

Undergraduate Thesis
International Studies

Nationalism and the Politicization of Identity: The Implications of Burmese Nationalism for the Rohingya



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Map of Burma¹



¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.andrew-drummond.com/2013/03/just-what-is-going-on-in-arakan-state.html>.

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Introduction

Ever since Burma gained independence in 1948, Burma has been involved in continuous armed conflicts with various ethnic groups throughout the country (Callahan 83).² The cause for the internal strife can be found in British colonial rule and subsequent polarizing policies by the Burmese state (Smith 2007: 1-11). That is, during colonial rule the notion of ethnicity became politicized, whereupon the Burman-led post-independence Burmese state continued the ethnic discrimination, to the dissatisfaction of Burma's non-Burman ethnic groups. At the onset of Burma's independence, the Burmese policymakers basically had to decide what type of nationalism to adhere to: civic nationalism or ethnic nationalism (Muller 20). Whereas civic nationalism promotes an inclusive form of nationalism based on the principle of *jus soli*, ethnic nationalism presents a more exclusive model of nationalism, building on the idea of *jus sanguinis* (Lecours 154-155). Burma embarked upon the course of ethnic nationalism, using an ethnically defined national identity grounded on the Burman majority of the population, excluding the non-Burman minorities accordingly (Sakhong 2).

Thus, to resolve what Smith has called the "dilemmas of national unity in a country of diversity", Burma started from the premise of an ethnically homogenous nation to define its national identity (2007: 7). In spite of this, the existence of '135 national races' in Burma speaks volumes with respect to the actual degree of diversity among the Burmese population. Indeed, some scholars call Burma one of the most ethnically diverse and complex countries in the world (Callahan 83; Gravers 2014a: 149). Consequently, a civic nationalist approach to Burma's multicultural population would, in theory, have been more obvious to prevent the politicization of the identity of the non-Burman minorities. Yet, Henley points out that, from a practical point of view, a majority-minority bargain tends to arise, whenever a nation exists of a dominant ethnic core *vis-à-vis* a few impotent ethnic minorities.³ In view of Burma's demographic disposition, where ethnic Burmans represent about 66% of the population, while the remaining 33% of the inhabitants are considered to be ethnic minorities, there is in fact a case for the ethnic nationalist approach to have gained primacy after all (Smith 2007: 7-8).

Mindful of the exclusion-ridden ethnic nationalism in Burma, the consequences of Burmese nationalism for non-Burman ethnic minorities have been significant and continue to noticeably affect some ethnic groups to date. In that regard, the contested political identity of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Buddhist-majority Burma, presents itself as a case in point. In particular, the predicament

² For a discussion in respect of the use of Burma or Myanmar see Callahan's note on terminology (ix-xi). For the sake of clarity, I will use pre-1989 terminology, i.e. Burma and Arakan State, without intending to make any political statement.

³ Henley, David. "Dealing with diversity: the politics of ethnicity in Southeast Asia." Leiden University. Kantoren Stichthage, Koningin Julianaplein 10, Den Haag. 10 April 2014. Lecture.

of the Rohingya might serve to illustrate how and why certain forms of self-identification are controversial in the light of Burmese nation-building. Taking into account the characteristics of Burmese nationalism, the genesis of a Burmese national identity, and the implications thereof for the Rohingya, I will examine the case of the Rohingya in Arakan State in order to identify *in what ways the political identity of the Rohingya conflicts with the prevailing understanding of Burma's national identity, held by the post-independence Burmese state*. To do so, attention will be paid to three theoretical approaches to explain the politicization of identity, namely: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. In general, this examination is conducted in an effort to gain understanding on some of the reasons why the Rohingya issue in Burma remains unresolved to this very day.

In respect of the relevance of the Rohingya-question for a wider audience, there are a number of reasons why to take an interest in the quandary of the Rohingya. First of all, the United Nations has termed the Rohingya “one of the world’s most persecuted minorities” (qtd. in Abdelkader 102). Now commonly so characterized by the media, the plight of the Rohingya thus constitutes an extreme case within the spectrum of social justice. In that connection, second, the vast majority of the Rohingya possess another controversial quality, namely that of being stateless (Robinson and Rahman 16). A stateless person is “a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law”.⁴ Statelessness has rendered the Rohingya a particularly vulnerable group in Burmese society, because they are denied the enjoyment of any of the rights belonging to Burmese citizenship (Lewa 11-13). Thirdly, the Rohingya have become a victim of ‘hybridity’, considering that even the existence of the Rohingya as such is under debate (Chan 397; Leider 210-212). Inhabiting the Burmese borderland between Burma and Bangladesh, the Rohingya are considered foreign ‘Bangladeshi’ by Burma and ‘Burmese’ refugees by Bangladesh, illustrating the importance of historical evidence, or historiography, for claiming citizenship (Grundy-Warr and Wong 82).

In this Thesis, the case of the Rohingya will be analyzed in a holistic manner, using three distinct levels of analysis. To begin with, Chapter 1 will serve to introduce a *theoretical* framework on nationalism, wherein the concept of nationalism will be further explored, so as to determine what aspects of nationalism cause the politicization of identity. In Chapter 2, a *general* historical outline of Burmese nationalism will be given, to see how Burmese nation-building and state-building took shape in practice. Chapter 3 will be oriented to a *specific* case-study on the Rohingya, highlighting the main issues the Rohingya have faced in the course of Burmese nation-building. Finally, once the theoretical, the general, and the specific facet of the Rohingya-question will have been considered, the Conclusion will bring the insights from all three levels of analysis together, evaluating the findings and discussing the effects in an integrated and informed manner.

⁴ See: article 1 of the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons of 1954.

Chapter 1. Nationalism: A Theoretical Framework

According to Hutchinson and Smith, nationalism constitutes “one of the most powerful forces in the modern world” (3). Therefore, it is of vital importance to precede any detailed discussion with respect to the general history of Burmese nationalism and the concrete case-study of the Rohingya with an exploratory study of nationalism *in re*. This chapter will serve as a theoretical framework for the more factual, historical chapters to come, providing the required equipment to make any intelligible claims further onwards. Take notice, however, that it will not be attempted to provide an exhaustive overview of the entire academic field of nationalism. On the contrary, a selective method to the study of nationalism will be pursued, based on four building-blocks. First, the concept of a political identity will be opposed to the notion of a national identity, given Burma’s majority-minority bargain. Second, the difference between an *ethnie* and a nation will be addressed, in anticipation of the societal dynamics in multi-ethnic Burma. Third, the subject of the formation of nation-states will be broached to understand why nation-states engage in nationalism. Fourth, to comprehend how processes of nation-building and nationalism can politicize identity, the theoretical approaches of primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism will be considered.

1.1 Political Identity versus National Identity

Samuels utilizes the concept of a political identity to answer the question “when does identity become politicized” (148-149). He maintains that human beings have multiple identities, which become politicized through (1) individual choices and (2) social contexts (Samuels 148). In general, identity refers to the cognizance of ‘who we are’ and ‘who we are not’ (Massey 5). As a result, processes of identity-formation are inherently relational, that is, the designation of a ‘self’ or ‘us’ necessarily implies the demarcation of the ‘other’ or ‘them’ (Penrose and Mole 276-277). The need of individuals to self-categorize themselves into social groups arises from the fact that similarities and differences between identity groups ultimately render “the world subjectively meaningful” (Hogg et al. 260-261). Conceptually, then, a political identity refers to: “the way individuals categorize themselves and others, and how they understand the relationships of domination and oppression that exist between groups (Samuels 149). The ‘political’ component of a political identity refers to the usage of political power by an identity group to advance or defend the political interests of its members (Samuels 149). Put differently, an identity-based categorization of people into distinct groups is not merely a social affair; there is also a political aspect to it, given that social groups are likely to enter the political arena to promote their own political interests. In view of the fact that different social groups will adhere to dissimilar political conceptions of the ‘good’, membership to an identity group will inevitably acquire political significance. The extent to which that political significance will result in the politicization of

one's identity will depend on (intrapersonal) individual choices – what group you belong to – and (interpersonal) social contexts – how other groups relate to your group.

Importantly, national identity is a particular form of political identity (Samuels 35). Penrose and Mole stress the point that “[it] constitutes one of, if not the, most important identities in the modern world” (277). Similarly, Poole even contends that national identity is “the primary form of identity”, seeing that it encompasses and relates to all other manifestations of political identity (qtd. in Reynolds 2006: 247). The weight of a national identity emanates from the prominence of nation-states in the world, which is commonly illustrated by the patchwork of countries carving up the world map into distinct territories (Griffiths et al. 213). For Penrose and Mole, “nation-states are the only legitimate geopolitical unit”, so that the definition of a national identity determines the scope of legitimate beneficiaries of the resources that such geopolitical units possess and generate (277). A national identity, however, is not a given. It needs to be constructed. In the words of Chatterjee: “national culture was necessarily built upon the privileging of an ‘essential tradition’, which in turn was defined by a system of exclusions” (134). In the course of nation-building, nation-states have tried to forge national ties by means of utilizing a national identity as *the* dominant political identity, prevailing over other, subordinate political identities. Consequently, adherence to a non-national political identity will become politicized. That being said, the debate about national identity can be nuanced and divided into two modes of thought, with different implications for the politicization of identity. Those modes of thought are: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism (Muller 20).

