai Nyunt Lwin](#), SNLD Secretary. The ANP did well in Arakan State, but all other ethnic parties were routed.
3. Page 6 – "Since, as will be discussed in Chapter 1, some 30,000 Rohingya returned soon after the British conquest, this indicates that both the Rakhine and Rohingya communities grew at similar rates in the first eighty years of British rule."
Fact: Dr Ibrahim does not discuss this matter in Chapter 1, or indeed anywhere else in the book. An American Baptist missionary, the Rev GS Comstock, [recorded on Page 224](#) of an account of his time in Arakan that: "The population at the present time (1842) is estimated at about 250,000. Of these, about 167,000 are Mugs [Rakhine Buddhists], 40,000 are Burmese [Burmans], 20,000 are Mussulmans [Muslims], 10,000 are Kyens, 5,000 are Bengalese [new arrivals from Bengal], 3,000 are Toungmroos, 2,000 are Kemees, 1,250 are Karens, and the remainder are of various races, in smaller numbers." On page 249 the Rev. Comstock explains that his figures are taken from the 1842 Census held towards the end of the year. These annual Censuses began in 1829 and continue to this day. They were originally capitation or poll tax censuses conducted by the Revenue Officer (to assess the tax) and the Village Headman (to count numbers). At the time (1842), Buddhists (Rakhine and Burmans) outnumbered Muslims (including Bengalese) by about eight to one.

¹ In an [interview published on 2 March 2017](#), Vijay Nambiar, who was Special Advisor on Myanmar to the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, commented: "I am not aware of the provenance or accuracy of the quote ascribed to the UN", when the interviewer, Archana Misih of Rediff.com, prefaced a question by saying: "The UN has called the Rohingyas the 'most persecuted minority group in the world'." Vijay Nambiar is well placed to make such a comment.

4. Page 7 - “.....some British diplomats were encouraging the largely Christian Karen ethnic group to seize power.”

Fact: a shadowy group of Conservative MPs and former army officers associated in “The Friends of the Burma Hill People” were of concern to the Foreign Office (File FO 371/75677 of 1949), but no “British diplomats” were involved. The Karen are mostly Buddhists, not Christian. This is a popular misunderstanding. Only 9.5% of the population of Kayin (Karen) State declared that they were Christian in the [2014 Census – Volume 2C: Religion](#). But there are many Karen who live outside Kayin State who are Christian. Total numbers of Christian Karen throughout Burma might be as high as 30% of the total Karen population.

5. Page 7 - “.....The British had promised partial independence to the Rohingyas but reneged on this once the war was over.”

Fact: There is no evidence of this from any extant documentation e.g. Hugh Tinker’s “The Struggle for Independence 1944-48” which includes over 2,000 pages of original reports, telegrams and official papers relating to the negotiations on Burma’s independence. Moshe Yegar, quoted by Dr Ibrahim as a source, [acknowledges in Footnote 2 on Page 96](#) that: “I did not succeed in locating any written proof of the undertaking to set up a ‘Muslim National Area’ in Northern Arakan.” Local military commanders like the Military Administrator of North Arakan [Brigadier DCP Phelps may well have made](#) promises during the course of hostilities, but no later endorsement was ever given at a higher political level. In the same way, British Officers serving with Force 136 may well have made similar promises to Karens under their command. There are several references in the Tinker Papers to such pledges to the Karens, but none at all to similar promises which may have been made to the Muslims of Arakan. [Representations made in 1947 to Arthur Bottomley](#), then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and the British Government’s Observer at the Panglong Conference of February 1947, specifically mention pledges made by the Brigadier and AA Shah, a Muslim Member of the Indian Civil Service. The laconic response of the Governor’s Office is: “Office has no information of it.” It has not been possible to identify the official who wrote this remark, but his Minute is countersigned by “Nick” (later Sir Eric) Larmour, Deputy Secretary to the Governor. It is now known whether Arthur Bottomley ever responded personally to these representations made during his visit to Burma at the time. They are not, for example, mentioned in Bottomley’s own personal narrative of his visit to Burma included in the Tinker papers.

6. Page 8 - “.....the Rohingyas..... were not given full citizenship in 1948.”

Fact: there was only one citizenship available, namely full citizenship, but several routes to achieving this. As Article 10 of [the 1947 Constitution](#) put it: “There shall be but one citizenship throughout the Union.....”

7. Page 8 - "The 1974 Constitution.....insisted that they [the Rohingya] accept identity cards that described them as 'Foreigners'."

Fact: there is no such provision in the [1974 Constitution](#).

