



# The Chittagonians in Colonial Arakan: Seasonal and Settlement Migrations

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## **Colonial Wrongs and Access to International Law**

Morten Bergsmo, Wolfgang Kaleck and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (editors)



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**Front cover:** *Extraction of resources was a primary engine of colonization. The pictures show teak extraction in Colonial Burma by the British Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation around 1920. Above: A girdled teak tree and two foresters. Below: The Corporation used some 3,000 elephants to move logs. The photographs were taken by Mr. Percival Marshall (an employee of the Corporation). TOAEP thanks his great grandson Mr. Ben Squires for making them available and Professor Jonathan Saha for explanations.*

**Back cover:** *Storing ground used by the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. The photograph was taken by Mr. Percival Marshall around 1920.*

## The Chittagonians in Colonial Arakan: Seasonal and Settlement Migrations

Jacques P. Leider\*

### 6.1. Introduction

Muslim Chittagonians formed the dominant group of seasonal labourers and new settlers in north and central Arakan (now Rakhine State in Myanmar) during British colonial rule in Burma (1826–1948). The considerable growth of their settlements in the late nineteenth century was the defining factor which transformed Arakan's small pre-colonial Muslim community into the biggest Muslim group in Burma, concentrated in a densely populated border zone. The present chapter looks at these significant demographic and social changes, and responds to Morten Bergsmo's observation that the International Criminal Court Prosecution's legal approach in its request for a designated pre-trial chamber to authorize an investigation into alleged crimes in Rakhine State of 4 July 2019 "turns the spotlight on the demographic background of the conflict in northern Rakhine".<sup>1</sup>

The term 'Chittagonians' was commonly used in colonial sources as a catch-all name for a variety of people from Lower Bengal's Chittagong division, which bordered Arakan division (Burma). According to the geographical context in Burma itself, it could refer to Chittagonian seamen or shipwrights along the Irrawaddy (the 'lascars'), an array of Hindu and Buddhist traders, peddlers and cooks in Akyab and Rangoon, or mostly, as

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<sup>1</sup> Morten Bergsmo, *Myanmar, Colonial Aftermath, and Access to International Law*, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2019, p. 1 (<https://www.toaep.org/ops-pdf/9-bergsmo>).

was the case of Arakan, Muslim agriculturists and seasonal labourers. As Chittagonians were the biggest group of Bengalis in colonial Burma, they were presented as a distinct category of the migrant and residential Indian population in early twentieth century records. One may bear in mind that the name ‘Chittagong’ itself applied to a city, a port, a district, and, as mentioned, a Bengal division. ‘Chittagonian’ functioned as an inclusive (‘being identified or identifying as Chittagonian’) or exclusive generic (‘Chittagonians as an Indian, non-indigenous race’) in the colonial nomenclature before it became a site of contestation denoting unchecked immigration and cultural othering in the socio-political context of late colonial Arakan.

## 6.2. Chittagonians and Rohingyas

Seven decades after British rule has ended, discussion of the number and role of Chittagonian settlers in Rakhine history remains politically sensitive. The reason is that the Muslim Rohingyas, most of the Muslims in Rakhine State, consider references to the colonial-period ‘Chittagonians’ as attempts to deny their own sense of identity and legitimacy. In 1948, Muslim leaders from the Jamiat ul-Ulama of Maungdaw (in north Rakhine), who were calling for an autonomous Muslim region within the Union of Burma, stated in a petition submitted to state authorities that they were *not* Chittagonians, claiming indigeneity and a historical link to pre-colonial Arakan and its Muslim minority.<sup>2</sup> This refutation was reiterated many times. Rakhine Buddhists, adamantly rejecting post-World War II Rohingya claims, pointed to the colonial roots of most Muslims in north Arakan.

However, seventy years after the end of the colonial period, the overall majority, if not all Muslims in north Rakhine, identify as Rohingyas demonstrating an ‘ethnifying’ process of Muslim communities living mostly, but not exclusively, in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships.<sup>3</sup> The rise of the modern Rohingya movement

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<sup>2</sup> Jamiat ul-Ulama Maungdaw, “Representation by the Muslims of North Arakan Claiming for an Autonomous State in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Areas”, in Home Department, Government of Burma, 24 February 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Territoriality matters in the context of identity formations. The successive exodus and ongoing flows of emigration from north Rakhine to East Pakistan/Bangladesh onwards to Pakistan and the creation of Rohingya diasporas in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia have raised questions on existential conditions and the production of a de-territorialized Rohingya identity.

as the manifestation of a regional Muslim nationalism since the 1950s was instrumental in this development. The pattern of mutual exclusion has not been overcome but reinforced as waves of communal violence and acrimonious confrontations on social media in the twenty-first century show. The nexus of ethnic recognition and citizenship became most prominent with the debate about the implications and, as argued by many, unjust nature and arbitrary implementation of the 1982 citizenship law.<sup>4</sup> Until 1962, the north Arakan Muslim claims of ethnicity and indigeneity evolved in parallel in the domestic political arena with the struggle for an autonomous state.<sup>5</sup> However, the process of becoming and identifying themselves as Rohingya does not eradicate the colonial past of Chittagonian settlements which is no less a fact rooted in time and space. It is a chapter from which Rohingya writers have shied away, nearly leaving an historical blank, though sources suggest a diverse picture of a plurality of Muslims in Arakan both before and during the British colonial period.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the term ‘Chittagonian’ is deeply resented because it was weaponized throughout decades of ethno-political contestation.

The challenges for historical research are not limited to the colonial legacy of Rakhine State. Current research faces a bewildering complexity

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Nick Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2017, vol. 47.

<sup>5</sup> The struggle of the Mujahid rebels (1947–61) with its looming threat of separatism dominated reporting on north Arakan in the 1950s. The conciliatory mood of Burmese politics under Prime Minister U Nu in 1960–62 hailed the promise of a political compromise for competing Buddhist and Muslim territorial claims. The creation of the short-lived Muslim-majority Mayu Frontier Administration in north Arakan is referred to by Rohingyas as a *de facto* recognition of their Rohingya identity.

<sup>6</sup> Maungdaw, 1947, see above note 2; “Address Presented by Jamiat Ul Ulema North Arakan on Behalf of the People of North Arakan to the Hon’ble Prime Minister of the Union of Burma on the Occasion of His Visit to Maungdaw on the 25th October 1948” (<https://legal-tools.org/doc/wb3uz2>). Mohammed Yunus writes: “It is totally misleading and ill-motivated to allege that bulk of the Muslims entered Arakan during British era. The fact is that many Muslim families, who had earlier been driven out by the Burmans, have returned to their homes in Arakan when peace prevailed there as explained by Phayre”, see Mohammad Yunus, *A History of Arakan Past and Present*, Magenta Colour, Chittagong, 1994, p. 53; in his informative work, Abu Anin (alias U Kyaw Min) provides a detailed criticism of the British census records pointing out inconsistent classifications of Muslims. Abu Anin’s presentation of “immigrants in Arakan” as being “mostly seasonal laborers” is representative of other Rohingya presentations, Abu Aaneen [alias Abu Anin or U Kyaw Min], “Towards Understanding Arakan History (Part II)”, on *Kalaban Press Network*, 11 September 2007 (available on its web site).



of issues which have grown from unresolved ethno-political issues in the aftermath of World War II. While the situation was complex in 1948, it became increasingly violent and complicated over the following years and decades. Examples of these complications abound. When Burma became an independent state in January 1948, neither the Arakanese (Rakhine) Buddhists nor Muslims in north Arakan were constitutionally recognized as an ethnic group (*'lu myo'*).<sup>7</sup> Arakanese were recognized as an indigenous (*'taing yin tha'*) group but Sultan Ahmed, a leading political figure after the war, notes the controversies which arose at government level, both in late January 1947 and after Burma's independence a year later, regarding the right of "Muslims of Akyab district North" to vote linked to the underpinning issue of the recognition of their indigeneity.<sup>8</sup> Arakan became an ethnically denominated state only in 1974<sup>9</sup>.

Rakhine's Buddhists see Rohingyas as the descendants of Bengali migrants of the colonial period, but have *also* seen them over time as people who, in shifting circumstances, crossed the border illegally after independence. These views were espoused by the Burmese/Myanmar authoritarian state after 1962. However, ethnic contestation was not the only cause of a festering communal dissent doubled by inequitable state policies that have not pacified but further torn apart the region. Security and border issues, poverty and underdevelopment joined the long list of factors to be considered. The triangular-shaped fronts of collision (including Buddhists, Muslims and the hegemonic state with its suspicion of centrifugal ethnic claims) saw occasional asymmetric political alignments as group and state interests were never in accordance but sometimes overlapping. State policies escalated the process of exclusion since the 1990s, but the Rakhine State and Rohingya issues remained on the margins of world attention. The internal displacement of tens of thousands of people in 2012 and the Rohingya mass flight to Bangladesh in 2016–17 brought to the fore the disenfranchisement, the *de facto* statelessness, and the transnational dimension of their refugee condition. Media attention also

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<sup>7</sup> 'Arakanese' and 'Rakhine' are used without any difference of meaning to denote the Buddhist majority population of Arakan (Rakhine State). 'Arakan' and 'Arakanese' are terms found in most sources before 1989 and therefore used in line with references to such sources. 'Rakhine' is acknowledged as the official spelling today.

<sup>8</sup> "Memorandum to the Government of the Union of Burma 18 June 1948" quoted in "Rohingya belong to Burma," *Arakan Monthly News and Analysis of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, Arakan (Burma)* 6 (2009), n° 1, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Arakan State was officially renamed Rakhine State in 1989.

generated an exacerbation of hostility in the public discourse, nationally and internationally, and catalysed sectionalist interpretations.