On the one hand, civic nationalism promotes an inclusive type of nationalism, using a territorial and legal (*jus soli*) understanding of nationhood to define the nation (Lecours 154-155). On the other, ethnic nationalism presents a more exclusive model of nationalism, grounding nationhood in cultural elements such as ethnicity, religion, and language (*jus sanguinis*) (Lecours 154-155). The contrast between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism is that civic nationalism advances an *objective*, political conception of a nation, whereas ethnic nationalism promotes a *subjective*, cultural understanding of a nation (Lecours 153). The crux is that civic nationalism can accommodate several nations under the umbrella of *one* civic nation, while ethnic nationalism cannot, because ethnic nationalism is based on the presumption that “each nation ought to have its *own* state, and that each state should be made up of the members of a *single* nation” (emphasis added) (Muller 21).

That is why the politicization of the identity of social groups will hinge, to a large extent, on the kind of national identity adhered to by the dominant identity group in society. For one, if the dominant identity group opts for a civic nationalist approach to govern a multicultural population, then, the national culture will be built in contrast to *extraterritorial* nations, thereby solidifying the *territorial*

identity groups, despite the differences between them, into a single national community (Hastings 34). For another, when favoring the ethnic nationalist approach to rule over a heterogeneous population, the political identity of one identity group in society will come to dominate and discriminate against the deviant political identities of (*extraterritorial* and) *territorial* social groups, politicizing their identities accordingly, leading to political competition, or, at worst, civil conflict (Hastings 34). In sum, “*jus sanguinis* leads logically to ethnic cleansing, *jus soli* to ethnic integration” (Hastings 34).

1.2 *Ethnie versus Nation*

So far, it has been established that different political identities can conflict with one another, since identity groups will hold various views as to how to exercise political power. Now, it may be opportune to concretize those identity groups into *ethnies* and nations, seeing that, in the context of the formation of a nation-state, the politicization of one's identity will be dependent on the kind of identity group to which one belongs. An *ethnie* can be defined as: “a named collectivity sharing a common myth of origins and descent, a common history, one or more elements of distinctive culture, a common territorial association and [a] sense of group solidarity” (Smith 1985: 128). A nation, by contrast, is understood to be: “a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own” (Weber 176). In other words, the difference between a nation and an *ethnie* is that an *ethnie* is more concerned with cultural elements, while nations harness certain cultural traits for political ends (Smith 2006: 175, 177). Or, an *ethnie* is an apolitical nation and a nation is a political *ethnie*.

Anyway, Smith holds that originally *ethnies* preceded nations (2006: 172-173). Hastings equally asserts that nations are “formed from one or more ethnicities” (3). Nevertheless, Weber remarks that “the sentiment of ethnic solidarity does not by itself make a nation” (173). What makes an *ethnie* a nation, according to Connor, is self-awareness of “the group's uniqueness” (388). “While an ethnic group *may*, therefore, be other-defined, the nation *must* be self-defined” (Connor 388). Similarly, Hastings contends that “[a] nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity”, as nations aspire to have their own state, while *ethnies* do not (3). Indeed, there is no such thing as an *ethnie*-state threatening the nation-state, given that ‘awakened’ *ethnies*, i.e. nations, will generally strive for a state of their own, or agree to become a part of a civic nation. Hence, the gist is that nations can incorporate nations and *ethnies*, whereas *ethnies* cannot, lest *ethnies* turn, if possible, nationalist and become nations themselves, via self-protective processes of nationalism (Hastings 30).

1.3 State versus Nation

From the perspective of social justice, ideally, each societal group (*ethnie* or nation) ought to be treated equally.⁵ Nation-States, however, may be said to adhere to an alternative stance, seeing that certain political identities can be deemed subversive to national unity, e.g. when a ‘rival’ *ethnie* evolves into a nation and adopts an ethnic nationalist attitude, demanding for a separate state. In that regard, it is important to stress that the link between a nation and a state is not self-evident, for belongingness to a nation is a *subjective* issue, whereas citizenship of a state is an *objective* fact (Samuels 37). That is, nation-states consist of two separate entities: a nation and a state (Reynolds 2005: 23). States are sovereign political-legal units ruling over a particular territory and population (Griffiths et al. 213). Nations, contrariwise, are “a cultural grouping of individuals who associate with each other based on [a] collectively held political identity” (Samuels 35). The state and the nation are interdependent, as states provide the political autonomy and institutional framework nations lack and nations give states the required loyalty and legitimacy for its continued existence (Reynolds 2005: 24). Situated between both, nationalism serves as an essential hyphen linking both the nation and the state to each other (Reynolds 2005: 23-24). The crux is that national unity, so the argument goes, depends on the correspondence of the subjective nation with the objective state, since any discrepancies between the two might in the long run result in the disintegration of the nation-state. Adherence to a non-national political identity can, therefore, be viewed as problematic for nation-states, for it entails a lack of solidarity. Put simply, that is why the ideals of social justice have oftentimes been neglected, as the process of nationalism ‘required’ nation-states to treat ‘recalcitrant’ social groups differently.

Apropos of the ‘cementing’ role of nationalism, Mookherjee considers how the nation constantly needs to be materialized and performed (1-18). The nation is made into an object, because nationalism needs cultural symbols to connect the political state with the cultural nation. For that reason, Anderson speaks of nations as “imagined communities”, who can be differentiated from each other depending on the scope of imagination adhered to (5-7). In consequence, the politics of nationalism entails the imagining of difference, for instance, by materializing the imaginary discourse surrounding the abstract nation into concrete forms, such as: “the census, the map, and the museum” (Mookherjee 4). So, national culture may be used as a legitimizing tool to root and connect the nation to the state. Likewise, the “invention of tradition” has been employed as an instrument to confer a sense of historical continuity on novel traditions (Hobsbawm 1-14). Put differently, tradition is not a stable entity, implying that the continuity of a tradition is in fact a recent act, through which (modern) nations selectively reinvent the past to look like ‘antique’ and ‘natural’ cultural units (Hobsbawm 14).

⁵ See the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which has not been ratified by Burma, as a case in point.

Considering that states and nations do not always overlap, Penrose and Mole perceive two dissimilar trajectories underlying the creation of nation-states (272-275). The first trajectory begins with the existence of a state, after which a nation has to be built that coincides with the state boundaries. The archetypical example of this model of nation-state formation is the French revolution of 1789 (Penrose and Mole 273). At first, the French revolutionaries aimed at establishing a state, which would recognize all people living in France as a part of the French nation via citizenship, in keeping with civic nationalism. But, it appeared to be the case that a more narrow understanding of the nation was needed, for a state is only deemed legitimate when representing the interests of a sole nation, leaving open two possibilities: breaking up the state into smaller nation-states, or, as happened in France, homogenizing (subversive) *ethnies* and nations within the state, in accordance with the tenets of ethnic nationalism (Penrose and Mole 273-274). Thus, in France, nation-building only started *after* the coming into being of the French state. The second trajectory is diametrically opposed to the ‘French model’, beginning with an existing, unified nation occupying a certain territory, which, after having proclaimed sovereignty over that same territory, will have to engage in state-building, in order to assume the form of a nation-state (Penrose and Mole 274). The commonality between both trajectories is that either one of them aims to “make the boundaries of the nation and the state coincide” (Penrose and Mole 274).

*1.4 Primordialism, Constructivism, and Instrumentalism*⁶

Hitherto, the discussion regarding the influence of nationalism on the politicization of identity has been concerned with *how* identity becomes politicized. That process of politicization may, in essence, be described as follows: First, individuals will self-categorize themselves through individual choices into different social groups. Then, those identity groups will constitute the surrounding social contexts wherein individuals operate collectively. The social milieus will result in relationships of domination and oppression between identity groups, ending in the politicization of the identity of some in society, thereby influencing, again, individual choices, seeing that individuals can either resist or surrender to the perceived threat. That being said, it is now expedient to turn to the question *why* identity becomes politicized, so as to add an extra dimension to the discussion. In that respect, the following three explicative approaches come to the fore: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism.

⁶ Previously, I have written a similar piece, which I am now extending, see: Boon, Raphael. “Nationalism and Nation-building in Thailand – A Multilayered Approach to Understand the Case of the Patani Malays.” *Religion and National Identity - A Comparative Perspective*. The Hague: n.p., 2014. 6-23. Print.