8. Pages 8, 9, 42, 50 and 57 - These pages contain implicit or explicit references to a "1974 Emergency Immigration Act" and its provisions.

Fact: this reported "Act" is but an inspired reincarnation of a [1947 Act under the same name](#) promulgated during the final year of British rule. The 1947 Act is still in force and was used in 2016 to prosecute both [the dissident monk U Gambira](#) and [three inter-faith activists](#). There was no 1974 "Act", despite the importance which Dr Ibrahim attaches to it and its supposed provisions.²

9. Pages 8 and 49 - These pages contain references to a supposed "1961 Census". On Page 8 we read: "They are described as Rohingyas in the 1961 census, indicating an ongoing recognition of their existence as an ethnic group under that description." There is an endnote reference to "[Min U.K. 2012: An Assessment of the Question of Rohingyas' Nationality.](#)" The reference is to U Kyaw Min, a well-known and respected Rohingya politician in Yangon.

Fact: The endnote does not support the text in any way. U Kyaw Min does not mention a 1961 Census because there was no such Census. The designation "Rohingya" is furthermore not to be found as a designation in Burmese legislation at any time. For the record, Censuses were held in independent Burma in 1953/54, 1973, 1983 and 2014.

10. Page 9 - "The Rohingyas....do not have a long history of revolt, apart from the brief unrest in 1947."

Fact: the Mujahadin revolt lasted 14 years from 1947 to 1961 when their surrender was accepted by the Vice Chief of Defence Staff, Brigadier Aung Gyi, in [ceremonies held in Maungdaw in July and October 1961](#). The author makes other references to this supposed "short-lived revolt" on Pages 7 and 47.

11. Pages 9 and 41 – "The military annulled the results of the 1990 elections...."

Fact: The results of the elections were valid from 30 June 1990, when the final results were announced, until 8 March 2010 when it was decreed under [Article 91 \(b\) of the Pyithu Hluttaw \(Lower House\) Election Law](#) that: "As the Multi-party Democracy General Election held under the law repealed by this Law is no longer consistent with the Constitution, the results of the said election [1990] shall be deemed to be invalidated automatically." The full

² There were Parliamentary "Acts" 1946-1962, Revolutionary Council "Laws" 1962-1974 and Pyithu Hluttaw "Laws" 1974-1988. Any 1974 "Act" would have been a "Law". See <http://myanmar-law-library.org> for texts.

story of the 1990 Elections may be found [at this link](#). The dispute between the election winners and the military rulers was that the NLD wanted the transfer of power immediately, while the military rulers insisted first on the promulgation of a new Constitution before the transfer of power.

12. Page 13 - “The NLD boycotted the 2010 elections (partly because Aung San Suu Kyi was banned from standing). . . .”

Fact: Aung San Suu Kyi declared that “she would not dream of taking part” in the elections. She was almost certainly eligible to be a candidate, but sought no ruling on her eligibility.

13. Page 13 - “The USDP may even be prepared to consider a form of national unity government between the USDP and the NLD.”

Fact: not for one moment did the USDP imagine that the NLD, which had won a landslide electoral victory, would ever need or want them in a coalition government.

14. Page 18 - “ independence in 1948. At that same time its administrative title was changed from Arakan to Rakhine.”

Fact: the 1974 Constitution established the “Arakan” State. The name only changed to Rakhine State in 1989 under [Government Notification No. 5/89 of 18 June 1989](#).

15. Page 21 – “Under these influences, the Rohingyas’ language evolved from its earlier roots with the adoption of Arabic and Persian words, and the script adapted to more closely resemble that of Bengali.”

Fact: there is no historical written Rohingya language. Depending on their origins, Muslim settlers in Arakan from the 15th Century onwards generally spoke in a Bengali vernacular, but wrote in the Arabic, Persian, Urdu or Bengali languages. Claims that Arabic or Bengali script was used to represent Arakan-Bengali historical texts have not been substantiated. [In a message dated 25 October 1948](#), the Muslim Council of North Arakan assured Prime Minister U Nu that: “Our ancestors used Arabic script and this fact also shows the descent of our ancestors from the early Arab settlers. Our spoken language is different from that of Chittagonian and the Bengalis. We have adopted Urdu as our written language only very recently while the Chittagonians have Bengali as their written as well as spoken language. At present we have adopted and formulated a scheme for the introduction of Burmese as our written language. We venture to suggest that lack of teachers and schools for the working of the scheme retarded its progress.” Work is also in progress to develop a script [based on other languages, including English](#).