In this context, the global acceptance of the right to identify and get recognition as ‘Rohingyas’ proceeded swiftly and in an uncontentious way. The sequential crises after 2012, including the narrative of earlier phases of violent conflict between Muslims and Buddhists, state-enforced marginalization, exclusion, disenfranchisement, and military-induced mass flights led to incriminations of ethnic cleansing and genocide, and established a harrowing account of Rohingya victimhood. With increasing visibility in the media, Rohingya history, an essential part of earlier campaigns to claim Rohingya legitimacy, shrank to a record of human rights violations. The importance of documenting Muslim victimhood is indisputable. However, it seems as if the paradigmatic shift from an obscurely communicated conflict to a widely publicized global issue implicitly made wider questions about the social, political and cultural history and its context in Rakhine State redundant. Yet, reading the modern history of north Rakhine Muslims backwards as a track record of state oppression is a narrow option. The region’s past calls for a sensitive approach, but even radical solidarity with the oppressed must obviate determinism, a constricted focus on binary state-ethnic relations and pay sufficient attention to the *combinations* of injustice that have plagued the region and its people, including the majority Buddhist Rakhine population.

Moreover, complicated issues should not be made into taboos. ‘Chittagonian’ has surely become such a taboo. Political correctness cannot resolve the dilemma of using or skirting the term ‘Chittagonian’. It becomes obvious when writing about World War II in Arakan. Rohingyas take credit for the participation of their ancestors in the anti-Japanese campaign of the British, while these men are invariably referred to as ‘Chittagonians’ in reports and memoirs. As the history of the ‘now’ in Rakhine State is changing rapidly and society and politics are in transition, investigating the roots of conflicts and the dynamics of change for the sake of transparency is demanding, but not superfluous. The history of Chittagonian settlers and the formation of local and regional Muslim identities, such as the emergence of the Rohingyas in north Rakhine, are interwoven and intimately connected. The colonial past is immanent in the present. A critical examination of the colonial archive should level the field for further debate and enlarge the space for co-producing knowledge that has



been sorely lacking in the quest for justice for all groups and actors in the Rakhine State crises.

The present chapter investigates migrant Chittagonians who settled either temporarily or permanently in north Arakan, or were part of an annual, seasonal movement of agricultural laborers supplementing the workforce needed in Arakan's fluctuating rice economy from 1860s to 1930s. It draws on decennial census reports, gazetteers, annual reports and settlement reports of Lower Bengal and Burma. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part starts with a brief note on borderlands, migrations and the colonial sources and their classification of Muslims. The second part explores the statistical evidence of the Bengal census and the textual evidence from Burma reports to illustrate and put into perspective the connection between Chittagonian migrations and the rice economy of Arakan. One important observation about the sources is that the colonial notes on seasonal migration, a highly visible phenomenon, are out of proportion with the record on the slow process of settlement migration. The third part presents the growth of Muslim communities in north Arakan, based on an exploration of numerical data from the census records. It also offers a critical view of evolving British classifications of the Muslim population. Moving from a general to a more specific, micro-level representation of data, the investigation of Chittagonian migrant communities at township level elucidates both temporal (migratory waves) and spatial (southward push) aspects of their growth.

This chapter concludes by arguing that the colonial state instrumentalized settlement migration for fiscal reasons, but failed to acknowledge the social and political impact of the Chittagonian settlement migration in the long run. Until before World War I, the wastelands in the borderlands were sufficient to absorb the inflow of newcomers, and communal tensions were a lesser risk. However, the threat of inter-ethnic strain was increasing in the subsequent decades. The seasonal migration, on the other hand, was a constant, recurrent phenomenon which functioned largely independently of social and political conditions in Arakan. The interdependence of Chittagonian coolie laborers and Arakanese rice growers created a symbiotic relationship which was significant and advantageous for both parties.

### 6.3. Borderlands, Migrations and Classifications

Borderlands are rightly considered to be complex areas because shared identities and inner frontiers overlap, while zones of friction and exclusion may arise from rivalling interests. British officers in Maungdaw in 1943 noted the contrast between the Buddhist villages north-west of the Naf River in what was Bengal (a majority-Muslim land) and the dense Muslim population on its south-eastern side, in Buddhist Burma's Akyab district, where they were stationed.<sup>10</sup> Coastal and hinterland migrations were a recurrent phenomenon in the frontier region of Arakan and Bengal (the north-east Bay of Bengal when viewed from the oceanside) throughout the last five centuries. They took place in opposite directions (alternating north to south/south to north movements) and various ways (individual and group migrations, invasions combined with deportations, forced resettlements for economic and military reasons, refugee movements, large exodus); they could be reverted (seeing the complete or partial return of refugee settlers) and could spill over into peripheral zones beyond the frontier region. They depended on or were impacted by changing economic and political conditions and included people of different religious and ethnic affiliation. Small Tibeto-Burman groups of the frontier region such as the Mro and Khumi, larger communities such as the Daingnet/Chakma, or the historically dominant populations such as Rakhine and Bengali speaking Muslims experienced voluntary or involuntary displacement within the Arakan-Bengal borderland.

Under British rule (1826–1948), the administrative border at the Naf River that separated Cox's Bazar sub-division (Chittagong district) and Akyab district (Arakan division) was not an impediment to human circulation via land or water. Transborder migration continued after the Government of Burma Act of 1935, which separated Burma and India. The Indo-Burman Immigration Agreement of 1941, an outcome of the enquiry on the 1938 anti-Indian riots and James Baxter's *Report on Indian Immigration*, did not impact the migratory flows between Arakan and Bengal before 1948. During the second half of the colonial rule when transborder migration was an important demographic factor, seasonal, temporary or settler migrants moving from Bengal to Arakan or inversely

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Mole, *The Temple Bells are Calling A Personal Record of the Last Years of British Rule in Burma*, Pentland Books, Bishop Auckland, 2001, pp. 193-94.

were not counted or registered by the administration in Bengal or Burma. Only occasional estimations were established.

The language of the colonial archives reveals mindsets that are different from ours. Its vocabulary and syntax present late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century views on the merits of immigration as a tool of civilizing progress; they demonstrate a colonial obsession with racial categorization underpinned by concepts of a moral economy which saw hard-working, land-conquering people (such as Bengali people from Chittagong) as agents of advancement, superior to other people often described as lazy, a term applied to various types of Southeast Asians in colonial settings, the Arakanese (Rakhine) being one such example. The colonial categorizing was not only a process of hierarchizing by racial and productivity criteria, but it also conditioned and formalized an interethnic 'othering' which impacted social and political relations.

However, the impression of a single homogenous colonial mind-set or a monolithic type of colonial knowledge would be mistaken. Views changed and seemingly moved by generational cohorts, interpretations of statistical data varied, and individual prejudice and opinions expressed in print could contradict or cut across state policies pursued in the name of progress. For that reason, colonial quotes no less than numerical figures, when cited as proofs or illustrations, need to be fleshed out with critical context.

The practice of decennial census reports started in British India in 1872. The two main criteria used to categorize the population in British Burma in the census reports of 1872, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 was their religious affiliation and the language group they belonged to. This meant that independently of their origins, period of residence in Arakan, cultural roots, social integration, or their own sense of belonging, all the Muslims in Arakan found themselves grouped together under the heading of 'Muslims', while all those people (either Muslims or Hindus) who had ancient origins in Bengal and spoke dialectal forms of East Bengali were counted as Bengali speakers. On the other hand, since the early-nineteenth century, administrative and missionary descriptions pointed occasionally to a difference between local Muslims ('Arakan Mussulmans'/'Arakan Mahomedans') and 'Bengalis' or 'Indians' from Chittagong who were *new* immigrants. This difference between Muslim communities whose ancestors had lived in Arakan since the time of the Arakanese kings (that is, before 1785) and those who were post-1826 immigrant settlers was not

relevant for their categorization in the census records.<sup>11</sup> In racialized terms, Chittagonians were classified as ‘foreigners’ because they were Indians who were not viewed as an indigenous population of Burma. While Muslims could be either indigenous or foreigners, the option for Muslims to choose expressly between the category ‘Arakan Mahomedan’ or ‘Chittagonian’ in survey operations was provided only in the census reports of 1921 and 1931.

British records (land tax settlements, census reports, annual administration reports, gazetteers) contain statistical information on different groups of people living in Arakan, their professional occupations, religious affiliation, seasonal migration, agricultural land expansion, and, in the early-twentieth century, increasingly detailed demographic data (population number, births, age, civil condition, gender ratio, infirmities, education). The individuality of migrant and acculturated Muslims is difficult to recover in the interstices of these matter-of-fact administrative documents. Their subjectivity is effaced because they appear as a mass, positively portrayed as diligent farmers and gardeners, but *anonymous*. They were faceless and voiceless in the sense that the motives of their migrations and the representations of their lives as trans-regional labourers or settlers did neither take shape in their own words nor in the descriptions of the colonial commentators. The same is obviously true for the mass of the resident Buddhist population, too, whose subjective experience of territorial, economic and demographic change remains hidden. The reconstruction of a portrait of the people hits severe limits as we encounter the constrictions of archival records.

#### **6.4. Chittagonians and the Colonial Rice Economy in Arakan**

Arakan had been a flourishing Buddhist kingdom between the fifteenth and seventeenth century, its majority population being the Arakanese (Rakhine), a group probably more internally differentiated by regional characteristics than in contemporary times. As the kingdom expanded along the coast and established hegemonic control over the coast from Lower Burma to Southeast Bengal, its population became more diverse including Muslims, Hindus and Christians coming from neighbouring India and Southeast Asia. The royal administration depended on the role of

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<sup>11</sup> 1785 marks the beginning of Burmese rule in Arakan and 1826 the conclusion of the Yandabo treaty which put an end to the war between the court of Amarapura and the East India Company.

foreign elites as the kings defended their vast zone of coastal rule and opposed the Mughal expansion in Bengal. Muslim villagers were deported in great numbers to the centre of the kingdom to create buffer zones along the borders with Bengal. In hindsight, the history of the kingdom suggests the formation of a multi-layered presence of Muslims as a result of migrations and deportations.