1.4.1. *Primordialism*

Firstly, and in contrast to constructivism, primordialism holds that political identities are ascribed, fixed and immutable, and determined by common ancestry (Yang 42). Primordialism thus assumes that political identities are innate and invariable (Samuels 153). Geertz argues, in that connection, that primordial ties stem from “the givens” of social existence rather than social interaction, that is, one’s “immediate contiguity and kin connection”, as well as one’s: religion, language, and customs (259). Similarly, Shils maintains that social attachments are largely a derivative of “primordial affinities”, in particular, blood ties (142). Both Shils and Geertz attribute “ineffable” import to primordial bonds (Shils 142; Geertz 259). So, primordialism views a political identity as static; you are born with it *physically* or you will internalize it *culturally* during childhood, as a result of which a political identity is choice-independent and change-resistant (Yang 42; Samuels 153). In line therewith, the primordialist school of thought can be divided into two currents: a biological one and a cultural one (Yang 42-43; Samuels 153-154). For one, the biological perspective emphasizes that genetic kinship bonds will extend from a nuclear family, to an extended family, to an identity group, bringing about ‘politicizable’ group loyalties (Yang 42; Samuels 153). For another, the cultural perspective stresses the value of common cultural and historical kinship connections, through which an emotional and psychological sense of belongingness to an “extended family” can be imagined, which is worth defending (Yang 43; Samuels 153). To conclude, primordial attachments can spur political action whenever the primordial ties of a collective of individuals are at risk, causing individuals to act “just as they would if their family were threatened” (Samuels 154).

1.4.2. *Constructivism*

Secondly, and in contrast to primordialism, constructivism claims that political identities are constructed (and reconstructed), flexible and mutable, and a product of society (Yang 44). Constructivism, therefore, presumes that political identities are acquired and variable (Samuels 153). As for *ethnies*, for example, Hagel underscores that “[t]he location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers” (153). With regard to nations, Anderson asserts that nations are also constructed, notably in the form of “imagined communities”, following the rise of print-capitalism and vernacular languages (1-7, 36-46). That is, “*all* communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (...) are imagined” and (re)constructed, since the size of nations precludes its members from knowing every co-national, despite appealing to just that belief, to the extent that people are willing “to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 6-7). Put

shortly, though alluding to primordialist-like qualities, nations can, in fact, be typified as modern, “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 13-14). Be that as it may, it is imperative to underline that Samuels’ political identity theory is essentially constructivist in nature. In Samuels’ view, a political identity is constructed in two related ways. First, within the bounds of congenital physical characteristics, individuals can *choose* what identity to adopt and what political significance to assign thereto, implying that identities can change, emerge and disappear, and differ in meaning as circumstances require (Samuels 157). Second, the salience of an individual’s political identity will hinge on particular political developments in one’s *social context*, so that the politicization of identity is not assumed, like primordialism does, but context-dependent, i.e. variable (Samuels 158). The interplay between individual choices and social contexts presupposes a constant (re)construction of identity, because both factors shape and constrain one another via processes of politicization (emphasizing differences) and depoliticization (emphasizing similarities), in the light of, for instance, “long-term social, economic, or technological change” (Samuels 161-168).

1.4.3 Instrumentalism

Thirdly, comprising both primordialist and constructivist features, instrumentalism purports that political identities are an instrument or strategic tool to advance economic or political interests (Varshney 282-285, 288). Whereas primordialism fails to explain why political identities change, emerge and disappear, and differ in salience depending on the circumstances, constructivism, for its part, meets with difficulties to clarify why people attach so much significance and loyalty to a political identity, e.g. citizenship of a nation, if it is merely an ‘imagined’ construct. Unlike the focus of primordialism and constructivism on the long-term *origins* of the coming into being of political identities, instrumentalism concentrates on the short-term *goals* for which political identities are formed (Thananithichot 252). The principal idea of the instrumentalist approach is that a political identity is “neither inherent in human nature nor intrinsically valuable”, for what matters is the usefulness of a political identity to attain a particular objective (Varshney 282; Yang 46). Instrumentalism basically holds that identities are fluid and acquire meaning so long as they are relevant to reach an interest (Varshney 288). Or, based on a cost-benefit analysis, the importance of a political identity is derived from the degree to which such an identity can serve as a means to reach an economic or political end (Thananithichot 252). In the course of the rational pursuit for power, leaders of interest groups can mobilize people by borrowing from the following discourses: primordialism and constructivism. On the one hand, leaders can tap into the rhetoric of primordial kinship bonds by *linking* ‘natural’ identity groups to economic and political interests. On the other, leaders may use constructivism as an interest-based mechanism to *create* political identities in accordance with their economic and political purposes. All in all, instrumentalists cannot only use

and manipulate identity to take power; they can also pragmatically deploy primordial and constructivist strategies to do so, in either case politicizing identity until the economic or political aims are met.

Having established *why* the politicization of identity occurs via the theories of primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism, and *how* the politicization of identity flows from processes of nation-state formation, the interrelations between *ethnies* and nations, and the interplay between political identities *vis-à-vis* national identities, it is opportune to move from the theoretical facet on nationalism to the general facet on Burmese nationalism, to see how Burmese nation-building, state-building, and nationalism took shape in practice.

Chapter 2. Burmese Nationalism: An Historical Overview

To figure out what the prevailing understanding of Burma's national identity, held by the post-independence Burmese state, amounts to, it is indispensable to subdivide and abstract Burma's complex history into manageable proportions. In that connection, the general patterns of Burmese nationalism can be split up into five distinct periods. The first episode to consider is the period up to Burma's independence, in which Burma was colonized by the British and fought for independence (1824-1948). Under the leadership of Aung San, Burma's struggle for independence seemed to end in an inclusive form of nation-building, in keeping with Burma's multi-ethnic population. But, Aung San was murdered just before Burma gained independence in 1948. The second phase of Burma's history, then, is marked by the rule of U Nu, who changed the plans of Aung San and adopted an exclusive, Burman-based view of Burma's national identity (1948-1962). Here, it is important to note that U Nu's polarizing move incited ethnic groups all over Burma to take up arms, heralding a period of sixty years of violence. In 1962, U Nu's government was toppled by Ne Win, ushering in the third period of Burma's history, characterized by military rule and the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' (1962-1988). By the year of 1988, Ne Win's position had become untenable, whereby a fourth stage in Burmese history ensued, i.e. that of prolonged military rule by Saw Maung and Than Shwe and the 'Roadmap to Democracy' (1988-2011). The last period to distinguish is the ongoing phase of Burma's transition from a military dictatorship to a democratic society under Thein Sein (2010-present). Recall, finally, that the purpose of this chapter is to set up a frame of reference, wherein the following case of the Rohingya will be situated.

2.1 British Burma, Aung San, and the Panglong Agreement (1824-1948)

Before the British started colonizing Burma in 1824, 'Burma' consisted of loosely affiliated, semi-autonomous kingdoms, with fluid borders, whose interrelations were founded on a tributary system, revolving around the dominant Burman Kingdom (Ricklefs et al. 93-99, 135-137). Although the concept of nationhood had not yet taken root at that time, it seems safe to say, in retrospect, that there had never existed anything like a pre-colonial "Burmese nation" (Yawnshwe 82). Lu Maung remarks that "the peoples of Burma [had] been divided since the beginning of history", witness, for example, the countless wars and counter wars waged between them (17, 21). In 1886, when the British eventually conquered the whole of 'Burma', the British gained control over a collective of feudal kingdoms, sharing a feudal heritage, which had, previous to that moment, not yet been under common political control (Lu Maung 20-21). The British, whose motives for colonizing Burma were security and profit, considered Burma's demographic disposition a minor point from the very start, simply incorporating Burma into the British Empire as a province of

British India – not as a separate colony (Smith 1999: 40-41). That is, “nation building was never a British priority” in Burma, nor was state-building (Smith 1999: 40; Smith 2007: 8-9)

The British annexation of Burma and the subsequent application of divide-and-rule policies merely aggravated and deepened the already existing differences. Tapping into those differences, the British colonialists did nonetheless create and politicize ethnic divisions which were non-existent in Burma’s pre-colonial era, by territorializing ethnic differences through mapping, periodic censuses, and the promulgation of discriminatory legislation (Gravers 2007: 13; Lu Maung 21-22). So, the politicization of ethnicity is in fact a modern phenomenon. As for that matter, colonial rule produced a number of bottlenecks for the unification process in post-independence Burma. To begin with, and most important, the British divided Burma into two separate administrative systems: Burma Proper (the plains of Burma) and Frontier Areas (the hills of Burma), thereby separating the Burmans from the non-Burmans (Gravers 2014b: 145). In Burma Proper, inhabited by the Burman ethnic majority, the British imposed direct rule, whereas the Frontier Areas, peopled by the non-Burman ethnic minorities, were ruled indirectly (Yawnshwe 84). Consequently, the Burmans were confronted with a *new*, modern administrative system, dismantling traditional power structures and dethroning the king, while the non-Burmans, once having recognized British supremacy, could hold onto their *old*, traditional administrative customs (Smith 1999: 41-43). By doing so, the British took advantage of the political situation in those days, politicizing identity in an instrumentalist way, as liberating the “former vassals”, i.e. the non-Burmans, from the yoke of feudalism under their previous “lords”, i.e. the Burmans, sufficed to bring about peace in the Frontier Areas, after which the exploitation of Burma Proper could commence (Yawnshwe 84-85).

