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Conflict and mass violence in Arakan (Rakhine State): the 1942 events and political identity formation

Following the Japanese invasion of Lower Burma in early 1942, the British administration in Arakan¹ collapsed in late March/early April. In a matter of days, communal violence broke out in the rural areas of central and north Arakan (Akyab and Kyaukphyu districts). Muslim villagers from Chittagong who had settled in Arakan since the late 19th century were attacked, driven away or killed in Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and other townships of central Arakan. A few weeks later, Arakanese Buddhist villagers living in the predominantly Muslim townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung were taken on by Chittagonian Muslims, their villages destroyed and people killed in great numbers. Muslims fled to the north while Buddhists fled to the south and from 1942 to 1945, the Arakanese countryside was ethnically divided between a Muslim north and a Buddhist south. Several thousand Buddhists and Muslims were relocated by the British to camps in Bengal. The unspeakable outburst of violence has been described with various expressions, such as “massacre”, “bitter battle” or “communal riot” reflecting different interpretations of what had happened. In the 21st century, the description “ethnic cleansing” would likely be considered as a legally appropriate term. Buddhists and Muslims alike see the 1942 violence as a key moment of their ongoing ethno-religious and political divide.

The waves of communal clashes of 1942 have been poorly documented, sparsely investigated and rarely studied.² They are not recorded in standard textbooks on Burma/Myanmar and, surprisingly, they were even absent from contemporary reports and articles that described Burma’s situation during and after World War

¹ Officially named Rakhine State after 1989. Arakan can be used both as a geographical and historical term in contexts where the territory referred to is larger than the modern Rakhine State. Therefore its use should not be entirely discouraged. The terms “Arakanese” and “Rakhine” are used synonymously in this article. An alternate spelling is Rakhaing. An English pronunciation of the term “Rakhine” is closer to the actual ethnonym of the Buddhist majority population than the term “Arakanese”. Many Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingyas writing in English still have a clear preference for “Arakan”, while they are strictly divided on the use of respective ethnonyms. Identities and ethnonyms are historically conditioned, but the available space would not allow for a review of a the heated debate that emerged after 2012 about the use of the names “Rohingya” and “Bengali” (see Leider 2013). Nor does the article include a detailed examination of the use of terms such as “Kala” used by Buddhists to designate the Muslims or “Mugh/Magh” used by Muslims to name the Rakhine/Arakanese. Both terms can be used pejoratively.

² Saya Khaing Myo Saung’s chapters 5-9 in *The bad colonial heritage of Arakan and the expansion of the Bengali Muslims of Chittagong* (Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 94-140) deal with the events to some extent. Abu Aneen’s chapter on the 1942 violence (Abu Aneen 2007 [2002]) is an attempt to balance the various accounts and includes instances where efforts were made from leaders of both communities to contain the riots. Both authors draw heavily on Bonpauk Tha Kyaw’s war memories (Bonpauk 1973) and other Rakhine authors such as Thein Pe Myint. Abu Aneen’s use of diverging Muslim accounts and his comments point to the complexity of competing memories. He also mentions sources in Urdu that he could not access. Khaing Myo Saung and Abu Aneen are pseudonyms, one being a highly regarded Rakhine teacher and the other a respected Rohingya party leader. Defert (2007, 130) mentions the request made by a Rohingya to an NGO in Thailand in 2006 for the funding of a historical research project on the massacre of 100,000 Muslims by Buddhists in 1942.

II. From a historiographic point of view, the 1942 atrocities in Arakan may be considered as an example of the academic marginalization of the borderlands of Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Arakan/Rakhine State in modern times. In 1952, B.R. Pearn, a professor of history from Rangoon University, wrote a confidential report for the Foreign Office on the Mujahid revolt that consumed North Arakan since 1948. The report contained a historical background that included the 1942 violence. However eight years earlier, Pearn himself had read a paper at the Royal Society of Arts in London ("Burma since the invasion," 14 December 1944) that did not even hint at the forced displacement and the killings that had taken place two years before in Arakan (Pearn 1945; see also Bowerman 1946).

Nonetheless, more recently, following the waves of intercommunal violence in June and October 2012, the events of 1942 have been re-interpreted in the context of background descriptions of the Rakhine State crisis and the plight of the Rohingyas. The prevailing interpretation embeds the violent incidents of 1942 in a record of anti-Muslim persecution, implicitly or explicitly suggesting that Muslims had been victims of discrimination long before the Nagaraja campaign of the Burmese army in 1978 that pushed a quarter million of Muslims over the border into Bangladesh. Such a reading misses relevant facts and important nuances. The terrible confrontation of 1942 had in fact tragic consequences for both communities. The inglorious events have never been a source of contentment or pride for any of the two parties. Actors on both sides of the social and religious divide have to share the responsibility for criminal behavior. Still, there is regrettably little reliable or detailed information at hand on what triggered the violence in Minbya or Myebon, what happened hereafter and in which exact circumstances a wave of revenge killings occurred. Yet, importantly, what happened during the war had an immediate impact on the political consciousness of the people and the strategy of their leaders.

The present article is an attempt to compile available information on the 1942 violence, the geographical and historical context and the estimations of the number of victims and displaced. It is attentive to the remembrance of the events, their retelling and their impact on the relations and the political ideas of the two groups. Generally speaking, the mutual acts of aggression that led to killings and massive forced displacement increased inter-ethnic hostility. Nonetheless, the article aims primarily at an assessment of the 1942 violence with regard to political identity and supports the argument that the 1942 violence was historically relevant because it determined the civic awareness and the political orientations of Buddhists and Muslims during the early post-war period. In that regard, it provides an input of critical historical awareness that may contribute to a better understanding of the Rakhine conundrum after World War II (see Derek Tonkin's subsequent chapter on citizenship and other Rakhine-related work in the volume).

Over a million Indian migrants had been recorded in the 1931 Burma census. Tensions with the native population were rife in the 1930s. In Burma proper, the anti-Indian riots of 1938 led the government to commission a report on Indian immigration (Baxter Report 1940), but the Japanese invasion cut short the implementation of measures that the report suggested. In Burma, the number of Indians had been steeply growing after the First World War and many of them lived and worked in cities, notably in Rangoon. Arakan's situation was different. Seasonal labor was typical for the local rice growing economy, but Chittagonian agriculturists had settled in growing numbers in North Arakan since the opening of the Suez Canal that had favored the production and the export of rice. In 1931, three quarters of the resident Muslim population of Arakan (a quarter million) was born in the country. This number included a small, but much older precolonial community of Arakanese Muslims who were socially well integrated and spread throughout the province.

Muslims in Arakan had not been politically active before the war as the colonial order was a sufficient shield of protection for their economic and political interests. However in 1942, the breakdown of the British rule and a mixed context of physical threats and political opportunities transformed the elite of Muslim land-owners in North Arakan into a politically active group. These men were bound by the same cultural and geographical origins and, pushed by the circumstances, took the conservation of public order into their own hands. They also imagined the project of an exclusive Muslim territory ruled by themselves, a venture that inspired Muslim identity formation throughout the 1940s and 1950s and fired the early Rohingya movement. In the minds of the Buddhist Rakhine, on the other hand, the 1942 expulsion from the north fostered the adamant belief that the Chittagonian settlers, under the guise of labor migration, were bent on pushing the Buddhists out of their homeland.