After a period of decline and political breakup prompting calls for outside intervention, Arakan was annexed by Badon, the king of Myanmar, in late 1784.<sup>12</sup> The political, religious and cultural elites of Arakan were resettled in the neighbourhood of Amarapura, the royal capital, and the region entered a process of institutional and administrative integration. Unrelenting demand for manpower, however, and exorbitant taxation by the king led to a mass flight of tens of thousands of people from Arakan crossing the Naf River into the southern part of Chittagong, held by the British since 1761.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the Burmese court did not want to see its subjects run away at will, and political frictions with the East India Company ensued. Aggressions resulting from the cross-border movement of rebels and refugees poisoned the relations and were one of the causes of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26).

The British military campaign had been horrifically expensive, and the British were keen to see the population of Arakan grow, agricultural production increase, and tax revenue cover the expenses of the administration and the garrisons. The economic history of Arakan during the colonial period was a history of the expansion of its agricultural lands and the growth of its rice production.<sup>14</sup> Exhausted by years of civil strife and fiscal mismanagement by its first British administrators, Arakan's population grew nonetheless rapidly after 1835. Many Arakanese Buddhist refugees who had fled to Bengal decades before returned; that movement lasted until the 1850s. The immigration of Bengalis, Burmese and Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> On the history of the Mrauk U kingdom, see Jacques P. Leider, *Le Royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie, Son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle*, PEFEQ, Paris, 2004; on the period of Burmese administration (1785–1824), see Jacques P. Leider, "Politics of Integration and Cultures of Resistance. A Study of Burma's Conquest and Administration of Arakan", in Geoffrey Wade (ed.), *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*, Routledge, London, 2014, pp. 184–213.

<sup>13</sup> The Naf River was not, as occasionally stated, a border invented by the British.

<sup>14</sup> Tun Wai, *Economic Development of Burma from 1800 to 1940*, University of Rangoon, Rangoon, 1961.

was nominally encouraged. Rich alluvial soil and a stable taxation regime were vaunted as assets that could attract cultivators from Central Burma and East Bengal. Wages were higher in Arakan than in Bengal. However, flows of migrants varied according to local pull and push factors; immigrant settlers likely made choices based on a variety of opportunities and conditions. The border region, largely covered by jungle, was poorly populated and had been barely governed. Famines, over-population and cyclones in Bengal are rarely named in the sources as triggers of migration, but they must have played a role. Higher salaries, wastelands to be exploited, and a familiarity with social and geographical surroundings are factors traceable in the sources regarding Chittagonian migrants. Seasonal migration from neighbouring Chittagong to Arakan during the harvest period became a recurrent phenomenon after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852). Nonetheless, the region remained a backwater of Burma until the end of the colonial era, shut off towards the East by a mountain range, isolated by the lack of roads, and devoid of any major public or private investments in communications. The general growth of the agricultural population was a rare source of pride for administrators who had little else to report about progress. Industrial development and construction of basic infrastructure bypassed Arakan until the late twentieth century.

‘British Burma’ was formed in 1862 following the annexation of Lower Burma (1852), with a contiguous territory including Arakan and Tenasserim (both ruled since 1826) and Lower Burma.<sup>15</sup> Taxation of agriculturally exploited land in Arakan used to be settled *annually*. Starting in 1867, efforts were undertaken to make fiscal arrangements for longer periods (generally fixed for five or ten years). Such ‘land revenue settlements’ (1867–68, 1885–88, 1901–02, 1913–16) included information on the modes of cultivation and the cultivators; they are an important source to take stock of both seasonal and permanent migration of Chittagonians.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1958, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Relatively few printed and nearly no manuscript documents relating to the fiscal and judicial administration of Arakan have survived for the period before the 1860s. A cyclone in late 1868 was invoked by the authors of the *Report on the progress of the Arakan division from 1826 to 1869* to explain the paucity of factual content in their compilation. Even a follow-up report dealing with the period up to 1875 was exceedingly thin. See *Report on the progress made in the Arakan division from 1826 to 1869*, Government Stationery, Rangoon, 1870; *Report on the progress made in the Arakan division from 1865/66 to 1874/75*, Government Stationery, Rangoon, 1876.

The administration of Arakan division was organized in three districts, from north to south, Akyab, Kyauk Phyu, and Sandoway. In 1865, the Arakan Hills Tract was separated from the Akyab district and became the Arakan Hills district mostly inhabited by Chin people. Demographic growth at district level can be investigated from annual reports. Akyab was the most populous district, stretching along the border with Bengal. It was divided into eight, later nine townships, with the population of a few towns and ports sometimes listed separately in the census reports. While the study of the population at *district* level is possible starting with the 1872 report, the study of settlement immigration at *township* level can only be undertaken from 1891 onwards, when the census reports included the so-called ‘Provincial Tables’. Most townships saw an inflow of Chittagonian settlers, but it is only in the northern townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung that Muslims came to form a majority. The peculiar conjuncture of trans-regional settlement migration remains for a large part elusive, because land migrations were not recorded. As stated above, the role of seasonal labourers was regularly confirmed in annual reports, census reports and gazetteers while the expanding settlements of Chittagonians in north Arakan were only marginally acknowledged even at the time when Chittagonians did already form a majority population along the border.

#### **6.4.1. Settlement Migration and the Development of Arakan’s Agriculture**

During nearly forty years (1850–1890), British administrators in Arakan were eager to develop the transformation of waste lands into rice fields by settling migrants and providing fiscal advantages. East Bengal’s Chittagonians became the biggest groups of migrants, first settling along the under-populated border with Bengal.<sup>17</sup> This was the township of Naaf, renamed Maungdaw in 1911, the name of its chief town. Seventy per cent of its population were Chittagonian migrants at the end of the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> The number of settlers then saw a steep increase in the 1890s as we will see below. The creation of Buthidaung township from a division of Rathedaung after 1901 resulted from a growing number of inland mi-

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<sup>17</sup> English-language research on the development of agriculture in colonial Arakan does not seem to exist yet.

<sup>18</sup> *Report on the Settlement Operations in the Akyab District Season 1886–87*, Superintendent Government Printing, Rangoon, 1888, p. 3 (‘Settlement Report in Akyab 1886–87’).



grants crossing the Mayu Range to settle in the northern part of Buthidaung. However, the pool of available land was shrinking in the early years of the twentieth century reducing new settlements. Chittagonian migrants then probably started to move further south into other townships of Akyab district and the north of Kyauk Phyu district (Myebon) where their percentage in the 1930s still remained below 15.

In his *Report upon the Revenue Administration of the Province of Arracan for the year 1850–51*, Commissioner Arthur P. Phayre noted the “extensive demand for the rice of this district in foreign markets” and that “a larger export than ever before occurred”. He concluded that “this large export, it may confidently be expected, will act as a stimulus for further cultivation”. In Akyab, he reported, “wide tracts of country still remain waste”.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, S.R. Tickell, Phayre’s Assistant Commissioner, made a comment on the slowing increase of the capitation tax-paying population:

it may be fairly inferred that the main source of our increase of population, which is Chittagong, is nearly exhausted; I believe I am correct in saying that the mass of the people who have immigrated from thence are the Arracanese, who fled the country on the incursions of the Burmese ... these have nearly all returned, and unless we can look to other quarters for an influx of population, we shall, I apprehend, have nothing to depend upon ere long, but the rising and future generations of the present inhabitants for an increase of population.<sup>20</sup>

Tickell was referring to the exodus to Bengal of tens of thousands of people from Arakan between 1795 and 1800, fleeing over-taxation and forced military recruitment, and their slow return during the 25 years of early British rule, a period sketched above. Tickell’s pessimistic apprehension was unwarranted because Akyab’s population kept on growing over the next decades, thanks to immigration from East Bengal, to a lesser

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<sup>19</sup> “From Captain A.P. Phayre, Akyab, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Calcutta, 22 October 1851”, in *Reports on the Revenue Administration of Hazareebaugh, Arracan, Tenasserim Provinces, and Assam for 1850–51*, Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1853, pp. 16–17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

degree from Upper Burma (still an independent kingdom until 1886), and from Kyauk Phyu district (Ramree Island).<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, in the 1860s, immigration from Bengal stagnated, and while the percentage of people classified as indigenous ‘Mahomedans of Burma’ revolved around five per cent, the part of ‘Indians’ (that is, immigrants from Bengal) did not rise much beyond seven per cent.<sup>22</sup>

Efforts to facilitate the arrival of migrants were made. In the Rules for the settlement of land revenue in the Province of British Burma (1866), it was stipulated that

*bona fide* cultivators may come into a circle under settlement, and cultivate unappropriated new land, and no question to be asked as to their right to do so. This stipulation includes any immigrant from foreign territory and any British subject.<sup>23</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Stevenson, the Commissioner of Arakan, noted in his report of January 1869:

Our want of population is well known; there is abundance of land to repay the toil of cultivators. [...]

Under our revenue system every possible facility was offered to the cultivator to take up waste land, really available, however, only in districts where district officers took special care that *Thoogyees* (*that is*, village heads)

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<sup>21</sup> “Burmese and Shans from Upper Burma come down in large numbers every year, and, though the majority return after a few months’ stay, many no doubt remain and these, from their affinity with the natives, are the most useful class of colonists that come into the country; Of the Chinese immigrants, a good many settle in province; but the multitudes of Bengal and Madras labourers who arrive at the beginning of every dry season nearly all return to their homes as soon as the approach of the rainy weather brings their occupation to an end. Even of these, however, there must be an annually increasing residuum of permanent residents.”, see *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1876–77*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1878, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Report on the Administration of the Province of British Burma for the year 1863–64*, Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1864; *Report on the Administration of the Province of British Burma for the year 1864–65*, Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1865; *Report on the Administration of the Province of British Burma for 1865–66*, Foreign Department Press, Calcutta, 1866; *Report on the Administration of the Province of British Burma for 1866–67*, Foreign Department Press, Calcutta, 1867.