16. Page 27 - “.....After Burma achieved its own independence in 1948, some Arakanese Muslims went on to petition the Constituent Assembly in Rangoon for the integration of Maungdaw and Buthidaung districts into East Pakistan.”

Fact: There is no evidence that any such petition was presented, though the [Muslim Council of North Arakan](#) and [the Arakan Muslim Conference](#) pressed for better representation in the Union Parliament in the late 1940s and early 1950s, while proclaiming their loyalty to the State. Rohingyas are likely to be surprised by Dr Ibrahim’s allegations. (Maungdaw, as a district, included Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships.) The Constituent Assembly was elected on 9 April 1947 for the specific purpose of drawing up and approving the new Constitution. This came into force on Independence Day, 4 January 1948. The Constituent Assembly became the Union Parliament that very same day, to be precise at 10.30 a.m. when President Sao Shwe Thaik made his Inaugural Address to the Union Parliament, no longer the Constituent Assembly.

17. Page 28 - “After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the BIA (Burma Independence Army) waged a low level insurgency against British rule from 1946 to independence in 1948.”

Fact: the BIA was disbanded in late 1942 and reconstructed as the Burma Defence Army by the Japanese. On pseudo-independence in August 1943, it became the Burma National Army. Its forces were renamed the Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF) after General Aung San had joined the British and became the nucleus of the post-war Burma Army. At no stage did the “BIA” or its successors wage a low level insurgency against the British, though both the Burma Army and British Forces still in Burma cooperated in contending with a nascent Communist insurgency.

18. Page 29 - “When Burma became an administrative unit distinct from India in 1937, the British commissioned a report looking at population changes in the region since 1872. This report, written by James Baxter....”

Fact: [the Baxter Report](#) was solely concerned with Indian immigration into Burma and was commissioned in the wake of anti-Muslim riots in 1938. By Resolution of 1 July 1939, the Government of Burma “appointed a Commission of Inquiry to examine the question of Indian immigration into Burma.”

19. Page 30 - “It is of course true that Mayu [North Arakan] was administered by the military after 1948.....”.

Fact: The Mayu Frontier District existed only from 1961-1964, as part of the Frontier Areas Administration scheme set up by General Ne Win in 1958 (Chancery [Rangoon letter 12 October 1965 to Derek Tonkin](#), Burma Desk Officer FO).

20. Pages 30 and 31- “As discussed, the British censuses were done in the interests of the imperial power. Practically, for most of the colonial period, the British were interested in only those aspects of their subjects that could be used as indicators of their loyalty, or lack of it. In the case of Burma, religion was more important than ethnicity in this respect.....But, as we have seen, this [the absence of any reference to “Rohingya” in the 1826 headcount by Sub-Commissioner Charles Paton] is because the British opted to classify on the basis of religion and not ethnicity.”

Fact: a study of the decennial Censuses held in 1872 (delayed from 1871), 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931 reveal a steady development in Census reporting techniques. By 1911 it had already become apparent that race and language were as important as religion. This led to the appointment of an expert adviser, Mr LF Taylor, on race and language in time for the 1921 Census. The significance of his contribution is summarised in [Paragraph 129 of the 1921 Census report](#). By the time of the 1931 Census the ethno-linguistic and anthropological content of the Census report had become even more important than religion. The statement that “the British opted to classify on the basis of religion and not ethnicity” is not borne out by the historical record.

21. Page 44 - “By mid-1949, Burmese-British relations had effectively ended over revelations that at least some British officials had plotted a coup to bring the Karen to power as they were seen to be more reliably anti-communist than U Nu’s official government.”

Fact: though the Burmese government were intensely suspicious of support for the Karen cause by renegade British officers, “the British Services Mission dutifully assisted in the counter-insurgency campaign against the Karens in 1949. Technical support to the Burmese Air Force, which inflicted severe blows on the Karens, was potentially decisive in stemming the Karen tide”. ([The Clandestine Cold War in Asia 1945-1965](#) edited by Richard Aldrich and Ming-Yeh Yawnsley). Relations had not “effectively ended”. The British Services Mission continued, Britain did not halt the sale of arms to the Burma Army and by the early 1950s the British were supplying new squadrons of Spitfires.

22. Page 49 - “The 1947 Constitution formally acknowledged that all ethnic groups in Burma were immigrants and that the differential treatment of the Rohingyas would be subsequently addressed.”

Fact: [the 1947 Constitution](#) makes no reference to “ethnic groups”, “immigrants” or “Rohingyas”. The Constitution does however lay emphasis in Article 11 on the right to citizenship of the “indigenous races” of Burma, without defining these races. The [endnote reference to an FIDH 2000 publication](#) likewise makes reference to all ethnic groups in Burma being “immigrants”.