No enquiry commission ever established a record of the events and the injustice committed. Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan may even have felt that there was no need for any investigation after the war or a preservation of evidence as the bare facts were still at hand for anyone to see and remember. In sum, the lessons were there to be learned by those who had participated or suffered. The ethnic cleansing of 1942 and the three years of ethnic and political division of Arakan certainly conditioned the political beliefs of the local actors and transformed the ethnic and religious differences into a rift that was henceforth perceived as unbridgeable. Therefore, the selective communalist interpretations of the events gained more importance than the need for any elucidation of what had really happened and why. Partisan views were lastly commodified into historical truths.

There is, as we have noted, very little noteworthy writing on the 1942 events.³ Sources to explore the ethnic cleansing of 1942 are a motley collection of partial Buddhist and Muslim accounts mainly focusing on the losses of their own communities and a few succinct British war memories. Much of the material used for writing this paper is freely available in print or appears on Rakhine or Rohingya websites. Most descriptions of the 1942 events have been written many years after the events took place. They may contain witness accounts, but there is very little verifiable evidence. As a result, the descriptions of what happened, as much as the beliefs of Buddhists and Muslims about the events, seem largely based on extrapolations and interpretations of a mix of facts, guesses, hearsay and prejudice.

Violence and ethnic cleansing in 1942

Moshe Yegar's description of the 1942 massacres in his work on *The Muslims of Burma* is probably one of the best known general depictions. However the presentation is very general, it contains no chronology and does not provide a specific context for the actors.

"Gangs of Arakanese Buddhists in southern Arakan, where the Buddhists are in the majority, attacked Muslim villages and massacred their inhabitants. Whole villages were sacked and their inhabitants murdered. Some Arakanese notables attempted to prevent the wholesale massacres, but without success. Muslim refugees streamed to northern Arakan... [...] The refugees reaching Maungdaw incensed the local Muslim majority with their stories, and the latter began to mete out similar punishment upon the Buddhist minority in their midst. These acts of mutual murder soon caused the Buddhist population in northern Arakan to flee, even as the Muslims had fled from the

³ A rare exception is the brief mention of "the ethnic cleansing in British controlled areas particularly around the town of Maungdaw" by Clive J. Christie in his *Modern History of Southeast Asia* quoted in Aye Chan (2005, 408).

south. It was in this manner that Arakan became divided into two separate areas, one Buddhist and the other Muslim (Yegar 1972, 95).”

In Pearn’s report on the Mujahid Revolt mentioned above, the 1942 massacres are linked to the mounting communal tensions of the 1930s. Strikingly, ten years after the events, Pearn found it easier to *explain* the violence than retrace what had actually happened. Recalling that the townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung “came to be inhabited more by Muslims whose origins and to a great extent sympathies lay across the frontier,” he concluded that “it is not surprising that the Arakanese should feel that they were being driven out of their homeland” and

“communal tension was unavoidable, and was intensified when the development of self-government in Burma from 1923 onwards, with its accompaniment of communal representation in the legislature, tended to emphasise the dissimilarities between communities. The tension found its expression in 1938, when Maungdaw and Buthidaung were involved in the anti-Muslim rioting which spread over Burma in that year.”

Construing the events as an argument of historical inevitability, Pearn avoided the issue of political responsibility and agency.

“The collapse of authority in 1942 at the time of the Japanese invasion gave an opportunity for this friction to express itself once more, and in April 1942 Akyab district was the scene of civil war, in which unknown number were slaughtered and many perished of starvation and exposure in attempting to find refuge elsewhere. The devastation caused by the military operations of the next three years caused a continued flight of population: where possible, Arakanese from the north fled southwards, and Muslims fled to Chittagong where refugee camps had to be provided for their accommodation.”

Muslim sources, like the ones used by Yegar, agree that violence started with organized Arakanese/Rakhine attacks against Muslims in the rural area of Central Arakan. It broke out allegedly on the 28 March 1942 in either Minbya or Myebon township. Thereafter the aggressions spread over several neighboring townships.

According to A.F.K. Jilani, a veteran Rohingya militant, armed Arakanese attacked their Muslim neighbors in a village of Minbya township, Chanbili. During the next two days, the attacks, including looting and killing, spread to other villages in Minbya (“Lombaissor,” “Taungyi Nyo,” “Apawka pass”) and then to Myebon (“Raichang,” “Pankha”). During the month of April 1942, massacres took place successively in Pauktaw, Mrohaung [Mrauk U], Kyauktaw and Rathedaung. Muslims who fled, joined other communities in Akyab where they acquired arms and defended themselves. Arakanese also led attacks against Muslim villages in Buthidaung township reaching as far north as Taung Bazar (Jilani 2006).

Aye Chan, a Rakhine historian, counters Muslim allegations with a local source stating that the anti-Muslim violence was initially triggered by the killing of the Buddhist village headman of Rak Chaung village (Myebon township) together with his two brothers. This act apparently provoked organized Buddhist attacks on Muslim villages where people were killed (Aye Chan 2005, 405).

According to a contemporary Arakanese witness, local Buddhist leaders started by launching attacks against Muslims first in Letma as they suspected them to plan evil (Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 105 quoting Maung Kan Htu’s notes). Sultan Mahmud, a North Arakan Muslim member of parliament since 1951 and Minister of Health under Prime Minister U Nu in 1956, similarly stated that the violence started in Letma, a village in

Myebon township. From there, he said, it spread to six townships including Minbya, Pauktaw, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw and Rathedaung that were “depleted” of Muslims by “murder and massacre” (Mahmud 1950, Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 105).

Muslim sources seem to agree that the violence was prompted by the *Thakin* leaders in Arakan. The *Thakins* were a nationalist, anti-colonial organisation that had emerged in the 1930s. A small group of them, the Thirty Comrades, received Japanese military training in 1940 and joined the Japanese invasion. They were credited with the creation of the Burma Independence Army that grew into a troop of 8000 in 1942 and supported the advance of the Japanese. Pearn explained that the BIA troops

“fought, bravely enough, alongside the Japanese, and ... also took over the administration of the districts which successively fell into enemy hands. Thus, for some months in 1942, an increasing part of Burma was administered by the Burma Independence Army (Pearn 1945, 156).”

However, according to him, the Thakins also included criminals and the results of their administration

“were so disastrous that the Japanese themselves had to intervene. Oppression and corruption reached such an extent that the Japanese suppressed the Burma Independence Army (Pearn 1945, *ib.*).”

Pearn’s description thus gives support to the idea that BIA members initiated the anti-Muslim violence. BIA forces coming from the Irrawaddy Valley entered Arakan by the Am road and reached Minbya township after passing the Arakan Yoma ridge and crossing the Lemro River (Bonpauk Tha Kyaw 1973, 80-82). Yet the Burmese Independence Army had to face first of all retreating British Indian troops and the sudden prominence of the BIA in the short period between the collapse of the British rule in March and the occupation of Akyab by the Japanese in May 1942 does not answer the question of the underlying causes of the communal violence in the context of central Arakan. Moreover, the fact that in the north and possibly elsewhere the local Muslim communities enjoyed support from British Rajput troops⁴, and were not in favor of the “liberators of Burma” may have had an immediately negative impact on communal relations. Bonpauk Tha Kyaw, who followed *Thakin* Bo Ran Aung to Arakan, describes a series of encounters with Rakhine local leaders such as Thein Kyaw Aung and Maung Kyaw Ya and men who boasted with their killings of Muslims (Bonpauk 1973, 76). Yet while he was discredited in Muslim eyes for cooperating with such people, Tha Kyaw seems to have interpreted the events as entirely detrimental to the cause of the liberation of Burma from the British imperialists (Abu Aneen 2007; Bonpauk 1973, 77). His witness account does not suggest that reasonable voices were very successful trying to dissuade the rioters.