<sup>23</sup> *Reports on the Revenue Settlement Operations of British Burma for the year 1867–68*, Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1869, vol. 1, p. 9 (‘Revenue Settlement Operations Report 1867–68’).

granted land within their powers as freely and with as little trouble to the applicants as the rules intended.<sup>24</sup>

Though Bengalis were already “the preponderating race [in] the Naaf township” in 1869, their immigration remained below British expectations until the late 1870s, because Chittagonians preferred to settle north of Naf River, in Bengal.<sup>25</sup>

it is a pity immigration does not assume a more solid form, but there are many circumstances which tend to retard and hold it in check. The Chittagong district, which borders on the northern frontier, contains a very large expanse of country with a considerable area of waste land; vegetation is abundant, and but little labour is required to produce the necessaries of life. Being under British rule, with a comparatively light taxation, it would require attraction of a special nature to induce people from those parts to leave their homes and settle down in a strange land. [...] Natives from Chittagong know full well the condition of the country as regards the demand for labour [...].<sup>26</sup>

In 1874, a British initiative to bring Indians to Lower Burma generated mediocre results, and the project was abandoned a few years later when the government concluded that Indians, reluctant to relocate and pioneer the transformation of waste lands into rice fields, were more amenable to supply labour for industrial activities in cities. However, the situation in Arakan was different.

The flow of seasonal laborers, which we will discuss in the next section, was already a well-established part of the agricultural production cycle, but it did not respond to British ambitions to develop the land.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 29, 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 82. Occasionally, later sources provide glimpses of the progress of settlement immigration during the period before 1890. R.B. Smart describing Payabyin, a village east of the Kalapanzin River in Buthidaung township, says that it was founded in 1864 “by settlers, Arakanese and Chittagonian, driven from the Maungdaw township by the pressure of immigration from Chittagong”. The migrant pressure did not relent during the following years as Smart goes on saying that “It is interesting to note that after a further period of 50 years, many of these settlers have now migrated to the *Yo chaung* (*that is* creek) for the same reason”. (R.B. Smart, *Burma Gazetteer Akyab District, vol. A*, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1917, p. 240). Many of the Akyab District Gazetteer’s village descriptions make also specific reference to the waste land grants.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 30.

The swarms of Indian coolies who flock to our parts every working season, and periodically return depriving the province of their permanent labour and of their accumulations, can scarcely be designated emigrants, as their visit was not an attempt at settlement, and their exodus has nothing in the nature of expatriation.<sup>27</sup>

Only in the late 1870s did settlement immigration take off with a modest, but regular flow of immigrants.

The Bengalees come over from Chittagong into the Akyab district of Arakan, where there is an exceedingly scanty population and large tracts of culturable land, of which they can get grants on the most reasonable terms. The great drawback in their case is the want of capital to conduct agricultural operation on anything approaching a large scale; but, as it is, some 500 families now settle down annually in the trict.<sup>28</sup>

A “Note on Waste Lands in Lower Burma for Cultivation” in Philip Nolan’s 1888 *Report on the Emigration from Bengal to Burma and how to promote it* also stressed the need for more agricultural settlers in the Kaladan Valley (Arakan) and the minimal investments needed.

District Officers might well devote attention to getting Bengali settlers here. There are large tracts of land which have passed out of production and large tracts that have never been cultivated that only require bunding to make them productive. The present inhabitants would no doubt object to grants on the ground of interference, prior claim, old possession etc. But any claims of this nature not entered in the settlement registers should be received with caution. Five years’ exemption from revenue and second-class soil rates on new *pottahs*<sup>29</sup> would, I think, encourage Bengalis to settle.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1875–76*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1877, p. 21 (‘Burma Report 1876–76’).

<sup>28</sup> *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1877–78*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1879, p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Pottah means “a deed of lease [...] specifying the condition on which the lands are held and the value or proportion of the produce to be paid to the authority or person from whom the lands are held”. See Horace Hayman Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms and of Useful Words Occurring in Official Documents Relating to the Administration of the Government of British India*, W.H. Allen and Co., London, 1855.

Interestingly, the settlement officer quoted by Nolan compared the Kaladan township in central Arakan with the northern Naaf township, noting its optimal development. Up to 1888, Naaf township had already seen a considerable transformation of waste lands into rice fields and a steep growth of its immigrant population. The settlement officer reported that 70 per cent of the population were Bengalis, who occupied 79 per cent of the cultivated area, and accounted for 84 per cent of the tax-paying lands.<sup>31</sup> There was intense satisfaction and the Chief Commissioner declared himself ready “to consider any plan which the Commissioner [of Arakan] may propose for attracting Bengali immigrants if the privileges accorded by the Revenue Rules are not sufficient”.<sup>32</sup>

The Naaf tract presents some new features in the greater density of population, the preponderance of Bengalis, the greater value of land, the better condition of the cultivators, the higher rent of tenants’ holdings, and the larger amount of land let out to tenants.<sup>33</sup>

The density of the population of Bengal, coupled with ties of race and relationship, re-acts upon the agricultural condition of the Naaf which immediately adjoins Bengal. Pressure is met and overcome in view of compensating advantages [...].<sup>34</sup>

Immigration was promised to increase in the short run. In 1887, a settlement report for a land tract in the centre of Akyab district (Rathedaung and Ponnagyun townships) noted that Akyab’s population had “considerably increased [...] and with it the demand for land”:

Bengalis from Chittagong, Burmans from Ramree and settlers from the hills are to be found in considerable numbers throughout the tract.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Nolan, *Report on the Emigration from Bengal to Burma and how to promote it*, The Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1888, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Settlement Report in Akyab 1886–87, see note 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Report on the Settlement Operations in the Akyab District Season 1885–86*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1887, p. 2.

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This growth took place even though taxation rates exerted an “unequal pressure”. Taxation was comparatively higher than elsewhere in Burma and land was said to be poorer.<sup>36</sup>

The subsequent push of Chittagonians into Arakan (1891–1901) formed the last major episode of what was described ten years later for Burma in general as “an era of rapid expansion” when “fertile culturable land could be obtained for the simple cost of clearance”.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, this period connected evenly to the considerable rise of the population in the southern ‘*thanas*’ of Cox’s Bazar sub-division of Chittagong, on the Bengal side.<sup>38</sup> It went together with a move to colonize empty spots in south-east Bengal, and the migrant upsurge was therefore less an invasion of Arakan than an extension of the agricultural frontier of the sub-division of Cox’s Bazar, as I will argue below. On the other hand, the increase of Muslim settlers in north Arakan led, according to British comments, to a displacement of Arakanese who moved out of the region. The rise of the Chittagonian community in north Arakan before World War I was, in conclusion, a process where a cluster of administrative, fiscal, territorial and ethnic factors jointly played into each other.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the consolidation of the percentage of Muslims in north Arakan and the fact that three quarters of the resident Muslims had been born in Burma shows that settlement immigration had lessened. New migrants, in smaller numbers, were moving further down south. Fertility, rather than immigration, would explain the rapid Muslim population growth in Maungdaw during the twenty years before World War II.<sup>39</sup>

The sober administrative language of the 1850s and 1860s had projected migration as an economic gain; the language of the 1870s and 1880s marked it as a positivist turn, emphasizing *progress* via land settlements and an improved condition of the people. The migrant wave in the

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 26.

<sup>37</sup> C. Morgan Webb, *Census of 1911* volume IX, Burma Report, vol. 1, Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1912, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> E.A. Gait, *Census of India 1901, volume VI B, The Provinces of Lower Bengal and their Feudatories, Provincial tables*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1902, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> The explanation of the 1931 census report that the 18 per cent increase of Maungdaw’s population between 1921 and 1931 was essentially due to the immigration of 21,000 ‘Indians’ is a bewildering statement. J.J. Bennison, *Census of India 1931 volume XI, Burma vol. I, Report*, Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1933, p. 34.

last decade of the nineteenth century, however, led to more opinionated comments. Agricultural expansion was interpreted less in economic or demographic than racial terms. The migratory phenomenon was historicized as a matter of superior racial destiny.

Arakan Deputy Commissioner Smart's comment on the Chittagonian migrants is typical of the racialized representation of Indian migration to Burma in the early twentieth century:

Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale [...] Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district. The later settlers, who have not been sapped of their vitality, not only do their own labour but it is not uncommon to find them hurrying on their own operations to enable such as can be spared to proceed elsewhere to add to their earnings by working as agricultural labourers, boatmen or mill coolies.<sup>40</sup>

British administrators were convinced that the rise of Burma's civilization at the end of the first millennium CE was due to their racial mixture with immigrant Indians (Brahmanism and Buddhism being essentialized by them as racial-cum-intellectual-and-cultural imports). In the case of Arakan which had had a different history of dynastic successions than Burma, they dismissed 'national' Arakanese legends that connected the Arakanese group, for religious and cultural reasons, to prestigious origins in north India (the land of the historical Buddha and his clan). Alternately, they turned to interpretations of the "character of the Arakanese people" as in the following comment of 1891:

In some respects, they resemble the Burmans, but they do not have the same fascinating character [...] The Arakanese, it is said, approximate more closely to Hindu and Musalman customs in secluding their women. They are cleverer and more persevering than the Burmese generally. In the opinion of some, the Arakanese are a decaying race, but this opinion is strongly combated by others, who believe that the Arakan branch will outlive the Burman.<sup>41</sup>

A similar comment is found in the 1901 census report:

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<sup>40</sup> Smart, 1917, p. 87; 241, see above note 25.

<sup>41</sup> H.L. Eales, *Census of 1891 Imperial Series, volume IX, Burma Report, Vol. 1*, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1892, p. 197.