23. Page 49 – “The Rohingya were told that they had no need to apply for a citizenship certificate ‘as you are one of the indigenous races of the Union of Burma (see Appendix 3)’.”

Fact: the photocopy of a Statement of Citizenship dated 31 December 1949 by U Tha Tan, Subordinate Judge in Buthidaung, informs Abdul Zolil, a retired process-server, that “you need not apply for the Citizenship Certificate as you belong to one of the indigenous races of the Union of Burma as defined in Section 3(I) of the Union Citizenship Act 1948 (Burma Act No. 66 of 1948)”. It is however not known what race Abdul Zolil put down in his affidavit. Recognised indigenous races included, for Arakan Muslims, those listed in the 1931 Census, such as “Arakan-Muslim”, Kaman, Myedu and Zerbaidi (redesignated “Burmese Muslim” in 1941). [The 1948 Act](#) only listed in Article 3(I) the eight main race groups “and such racial group as has settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 A. D. (1185 B.E.)”. The designation “Rohingya” did not appear in any British or Burmese legal instrument at any time. ³

24. Page 86 – “In more remote areas, such as the Maungdaw village of Duchiradan, there have been occasional outbursts of violence where upwards of 4,000 Rohingyas have been killed, raped, arrested or taken to undisclosed places.” This is referenced to “Human Rights Council 2014 *Hear our Screams*”.

Fact: the UN Human Rights Council has issued no such publication. This passage is based on Paragraph 83 of [a report entitled *Hear our Screams*](#) co-authored by two South African organisations, “Protect the Rohingya” and the Muslim Lawyers Association. Paragraph 83 of this report reads: “Recent information that has transpired about events in the Maungdaw village of Duchiradan (Kila Dong), offers a glimpse into what is going on in the area: a continued pattern of violence and persecution by both the local authorities and extremist citizens of Rakhine State. In this village of upwards of 4000 Rohingya, people have been slaughtered, raped, mutilated, hunted down, arrested, and taken to undisclosed places.....” The original report has been manipulated to transpose the number of inhabitants resident in the village to the number killed. It later emerged that, although there had been a serious incident in Duchiradan on 13-14 January 2014, the only person who had lost his life was a Police Sergeant. The UN and its Members accept this view of events. This is not to say that the events were not credible, only that they turned out to have been greatly exaggerated.

³ Abdul Zolil’s granddaughter Daw Khin Hla spoke about this matter at the afternoon session of the People’s Tribunal on Myanmar held on 6 March 2017 at Queen Mary College, London. According to Daw Khin Hla, her grandfather had stated in his affidavit that he was enquiring “as an indigenous Muslim of Arakan”, which was at the time an officially recognised indigenous race-category also recognised under British rule.

It is tempting to speculate about why Dr Ibrahim, who has [an impressive academic record](#), should have been so careless of current and historical fact as to cause possible damage to the struggle which so many individuals and organisations are fighting in order to secure an end to the victimisation and persecution of those who choose to call themselves Rohingya in Rakhine State. If, for example, he had only asked to see a copy of the supposed “1974 Emergency Immigration Act”, he would soon have discovered that no such Act exists, and would have drawn his own conclusions about the trustworthiness of his informants and associates.

On the two specific issues on which I take him to task, I cannot believe that he has actually read the 1940 Report of the Financial Secretary James Baxter on Indian Immigration released in 1941 or the encyclopaedic repetitions which he quotes of Buchanan’s 1799 essay which are presented as though they are fresh, original sources when their transparent attribution to Buchanan is evident to anyone who has read the accounts. I am however reluctant to conclude that Dr Ibrahim is in a state of denial about the historical reality, cherry-picking from the Baxter Report, for example, only those snippets of information which support an extremist interpretation and exhibiting other traits of classical denialism which include conspiracy theories (the several references to the machinations of British diplomats and officials). I would prefer to believe that he relied, unwisely and unduly, on false “experts” who have simply led him up the garden path – an innocent in the La La Land of Rakhine State. The moral of this tale is: always check original sources, open the envelope yourself, and never ever believe only what others may tell you about alleged sources.

Should he care to read this essay, Dr Ibrahim may understand the extent to which he has been manipulated to present a bogus narrative of the Rohingya people. Far from helping them in their misfortunes so poignantly recorded in recent weeks by [the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and the [UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar](#), this unfortunate presentation can only have aroused yet further misgivings among the Burmese people generally who sense, as the more enlightened among them already know, that much of what he has written is simply not true.

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