It is reported that a great number of Muslims were killed while a greater number were able to flee to the predominantly Muslim areas in Buthidaung and Maungdaw, and further on to Chittagong. Yegar speaks about 22,000 refugees who fled to India (Yegar 1972, 95). Abu Aneen summarizes Muslim views that there were about 100, 000 who fled and were relocated to Rangpur in Bengal (Abu Aneen 2007)⁵.

⁴ Thein Pe Myint, as quoted by Abu Aneen, stated that Muslims got support from Indian troops during the riots (Abu Aneen 2007).

⁵ Conversely this high figure would explain that upon their return from India after the war, the refugees contributed to steep increase of the population in a short while. Abu Aneen argues that the total Muslim population uprooted due to the riots was 200,000, mostly resettling in North Arakan.

Sultan Mahmud goes on to describe what happened thereafter: “These refugees in Maungdaw who had lost their dearest one and all their property now turned against the Rakhine and fell upon them in retaliation” (Mahmud 1950). Ba Tha further explains:

“In turn, the Rohingyas who survived and took shelter in Maungdaw-Buthidaung area wanted to create trouble there. The Maughs [=Arakanese] timely ran away from this area to Kyauktaw and Myohaung [Mrauk U] townships... (Ba Tha 1960)”.

Indeed, the next chapter of events took place in the countryside around the town of Maungdaw where the Buddhists formed a small minority among a majority of Muslim villages. Armed Bengali Muslims attacked those villages and thousands of Buddhists took refuge in the town of Maungdaw. An anonymous eyewitness source describes the town under siege:

“The armed Bengalis [Chittagonian Muslims] set up roadblocks, destroyed the bridges, and encircled the Rakhine villages. By then more than 20,000 armed Bengalis had surrounded the Maungdaw town. All the entry and exit points had been completely blocked and the horrifying news of surrounding Buddhist villages being burnt to the ground and their people slaughtered reached the town constantly. The town was already sheltering hundreds and hundreds of Rakhine refugees from the nearby Buddhist villages. Many were injured or wounded ... But now they were trapped in Maungdaw together with the Rakhine-Buddhists of the town (Anonymous 2012).”

Thanks to the intervention of a local magistrate, a detachment of Gurkha troops prevented a massacre and ferried several thousand Arakanese refugees from Maungdaw to Bengal where they were relocated to a camp in Dinajpur (Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 119-126). The eyewitness source concludes:

“All the Rakhine villages, there were hundreds of them ... on the extremely fertile strip south of Maungdaw Town between the Naff River and Mayu Ranges, were completely wiped out by the rioting Bengali Muslims within few days. While the Rakhine villagers from the foreshore villages like Nga-khu-ya, Chan-byin, Ywat-hnyo-taung, and Tha-yet-oat villages were able to manage to escape by their sampans across the Naff River, the villages far from the river were burnt down and the whole village slaughtered by the rioting Bengali-Muslims (Anonymous 2012).”

The British Commissioner of Arakan had left Akyab in late March 1942, so had the Royal Air Force and the Indian Navy while many soldiers of the Akyab garrison deserted. The Deputy Commissioner, the Arakanese U Kyaw Khine, moved the headquarters to Buthidaung.

The dramatic developments that took place in North Arakan are reported in a few British descriptions mostly written many years after the events. Peter Murray, a British officer who was based in Maungdaw in 1943, took a particular interest in the organization of local Muslim self-government between March and October 1942. According to Murray’s sources, Kyaw Khine, the Deputy Commissioner “did what he could to keep the peace and maintain the administration, but everywhere law and order was dissolving into bitter and bloody fighting between CF⁶ and Magh” (Murray 1980, 3).⁷ A contemporary Arakanese/Rakhine source confirms

⁶ According to Derek Tonkin, a former British Ambassador, “the designations 'CF and 'CK' were briefly popularised by the British military administration in Northern Arakan during the Second World War. The probability is that the 'F' and the 'K' reflected the need by the British Army to distinguish Chittagonians, as a British source has put it, "between effer for men and something else for women, but in as genial a way as only the Army would know how". (Email communication with the author 4 February 2016).

that U Kyaw Khine “tried really hard together with the Muslim leaders Yasein and Sultan Mahmud to prevent the slaughter” (Hla Oo 2012). The Deputy Commissioner was killed when he tried to investigate a looming Muslim attack on Buthidaung. Soon after his murder, Muslim forces assaulted Buthidaung and all the Arakanese were either killed or had to flee.

Murray’s summary of the events is based on a collection of contemporary sources, including eyewitness accounts. He explains that the fighting had been “provoked by long-standing racial religious and discords and fuelled by simple greed for loot”.

“In the areas nearest the Indian border, the Maungdaw Township down to near Foul Point and the Buthidaung township to about 20 m[iles] south of Buthidaung, the Maghs were killed or driven out (except for small groups in Maungdaw and Buthidaung towns, which had always been predominantly Magh); all Buddhist buildings, pagodas and monasteries, were razed or burnt, and all Magh villages burnt and all Magh property (mainly cattle) seized. Similarly further south, all or nearly all CFs were killed or driven out, mosques destroyed and CF cattle seized (Murray 1980, 8).”

Murray also mentions the evacuation of 9000 Arakanese from Maungdaw to Dinajpur thanks to U Kyaw Min, a senior Arakanese Indian Civil Service officer.

Once they controlled the pre-dominantly Muslim areas along the border with the district of Chittagong, the Muslim leaders created a political order of their own though they remained loyal to the British in their opposition to the Japanese. They created the so-called “peace committees” and divided the rule within Maungdaw district among themselves. When BIA emissaries from Akyab approached them in May 1942 to gain the Muslim community over to the Japanese side, the BIA delegation was supposedly massacred after a dinner served in Maungdaw (Murray 1980, 7).

Murray lists the Majlis-i-shura of E.D.S. Maracan, a wealthy Indian businessman established south of Maungdaw town, the Maungdaw Central Peace Committee under Omra Meah, a schoolmaster, the Bawli Bazaar Committee under Faruq Ahmed, the Peace Committee (“Anjuman Tahufazzal Islam”) of Shabe Bazaar on the Pruma River under Mohamed Luqman that merged subsequently with the Faqira Bazaar Committee. In Buthidaung township there were the Panzai Bazaar Committee on the Kalapanzin Valley under Abdul Salaam, the Taung Bazaar Committee under the schoolmaster Abdul Bari, a committee at Bogrichaung under the reputed landowner Abdul Bari Chowdhury, and an unspecified town peace committee in Buthidaung.⁸

Further south towards Rathedaung, there was a robber, Faruq, who ruled the area with his gang.⁹ Trade relations with the Chittagong markets took the place of Maungdaw’s former connections with Akyab. While the peace committees served the need to establish “law and order and inter-village relations”, the various leaders were rivalling and quarreling with each other. However, their “first and foremost” problem, says Murray, was to get rid of the “hereditary enemies, the Arakanese, a problem which they tackled with vigour and courage and had disposed of by the end of May” (Murray 1980, 5). Murray’s understated formulation of the ethnic cleansing suggests that it was likely perceived by contemporary observers as collateral damage.