Save for a few Indian usages assimilated from his Chittagonian neighbours and a trifle of Aryan ballast acquired from the same source, the Magh or Arakanese is, to all intents and purposes, a Burman, but a Burman, be it said, bereft of much of his charm.<sup>42</sup>

Statistical enquiries on language usage informed a parallel argument to the overall negative portrayal of the Arakanese. The seeming decline of the use of Arakanese as a language of communication, as stated in the 1901 census, bolstered a narrative on Arakanese degeneration, emphasizing the “phonetic disintegration” and the “decomposition” of the language. Arakanese was described as a “separate form of speech, dying hard”, but “bound eventually to disappear”, thus leading to the conclusion that “after another decennial census or two it will probably be possible to calculate fairly accurately the date by which it will have vanished off the face of Burma”.<sup>43</sup>

Indian immigration was imagined as potentially re-invigorating. The penetration of Arakan by Chittagonians was going to follow the rules of a historical playbook according to which Indian migration and Indian influence had already determined the earlier course of Burmese history. The colonial beliefs in an Indian racial bonus flourished before World War I and applied both to Arakan and Burma. Nevertheless, colonial opinions disagreed on the outcome. On the one hand, there was a “prevailing tendency to assume that the Burmese as a race are doomed by the modern incursions of Indians into the province”. Others opined that “just as in the past the Burmese tribes assimilated what was essential and what was advantageous from the immigrant Indian”, so that there was “reason to believe that the present phase of Indian immigration is strengthening rather than weakening the hold of the Burmese on the province”.<sup>44</sup>

A similar representation of deeply racialized, yet contrasting views is found in Major Enriquez’ *Burmese Wonderland* (1922):

In the north-east portion of Akyab, in the Buthidaung Sub-division, the population now consists chiefly of permanent

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<sup>42</sup> C.C. Lowis, *Census of India 1901 Burma, volume XII, vol. 1*, Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1902, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> As the declared aim was to produce a “classification of the races”, language was seen as the “most obvious and surest criterion of difference” to study the people of Burma scientifically. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>44</sup> Webb, 1912, p. 74, see above note 37.



Chittagonian settlers. [...] The Arakanese now tend to concentrate in the Sub-division of Kyauktaw. Some people think they must necessarily be submerged in time. Others believe that they will hold their own. Fortunately, they do not intermarry much with Chittagonians, and though rather an indolent race, have yet brains enough to be fairly prosperous, and in a few individual cases even rich.<sup>45</sup>

Not economic, ecological, territorial and cultural factors, but racial qualities were perceived as the determining factors of social change. An assumed pseudo-scientific nexus between a declining Arakanese majority and a zealous mass of Chittagonians was sufficient to rationalize the superficial observations made by the colonial elite. In this context, questions for the state to worry about social frictions and communal tensions would not arise. With the Victorian sentiment that law and order were the prerequisites of happiness, ‘happiness’ may have been tacitly assumed to prevail because the colonial state’s subjects in Arakan did not cause trouble within its law and order regime.<sup>46</sup> This colonial mood of self-contentment was violently shaken by the 1938 Indian riots in Burma and radically put into question by the 1942 ethno-religious violence in Arakan. Nonetheless, in the case of Arakan, it did never lead to investigations into the complex regional context of mixed populations within the Bengal-Arakan borderlands.<sup>47</sup>

Chittagonians who settled in Arakan after the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandabo (1826) were welcome economic agents; they were industrious and reliably productive. Classified as cultural and ethnic ‘foreigners’ after having crossed an administrative border within British India, they did not become an object of study in themselves, nor was their demographic growth perceived as a factor of critical social impact in Burma.

At the outbreak of World War II, racial prejudice informed common knowledge on the border region propelled to become a major theatre of warfare. The *Report on Arakan (Akyab district and Arakan Hill Tracts)*,

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<sup>45</sup> C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese Wonderland A Tale of Travel in Lower and Upper Burma*, Thacker, Spink and Co., Calcutta, 1922, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> I am paraphrasing from F.S.V. Donnison’s preface to his book. F.S.V. Donnison, *Burma*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London, 1970, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Jacques P. Leider, “Territorial Dispossession and Persecution in North Arakan (Rakhine), 1942-43”, Policy Brief Series No. 101 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2020 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/101-leider/>).

produced by the General Staff at the British Army's headquarters in August 1942, stated under the heading "People" that "the Arakanese himself is lazy and careless", and had been "ousted [...] in agriculture and village trading" by "a large foreign element which has come in from India".<sup>48</sup> A year later, after the horrific ethnic vengeance campaign in the wake of the First Arakan Campaign, and with a view to rallying the Arakanese Buddhists to their cause, British ethnographic guidance for military behaviour towards civilians met along the front line in Arakan was updated.<sup>49</sup>

#### 6.4.2. Seasonal Migration and Labour Dependency

Since the 1860s, British administrators in Arakan explained in their reports that the agriculture of Akyab district depended on hired labour.<sup>50</sup>

During the reaping season, and indeed before, coolies from the Chittagong district come over in hundreds, and appear to do most of the real labour of the country in the northern parts as regards paddy cultivation.<sup>51</sup>

Many 'coolies' from Chittagong (and, to a lesser degree, from southern India and central Burma) came for the annual harvesting and transporting of paddy rice.<sup>52</sup> Temporary laborers were also employed during the ploughing season and for handling the paddy rice at the mills in

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<sup>48</sup> General Staff of the British Army, *Report on Arakan (Akyab district and Arakan Hill Tracts)*, 1942 ('British Army General Staff Report'), National Archives of the UK, WO 230-1480.

<sup>49</sup> British Library IOR R-8-3, "Descriptions of the Inhabitants of the Arakan" produced by the General Staff, Eastern Army, "based on the Government of Burma's views on the names to be used in describing the different communities" set apart the "bulk of the population" being Buddhist Arakanese, recognized Arakanese Muslims ("long domiciled Mohammedan community"), Hill Tribes ("very simple and primitive") and Chittagonians (described as "domiciled Indians").

<sup>50</sup> An excellent description is Commissioner Lt. Col. Stevenson's paragraph on Chittagong coolies in Revenue Settlement Operations Report 1867-68, p. 81, see above note 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> Chittagonian settlers were also involved in providing such labour: "The latter settlers who have not been sapped of their vitality, not only do their labour, but it is not uncommon to find them hurrying on their own operations to enable such as can be spared to proceed elsewhere to add to their earnings by working as agricultural labourers, boatmen or mill coolies". See Smart, 1917, p. 15, see above note 25.

Akyab port.<sup>53</sup> At the end of the season, laborers returned home. A description in the unmistakable colonial style reads as follows:

large numbers of immigrants from Bengal and Chittagong reach the Akyab district penniless and on foot, but, at the close of the season, with full purses return by steamer to their homes.<sup>54</sup>

‘Coolies’ coming to Arakan came mostly by land, which was cheaper, but when crossing the Naf River at the border of Chittagong and Arakan divisions to step into Maungdaw township, their numbers were not recorded.<sup>55</sup> They returned more comfortably by direct steamers on the coastal sea road, boarding in Akyab where passenger numbers were reportedly recorded by port authorities.<sup>56</sup> The annual record of outbound passengers in Akyab port could tell us something about the yearly transport of people from Akyab to Chittagong, but it would still throw little light on migration as a whole. Migrants to Arakan may have been temporary migrants like Indians elsewhere in Burma, staying not just for a season, but for several years before returning home with their savings. In fact, numbers about emigration and immigration in the annual reports do

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<sup>53</sup> Temporary labourers are understood to have spent several years in Arakan before returning home. “The greater part of the purely temporary sojourners arrive about the harvest season from Chittagong and Madras, and after rapidly amassing a sum, which for them is wealth, return to their homes, having spent from one to five years in the country working as labourers”. See *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1878–79*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1879, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Report on the Census of British Burma taken on the 17th February 1881*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1883, p. 23 (‘1881 census report’). See also *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1874–75*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1876, p. 143; *Burma Report 1875–76*, 1877, p. 119, see above note 27.

<sup>55</sup> The ‘land road’ was a combined inland land and river road. Administrative reports do not contain any description of this road. World War II military descriptions of the “old Arakan road” vaguely indicate a footpath from Idgarh down south to Garjanian (southern part of Bandarban) and onwards to Maungdaw. The “New Arakan road”, most likely the colonial-period road of migrants, led from Cox’s Bazar–Ramu south to Taungbro (also referred to as Tumbru) from where boats took passengers down the Naf River to Maungdaw. See British Army General Staff Report, see above note 48. A comprehensive note on the seasonal migration is found in Webb, 1912, p. 80, see above note 37.

<sup>56</sup> Data on immigration and emigration get scanty in the annual administration reports after World War I. Information on Akyab port’s inbound and outbound passengers was only occasionally reported. Serial data from the port authorities in Akyab do not seem to have survived in the archives.

not tell us anything clear about either seasonal or settlement migrants. Take the *Report on the Administration of Burma for the year 1873–74*:

The number of persons who left the Arakan Division in the year of report exceeded the number of immigrants according to the returns, viz., 6500, against 5035; but these figures can scarcely be correct, since many thousands of coolies travel between Chittagong and Akyab in steamers during the shipping season, and it is believed that many thousands more come into the division either by boat or overland.<sup>57</sup>

Nearly twenty years later, the 1891 Burma census confirmed this assessment, stating that the “immigration and emigration figures of Akyab are worthless”.<sup>58</sup> Even for recording census figures, colonial administrators depended on the information provided by local ‘*thugyis*’, formerly heads of groups of villages, who became tax collectors under the British and depended for their input on local village headmen. Nonetheless, the Arakan commissioners considered these figures as “tolerably correct”, or noted that in rural districts, statistics were likely better than in towns, because “there is no reason why figures should not be accepted as fairly accurate”.<sup>59</sup> Concluding comments sounded cautious:

The figures of 1881 and 1891 would tend to prove that there is established in Burma a large and increasing colony of natives of India and their descendants.<sup>60</sup>

Even in the 1930s, when census records became more complex and detailed, administrators tersely noted that immigration by land was not put on record. State authorities did visibly not care much about the number of migrants from Bengal who entered north Arakan. The author of the annual report of 1933–34 made the following comment on the immigration and emigration figures:

These figures relating as they do to passenger traffic by sea, take no account of the large numbers of agricultural labourers who enter Arakan by the overland route from Bengal and

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<sup>57</sup> *Report on the Administration of Burma for the year 1873–74*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1875, p. 136.

