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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