⁷ Khaing Myo Saung (Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 105-7) deals in greater detail with efforts of Arakanese leaders to reestablish public order.

⁸ According to Abu Aneen, the name of the leader of the Buthidaung peace committee was a Zahiruddin (Abu Aneen 2007).

⁹ A detailed list of members of the Maungdaw peace committee is also presented by Khaing Myo Saung (Khaing Myo Saung 2012, 113).

Anthony Irwin, the author of a book on the military events in Arakan, sums up the 1942 violence in another minimalist formulation: “Whilst it lasted, it was a pretty bloody affair” (Irwin 1946). At the time, the British were faced with the immense challenge to gain ground in the war against the Japanese and one device was the recruitment of local Muslims to gain intelligence from behind the Japanese lines. As Pearn explains, the pool of recruits for the formation of “V Force” were the “local bodies of armed Muslims” that had been organised under the authority of the peace committees (Pearn 1952).

“In the autumn of 1942, members of these bodies were organised as part of a para-military formation known as “V Force”, and were trained, clothed, armed and paid by the British. The Muslim V Force was active for the remainder of the war in Arakan, and became a large and powerful – though ill-disciplined – intelligence and intruder agency, which, incidentally, used its intelligence duties as a means of smuggling textiles into Japanese-occupied territory, much to its own profit (Pearn 1952).”

However, before autumn 1942, the same men had been, as Pearn writes, “engaged in civil war with the Arakanese Buddhists”. Pearn, like Murray, thus suggests that these men had previously been involved in ethnic cleansing and the forced displacement of Maungdaw and Buthidaung Buddhists. During the following years of war against the Japanese, the Muslim hostility towards the Arakanese further increased as the Muslims perceived the Arakanese Buddhists as traitors while they saw themselves as loyalists.¹⁰ V Force gained fame as an indispensable support for the British war effort in Arakan between late 1942 and 1945. Its action has been described in glowing terms in Anthony Irwin’s *Burmese Outpost* and C.E. Lucas Philipps’ *The Raiders of Arakan* (Irwin 1946; Philipps 1971). After the war, their sacrifices for the British served as one of the main arguments to call for the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone in North Arakan. The call made by the Jamiat ul-Ulama (Association of religious teachers), the main *political* body of the Muslim leadership in North Arakan, was not heeded by the British authorities, though it was not inconsistent with the British self-perception of Britain’s role as the protector of ethnic minorities in Burma. Informal suggestions and opinions to grant the Muslims such an autonomous territory had circulated among British military ranks during the war as they highly valued the contribution of V Force to the war effort (Mole 2001, 193). However, promises were never officially acknowledged or couched in writing. Claims to designate North Arakan as a frontier zone, as made by the Jamiat ul-Ulama in the aftermath of the second Panglong Conference (February 1947), failed as well. They were immediately rejected by the British authorities stating the historical unity of Arakan and the fact that it had never been a “frontier” in the sense of the Shan, Kachin or Chin territories.

Political coming of age of the Muslims

The political and military developments in 1942 and afterwards had an impact on the political mobilization of the Muslim elite of North Arakan. The war and the collapse of the British rule created an environment where ambitious local leaders could explore the exercise of power in small areas that they ruled by their own means. Murray notes that the Chittagonian migrants under British rule had been “minimal, even-handed and rather dull for 116 years and had on the whole prospered mainly as rice farmers” (Murray 1980, 10). The de facto autonomy of the Muslim “peace committees” during the critical months of 1942 gave the

¹⁰ Abu Aneen makes an effort to counter-balance the impression of exclusive British loyalism by stating that “*there [were] Muslims, especially educated ones, who at the first hand help the Japanese and got capital punishment at the hand of British, e.g. Mr. Kala Meah of Kwindaing Village, Buthidaung* (Abu Aneen 2007).

Muslims a strong awareness of their political interests and potential leverage. Murray makes clear this point when he writes that in his view they “had quite lost their pre-war meekness and were quite prepared to protect themselves”. The change of conditions thus produced a novel situation that opened up new political space for a whole generation of North Arakan Muslims. A bird’s eye view the organizational mobilization of North Arakan Muslims from the 1930s down to the 1960s reveals the link between the Jamiat ul-Ulama founded in the late 1930s, its political role after the war, the project of a separate Muslim territory that emerged after 1942 and became a central concern of the Mujahid rebels and, lastly, the diffusion of the idea that North Arakan Muslims formed a historical community of mixed ethnicity. The choice of a unifying name to designate this community was critical. Its spelling (Rwangya, Roewhengya, Ruhangya, or Rohingya) was debated among like-minded local leaders and Rangoon University Muslim students from Arakan during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was an educated elite that formed, in its early stages, the political and ideological “cloud” that one can refer to collectively as the Rohingya movement (Leider 2013 (2)).

An embryonic political consciousness of the North Arakan Muslim elite may well have existed since 1937 when Burma was separated from India and the Naf River became the border between two distinct political entities. However, it was the post-1941 experience of several years of a relative autonomy that propelled the political coming of age of the geographically concentrated, but regionally isolated group. Between 1942 and 1945, Muslim landlords and strongmen could effectively exercise administrative control over an area emptied of its Buddhist population, acting on their own or within the context of British military administration. Bursting with self-confidence about the role that they had played either in V Force or in the local administration, at the end of the war, these leaders faced the risk to be politically ignored. So they wanted to strike the iron while it was still hot: preserving the conditions of Muslim political autonomy and staying apart from the Buddhist population. In their letter to A.G. Bottomley, HM’s Under-Secretary for Dominions, presented in February 1947, the Jamiat ul-Ulama wrote:

“...when the Government protection was withdrawn from this area, we functioned successfully in the interim period as a sovereign State forming a Peace Committee, the Administrative Body, in North Arakan. This conclusively proved our ability to manage our own affairs. [...] ...when the Burma campaign was launched in the North Arakan Front, and the advancing Allied forces entered this area, this Peace Committee, the Administrative Body, gained recognition from the military Administrator, North Arakan. And this Administrative Body, was given many pledges towards self determination, on the model of autonomous Muslim State in New Burma (*Representation... 1947*).”

Interestingly, the letter refers two times to the “carnage” and the “communal riots” of 1942, but both expressions remain unspecific as to whom was to blame for the violence.

A year later, the Jamiat ul-Ulama pleaded its project of political autonomy with the U Nu government. To no avail. The AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League) leaders and those Burmese politicians who held power throughout the 1950s were strongly attached to the idea of a unitary state where despite the diversity of identities and interests, each ethnic group would freely submit to the consensus of a united nation. When the revolt of the Mujahids spread out in the first half of 1948, the government seems to have taken the sweeping view that North Arakan Muslim leaders were either self-proclaimed or disguised separatists. Under such conditions, the Jamiat ul-Ulama was not in a position to use the damage and the distress of 1942 in its own favor. Nor could it play up the communal aspect of the violence as the Arakanese/Rakhine viewpoints gained a stronger stand after 1948.

Upon Prime Minister U Nu's visit to Maungdaw on 25 October 1948, the Jamiat ul-Ulama changed its approach, pleaded for an "amicable settlement" with the Arakanese and blamed the 1942 violence on the "divide and rule" policy of the British.