<sup>58</sup> Eales, 1892, p. 176, see above note 41.

<sup>59</sup> *Report on the Administration of Burma for the year 1879–80*, Government Printing, Rangoon, 1881, p. 97.

<sup>60</sup> Eales, 1892, p. 176, see above note 41.

who cannot be counted. As many of these returned to Bengal by sea, the Arakan figures show a false balance.<sup>61</sup>

What was the annual number of seasonal migrants? Several tens of thousands each year on average, but the numbers seem to have fluctuated considerably. In the 1872 census report, the ‘Collector of Chittagong’ is quoted stating that “there are annually nearly 15,000 emigrants from Cox’s Bazar alone to Arakan”.<sup>62</sup> The *Report on the Administration of Burma for the year 1880–81* indicates 80,000, a considerable figure at a time when the general population of Arakan stood at around 590,000.<sup>63</sup> Yet three years later, the annual report even cited opinions putting it at “at 200,000; but this figure is probably much above the truth”.<sup>64</sup> The *Akyab Gazetteer* of 1917, an important and fairly reliable source, put it at an average of 50,000.<sup>65</sup>

When the India-Burma Immigration Agreement of 22 July 1941 included a temporary stop to the migration of unskilled labour, “in Arakan, [...] an acute shortage of labor was immediately revealed and within a very short time after the signing of the Agreement, the Government of Burma had to ask the Government of India to allow the importation of 35,000 laborers into the Arakan Division”.<sup>66</sup> The seasonal migration went on after World War II and still comprised up to 20,000 laborers.<sup>67</sup> It is unclear when it came to an end, given the regional insecurity after the war and the armed conflicts in Arakan in the period from 1947 to 1952 involv-

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<sup>61</sup> *Report on the Administration of Burma for the year 1933–34*, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1935, p. 110. In the census report of 1931, an explanation is provided on the recording of sea arrivals and departures. Port health officers counted arrivals themselves while asking companies for the number of departures. The records of shipping companies were estimations of tickets sold and children were not included. See Bennison, 1933, pp. 18–19, 34, see above note 39.

<sup>62</sup> *Report of the Census of British Burma taken in August 1872*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1875, p. 16, para. 79 (‘Burma Census 1872 Report’).

<sup>63</sup> *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1880–81*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1881, p. 123.

<sup>64</sup> *Report on the Administration of British Burma during 1884–85*, Government Press, Rangoon, 1885, p. 64.

<sup>65</sup> Smart, 1917, p. 36, see above note 25.

<sup>66</sup> “Annual Report of the Agent to the Government of India in Burma for the Period January 1st to December 31st, 1941”, British Library, IOR-B-M-3-1108.

<sup>67</sup> Commonwealth Relations Office, “Letter of Peter Murray, Foreign Office, to R.W.D. Fowler”, 24 January 1949.

ing communist groups, Muslim rebels, paramilitary troops and regular army units in the countryside.

Against the background of these fluctuations, there are other factors that impacted the annual flow of seasonal workers. Quoting from a report on the land revenue administration for the year 1906–07, the census report of 1911 tells us:

The Deputy Commissioner remarks that these Chittagonian coolies come to Akyab, only when crops fail in Chittagong and work is scarce, and that changes in contemplation in Chittagong may provide them in a few years with sufficient work at home.<sup>68</sup>

The same author concluded that these circumstances “foreshadowed” the “decline and even the extinction of this migration”. This was not going to happen. The decrease of annual seasonal migrants from 1907 to 1911 was attributed to the taxation of the migrants, a new policy, as the migrants had not been targeted previously with a capitation tax.<sup>69</sup> There is no confirmation of any decline in subsequent years. The prospect of a decline of seasonal migration hailed, in the minds of British administrators, the prospect of seeing the Arakanese “come to their senses” and do the hard work once again themselves (rendered in the report as “productive of beneficial results”).<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the colonial period, most British administrators took a negative view of Arakanese Buddhist farmers who hired Chittagonian coolies to do most of the hard work in the fields, calling it “excessive employment of hired labour”.<sup>71</sup> However, even the indigenous Muslims in Kyauktaw depended on the imported labour:

These men have often informed the Settlement Officer that they had got so out of the habit of doing hard manual labour that they were now absolutely dependent on the Chittagonian coolies who come yearly to help them over the most arduous of their agricultural operation, ploughing, reaping and earth-work.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Webb, 1911, p. 81, see above note 37.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Smart, 1917, p. 15, see above note 25.

The general picture of the Chittagonian seasonal migration remains diffuse. We do not know exactly when it started, and how it came to an end. We are left to imagine the lives and motivations of Bengali labourers in a seemingly unchanging flow back and forth between their homes and Arakanese rice fields. A satisfactory re-construction of the organization and conjuncture of the alternating movement throughout the eighty-year-period under review in this research is not supported by the sketchy sources. There are nonetheless two important takeaways.

The seasonal migration was simultaneously dependent on complex circumstances in Arakan and in Bengal. It had none of the simplicity hinted at in many of the short administrative descriptions. Arakan's Commissioner Stevenson noted in 1869 that "[n]atives from Chittagong know full well the condition of the country as regards the demand for labour and fix their own terms, being well aware that there is no competition in the market".<sup>73</sup> Other citations presented above, and not least the widely differing estimations of seasonal numbers, suggest a variety of reasons why the seasonal migration fluctuated. Besides famine due to poor harvests, the devastating cyclones of 1876, 1897 and 1919 destroying local livelihood in Bengal may have had an immediate impact.

The second insight is the symbiotic character of the co-operation of Buddhist and Muslim landowners in Arakan and seasonal labourers from Chittagong district. This Bengal-Arakan labour interdependence of agricultural production was a major aspect of the Arakanese rice-based economy promoted by the British. It seems as if it functioned smoothly, its dynamics unimpeded and independent of communal tensions that were soaring after World War I.

Seasonal migrations raise many more questions concerning the society, the economy and the lives of people in colonial Arakan. However, they constituted a marginal phenomenon in Burma, distinctively different from the mighty flow of Indian migrants to the port of Rangoon, which raised intense interest by contemporary decision-makers and later academic research alike.<sup>74</sup> Seasonal migration towards Arakan was definitely a minor issue within the context of Bengal's labour market, where the

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<sup>73</sup> Revenue Settlement Operations Report 1867–68, p. 30, see above note 23.

<sup>74</sup> Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, Vora and Co. Publishers, Bombay, 1960; Nalini Ranjan Chakravarty, *The Indian Minority in Burma – The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*, Oxford University Press, London/New York/Bombay, 1971.

number of people recorded as migrants (because they crossed domestic, intra-Indian borders) counted in the hundreds of thousands.

#### 6.4.3. Chittagonian Migrations: Insights from the Bengal Census

Chittagong district was one of Chittagong division's four districts, together with Tippera, Noakhali and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Chittagong division itself was part of Eastern Bengal, which saw a rapid increase of its population after 1881. Bengal's census records do not provide explicit information about either seasonal, temporary or permanent migration to Burma or Arakan. Nonetheless, trends, figures, growth rates, and gender balance revealed by data from 1872 to 1931 (but more specifically 1891 to 1931, when provincial records were included in the census tables) provide a context which supports the descriptions made in Burma's administrative records of the seasonal and settlement migration of Chittagonians to Arakan.<sup>75</sup>

The corollary of the dominant Chittagonian male population recorded in the decennial records of Akyab District (Arakan) must be assumed to be a corresponding imbalance of a higher female population in the census records of Chittagong district. This is indeed what data at the district and *thana* level show.<sup>76</sup> Much colonial ink was spilled in comments about the higher percentage of the male population in the total pop-

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<sup>75</sup> Sources used for the present section are the imperial and provincial tables of the Bengal census records from 1872 to 1931. See J.A. Bourdillon, *Report on the Census of Bengal 1881 volume II, Appendix B Statements I to XXI*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Bengal, 1883; J. A. Bourdillon, *Report on the Census of Bengal 1881 volume III*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Bengal, 1883, Appendix C, statements XXI to XXX; C. J. O'Donnell, *Census of India 1891, volume IV, The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1892 (see the Administrative Tables); E.A. Gait, *Census of India 1901, volume VI B, The Provinces of Lower Bengal and their Feudatories*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1902 (see the Provincial Tables); L.S.S. O'Malley, *Census of India 1911 Volume VI Bengal*, Bengal Secretariat Depot, Calcutta, 1913, Part II Tables; W.H. Thompson, *Census of India 1921 volume V Bengal*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1922, Part II Tables; A.E. Porter, *Census of India 1931 volume V Bengal and Sikkim*, Central Publications Branch, Calcutta, 1933, Part II Tables.

<sup>76</sup> The observation was first made by the author of the 1872 census report, explaining that in Akyab district, the balance was 53.56 per cent males to 46.44 per cent females, while in Chittagong, it stood at 47.5 per cent males to 52.5 per cent females. See Burma Census 1872 Report, p. 16, see above note 62.



ulation of India.<sup>77</sup> This was the norm in Bengal, too, with a single, barely varying exception, Chittagong district, which counted more women than men on average. In 1891, there were 8.67 per cent more women recorded than men; in 1931, the difference was still 5.55 per cent. This does not mean that the excess number of women in Chittagong's district population was a biological or an otherwise permanent phenomenon; the statistical difference denotes that when the census was taken (generally in February or March), there were more women recorded than men. The seasonal migration described by British administrators in Arakan is one very likely explanation for this observation. In absolute numbers, throughout the period under consideration, the excess varied between 43,000 to 52,000 for Muslim women and 1,500 to 13,000 for Hindu women. These numbers would admittedly request further study to unravel age cohorts and tease out the groups corresponding more immediately to the male-age cohorts recorded in the Akyab district tables of the Burma census.

