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► **To cite this version:**

Jacques Leider. Rohingya: the Name and its Living Archive. ASEANFocus, 2018, 2018 (2). halshs-01869740

HAL Id: halshs-01869740

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01869740>

Submitted on 6 Sep 2018

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Rohingya – the Name and its Living Archive

Jacques P. Leider deconstructs the living history of the name “Rohingya.”

The intriguingly opposing trends about using, not using or rejecting the name “Rohingya” illustrate a captivating history of the naming and self-identifying of Arakan’s Muslim community. Today, “Rohingya” is globally accepted as the name for most Muslims in North Rakhine. But authorities and most people in Myanmar still use the term “Bengalis” in referring to the self-identifying Rohingyas, linking them to Bangladesh and Burma’s own colonial past.

The recent change in the embrace of the name has been sudden and profound. Two decades ago, reports by humanitarian and human rights organisations on refugees in Bangladesh referred to the Muslims as “sometimes called...” or “also known as... Rohingyas,” showing the authors’ hesitation on how to apply the term. This reluctance has vanished. With the existential plight of the Rohingya continuing after 2012, the Bay of Bengal boat refugee crisis in 2015, and the Rohingya mass flight to Bangladesh of late 2016 and after August 2017, the use of the name “Rohingya” became entirely uncontroversial in the media outside Myanmar due to the transformative power of the country’s Islamophobic crisis. The change was an informal international recognition of the right to self-identification of a group of people that remain subject to ongoing state persecution.

The retrospective designation of Muslims as “Rohingya” in colonial accounts on Arakan among Rohingya writers is therefore not surprising. It connects to the group’s historical self-representation: Rohingyas lay claim to a rich and diverse Muslim history in Arakan’s past. Today the expanded usage of the name is favored by global acceptance and its status as the default name for most Muslims of Rakhine State. Nonetheless, the use of the name among the North Rakhine Muslim communities remains less clear.

The name “Rohingya” has a history, and that history is an integral part of the development of Muslim political self-affirmation and the ongoing process of collective identity formation in Rakhine State. It also reflects the contested relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine State after independence and the deterioration of state-minority relations. Studying these naming practices and their changes is therefore not a research on historical minutiae.

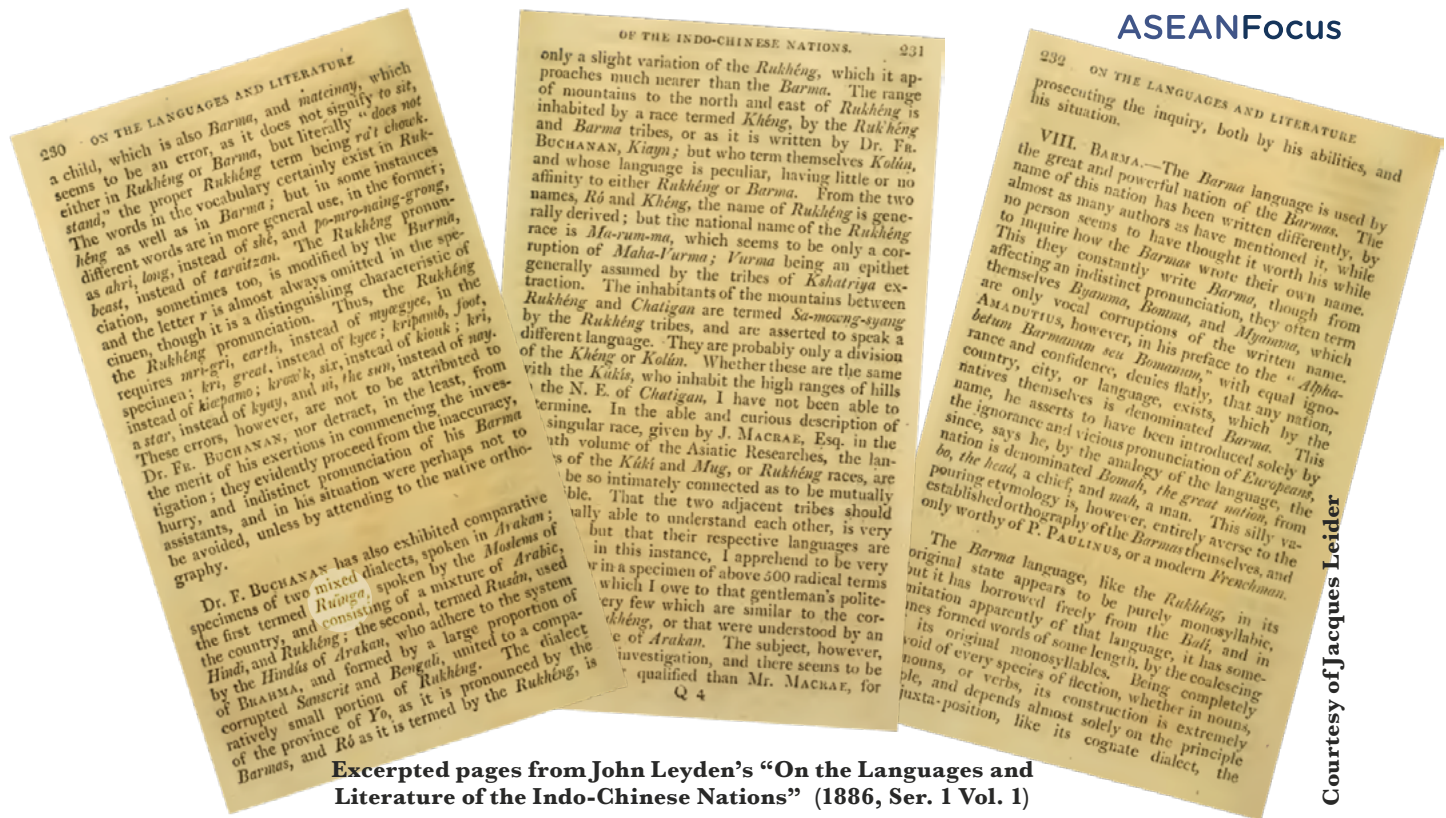
One spontaneous outcome of the name controversy since 2012 was ad-hoc compilations of source texts and references

to do research on the history of the Rohingya and the name itself. Rohingyas and pro-Rohingya activists were keen to prove that the Union of Burma had already recognised the Rohingya as an ethnic group in the 1950s and 1960s so that their citizenship rights could not be denied. Academics and independent researchers also formed archives containing official and non-official documents that allowed a close examination of the chronological record.