"The divide and rule policy of an Alien Govt. had created in the past a large measure of misunderstanding and distrust between our people and our Arakanese brethren. This policy culminated in the massacre of 1942 of our people residing in various parts of Akyab District. This unhappy episode brought in, in its tail, communal feuds throughout the whole of Akyab District. We are at pains to rub this unhappy happenings from the minds of us all and come to an amicable settlement between our people and our Arakanese brethren ("Address presented by Jamiat ul-Ulama..." 1948)."

Certainly none of the two communities forgot the terrible experience of unbound violence, destruction of the livelihood of thousands of people, slaughters and displacement. Nonetheless, as this extract shows, the Muslim leadership seriously downplayed the 1942 events to safeguard its fragile political interests. Peace-minded Muslim leaders and Mujahidin rebels alike shared the same endeavor for autonomy which they promoted throughout the 1950s while rejecting at the same time the creation of an Arakan State ruled by the Buddhists.

The political situation of Arakanese nationalists, on the other hand, mirrored the one of the divided Muslims of North Arakan. Some argued the case of the creation of an autonomous Arakan state in parliament (like U Kyaw Min) while others fought for an illusory independence by waging a guerrilla war against the government troops (like the monk U Seinda). Both Muslims and Buddhists were keen to reach out for the support of the government. There is no doubt that the ethnic cleansing had, to a certain extent, played in each other's hands, strengthening local ethno-religious domination. However, neither the Buddhists nor the Muslims could hope for any political return playing up the events of 1942. There was nothing to be won by fighting each other. It rather looks as if a veil was silently drawn over the 1942 violence.

In the early 1960s, the winners of the political tug-of-war for a special status were the Muslims, and not the Buddhists, because the Muslims could interpret the formation of the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) as a political triumph of the Rohingyas and their core demand for an autonomous zone, free from the potential interference of Buddhist Arakanese/Rakhine (Tha Htu 1962; Leider 2013 (2)). The MFA (1961-64) included the townships in the North of Arakan where the Muslims formed an absolute majority. The creation of the MFA marked the golden years of the associative life of the Rohingya movement. However, the Rohingyas indulged in the mistaken belief that following the surrender of the Mujahidin rebellion, the government had officially recognized the Rohingyas as an ethnic group of the Union. This was a delusion. At hindsight, the suppression of the MFA in 1964 marked the premature end of the Rohingya movement in Burma as an officially tolerated tool of Muslim ethnic self-affirmation.¹¹

Post-independence government policies towards the Muslim minority in Arakan can at best be called erratic. During the parliamentary period (1948-58; 1960-62), the government and its immigration authorities failed to deal efficiently with the issue of hundreds of thousands of Muslims (often referred to as Pakistanis in the

¹¹ A slightly more realistic interpretation would be that the MFA was formed after the introduction, in 1960, of a special military administration called "frontier administration" whose primary aim was not the welfare and the political endeavors of the Muslim community, but a stronger control of the border area by the army. It was suppressed in 1964, two years after Ne Win took power, re-igniting in a short lapse of time the Muslim rebellion against the central state. Buthidaung and Maungdaw became, once again, part of Akyab (later Sittway) district.

1950s) as well as Chinese by clarifying their rights and their legal status. Many may have had a demonstrable right to claim citizenship, but it was neither ascertained nor made effective. At the same time, no consistent efforts were made to confront the issue of illegal immigration, a problem that further poisoned inter-communal relations in Arakan and led to the violence and the exactions that accompanied the Nagaraja campaign in 1978, officially started as an immigration control backed by the army.

The increasingly nationalistic Ne Win regime (1962-1988) pushed the politically active Rohingyas beyond the borders into East Pakistan and Bangladesh where an important Rohingya community built up during the 1970s. Born as a form of regional Muslim nationalism in Arakan, the Rohingya self-perception of a historical Arakanese Muslim identity survived as an ethno-religious ideology in exile and expanded with Rohingya migrants and refugees to Pakistan and the Middle East. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, its militants were limited in their action, organizing poorly equipped guerrilla troops in the borderlands. Muslims in Arakan kept on identifying primarily as Muslims.

The claim of Rohingya ideologues that the majority of the Muslims in Arakan had always been “Rohingyas” is an article of faith based on historical and cultural claims. It warrants further critical examination against the background of post-1942 developments (Leider 2013 (1 and 2); Leider 2014). Still, there is little doubt that the Muslim masses in North Arakan underwent a process of ethno-religious identification after 1948 that has remained in motion until the most recent years. The process that led to a sense of shared destiny as victims of state harassment was certainly hastened by the disenfranchisement of Muslims after 1982, the mounting discrimination by the security forces, the exodus of 1978 and 1991-2 and the state’s unrelenting oppressive regime, especially since the 1990s. Following its global recognition after 2012, the Rohingya label finally paired a condition of statelessness with an international recognition of refugee status. This was a reversal of the fortune of what it had earlier meant to be a Rohingya. The early Rohingyas pinned their political aims to arguments of historical legitimacy that spoke mainly to an elite. For a long time, these arguments escaped any critical discussion (with the exception of Arakanese/Rakhine writers who contested them, see Phaw Zan 1951) and were increasingly superseded by legal approaches preferred by the international community. After 2012, the prioritization of the human rights perspective enabled powerful dynamics of international support and advocacy for the Rohingyas, but it decontextualized the history of the becoming of the Rohingyas. One example is precisely the thematic marginalization of the 1942 events as a tragic episode of ethnic cleansing where members of the two communities had both been offenders and victims.

The authoritarian state mistrusted the Arakanese nationalists no less than the Muslims. Still, the ethnic identity of the Arakanese/Rakhine was firmly anchored in the 1947 and 1974 constitutions and their dissent with the central state did not raise an issue of political and ethnic legitimacy. Nonetheless, the Arakanese were granted an ethnically labelled state only in 1974, a change that was politically risk-free, as the new constitution that formalized its creation, also entrenched a one-party regime.

The interest of the authoritarian state in Arakan was not the creation of prosperity and welfare, but the maintenance of security and public order along the border. For the rival populations, the administrators and the security organs did not act as arbitrators, but as unpredictable distributors of favors. The state neither intervened to mediate the looming dissent between Buddhists and Muslims nor did it ever appropriate (or say: interpret in its favor or interest) any narrative of the 1942 injustice. Rather it was in the interest of the state to suppress such a narrative as it could upset the public order. Each community, the Arakanese/Rakhine and the self-proclaimed Muslim Rohingyas, re-created their own narrative about what

had happened, feeding their mutual disregard, ignoring the victimhood of the rival community and limiting its attention to its own sufferings (Leider 2015 (2)).

Before we turn to the later interpretations of “1942”, two other subjects need to be briefly presented. The first one is contextual and should not be overlooked. It concerns the painful journey of tens of thousands of Indians, many of whom, in 1942, crossed Arakan to reach their motherland. The second one presents and tries to disentangle some of the figures that have been quoted with regard to the victims of 1942.