In that regard, second, the incorporation of Burma into British India basically dissolved the Burman-Indian border, allowing for the unrestricted movement of people between both countries (Silverstein 1980: 32). Though the Burmans and non-Burmans did not immigrate to British India, the Indians, by contrast, did in large numbers come to Burma Proper, turning Burma into the “rice bowl of British India” (Lu Maung 20). The steady immigration of Indian workers, mostly of Muslim descent, “led to a popular belief among the Burmans that their country would soon be swamped” by an alien group (Silverstein 1980: 32-33). Adding to that fear, the Indians staffed many government departments, while the Indian Chettiars, a caste of bankers and moneylenders, owned most agricultural lands in the Burmese delta, rendering Burman agriculturalists dependent and impoverished, which nursed common grievance against British rule and fuelled nationalist feelings, strengthening the political identity of the Burmans accordingly (Smith 1999: 43-44; Ricklefs et al. 200-201). Fundamentally, Gravers points out that “the alien immigration was

resented by the Burmans” and that one “may find here the roots of the present anti-Muslim [sentiment]” in Burma, as appears from, among others, the anti-Indian riots after the Great Depression and during the Second World War; a matter which will return in Chapter 3 (2014: 146).

Moreover, third, the British dismantled all Burman-based forces and recruited their new armed forces mainly from the non-Burman minorities and Indians, classifying the army battalions depending on ethnicity, e.g. as “Karen Rifles”, “Chin Rifles” etc., exacerbating the process of ethnic self-categorization (Gravers 2007: 17). As Tinker puts it, “the military tradition was [one] of close identification of the soldier with his tribe or community rather than with the nation at large” (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 34). As a result, the local armed forces intentionally misrepresented the actual demographic composition of Burma, seeing that the Burman ethnic majority was ruled and policed by the non-Burman ethnic minorities and Indians (Silverstein 1980: 34). Fourth, and last, the ethnic Burmans of Burma Proper and the non-Burman ethnic minorities of the Frontier Areas fought on opposing sides during World War II, generating considerable communal violence from both parties (Smith 2007: 9-10). While the Burmans sided with the Japanese to overthrow the British and realize an “Asia for Asians”, the non-Burmans, who did not share the fierce anticolonial sentiments of the Burman nationalists, collaborated with the British ‘enemy’ instead (Ricklefs et al. 301-303). The Second World War, which ended British rule and cleared the way for Burmese independence, thus left the Burmans and non-Burmans totally at odds with one another.

From the 1930s onwards, it had been made clear by the British that Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas were to form a single nation-state at independence (Yawnshwe 84-88). But, when Burmese independence was approaching, the question how to unite the two areas was left to the Burmans and non-Burmans themselves. So, the key problem facing the political elite of the country, notably the independence leader Aung San, was how to bring the two parties together, as well as whether Burma would be built along inclusive or exclusive lines (Gravers 1999: 41). Gravers shows that Aung San opted for an inclusive model, as he rejected proposals to make Buddhism the state religion and underlined the importance of separating the realms of religion and politics from each other (1999: 41-52). More than that, Aung San strived for the incorporation of *all* ethnic groups under the auspices of a united Burma, thereby disassociating himself from the polarizing British policies, viz. using two separate administrative systems, that lay at the root of politicizing ethnicity (Gravers 1999: 42). In 1947, however, Aung San was murdered. With the demise of Aung San, followed by Burma’s proclamation of independence in 1948, the intended policy of realizing a federation of “Union States” was overridden and substituted with a more exclusive type of nationalism aiming for a unitary state (Sakhong 6).

Sakhong typifies the subsequent Burmese state as a “quasi-federal union”, whereas the essence of the Panglong Agreement of 1947 had been to create a “federal union” (1). At the Panglong Agreement, an agreement wherein some of the largest non-Burman ethnic minorities – not all non-Burman ethnic minorities were present – came to terms with the Burman majority to form the Union of Burma, the non-Burmans had been wary of forming a state with the Burmans, in view of the Burman-dictated feudal rivalries from the past and the likelihood of a contemporary repetition thereof in post-independence Burma. To alleviate that distrust, Aung San had made some significant promises to safeguard the rights of the non-Burmans, granting, in principle, the attending non-Burmans ‘full autonomy’ in exchange for joining the Union of Burma, thereby “entrenching an issue that would haunt nation-building in Burma long afterward” (Silverstein 1972: 6-9, 96-97; Ricklefs et al. 404-405). This is particularly so, because the materialization of a “federal union” never took place, as the assassination of Aung San occurred during the drafting process of the constitution of 1947, which, although unchanged to the letter, was interpreted entirely different by Aung San’s successor U Nu, to the great dissatisfaction of all non-Burman nations.

To conclude, Sakhong explains, with due regard to the concepts of nation-building and state-building, how Burma’s independence marked the beginning of a period of conflict, given that both a Burmese nation and a Burmese state had to be constructed (2-5). Remember, in that respect, that the so-called Burmese ‘nation’ comprised of many pre-colonial *ethnies*/nations, of which some now had agreed to form a “federal union”, as long as the Burman-led state would accommodate a friendly stance towards the non-Burmans. By order of U Nu, Aung San’s constitution of 1947 did no longer guarantee a similar protection. That is, U Nu pragmatically interpreted the ambiguous term “union” to refer to a unitary state, changing Burma from a “federal union” into a “quasi-federal union” (Sakhong 4-5). In that way, ‘state-building’ actually became a tool to engage in ‘Burman nation-building’, to the discontent of the non-Burmans, who quickly took up arms in response to U Nu’s move. The next sixty years of Burmese history are conflict-ridden, as the prevailing model of nationalism became characterized by the triad of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’, with a Burman-based conception of Burma’s national identity as a point of departure (Sakhong 2).

2.2 U Nu, ‘one religion’, and the 1962 coup (1948-1962)

Silverstein claims that U Nu took the view that “the ethnic, cultural, and territorial divisions among the peoples of Burma were artificial and largely the result of British rule and colonial policy and that in fact all the people were really one” (1981: 51). Considering that the constitution of 1947 does not explicitly mention the words “federal” or “federalism”, it should not come as a surprise

that U Nu construed the word “union” in the narrowest sense, disregarding the expectations of all minorities to obtain autonomy (Silverstein 1980: 186; Gravers 2007: 21). Whereas Aung San actively advocated for a Burma in keeping with the principle of ‘unity in diversity’, U Nu strongly disagreed therewith, arguing that “the solution of the minority problem [lay] in the cementing of racial bonds between all communities rather than in the dismembering of the Union and the creation of separate states” (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 150). From a primordial perspective, U Nu consistently underlined that “unity was natural among [the] ethnic groups of Burma”, since all the members of Burmese ethnic groups are “sons and daughters” of Burma and “kinsmen living in the same house in the same homeland” (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 149-150). Therefore, U Nu did not support the concept of minority rights, holding that the concept of minority rights was “a clever invention of the Imperialists to enable them to divide and rule”, i.e. an impediment to national unity and the realization of a unitary state (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 151).

In addition to U Nu’s dissociation from Aung San’s view with regard to national unity, U Nu equally ignored Aung San’s vision apropos of religion. For one, Aung San had emphasized unremittingly that “in politics there is no room for religion”, whereby Burma had to become a secular state, ensuring religious pluralism, in order to avert the politicization of religion and concomitant societal tensions (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 143-144; Sakhong 5). For another, U Nu, who was a pious Buddhist, instigated a government-sponsored religious revival of Buddhism, utilizing Buddhism as a “panacea” for all worldly problems, thereby mixing the realm of politics with religion (Smith 1965: 141-148). Besides, U Nu vigorously propagated Buddhism among the non-Buddhist people in the Frontier Areas, furthering the process of ‘Burmanization’ there (Smith 1965: 154). By doing so, U Nu manifestly violated the prohibition on “the abuse of religion for political purposes”, articulated in Burma’s constitution of 1947 (Gravers 1999: 56). Still, the most controversial and greatest violation followed when U Nu, after winning elections, turned Buddhism into the state religion of Burma in 1961, in line with, so he argued, “the desire of the overwhelming majority of Buddhists” – 89% of Burma’s population is Buddhist (Smith 1965: 263; Gravers 2014c: 293). Although U Nu tried to reassure Burma’s religious minorities that their rights would not be undermined, U Nu’s efforts were to no avail, as the politicization of the identities of non-Buddhists incited violence all over Burma (Sakhong 5-6). Then, in a “grand gesture” to stop the revolts, U Nu proposed to hold a “Federal Seminar” in 1962, so as to, at last, discuss the issue of federalism, but “just before U Nu was scheduled to speak, the military struck, seizing all the participants and ending all debate on this issue”, whereupon Ne Win assumed power (Silverstein 1981: 53).