The population of the Moishkhali-Kutubdia coastal *thana* (Cox's Bazar sub-division) in 1901 was recorded as *lower* by 7.3 per cent than in 1891. This loss was linked to the detrimental effect of the 1897 cyclone which did, as the census report tells us, almost as much damage as the one of 1876. During the 1881–1891 decade, the population recovered by 29.5 per cent while after a dip, it rose by 37.4 per cent from 1901 to 1911.<sup>78</sup> The huge gap of 25 per cent between the male and the female Muslim population in 1901 suggests that many men had left for seasonal work in Arakan. The total population must therefore have been higher during the 'none-harvesting-season' of the year. While the population of Moishkhali-Kutubdia increased considerably until 1911, the gender gap still remained at an impressive 16 per cent. If the gender gap (indicating a higher female population at the moment of the decennial census record) is, as I assume, a valid indicator for male Muslim seasonal migration to Arakan, the decreasing percentages in 1921 (12 per cent) and 1931 (9 per cent) may suggest that the number of seasonal workers from this region going to Arakan remained stable in absolute numbers.

Census figures do also provide strong contextual grounds for the flow of emigrants out of Chittagong district. Eastern Bengal saw a con-

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<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Henry Beverley, "The Census of Bengal", in *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 1874, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 69–113; Henry Beverley, "Census of Bengal, 1881", in *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 1883, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 680–690.

<sup>78</sup> Thompson, 1922, p. 88, see above note 75.

siderable increase of its population from 1872 to 1931 in contrast with West Bengal. Census figures of Burdwan, Presidency and Rajshahi divisions show a moderate growth (13.7, 36.2 and 28.5 respectively) when compared with Dacca and Chittagong divisions (with 82 and 98.4 per cent respectively). However, within Chittagong division the population of the districts of Tippera and Noakhali more than doubled, while Chittagong district's population rose much less (59 per cent).<sup>79</sup> These general observations are only moderately helpful for our investigation, unless we focus our attention on the demographic growth in the individual '*thanas*', the administrative units below the sub-divisional or district level.<sup>80</sup>

Chittagong district, which counted approximately 1.8 million people in 1931, was divided into the northern Sadar and the southern Cox's Bazar subdivisions. Cox's Bazar is the subdivision sharing a border with Arakan's Akyab district. The demographic growth of these two subdivisions from 1872 to 1931 was strikingly different. While the '*thanas*' in Sadar subdivision had an average population growth of 28 per cent (excluding the fast growing urban agglomeration of Chittagong), the '*thanas*' of Cox's Bazar subdivision had an average of 145 per cent.<sup>81</sup> This is not surprising because even in 1921, the southern part of Chittagong district was seen as "only partially developed" and attracted migrants.<sup>82</sup> Tek Naf, the '*thana*' stretching along the Naf River opposite Burma, saw an unbroken population growth of 162 per cent in 60 years.<sup>83</sup> The settlement migration from Chittagong district in Bengal to Akyab district in Burma should therefore be seen, as I have argued above, in the perspective of a southward migratory push towards regions where new agricultural lands could be exploited in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

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<sup>79</sup> The population increased strongly in the 1920s. The 1872–1921 increase was 43 per cent.

<sup>80</sup> Since 1982, a '*thana*' is called '*upazila*' in contemporary Bangladesh and defined as a sub-unit of a district. See "Upazila", on *Wikipedia* (available on its web site).

<sup>81</sup> For practical reasons, the figures of the census records have been aligned with the '*thanas*' as they existed in 1872 when their number was still lower. '*Thanas*' in Sadar division were Fatikchari, Hathazari, Raojan, Chittagong (Kotwali), Mirasarai, Sitakund, Patiya, Sitkania and Banshkali. '*Thanas*' formed in 1921 include Rangunia, Double Moorings, Panchalais, Boalkhali and Anwara. English spellings of several of these terms vary.

<sup>82</sup> Thompson, 1922, p. 88, see above note 75.

<sup>83</sup> Cox's Bazar sub-division counted four '*thanas*' in 1872: Cox's Bazar, Moishkhali (Maheshkhali), Teknaf and Chakaria. By sub-divisions, this number increased with the creation of new units: Ukhia (since 1911) and Ramoo and Kutubdia (since 1921). The percentage of 162 per cent for Tek Naf includes the data of the '*thana*' of Ukhia for the years 1911, 1921 and 1931.

Like Moishkhali-Kutubdia, the population of Teknaf-Ukhia area, opposite Maungdaw township (Arakan), was also lower in 1901 than in 1891, and it stagnated for another 20 years, rebounding only after World War I. In this case, however, there was no noteworthy gender gap to be observed in any of the five decennial census years, so that seasonal work (and a temporary absence of Muslim men) cannot explain the low level of the population. As the time period of this stagnation (the two and a half decades before World War I) matches quite exactly the growth phase of Chittagonian settlements in north Arakan, a likely hypothesis is the emigration of people from or coming through this area into Arakan. One may indeed suggest that people moved from elsewhere in Chittagong division, too, going further south-east and crossing the Naf River, but sources would not allow an assessment of their origins.<sup>84</sup>

Seasonal or temporary migrants also came from areas in Sadar subdivision further north. A gender gap indicating a higher female Muslim population fluctuating between 11 and 16 per cent in decennial records was a constant phenomenon in the '*thanas*' of Sitkania, Banshkhali and Anwara, bordering on Cox's Bazar subdivision. Patiya '*thana*' seems to have sent seasonal workers to Arakan until World War I, but less afterwards. On the other hand, in the late colonial period, seasonal workers seem to have come from much further away such as Hathazari, Mirsharai and Sitakund (all situated north of the city of Chittagong), a trend one can observe after 1901.

With few exceptions, the Bengal census data do not explicitly refer to or prove the migratory movements one observes in the record of Arakan, but both at macro and micro levels, they mirror and provide context to the rural demographic developments in Arakan.

### **6.5. Chittagonians and the Rise of a Self-Organized Muslim Society in North Arakan**

The descriptive elements traced in colonial sources on the Chittagonian settlements in north Arakan suggest the genesis of a self-organizing collectivity forming besides Arakan's majority Buddhist society.

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<sup>84</sup> Muslim men from the Cox's Bazar-Ramu area do not seem to have been involved in the annual seasonal migration, while the Chakaria area was less involved than neighbouring Moishkhali.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, north Arakan was underpopulated; Chittagonian settlers joined a sparse Arakanese population, settlements grew with land grants, and waste lands became rice fields. British administrators outlined matter-of-fact differences between both population groups – their houses were built differently; the way of cultivating was not the same – but their notes do not contain observations on cultural practices or social organization. The topic in which we are keenly interested in hindsight, such as village neighbourhoods, inter-ethnic relations, and the power balance among the rural elites, are absent from descriptions.

Accounts reiterate the favourable British views of Chittagonian thrift, as explained above. Early on, the Bengali gardens had caught the eye of the administrators.

This would show that the Bengalee holdings of paddy land are considerably smaller than those of the Mughls (*that is* Arakanese). In garden-land holdings [...] there is little difference in the area, but in the cultivation of miscellaneous produce, the Bengalees have certainly more land, and it is a class of cultivation in which they doubtless excel the Mughls.<sup>85</sup>

Early descriptions convey a picture of self-isolating communities.

Natives of India are found chiefly in Maungdaw and on the waste land grants above Buthidaung, where they far outnumber all other races. They live in their own villages and do not mix in any way with the Arakanese population. Whilst almost every Arakanese can talk Chittagonian, very few natives are acquainted with the language of their adopted country and none can read it.”<sup>86</sup>

However, it would be wrong to assume that Buddhist and Muslim societies did not interact and even influence each other in their social modes and habits. One may point to the transactional role of Muslim traders, peddlers, fishermen and producers of dry fish.

Still, against the background of a very limited body of sources, there is surely a need to theorize Buddhist-Muslim relations to structure

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<sup>85</sup> Revenue Settlement Operations Report 1867–68, p. 35, see above note 23.

<sup>86</sup> W.E. Lowry, *Report on the revision settlement operations in the Akyab district Season 1901–02*, British Burma Press, Rangoon, 1903, p. 5.

the rise and the presence of a concentrated Muslim community of largely migrant origins in north Arakan. While this challenge cannot be addressed in the present chapter, a few elements for such a discussion can be sketched. Any research on the ‘Chittagonians’, as outlined in the introduction of this chapter, is over-shadowed, not to say predicated, first, by the post-colonial rise of the Rohingyas as an ethnic expression of north Rakhine Muslims and as a localized movement in Burma’s post-independence political landscape; second, by territorial claims formulated by North Rakhine Muslim leaders after the end of World War II; third, by the domestic contestation of Muslim claims for self-identification; and, fourth, by a process of legal exclusion, denial of rights and physical oppression led by the state. Our intention to understand regional history and connect the colonial past of the multiple populations of Arakan with the post-colonial conundrum of Rakhine State is therefore heavily impacted by the need to disentangle, in a long-term diachronic perspective, the conflicted histories of self-affirmation of both Buddhists and Muslims, the histories of intercommunal relations and victimization and the role of the state and the military in the late colonial and the post-colonial as well as the World War II period.

The issue of the so-called deep roots of the ethno-political conflict in Rakhine State is not a question about what went wrong at a particular moment in the past, but about the dynamics of an open-ended conflictual process, which emerged since the colonial period. Pace the intentions of those who want to rename pre-World War II Muslims of north Arakan ‘Rohingyas’ in the name of retro-projecting a sense of historical justice. Arguably, the selfhood of colonial Chittagonian migrants must also be recognized in its own right. Their existence should not be erased from the historical record, sacrificed to twenty-first century ‘political correctness’ or falsified. Many years before the Burmese state and its security forces became a dominating actor in Rakhine State, the Japanese invasion and the breakdown of the British administration (1942) opened a domestic political space filled by the ethnopolitical goals and territorial ambitions of both Buddhists and Muslims. Short- and long-terms interests were diverging, and both communities were turning to the state for recognition and validation. The issues of acculturated Arakanese Muslims or newly self-identifying Rohingya Muslims do not conflict with the evidence of migrant population growth. Acculturation and ethnification cannot, however, be discussed outside the rapidly changing social and political con-

texts hitting the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minorities in the Bengal-Arakan borderlands.