Japanese invasion, British retreat and Indian departures

Moshe Yegar writes that the Japanese stopped Burmese violence against Indians and tried to win over the Indian minorities in the Southeast Asian states they had invaded (Yegar 1972, 68). Still, many Indians in Burma tried to flee the Japanese advance. Arakan was different again as it became a de facto lawless zone between the moment the British administration collapsed and the Japanese rule was firmly established. Then it found itself divided into a pro-British Muslim zone in the North and a Japanese controlled area covering the centre and the south of Arakan. At the same time, Arakan became the theatre of a massive outflow of Indians from Rangoon and Lower Burma. Hundreds of thousands fled the advancing Japanese and tried to reach India either by crossing Arakan or arriving in Manipur passing through the Chindwin valley. According to the British historian Hugh Tinker who studied the “long march” of the Indians, there were between 400,000 and 450,000 refugees who undertook the trek (Tinker 1975; 2).¹² The Indians who chose the Arakan road, crossed the Taunggup pass and were taken by boats up to Chittagong. The maritime part of the journey could take between 36 hours and 9 days according to the type of coastal craft. The number of the people who were recorded in Chittagong reached 200,000 in mid-May 1942, as reported by a source of the Indian Overseas Department. Another source estimated the total number of Indians passing through Arakan as between 100,000 and 200,000, noting that casualties on the Arakan road were “infinitely greater” than on other roads (Tinker 1975, 6). Yet, though it directly touched Arakan, the Indian exodus was an event that appears as surprisingly unrelated to the violence that took place at approximately the same time further north between Chittagonian Muslim settlers and Buddhist villagers.

Figuring the numbers of the victims

The massacres and the ethnic cleansing took place as the British rule collapsed and before the Japanese had established their control over the part of Arakan they conquered successfully. The months from April to June 1942 were a period of chaos and anarchy in Arakan’s countryside. Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of people killed or hurt, families dispersed, internally displaced or forced to flee abroad, as well as houses burnt and destroyed, remain unknown, as they were not recorded at the time that the violence took place.

A preceding paragraph has already alluded to the problem of giving an estimation of the number of victims in the two focal areas where ethnic cleansing took place. While the later British reports allow us to imagine the context and the events in the Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, they do not help us to make conjectures about the number of refugees and people killed. It is very difficult to measure the effect of the

¹² There were a bit over a million Indians in Burma according to the census of 1931. Various authors cite higher numbers for those who fled after the Japanese invasion, but fail to base their guesses on sources. Chakravarti (1971, 170) quoted by Aye Chan (2005, 405-6) indicates 900,000 “who attempted to walk over to India”. Tinker’s paper discusses competing figures, includes his personal testimonial and offers the most detailed and reliable analysis.

violence on the composition of the population in the townships in central Arakan (Minbya, Pauktaw, Myohaung [Mrauk U], Kyauktaw and Myebon) because the record about the first wave of attacks is opaque. Pearn noted that “unknown numbers had been slaughtered and many perished of starvation and exposure in attempting to find refuge elsewhere” (Pearn 1952), a formulation that paraphrases a statement found in an earlier British Foreign Office report of 1949. In his personal record about the last years of British rule, Robert Mole states that “as a result of the communal disturbances which occurred in 1942 after the British evacuation from Arakan ... the entire population of this area was now Muslim” (Mole 2001, 191). Shortly after the war, North Arakan Muslims indicated the figure of 40,000 people who were allegedly killed (*Representation* 1947). This number was understood as an estimation of Muslim victims who had formerly lived in the centre of the country. It did not include Buddhist victims in the northern border zone. Following Sultan Mahmud’s testimonial, Yegar (1972, 98) stated that 22,000 Chittagonian refugees fled to Bengal and were relocated in camps in Rangpur. It seems that only the former Muslim residents of Buthidaung could return in a short while to their villages. These approximate figures do not appear as unreasonable when we bear in mind that the population of the townships in the centre must have counted more than 300,000 people. For a deeper analysis of the estimates that have been circulated, one would need to consult the statistics of the number of Muslims and Buddhists at the township level. Unfortunately these data are not extant. Much of what can be said at present remains stuck with the very basic level of understanding of the numerical impact of the violence. The violence had visibly long-lasting material consequences. Buddhist villagers who returned to their properties in Maungdaw and Buthidaung were driven away at their return in 1945, or they left in resignation when the Mujahid revolt, which began in early 1948, shattered the government’s control in the area.

In the late 1970s, following the dramatic flight of nearly 200,000 North Arakan Muslims over the border into Bangladesh, Rohingya militants inflated the number of 1942 victims in their propaganda. Figures such as 80,000, 100,000 and even 150,000 were quoted for the number of people killed. None of these figures have been widely reported. The lower number of 80,000 was picked up by authors outside of the community, such as for example Mujtaba Razvi in his report on the problem of Burmese Muslims (Razvi 1978, 82). In his article on the 1942 massacre, A.F.K. Jilani, a senior Rohingya militant, provides some detailed figures on allegedly tens of thousands of Muslims killed in certain areas of Central and North Arakan concluding that “more than 100,000 Muslims were massacred and 80,000 fled to Chittagong and Rangpur refugee camps” (Jilani 2006; also *History of Arakan* 1978, 36).

Local sources have often referred to impressive arrays of villages that were hit by the violence. Sultan Mahmud listed a total of 294 Muslim villages in the districts of Kyaukphyu (Myebon township) and Akyab (Minbya, Ponnagyun, Myohaung, Rathedaung, Kyauktaw, Buthidaung and Pauktaw townships) that were “totally destroyed” with Buthidaung, Myohaung and Kyauktaw townships ranking highest with 55, 58 and 78 villages respectively (Mahmud 1950). Ba Tha, another Muslim author, quoted a similar list adding up a total of 307 villages that included villages in Rathedaung and Maungdaw township as well (Ba Tha 1960). Maung Tha Hla, a Rakhine writer, gives the number of 195 villages where the Buddhists were “wiped out” in Maungdaw township (Maung Tha Hla 2004, 69). Aye Chan, a Rakhine historian, stated that after the war Arakanese/Rakhine Buddhists could only return to 60 of the 200 Buddhist villages that had existed in Buthidaung and Maungdaw before the Japanese invasion (Aye Chan, 410). Another Arakanese source reports a slightly higher number of villages, 213, of which it lists 99 with the number of their households (except 2), totalling 4081 households, and a second set of 114 villages with an unknown number of households (Hla Oo 2012). Considering an average number of 41 households per village (as derived from the first set) combined with the average number of people per Rakhine household (4 or 5), one could speculate

about a total number of between 35,000 and 43,000 people concerned by the violence. The source mentions only Maungdaw, not Buthidaung and the range as indicated here is purely hypothetical. So it would have to be tested against the number of Arakanese who lived in Maungdaw and Buthidaung around 1942. The source states that these villages were burnt down and it names places where “the whole village [was] slaughtered” (Hla Oo 2012). Nonetheless, one may eventually contrast this speculative figure with the number of 20,000 Buddhists allegedly killed in the north that Kyaw Zan Tha suggested in his *Background of Rohingya Problem* (Kyaw Zan Tha 2008).

In sum, none of the figures that have been quoted can be independently confirmed, compared or referred to as fully reliable. More educated guesses would only be possible if the number of Muslims and Buddhists in the respective townships was known in detail.