2.3 Ne Win, 'one language', and the 1988 coup (1962-1988)

The military coup headed by Ne Win presented a new epoch in Burmese nationalism, shifting the 'center of gravity' from 'one religion' to 'one language' (Sakhong 7-9). Under U Nu's rule, Burmese nationalism had been closely connected with Buddhism, culminating in the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion of Burma. Yet, after seizing power, Ne Win almost immediately reversed U Nu's religious policies (Silverstein 1981: 239). As a result, the state no longer functioned as the patron of Buddhism, the conversion by the government of non-Buddhists in the Frontier Areas stopped, and all religious groups were thenceforth treated more or less equally. In place thereof, Ne Win would come to mix nationalism with socialism and stringent language policies, continuing and complementing the process of 'Burmanization' from a different perspective. The pivot of Ne Win's administration revolved around the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' and a twofold political strategy: (I) centralization and militarization of the state and (II) undertaking military counterinsurgency campaigns to end the armed opposition by non-Burman ethnic minorities (Smith 1999: 199). In that way, Ne Win adhered even more strenuously to the idea of a unitary state than U Nu, stating: "Federalism is impossible; it will destroy the Union" (qtd. in Smith 2007: 31). To justify and legitimize such stance, Ne Win strategically single out a passage from Aung San's speeches, wherein Aung San had underlined that the unity of a nation prevails over its parts: "Though Race, religion, and language are important factors it is only their traditional desire and will to live in unity through weal and woe that binds a people together and makes them a nation" (qtd. in Silverstein 1980: 231). In other words, Ne Win claimed to rule in succession to Aung San, so as to confer a sense of historical continuity on the military regime's efforts to protect the unity and independence of Burma.

In the quest for national unity, the 'Four Cuts' campaign and the adoption of Burmese as Burma's official language stand out as particularly controversial. By means of the 'Four Cuts' campaign, Ne Win's government tried to end rebellion and engage in nation-building, by cutting off insurgents from four links: food, funds, intelligence, and recruits (Smith 1999: 259-260). Moreover, the 'Four Cuts' campaign forcibly relocated entire communities, which were, thereupon, mobilized to fight against the remaining insurgents. The declaration of Burmese as the *sole* national language of Burma in the constitution of 1974, the nationalization of all schools, and the imposition of Burmese as the medium of instruction contributed to the isolation of the insurgents and the homogenization of Burma's multi-ethnic population (Sakhong 8). That is, by rendering all non-Burmese languages legally unofficial, Ne Win facilitated discriminatory practices against the languages of the non-Burman ethnic minorities. In that regard, Sakhong highlights that the 'Four Cuts' campaign and Ne Win's language policies were associated as follows: "In order to cut

‘information’ off in ethnic areas, successive military regimes in Burma have prohibited the publication of any information in ethnic languages. So, there is no independent newspaper, no independent radio station and no printing house for any ethnic language” (qtd. in Sakhong 9). Thus, while promoting Burmese on the one hand, Ne Win systematically eliminated and politicized the languages of the non-Burman ethnic minorities on the other, using language as an instrument to create a new sense of belonging among the non-Burmans. By the year of 1988, Ne Win’s isolationist ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ had become untenable, as Burma was virtually bankrupt, causing public dissatisfaction, mass pro-democracy demonstrations, and, ultimately, Ne Win’s resignation (Ricklefs et al. 372-373).

2.4 *Saw Maung and Than Shwe, ‘one ethnicity’, and democracy (1988-2010)*

After the fall of Ne Win’s military socialist regime, Burma approached “anarchic collapse” as more than 60 % of Burma’s territory, although representing only 10% of Burma’s population, was no longer under the effective control of Burma’s central authorities (Steinberg 2001: 186; Ricklefs et al. 372). Given that civilian leaders failed to restore public order in the transitional period following Ne Win’s departure, the army, the “savior of the nation”, once more staged a coup to end the popular protests, brutally suppressing the unrest in so doing (Taylor 393-395). Getting rid of Ne Win’s socialism, Burmese nationalism now became a tool to legitimize and glorify the historical significance of the *Tatmadaw* (the armed forces of Burma) in keeping the Union intact (Gravers 1999: 126). Take notice that, since 1962, the *Tatmadaw* had increasingly become a Burman-centric institution, whereby army rule essentially boiled down to Burman rule, excluding the non-Burmans from participation in government (Smith 2007: 20-23). Yet, despite this anomaly, the military consistently purported that “The Army is the Nation!” and that being against military rule was tantamount to being anti-national (Gravers 1999: 115-116). To mark the institutional dominance of the Burmans in the state apparatus of Burma, Saw Muang, the leader of the authors of the *coup d’état* in Burma, changed Burma’s name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 (Sakhong 11). As the terms ‘Burma’ and ‘Burmese’ originated from the British colonialists, the usage of the indigenous word ‘*Myanma*’ more accurately acknowledged the individuality of post-independence Burma (Lu Muang 71). But, in Burmese, ‘*Myanma*’ has an exclusively Burman connotation, so that, after the change of name, the Burmese nation-state explicitly came to represent the dominant ethnic group in society, i.e. the Burmans, politicizing the ethnic identities of the non-Burmans accordingly (Lu Muang 71; Sakhong 11). With the official recognition of ‘one ethnicity’, the re-adoption of a Buddhist-friendly attitude, and the continuation of the assimilatory language policies, the triad of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’, with a Burman-based conception of Burma’s

national identity, had grown to full stature under Saw Maung and, thereafter, Than Shwe (Gravers 2014c: 305-307; Sakhong 14-14).

That being said, it was maintained from the very beginning that the *Tatmadaw* had only temporarily seized power so as to re-establish public order (Ricklefs et al. 373). When the military refused to hand over power after multi-party elections had been held in 1990, arguing that the time was not yet ripe for a return to civilian rule, it was feared by the international community and national opposition groups that the army would come to rule perpetually, by sustaining a (self-created) crisis atmosphere, wherein the army could legitimately hold onto power (Gravers 1999: 116-117). Claiming, in 1992, that the transition to civilian rule could merely occur under a suitable constitution, the *Tatmadaw* seemed, for a long time, to postpone the actual drafting process thereof indefinitely (Taylor 413, 489). In 2003, the military only added to that impression when announcing the 'Roadmap to Democracy' without any timetable (Taylor 491). In the meantime, however, the government had, despite ongoing conflicts, concluded over 25 ceasefire agreements with antagonistic armed insurgents, ameliorating the center-periphery relations and restoring, on the whole, peace in Burma's border areas (Smith 2007: 1-2; Taylor 433-445). Hence, in 2008, after having re-established public order, the long-awaited key to democracy, the constitution of 2008, finally materialized, foreshadowing elections in 2010, after which the transition from army rule to civilian rule could take place.

2.5 Thein Sein, militant Buddhism, and the Rohingya (2010-present)

In spite of the (inter)national appraisal for Burma's return to democracy, democracy cannot be considered a cure-all for Burma's protracted nation-building problems. In that connection, Zaw Win underlines that "[c]ontrary to most popular assumptions, a nation will not ensue with the re-advent of democracy" (27). More worrisome are the observations Smith made when analyzing the relationship between democracy and Buddhism during U Nu's period of office, claiming: "Whatever the degree of support given by Buddhism to democracy, it is quite clear that the democratic political system stimulated and encouraged the trend to bring religion openly in political life" (1965: 312-313). Indeed, the primacy of Buddhism in Burma's democratization process forms one of the most striking corollaries of Burma's transition to democracy (Gravers 2014c: 319-320). The gist of the politically engaged Buddhism in Burma centers on the idea that Buddhism is, at present, in danger, in particular by the threat of Islam – 4% of Burma's population is Muslim (Gravers 2014c: 313-314).

Though there is also a progressive line of Buddhism aiming to establish Western-style democracy in Burma, the more conservative line of Buddhism, which views Western-style

democracy as incompatible with Burmese culture, has monopolized the dominant voice in politics, adhering to an aggressive ethnic nationalist conception of how democracy ought to function, thereby extending the process of ‘Burmanization’ into the present (Gravers 2015: 4; Gravers 2014c: 319-320). Having the upper hand, the nationalist 969 movement, which is publicly supported by Burma’s president Thein Sein, plays a pivotal role in spreading the anti-Muslim propaganda, alarming for the coming of a ‘Dark Age’ if the rise of Islam persists; a message with an immense impact upon the average Burman (Gravers 2014c: 315, 317). Apart from protecting Buddhism, the nationalist 969 movement equally aims at defending the Burman nation, race and, language from “Muslim conquest”, illustrating that democracy is far from resistant to the triad of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’ (Ytzen and Gravers 56-7). Note, in that respect, that the army is still a very powerful actor in Burmese politics, since, in fact, Burma’s ‘limited’ democracy is founded on a power-sharing structure between civilian leaders and the *Tatmadaw* (Ricklefs et al. 464). As for the implications of the politicization of Islam, the anti-Muslim riots in 2012 and 2013, allegedly organized by the nationalist 969 movement, come to the fore as the most striking feature of the current political climate in Burma, targeting and affecting, above all, the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority living in Arakan State (Gravers 2014c: 314).