The most uncontroversial textual sources where the name “Rohingya” or its early variants have appeared include newspaper articles and booklets written and published by Rohingyas and their organisations over 1958-1965. This includes the years 1960 to 1964 when the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) existed in the North of Arakan. The MFA united in a single unit the Muslim-majority districts of Maungtaw, Buthidaung and partly Rathedaung. It was run by the army as a special frontier administration, but its creation provided the Rohingya leadership in Maungtaw with the political success of an “autonomous zone” that Arakanese Muslim leaders had been requesting since 1947.

The texts produced during the above period are uncontroversial because they use the name “Rohingya” univocally and intentionally to present, explain and promote a separate Muslim ethnic identity in association with Muslim pasts in Arakan drawing on Rakhine chronicles, colonial historiography and pre-colonial Indian and Western sources. Important publications of this genre were *A Short History of “Rohingyas” An Indigenous Race of the Union of Burma* (1960), *Report and Historical References regarding the ethnic Rohingyas, sons of the Union* (1961), and *Ethnic Rohingyas and Kaman* all written originally in Burmese (Mohammed A. Tahir Ba Tha, 1963).

The various spellings of the name at that time, including “Roewhnyas,” “Roewhengya,” “Ruhangya,” “Rawengya” or “Royangya,” demonstrate an oral presence of the term and the absence of a standardised spelling. Rakhine Buddhists noted that “Rwangya” was prominently used by the old Arakanese Muslim community around 1948-49. Internal communal differences with the more recent Chittagonian settlers who came as labor migrants during the colonial period still existed for several years after independence before they subsided and gave way to a shared identity. The adoption of “Rohingya” to affirm a common ethnic identity of all North Rakhine Muslims became a political choice in the 1950s due to the active



Excerpted pages from John Leyden's "On the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations" (1886, Ser. 1 Vol. 1)

Courtesy of Jacques Leider

role of young and educated Arakanese Muslims. But their branding was not uncontested. The politically influential but more traditional Arakan Muslim Organisation remained unconvinced about the need for a separate name.

Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's mention of "Rooina" as a language of Arakanese Muslims deported to the royal capital Amarapura in the late 18th century shows that the word had existed in the East Bengali dialect spoken by Arakanese Muslims long before. However, its adoption in writing in the 1950s and in Muslim strategies of political and ethnic self-representation after Burma's independence was new. It did not appear in any British administrative record or any British census between 1869 and 1941. Therefore, even Burma experts were challenged to explain its etymology when it became newly known in the 1950s. The etymology is in fact unproblematic, as historical linguistics explain the term by its link to the literary Bengali word for Arakan.

In circumstances where the term "Rohingya" was used by Burmese high-level officials, interpretations should be made with reference to the appropriate context. Two famous examples call for attention: Prime Minister U Nu used the term Rohingya in a radio-talk in September 1954; and Brigadier General Aung Gyi paid recognition to the Rohingya as a national ethnic group in a speech in 1961. Both instances have been cited by Rohingya activists as proofs that Rohingyas had been recognised by the state as a "national race." Yet from a formal and legal point of view, these interpretations seem a bit far-fetched. However, the citations of the name made a lot of political sense as there was an intention by the Burmese leadership to cultivate friendship with and gain the support of North Arakan Muslim leaders at that time.

Identity cards held by Muslims where the name "Rohingya" was entered by the state bureaucracy appear as more convincing proofs to demonstrate that at times the term was

actually perceived by administrators as an ethno-religious designation. Photos of such identity cards are circulated on websites. The article on "Rohingya" in the official Burmese Encyclopedia in 1964 showed that under the MFA, the emerging Rohingya movement enjoyed political toleration and a semblance of state recognition that fell apart in the 1960s. When General Ne Win took power in 1962, his nationalist and unitary policies changed the political context, refusing to recognise an ethnic Rakhine Muslim identity. The MFA was suppressed in 1964 and the Rohingya ideology emerging during the parliamentary phase died an early death. It moved into exile with many Rohingya leaders leaving Burma in the 1970s and the creation of the Arakan Historical Society in Chittagong in 1975.

The formation of shared Muslim identities in North Rakhine has persisted nevertheless under past authoritarian regimes and the current government. The name "Rohingya" remains alive as a rallying cry for a defined Muslim ethnic identity. While the formation of a single Muslim community as a social reality in Rakhine State raises no doubts, the link between this process and the use of the name Rohingya within Muslim communities in Rakhine State should still be considered as a question of scholarly debate. The claims of a perpetual or millenary Rohingya identity, prevalent in the political propaganda of Rohingya militants and in recent media reports, essentialises what is certainly a dynamic process. Any discussion of contemporary Rohingya identities needs to look at the living archive of the name, taking into consideration a vast and complex human Rohingya network that stretches from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and beyond, comprising hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees who lay claim to a shared identity that cuts across very different national contexts. 🌐

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