Connecting the past to the present

The violence in 1942 occasioned a shift in the territorial distribution of Muslims and Buddhists in Arakan that lasted throughout the war and deepened the existing ethno-cultural gap. It also left scars on the social memory of the people of Arakan. The territorial re-distribution was not revised during the chaotic years of the post-war period when the government and the army struggled to enforce their rule and establish a semblance of political stability. A feeling of injustice lingered on and confirmed the mistrust of the Buddhists towards the Muslim settlers from Chittagong whose itinerant inflows they had viewed with suspicion since the pre-war period. The absence of a factual master narrative, which both Buddhists and Muslims could have agreed upon, barred the emergence of consensual interpretations of the events. Where a neutral observer invariably perceives a causal chain of acute tensions and detrimental actions primarily precipitated by a breakdown of the established political order, each community has singularly re-imagined the record of its own sufferings so that there are only fractional accounts that remain at hand seventy years later. Muslim narratives have very little to say on the massacre and the displacement of the Buddhists, while Buddhist narratives glance over the initial explosion of violence and the persecution of the Muslims. While in Rakhine accounts, the riots appear related to the excesses of certain individuals and the failure of leaders to restrain them, for the Muslim side, as Abu Aneen has put it, it was “not an accidental event”, but an “organized campaign” (Abu Aneen 2007).

In the late 1970s, when a quarter million of North Arakan Muslims took refuge in Bangladesh following the harassment and the wanton violence of security personnel that accompanied the authorities’ immigration checks, the Rohingya militants that lay in hiding along the border with Bangladesh created a narrative of Muslim persecution in Arakan that linked the displacement of Muslims in 1942 to the flight of 1978. The following quote is from a pamphlet of the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF).

“As long as a single Rohingya Muslim lives on earth, the world can never forget that in 1941, when the British government evacuated from Burma and the Japanese did not occupy yet, the Mugh Buddhists equipped with fire arms obtained from the British, plundered the Muslim villages and massacred nearly 100,000 Muslims in Arakan. Thousands of men, women and children were burnt alive by locking them up in bamboo houses, and depopulated more than 500,000 Muslims from hundreds of villages. This was the beginning of the present day on-going genocide against the Muslims in Arakan.” (Rohingya Patriotic Front 1978)

An undated, but probably more recent Muslim sketch is found in the following extract from another Rohingya tract:

“[they] were brutally killed in the horrific massacre of 1942, that was perpetrated against Rohingya Muslims. More than 20 thousand Muslim scholars and eminent people were killed among one hundred thousand people who met this ruthless fate. The callous killing of Moulana Abdul Jabbar (1868-1942) by Buddhists on 1st April 1942. Their killing was irreparable loss to Jamiatul Ulama. More over, half a million Rohingya Muslims ... were driven out of their homes Fifty thousand of them were in Rangpur refugee camps.” (Manifesto n.d.)

Maung Tha Hla’s description of the tragic events offers a recent depiction from a Buddhist perspective. For him, “the 1942 ethnic cleansing of Buddhist Rakhaings perpetrated by the Muslims was the most horrible barbarity recorded in contemporary Rakhaing history.” (Maung Tha Hla 2009, 47). He writes:

“The heavily outnumbered Rakhaings were ruthlessly and wholesomely butchered in the most barbarous manner at their homes, in the ancestral lands as they fled, and in the woods where they sought refuge from the vicious Muslim marauders. They vandalized, raped, and slew. They burned the Rakhaing houses and the Buddhist monasteries... Many thousands, regardless of gender or age, perished in the massacre. The hardest hit being the rural agrarian communities who lived in the outlying villages.... Armies of vultures hovered above the mutilated rotten bodies; the air was heavy with toxic fume; black smoke billowed from places far and wide.” (Maung Tha Hla, 2004, 70)

The present narratives connect the past to the present in ways that serve the validation of opposing identities. They also signal an absence of discursive communication that strikingly mirrors the competing historiographies of Buddhists and Muslims, which have for long divided the communities in their reading of the kingdom’s old and early history (Leider 2015 (1)).

Nonetheless, one has to bear in mind that the remembrance and the interpretations of “1942” have *not* been a permanent narrative element in the political and historical writing of either Buddhists or Muslims. The events remained an altogether obscure chapter of history, because, as this author would like to repeat, a straightforward and authorized record was never produced after the war. However, as the above citations show, references to 1942 were made during political crises, notably again after the violence in June and October 2012.

A look at recent articles written by Nurul Islam, a prominent Rohingya militant of the old generation and the present leader of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (since 1998), may illustrate this point. In “Rebuttal to U Khin Maung Saw’s misinformation on Rohingya”, Nurul Islam stated that “the 1942 massacre of Rohingyas was genocide” (Islam 2012). In an interview given in 2013, he underscored the link between 1942 and 2012: “During a period of 70 years from 1942 to 2012, they carried out countless operations against us, drove us out to other countries or to the sea, made massive Rohingya exodus two times and subsequently made them refugees” (Islam 2013). However, in previous articles “Facts about the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan” (Islam 2006) and “To bring harmony in Arakan, xenophobic works of the Rakhines must stop” (Islam 2009), he did not even mention the 1942 violence. Pointing out this difference is not an *ad hominem* criticism of Nurul Islam’s use of history, but simply one among other examples of the newly re-emerging post-2012 re-interpretation of the aggressions of March-April 1942 as a genocidal crime.

Importantly, recent writers did not simply mention “1942” as a dot on a time-line of communal violence in Rakhine State, but generated interpretations in tune with global discourses on human rights and persistent rumors on real or imagined threats. These post-2012 interpretations allow us to identify contrasting patterns: on the one hand, the Buddhist interpretation of Muslim agency in the form of a pervasive Muslim demographic and political threat; on the other hand, an analytical grid that interprets alleged racism, state discrimination and civic exclusion as a hidden scheme to progressively exterminate the Muslims. “1942” caught the collective power of the Buddhist and Muslim imagination, because its fearful details have fed analyses that exploit both global narratives of Muslim hegemonies and the semantic expansion of the powerful genocide terminology. “1942” has been interpreted as a forerunner of anti-Rohingya violence though there were no self-declared Rohingyas at the time of the events. Still, such an interpretation exemplifies the narrative of the victimization of Muslims worldwide that has been moving public opinion in Muslim-majority countries for decades. True or false reports on the persecution of Muslims worldwide have also been driving Muslim extremism in many countries of the Muslim and Western world.

For the Buddhists, the memory of 1942 matches a Buddhist counter-narrative that associates the demographic strength of the Rohingyas in North Rakhine State and in Southeast Bangladesh with the risk of an unchecked transnational Muslim expansion along the border with Bangladesh (and before 1971, East Pakistan). Post-2012 Rakhine nationalist interpretations of “1942” have also interpreted the killings of Maungdaw and Buthidaung Buddhists in 1942 as a genocide against their own community. Once again, this interpretation does not make the events of 1942 any more transparent, but it reflects the current Arakanese fears of a Muslim “invasion” from Bangladesh branding Muslims collectively as Bengalis. It likely serves the dreadful xenophobic propaganda more than the representation of core Rakhine political interests.

“But now these illegal Bengali Muslims, the descendants of those Muslim killers of 1942, are reinventing themselves as so-called ethnic Rohingyas and trying to gain our citizenship so that they and their brothers millions of Bengali-Muslims from Bangladesh can eventually seep into the proper Burma and swallow us Burmese Buddhists whole to the extinction (Hla Oo 2012).”