Having considered the history of Burmese nationalism, the connecting thread weaving through the sustained process of ‘Burmanization’ in post-independence Burma has been the strenuous application of the model of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’, albeit in varying degrees of intensity. Victimizing many of the non-Burman ethnic minorities in the course of time, at present, the Rohingya stand out as a special case. Therefore, it is apt to move from the general facet on Burmese nationalism to the specific facet on the Rohingya, to assess the implications of Burmese nationalism for the Rohingya.

Chapter 3. The Rohingya: “Original Settlers” vs. “Illegal Immigrants”

Today, approximately one fifth of the population in Arakan State is Rohingya, amounting to roughly 725,000 individuals in proportion to an Arakanese population estimated at 4 million people (Gravers 2014: 310c; Thawnghmung 324). It should be mentioned, however, that the term ‘Rohingya’ is politically charged, controversial, and polarized. Basically, the Rohingya debate can be typified by two, albeit accentuated, ways of thinking. For one, the pro-Rohingya camp takes the view that the Rohingya are an ethnically distinct group, descending from Muslim seafarers who settled in Burma in the ninth century, which, through the ages, have mixed with Bengalis, Persians, Moghuls, Turks and Pathans, in line with the historically pluralistic population of Arakan State (Human Rights Watch 1996: 10; Zarni and Cowley 693). For another, the contra-Rohingya camp is of the opinion that the ‘Rohingya’ are a modern construct, comprising, principally, of illegal Chittagonian Bengalis that arrived as a by-product of British colonial rule, who use the invented ‘Rohingya’ ethnicity as an identity-marker to obtain Burmese citizenship (Human Rights Watch 1996: 10; Zarni and Cowley 694).

The *dissensus* notwithstanding, Berlie argues that the Rohingya ought to be looked upon as a separate ethnic group, as the Rohingya share: a common proper name, a myth of common descent, a link with a homeland, a set of collective historical memories, a common culture, and a sense of solidarity (25). When assuming a similar starting point, then, the Rohingya possess two more distinguishing features, namely that of speaking Rohingya and practicing Islam (Yegar 1972: 25; Berlie 9-10). Mindful of the triad of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’, the Rohingya may be described, at its simplest, as a people who: are Rohingya, speak Rohingya, and practice Islam, thereby deviating, in full, from the Burman-based conception of Burma’s national identity. Nevertheless, in multi-ethnic Burma, which officially acknowledges ‘135 national races’, such observation is insufficient to understand why the political identity of the Rohingya (who are not recognized as a ‘national race’) is particularly problematic. It is of vital importance, therefore, to gain a deeper insight into the existential controversy concerning the Rohingya. To do so, first, an uncritical pro-Rohingya account of the history of the Rohingya will follow. Subsequently, the critical comments of the contra-Rohingya stance will be provided. Thereafter, the final section will discuss the ‘135 national races’ of Burma, the ‘Union Spirit’, and the Citizenship Law of 1982.

3.1 *The history of the Rohingya*

Starting with the pro-Rohingya angle, Yegar holds that the very first Muslims in Burma arrived as seafarers in the ninth century, bringing Islam to the coastlands of Arakan (2002: 19). The

designation ‘Rohingya’, for instance, is said to stem from the word ‘Rohang’ or ‘Rohan’, the ancient name of the Arakan region in the ninth and tenth century (Muang Yin 164-165). Throughout history, the number of Muslims in Burma grew steadily, but conversion of the Buddhist majority remained limited, given that the Burmese kings already protected Buddhism from external influences early on (Yegar 2002: 21). In the Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan, however, Islam gained a stronger foothold, because of its relative isolation to the rest of Burma (due to an inhospitable chain of hills) and its proximity to Islamic Bengal (Yegar 2002: 23). The influence of Islam manifested itself, in particular, by the custom of Arakanese kings to adopt Islamic titles, employ Muslims in the royal administration, and the utilization of Bengali coinage (Thawngmung 324). Only in 1785 did the Kingdom of Arakan become a part of the Burman Kingdom, after centuries of cultural interaction with the Sultanate of Bengal, long after the original settlement of the Rohingya, whose ethnic identity formation was nonetheless still fluid in those days (Yegar 2002: 24; Zarni and Cowley 693).

Then, in 1824, the British arrived, thereupon gradually gaining control over Burma via the Anglo-Burmese Wars. With the British in power, Burma became a province of British India, leading up to a significant increase of the Muslim population in Burma, as a result of Indian immigration (Yegar 2002: 27). In the sparsely populated region of Arakan, the Indian immigrants consisted mostly of Chittagonian Bengalis, coming from neighboring Islamic Bengal, considerably elevating the number of Muslims in Arakan too, while, at the same time, obfuscating the ethnic boundaries with the Rohingya; a major bone of contention in the current Rohingya debate (Thawngmung 324). During the Second World War, which was fought along racial lines, most of the Muslims in Arakan, i.e. Rohingya and Chittagonian Bengalis, combatted on behalf of the British, as the British had promised to grant them a separate Muslim state in northern Arakan in exchange for their loyalty (Yegar 1972: 96). Conversely, the Arakanese Buddhists sided “wholeheartedly” with the Japanese liberators (Smith 1999: 64). Once the Japanese managed to dislodge the British, a power vacuum originated that brought about serious communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims, ending in mass murders from both sides (Yegar 2002: 33-35). Owing to the mutual atrocities, Arakan State was *de facto* subdivided into two parts after World War II. The North became controlled by the Muslims and the South fell in the hands of the Buddhists (Chan 408).

When Burma’s independence was forthcoming after World War II, the Chittagonian Bengalis felt more affiliated to the objectives of the Muslim League in India, demanding that northern Arakan be incorporated into the nascent Muslim state of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), rather than Buddhist Burma, but both Aung San and Jinnah refused a similar course of events

(Yegar 1972: 96). Importantly, Yegar highlights that “[t]he Rohingya did not especially favor” the request of the Chittagonian Bengalis, illustrating that the Muslim community in Arakan was actually divided (1972: 96-97). But, by the year of 1948, when Burma gained independence, the different positions between the Rohingya and the Chittagonian Bengalis were disregarded; with all its consequences for the Rohingya, who, predominantly in the eyes of the more recent Burmese governments, had equally “threatened Burma’s territorial integrity in the eve of independence and could never be trusted again” (Yegar 2002: 28-30; Human Rights Watch 1996:11). To complicate matters further, after having been denied annexation to East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), the *Mujahideen* rebellion ensued in 1948, wherein the more radical Rohingya united with the Chittagonian Bengalis, for the purpose of obtaining at least a separate state *within* Burma, like the British had formerly promised (Yegar 1972: 96-97). The more moderate Rohingya, on the other hand, strongly opposed the rebellion, claiming that “the vast majority of Arakanese Muslims did not support them” (Yegar 1972: 96). Some Rohingya leaders even petitioned U Nu for arms to fight against the rebels, but to no avail, so that, in virtually lawless Arakan, the law of the jungle reigned, leaving the majority of the Rohingya subordinate to the violent dictates of a minority of rebels (Yegar 1972: 97). As an ‘awakened’ *ethnie*, during all that time, the Rohingya stressed, in contrast to the Pakistani-disposed Chittagonian Bengalis, that “the Rohingya were indigenous sons of Arakan, descendants of Muslim settlers of hundreds of years ago, differing from neighboring Chittagongs despite the similarities in language, culture, race, and despite the identity of religion” (Yegar 1972: 97-98).

Whereas the constitution of 1947 still tolerated the existence of the Rohingya as a Burmese minority, subsequent events made the Rohingya the most precarious Muslim group in Burma today (Berlie 48). That is, U Nu’s democratic government, allegedly to stay in power, expressly recognized the Rohingya as a legitimate ethnic group in Burma, giving them national registration cards, allowing them to vote, and permitting them to stand as candidates for state parliament (Zarni and Cowley 695-697; Thawnghmung 326; Arcaro and Desaine 168-169). As for Burmese nationalism, Arcaro and Desaine observe how in 1962, when Ne Win rose to power after a military coup, the process of ‘Burmanization’ took on a new meaning for the Rohingya (152-153; 158-160). Ne Win, an experienced military commander, made the army the central institution of Burma. Under military rule, the minority-friendly constitution of 1947 was abolished and replaced by a non-institutionalized vision of Burma as essentially Burman. Accordingly, every non-Burman element in Burmese society was brought out into the limelight, whereupon the army became a decisive actor in defining the boundaries of ‘Burmese-ness’, notably via the list of ‘135 national races’, the rhetoric of a ‘Union Spirit’, and the Citizenship Law of 1982. Ne Win proved

considerably less accommodating to the Rohingya, targeting several military campaigns against the supposed “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh”, who, so Ne Win argued, had substantially grown in numbers, as the Bengali *Mujahideens*, who came during British colonial rule, had deliberately encouraged fellow Bengalis to enter Burma during the *Mujahideen* rebellion, when, in post-independence Burma, the Burmese central authorities lacked control over the border with East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) (Thawngmung 326; Yegar 1972: 100). In other words, from then onwards, the Rohingya were no longer recognized as Burmese citizens, which, to date, remains the official standpoint of all post-1962 Burmese governments.

Seeking to separate nationals from non-nationals, Ne Win instigated a first military campaign, called *Nagamin* (“Dragon King”), in 1978, in order to “[take] actions against foreigners who [had] filtered into the country illegally”; specifically taking away all official documentation U Nu had previously attributed to the Rohingya throughout that operation (qtd. in Zarni and Cowley 707). To make matters worse, the plight of the Rohingya became legalized with the Citizenship Law in 1982. In essence, the Citizenship Law of 1982 is based on the ethnic nationalist principle of *jus sanguinis*, officially degrading the status of the Rohingya from (pending) Burmese citizens to stateless ‘foreigners’ on Burmese soil (Arcaro and Desaine 153-154; Lewa 12-13). When, in 1990, Saw Muang refused to hand over power after multi-party elections had been held, mass demonstrations against the military regime provoked a second military campaign against the Rohingya in 1991, so as to divert attention away from the government. Or, to create unity in Burma’s core, a (self-created) crisis in Burma’s borderlands *vis-à-vis* a common enemy was thought expedient to remedy the volatile situation; a clear example of the politicization of identity for political goals (Thawngmung 326; Lintner qtd. in Human Rights Watch 1996: 12).

Parnini exposes how the complexity of the Rohingya question is further problematized on account of the fact that the successive military campaigns against the Rohingya have caused many Rohingya to flee abroad, mainly to Bangladesh (281-296). Bangladesh, for its part, does not recognize the Rohingya as ‘Bangladeshi’ either, causing the Rohingya to be trapped in a deadlock situation, where Burma and Bangladesh toss the Rohingya problem back and forth. The military campaigns of 1978 and 1991, for example, led to veritable exoduses of the Rohingya to Bangladesh, expelling 220,000 and 250,000 Rohingya respectively (Grundy-Warr and Wong 83-85). In both cases, some claim forcefully, the exoduses were concluded with mass repatriations of the refugees from Bangladesh back to Burma, adding to the discourse of portraying the Rohingya as ‘Bangladeshi’, i.e. by no means improving the state of affairs (Grundy-Warr and Wong 85-87).

The most recent outbreak of disturbances between Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan State occurred in 2012, when an alleged rape of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men produced a wave of communal violence from both sides, culminating in the declaration of a state of emergency and the displacement of about 100,000 Rohingya (Robinson and Rahman 16). Interestingly, Thawngmung points out that, just like the present Burmese government, the majority of Arakan Buddhists also deny the existence of the Rohingya, linking such contemporary stance of the Arakanese inhabitants – in the 1960s the Arakanese Buddhists battled together with the Arakanese Muslims for an independent Arakanistan – to, among others, the grievances and hatred stemming from earlier inter-ethnic fighting and a provision in the constitution of 2008, which would allow for a “self-autonomous region” for the Rohingya, based on their demographic disposition in Arakan State (328-329; Yegar 1972: 97, 101). The past clashes can be viewed as yet another manifestation of a deep-seated anti-foreigner xenophobia, which came about during colonial rule and remains present in the political climate of Burma (Gravers 2014c: 310). The current public discourse depicting the Rohingya as ‘Bangladeshi’ is merely contributing thereto, inciting discontent among the populace and making leeway for populist, militant Buddhist politicians to take up the issue (Gravers 2014c: 311-318). Given the Rohingya boat refugee crisis in 2015, finally, Robinson and Rahman assert that the “only practical long-term solution” would be to grant the Rohingya Burmese citizenship, despite the atrocities of the past (18). On the other hand, as Grundy-Warr and Wong put it, a viable alternative is to offer a well-protected right of asylum to those forced to seek refuge in Bangladesh or a third country, without eventually imposing a dead-end repatriation of the Rohingya back to Burma, as happened formerly after the military campaigns of 1978 and 1991 (88-89).

3.2 The construction of the ‘Rohingya’

Proceeding with the contra-Rohingya camp, Chan rejects the historical presence of the ‘Rohingya’ in Arakan State, contending that the ‘Rohingya’ are in reality “the direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh)” (397). These immigrants started migrating to the Arakan region after the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which marked the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and the annexation of Arakan by the British. When the British gained authority over Arakan, they soon introduced a policy of migration from British India to Arakan, in order to increase its economic productivity and exploit its favorable agricultural conditions. Migration was facilitated by the fact that Arakan was no longer separated from British India by a border, while, at the same time, the British did not impose any numerical restrictions on emigration between provinces in British India either (Chan 399). As a consequence, the ‘original’, pre-colonial Muslim community of Arakan, which Chan recognizes as Burmese, was supplemented by a substantial amount of Muslim migrants from India, principally Chittagonian

Bengalis, who quickly became the numerically dominant ethnic group in northern Arakan (Chan 397, 401).

Unlike Berlie, who suggests that the Muslim community of Burma can be divided into four separate groups, namely: Burmese Muslims, Indian Muslims, Arakan Muslims or ‘Rohingya’, and Panthays, Chan holds the view that Indian Muslims and Arakanese Muslims or ‘Rohingya’ are actually one and the same people, which ought to be distinguished from Burmese Muslims and Panthays (396-398; 412). Called “Chittagonians” in the British colonial records, the term ‘Rohingya’ only came into use as from the 1950s, being an invention of Bengali intellectuals to secure a niche for the Chittagonian Bengalis in the ethnically-defined population of Burma, after the irredentist demand by the Indian Muslims to become a part of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) had failed and a later proposal to create an independent Muslim state within Burma had equally fallen on deaf ears (Chan 397, 408-409). Put differently, the word ‘Rohingya’ “cannot be found in any historical source in any language before [the 1950s]”, for the Chittagonian Bengalis had, until that time, used the name “Muslims of Arakan” as their political identity (Chan 397, 412).

In addition to Chan, Leider holds that the term ‘Rohingya’ is far from being undisputed in academia – which, incidentally, is indeed the case. That is, the exact origins of the word ‘Rohingya’ remain an issue under debate, considering that the usage of the name before the 1950s is scarce, if not inexistent, whereas the contemporary popularity of the designation does not amount to ascribing “ethnic-cum-religious” qualities to the “floating category” either (Leider 216-218). Leider demonstrates how the ‘Rohingya’, arguably the direct descendants of Bengali ancestors, changed political strategies depending on the actions demanded per historical situation (227-249). Basically, the ‘Rohingya’ first opted to join East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). When that failed, the ‘Rohingya’ tried to obtain a Muslim state in Burma. Those efforts were again without success, so that, in the end, the ‘Rohingya’, by then rendered illegal, could only apply for Burmese citizenship. To do so, however, the ‘Rohingya’ needed to have a legitimate ‘history’ to support their “imagined community”, leading to the invention of the ‘Rohingya’ as a separate Burmese, i.e. non-Bengali, ‘national race’. Despite the attempts to “play by the rules of the Union”, the Burmese central authorities proved unwilling to accept such reproduction of history by the Chittagonian Bengalis, simply denying the ‘Rohingya’ citizenship instead, by means of the Citizenship Law of 1982 (Leider 237).

3.3 The '135 national races', the 'Union Spirit' and the Citizenship Law of 1982

The denial of Burmese citizenship to the Rohingya comes to the fore in the absence of the Rohingya on the list of the '135 national races' of Burma; a list consisting of Burma's pre-colonial, 'indigenous races' (Gravers 2014c: 311; Lewa 11). In post-colonial Burma, the main challenges for the Burmese policymakers were how to create a viable nation-state and how to define Burma's national identity, with an eye to create unity among the multi-ethnic population of Burma (Zarni and Cowley 697). A major moot point, in that regard, was how to deal with the 'excrescences' of British colonial rule, notably the large-scale immigration of Indian migrants to Burma in the period from 1824 to 1948. Compromising between an ethnic nationalist and civic nationalist approach, Ne Win's administration would come to indicate the decisive direction to take for Burma's nation-building project, by adopting the ethnic nationalist concept of '135 national races' as the differentiating factor to separate nationals from non-nationals. Ne Win's underlying line of thought for that list may be described as follows: "We, the natives or Burmese nationals, were unable to shape our own destiny. We were subjected to the manipulations of others from 1824 to 1948" (qtd. in Zarni and Cowley 698). Thus, to undo Burma's regained independence from any foreign "manipulations", Ne Win essentially had to fall back on the last period of Burmese self-determination foregoing British colonial rule, thereby applying the year of 1824 as a baseline to define the scope of the *Taingyintha* ("original children of the soil"), which, thereupon, resulted in the formulation of the list of the '135 national races' of Burma (Zarni and Cowley 698-699).