After 2012, the charge of a state-sponsored genocide against the Rohingyas has become the monopoly of a new group of pro-Rohingya activists who produced international campaigns between 2013 and 2016.¹³ It was also strongly echoed by Rohingya activists. Still, such descriptions and allegations were rarely made or emphasised in human rights reports that raised international awareness on the plight of the Rohingyas between 1995 and 2011.¹⁴ Earlier on, the term “genocide” had only been occasionally part of the political vocabulary within the North Arakan Muslim and Rohingya ecosphere. Yet, it did not bear the ideological and legal ballast of the post-2012 interpretation of state-Rohingya relations as the history of a “slow” genocide. “Genocide” in Muslim parlance was first used in a kind of wake-up call on the title page of the Alethangyaw Constitution of Arakani Muslims in 1951, a catalogue of North Arakan Muslim political demands. At the time, it referred to the conditions of civil war created by the multiple rebellions throughout Arakan in 1949 and 1950. It did *not* allude to any anterior events. In the citation from the letter of the Jamiat ul-Ulama to Prime Minister U Nu of 1948 quoted above, the 1942 massacres were merely referred to as an “unhappy episode,”

¹³ The most prominent of these activists have been Matthew Smith, the director of Fortify Rights, an NGO, Maung Zarni, a Burmese activist, and Penny Green, a law professor and director of the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University in London. Noted publications of the genocide school are Cowley and Zarni 2014, Fortify Rights 2014, Fortify Rights 2015 and Green, MacManus and de la Cour Venning 2015.

¹⁴ The most prominent international human rights activist doing advocacy for the Rohingya refugees is Chris Lewa, founder and coordinator of the Arakan Project (2005).

not as a genocide. As we have noted, it looks as if, at that time, political actors who had likely been involved in the ethnic cleansing themselves, were keen to understate or pass over the terrible events. No party could claim innocence. Nonetheless, Sultan Mahmud, U Nu's Health minister, whose description of the events we have also quoted above, concluded that 1942 had not been a communal riot, but a "pre-planned cold-blooded massacre" (Mahmud 1950). This is probably the strongest expression one could come across in the 1950s. Comparable observations on a tendency to glance over the events could be made on the side of Buddhist writers. Khin Gyi Phyaw's paper on the Mujahidin only mentions the expulsion of Buddhists and Hindus in 1942 (Khin Gyi Phyaw 1959, 23) and Pho Kan Kaung elaborating on the danger of Rohingyas for political stability, says simply that Rakhine and Muslims fought each other (Pho Kan Kaung 1992, 88). Later on, Arakanese/Rakhine academics such as Aye Chan or Aye Kyaw who have been known for their strong criticism of Rohingya identity claims in the late 20th and early 21st century, barely mentioned the 1942 violence in their writings. The atrocities and the injustice, while never forgotten, rested mostly within each community's partial memory. But as the post-2012 developments show, this memory was mainly susceptible to be revived with reference to newer events and discursive contexts.

The 1942 events and political identity

The present exploration of the 1942 violence and its impact on civic identity is a preliminary investigation hampered by the lack of accessible primary sources and the absence of previous scholarly interest. Nonetheless, it may suggest pathways for further reflection and critical examination. Two analytical frames have to be distinguished to take into account, on the one hand, the 1942 events and their social and political impact, and on the other hand, the construction of commemorative narratives.

The sources that have been quoted illustrate the partial collective memories and the imparted sense of a collective victimhood. The argument proposed in the introduction, namely the link between the events of 1942 and the process of political identity formation cannot be extracted from the testimony of historical memories. It can only be explained with regard to the political behavior of the leading actors. Nonetheless, while the analytical differentiation provides historical clarity at hindsight, it does not necessarily reflect the self-perception of the actors or the groups of people concerned. The Rohingya leaders have never argued that the political dynamics of their call for territorial autonomy were ignited by the experience of 1942 or that the process of their communal identity was propelled by the concentration and the political isolation of their community increased by what happened between 1942 and 1946. Nor did Arakanese/Rakhine nationalists point to the 1942 events to underscore and possibly rationalize their projection of North Arakan Muslims as people to be excluded and with acclaimed identities that set them outside of the national community.

The links established in this article between the 1942 events and the political behavior and identities in the post-war period are an attempt of the historian to connect the shock, the ruptures, the displacements and the three years of enforced division with the singular splitting up of the native Buddhist Arakanese/Rakhine community and Arakan's complex Muslim community as evidenced in the sporadic inter-communal violence and the ideological dissent from the late 1970s until 2012. To make this point, one should not look at the ethnic cleansing from March to June 1942 in isolation. The months of anarchy and violence and the ensuing years of ethnic and political division until 1945 should be seen and interpreted as a single complex fact.

The immediate impact of the experience of persecution and the 1942 territorial break-up was the entrenched and durable political division of the Buddhist and Muslim communities and their leaders. There

is no hint that the leaders of the two communities ever wanted to work together politically or had a perception of a shared interest in pursuing their goals. This divisiveness certainly had its roots in the late colonial period, but the 1942 events confirmed the communal bitterness.

The present enquiry also makes clear that, besides reinforcing the mutual hostility, the experience of violence and partition did not impact the political ideas of the two communities in the same way. The strongest impact of the 1942-45 experience was what we have called the political coming of age of the Muslims. The upturn of the political conditions (British disaster after the Japanese invasion, anarchy, the British need for local auxiliaries to fight the Japanese) generated the political awakening of the Muslim community's local leaders. The Muslim leadership built on their control of resources and stocks of arms at the end of the war and internally formed a strong, though erroneous sense of the available political space when they stepped forward to claim an independent or autonomous region for the Muslims. The idea that the Muslims could win a separate territory in a short while by clever political manoeuvring was a political delusion. The slightly later production of a specific Rohingya identity (built on the old Muslim presence in the region) was another important element of the political awakening. Though it was slow to take off and to spread, seen at hindsight it has been a more durable outcome of the tidal moment of 1942.

The violence of 1942 had also an impact on the formation of the political ideas and collective identity of the Arakanese/Rakhine. This is not the anti-Rohingya drive that has been a mark of Arakanese/Rakhine nationalism since the 1970s and much more so since the 1990s. To say so would be an anachronism. To state brusquely that the 1942 events made the Arakanese/Rakhine anti-Muslim or more anti-Muslim would misjudge the complex socio-political context that underpinned the migrations during the colonial times. Arakanese nationalism was first of all thriving on an anti-Burmese stance. After independence, the Arakanese nationalist elite fought for a constitutional recognition of a specific Arakanese/Rakhine identity. This was not unlike the Muslim elite who, after 1948, strategically faced the Burmese state (not its Arakanese neighbors) fighting for its political goals. Early on, in the 1950s, the Arakanese nationalists saw the strong Muslim minority with its newly politicized leadership in North Arakan mainly as an annoyance. The 1942 impact lay elsewhere. In the collective psyche of the Arakanese/Rakhine, the experience of 1942 toughened the perception of a demographic threat. Therefore the ethnic cleansing of 1942 smoothly blended into the narrative on illegal immigration and unchecked borders that was and has remained the key political worry for the Arakanese/Rakhine. Rakhine nationalists have often presented the Chittagonian migration as the story of "guests" who betrayed the trust of their hosts as they took the land where they prospered as their own. After the war, Muslim settlers, despite the fact that many may already have been born in Arakan, were still seen as intruders who were not ready to integrate the majority society and failed to adopt local cultural habits unlike earlier generations of Muslims. With our present knowledge, it would thus be difficult to single out the 1942 events as a moment that triggered a certain political turn of the Arakanese/Rakhine identity formation during the post-war period. The interpretation that links the self-perception of the Arakanese/Rakhine as victims of both Burmese oppression and Muslim immigration – a kind of grand historical narrative from 1785 down to the present – rather calls for a deeper investigation of social conditions and inter-ethnic relations in Arakan during the 1920s and 1930s.

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