In theory, the *Taingyintha* interrelate with one another on the basis of the principle of equality, seeing that the Burmans are but one 'national race' among the other, non-Burman 'national races' (Cheesman 215). To unite the multi-ethnic 'indigenous races' of Burma into a Burmese nation, the Burmese policymakers have employed multiple techniques to create a common sense of belonging among Burma's '135 national races'. For one, the Burmese state circulated a discourse of 'unity in diversity' by emphasizing how *all* '135 national races' are said to be presented with a (primordialist-like) 'Union Spirit'; a commonality that creates unity between them for the cause of maintaining Burma's territorial integrity (Cheesman 216-218). The 'Union Spirit' acquires meaning in the light of the common origins and shared experiences of the Burmese 'indigenous races', who have been "drinking the same water, for aeons of time, *having been born of the same ancestry*" (Cheesman 217). Or, via the construction of the 'Union Spirit', the multi-ethnic Burmese population has been casted into an "imagined community", based on a primordial myth of common descent, the divisive experience of British colonial rule, and an, since time immemorial, indestructible pursuit to continue the self-preservation of Burma (Cheesman 217). For another, the remaining methods of unification, which successive Burmese governments have used to create a

‘sense of togetherness’, have been, paradoxically enough, to subdue the ‘135 national races’ to a process of ‘Burmanization’ and centralization, giving a rather Burman-centric edge to the rhetoric of ‘unity in diversity’, virtually plunging post-independence Burma, as has been discussed comprehensively in Chapter 2, in a long-lasting state of strife (Cheesman 217-219).

Finally, Zarni and Cowley call attention to the drafting process and promulgation of the Citizenship Law of 1982 as *the* crucial events in the ‘de-Burmanization’ of the Rohingya (701-705). From the 1960s onwards, Ne Win’s government had kept loosely to promoting and institutionalizing the concept of the *Taingyintha*, yet, following the *Nagamin* campaign and the agreed-upon mass repatriation of the Rohingya back to Burma, Ne Win decided to seal Burma’s contra-Rohingya attitude with the legalization of the list of the ‘135 national races’, through the adoption of the Citizenship Law of 1982 (Cheesman 216; Zarni and Cowley 703). To do so, Ne Win’s policymakers arguably ignored the scarce, but existent, evidence of the pre-colonial presence of the Rohingya in Burma, while, at the same time, consciously using a British exploratory survey from 1824, which did *not* make reference to the term ‘Rohingya’, to establish the list of Burma’s ‘national races’ (Zarni and Cowley 692-694, 703). So, “based on *one* survey by the British colonialists – surveys which were extremely problematic” (emphasis added), the drafting committee delegitimized all claims by the Rohingya to constitute a Burmese ‘indigenous race’ (Zarni and Cowley 692, 703). Falling outside the list of the ‘135 national races’, who obtained full citizenship rights, the Rohingya became a *de facto* stateless people, as the stringent requirements to (re)gain Burmese citizenship under the Citizenship Law of 1982 are well-nigh impossible to meet (Thawngmung 329-331). In consequence, the Rohingya have been denied *all* political and economic rights accompanying Burmese citizenship since 1982, leading to very serious human rights violations, which, in the course of time, have been specified as: crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide (Human Rights Watch 2013; Zarni and Cowley).

Conclusion

This Thesis has attempted to approach Burmese nation-building, state-building, and nationalism by means of three distinct facets: a theoretical facet, a general facet, and a specific facet. Considering all facets together, a final, informed analysis of the case of the Rohingya will be made, so as to establish *in what ways the political identity of the Rohingya conflicts with the prevailing understanding of Burma's national identity, held by the post-independence Burmese state.*

To begin with, it is important to realize that a nation-state is a construct, i.e. a modern political unit linking an “imagined community” to a geographic territory. Given that both a nation and a state are abstract entities, nation-states need to create a grand narrative wherein the nation and the state are collectively rooted into time-immemorial, with the nation-state as a ‘natural’ outcome of a teleological process. To feign a sense of historical continuity, the “invention of tradition” has proven to be a formidable instrument to write the nation-state into existence, especially in combination with the rise of print-capitalism and vernacular languages, which, in modern times, symbiotically linked “invented traditions” and “imagined communities” to each other, creating fully-fledged nations. Modernization, then, can be understood as a process where the separate entities of the nation and the state gradually congregate, marking the beginning of the era of nation-building, state-building, and nationalism. In that regard, Burma's pathway to modernization was characterized by a false start, as the British colonialists did not engage in nation-building nor state-building, bringing about considerable difficulties for the prospective Burmese nation-state. That is, through ethnicity-centered divide and rule policies, the British instrumentally politicized the feudal power relations pertaining to pre-colonial Burma, turning, in due course, apolitical, “other-defined” *ethnies* into political, “self-defined” nations.

In multi-ethnic Burma, the post-independence Burmese state preceded the existence of a Burmese nation. In that connection, it would have been advisable to build the Burmese state in keeping with the tenets of a “federal union”, while adopting a civic nationalist approach to define the Burmese nation, seeing that the post-independence Burmese state actually encompassed many *ethnies*/nations. But, the Burmese grand narrative has been an exclusive undertaking from the very start, due to the fact that the demographic disposition of Burma, i.e. the size of the different *ethnies*/nations, resulted in the Burman ethnic majority having primacy over the non-Burman ethnic minorities. Consequently, the dominant interpretation of Burma's national identity, propagated by the post-independence Burmese state, has been that Burma's national identity ought to be Burman-based, consistent with the principles of ethnic nationalism. Adhering to the triad of ‘one ethnicity, one language, and one religion’, to be Burmese is, essentially: to be Burman, speak Burmese, and

practice Buddhism, resulting in the structural politicization of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities of the non-Burman ethnic minorities. Subordinated to a process of ‘Burmanization’, the non-Burmans have been refusing integration and assimilation *en masse* ever since Burma gained independence, holding on to their identities, even at the cost of conflict, as a consequence of deep-seated “primordial affinities”. While it was hoped that Burma’s transition to democracy could ameliorate and de-politicize Burma’s majority-minority bargain, militant Buddhism has gained momentum, opposing the threat of Islam in general and the presence of the Rohingya in particular.

Looking at the political identity of the Rohingya and the national identity of post-independence Burma, the Rohingya, who are Rohingya, speak Rohingya, and practice Islam, are to be typified as an ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority. Unlike the ‘135 national races’ of Burma, the Rohingya have experienced an anomalous trajectory of Burmese nationalism, being subject to the process of ‘Burmanization’ until 1962, after which a process of ‘de-Burmanization’ ensued. Or, the Burmese nation-building project initially *included* the Rohingya as Burmese citizens, but *excluded* the Rohingya once they were rendered stateless and labeled illegal Chittagonian Bengalis. Thus, since 1962, the *individual choice* to self-identify as Rohingya is politicized by a hostile contra-Rohingya *social context*, for the Rohingya ethnicity is seen as a ‘fake’, ‘invented’ identity-marker to obscure the instrumentalist efforts of “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh” to obtain Burmese citizenship. Conversely, the Rohingya have increasingly come to self-categorize as Rohingya, in order to enforce their claim of being the “original settlers” of Arakan State.

In an unsettled historiographic polemic, the scope of Burma’s national identity has been civically *widened* and ethnically *narrowed* to solve the Rohingya problem, notably with the introduction of the list of the ‘135 national races’, the concept of the ‘Union Spirit’, and the Citizenship Law of 1982. As a result, to be Burmese is, minimally, also: to belong to a ‘national race’, to possess the ‘Union Spirit’, and to fall under the reach of the Citizenship Law of 1982. In that way, the Burmese policymakers legitimized the ‘135 national races’ as Burmese, despite holding a Burman-based conception of Burma’s national identity, while equally de-legitimizing the Rohingya as non-Burmese, ‘imagining’ the Burmese nation as a post-colonial continuation of Burma’s pre-colonial age; a (re)construction whereby the Rohingya, a “foreign” manipulation of Burma’s colonial era, were no longer recognized as a legitimate ethnic group in Burma, rendering the Rohingya “one of the world’s most persecuted minorities”, with all that that entails.

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