What comes to mind in the Myanmar context is the concept of the plural society seen by J.S. Furnivall as people who mix but do not combine, who meet in the marketplace but do not share culture. The concept of a ‘parallel society’, much discussed by German scholars in the early twenty-first century (*Parallelgesellschaften*) points to ethnically distinctive communities in contemporary Western societies and the expression includes the notion of deliberate segregation which could be relevant to discuss the manifest process of alienation underpinning communal relations in Arakan/Rakhine State.

The way that ethno-religious communities competed for social, economic and political shares in the modernizing project of the colonial rulers further suggests the need for a bottom-up perspective. In a history from below, the ruthless prioritization of productivity undermined the traditional cultural hierarchy and turned upside down a territorial and social order where Buddhist Arakanese (with the exception of a tiny class of wealthy families) were receding while immigrants were expanding.

The sections below drawing on colonial census data present the growth of the Muslim community in Akyab district, particularly in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, demonstrate the impact of immigration as the major factor of Muslim population growth and provide an overview of migrant and indigenous Muslim communities in Akyab district. They provide important though unquestionably limited insights into Muslim communal formations and ‘sedimentary’ diversity. Yet these insights shed light on conditions right at the moment when communal riots broke out in 1942 pitting Muslims and Buddhists competing for the control of agricultural lands against each other.

#### **6.5.1. The Growth of the Muslim Community in Arakan During the Colonial Period**

The data contained in Burma census reports have been rightly criticized, first of all by British colonial administrators themselves looking back at the work of their predecessors. Criticisms extend to the quality of the numerical record, the reliability of the figures collected, the choice of categories to organize the data, and in more recent days, the racial and ethnicized classification, which essentialized the identities of people in ways that had little consideration for social change and inter-ethnic complexity.

Rohingya writers have criticized the British record of the Muslim population in Arakan arguing that there was no settlement immigration, because Muslims included in the census records, taken early in the year, were actually seasonal migrants.<sup>87</sup> This is an important observation, but it cannot be answered in a fully satisfactory way, because, as mentioned above, we do not know the volume of seasonal migrants in the census years more than in any other year as it was not recorded. A difference of a few days could indeed have a relevant impact on the total number to be recorded.<sup>88</sup> The assumed over-estimation (mostly of Muslim men) must therefore have declined, as the date of the census receded from mid-February to mid-March from 1881 to 1921. Any over-estimation must also have had a lesser impact, as the general population grew while there is no indication that seasonal migration increased over time. There is one occurrence where the difference must be taken into account, as it created a statistical deviance. The 1872 census was taken in August, “during the rains after the coolies had returned home”, while the 1881 census was the earliest census ever taken “in the height of the milling season”.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, as the present research shows, it is not the development of the total number of Muslims in Akyab district which is the most relevant observation, but the divergence in local community growth. It is the territorial aspect and the social context that matter, much less than absolute numbers.

Despite many critical inputs on the deficiencies of the colonial sources and the caveats to heed, the census figures are the only source where we can find answers to questions on demographic change. As seen above, the textual evidence on migration to north Arakan provides a continuous and therefore reliable indication about the flow of Chittagonian immigration.

The ‘imperial’ and ‘provincial’ tables provide series of data to build coherent arguments about the growth of the general population, the growth of the Muslim communities, the proportions of different communities, and most importantly developments at a local level.

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<sup>87</sup> The dates of the India and Burma census were 15 August 1872, 17 February 1881, 26 February 1891, 1 March 1901, 10 March 1911, 18 March 1921, and 24 February 1931.

<sup>88</sup> “A postponement of the record by ten days in the busiest portion of the emigration season would cause a marked reduction in the number of immigrants to be entered”. See Eales, 1892, p. 72, see above note 41.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

The present section argues that Chittagong immigration was socially and economically important, had a major impact on the demographic development of Arakan, and recreated the religious and social landscape of Akyab district.

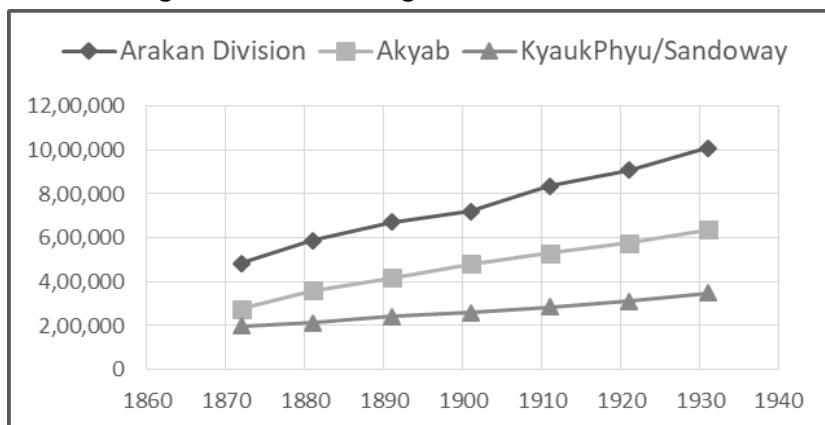
Minor numerical differences between imperial and provincial tables for district and township totals are recurrent but statistically insignificant and remain un-noted. The small ethnic minority groups (such as Mro, Khami and Daingnak) are not taken into account in this research; the Kaman and Myedu communities are not included or discussed because they were numerically inconsequential, and were never distinguished officially as separate groups before 1931. The districts under consideration are Akyab, Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway, leaving aside the Arakan Hill Tracts, which are irrelevant for the present investigation. The study of the Chittagonian immigration to Arakan is mostly a study of the Muslim migrant flow to the various townships of Akyab district. Myebon township, belonging to Kyauk Phyu district, is an exception; it was allegedly home of indigenous Muslims tracing their origins back to the seventeenth century, but became a destination for Chittagonian migrants after World War I.

To simplify comparisons, data of Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway, forming the south of Arakan, have been put together. Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway together formed 40 per cent of Arakan's population in 1872, but this percentage fell to 35 per cent until 1931. Akyab's rise was due to a number of factors, three of the reasons are the extension of the land used for rice cultivation, Akyab port's rise as a trade hub, and the Chittagonian immigration. It is useful to recall that Chittagonians were not the only settlers coming to Arakan. Between the First and Second Anglo-Burmese Wars, Burmese from Lower Burma came to south Arakan, people from Upper Burma arrived after 1852, the arrival of Chinese, though marginal, was noted since the 1860s. Hindus were an economically relevant but numerically insignificant group during the entire colonial period, making up around 2.5 per cent of the population in Akyab district, but staying below 1 per cent anywhere else in Arakan. Nonetheless, Hindu Oriyas, non-Chittagonian Bengalis, and Muslim 'Madrassis' counted among the colonial immigrants, too. Domestic Buddhist migration from Ramree played an important role in the development of villages in the Rathedaung and Buthidaung areas and is frequently managed in gazetteers and census records.



From 1872 to 1931, the population of Akyab district grew by 130 per cent, the growth in Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway was 76 per cent (see Graph 1 below). Akyab district's population grew 42.6 per cent from 1870 to 1900 and only 24 per cent from 1900 to 1930. The author assumes that immigration declined as a factor of growth after World War I, as three quarters of the Muslim population were born in Arakan in 1931. Fertility became the essential growth factor.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless immigration did not disappear and spilled over into the southern townships.<sup>91</sup>

Table 1 shows the growth of the population in Arakan division, Akyab district, and Kyauk Phyu-Sandoway districts. Akyab district's growth was driving the division's demographic growth. The surge between 1872 and 1881 has been explained above as a result of different dates for the census. The rise between 1891 and 1901 marks the most visible moment of growth due to immigration.



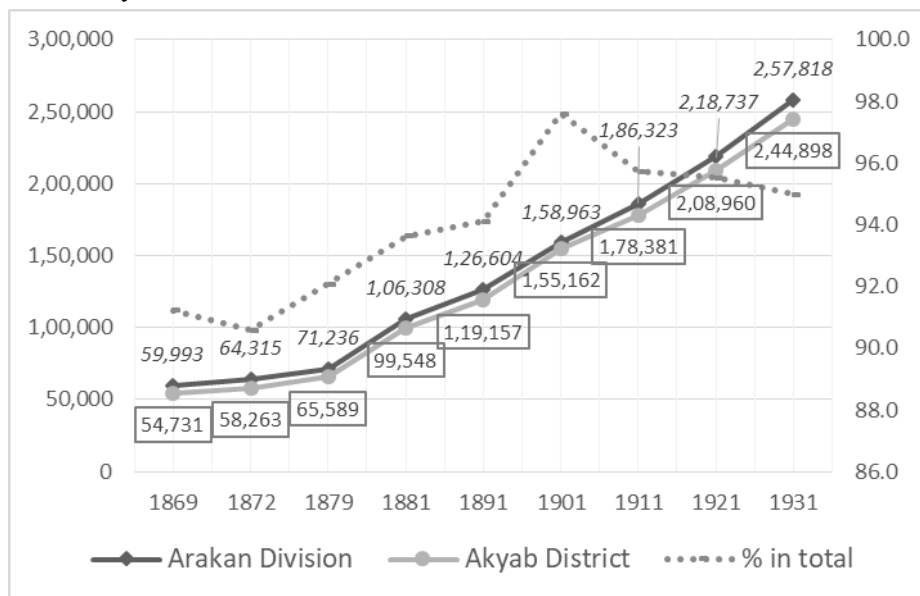
**Graph 1: General population growth in Arakan division, Akyab district and Kyauk Phyu-Sandoway districts (1871-1931).**

A comparative view of the growth of Muslim communities in Arakan division and Akyab district shows that Akyab district was driving Muslim population growth between 1872 and 1901 (Graph 2). In the early-twentieth century, the percentage of Akyab district Muslims in the total

<sup>90</sup> The British rule of thumb for the composition of a Buddhist household in Arakan was five and for a Muslim household six people.

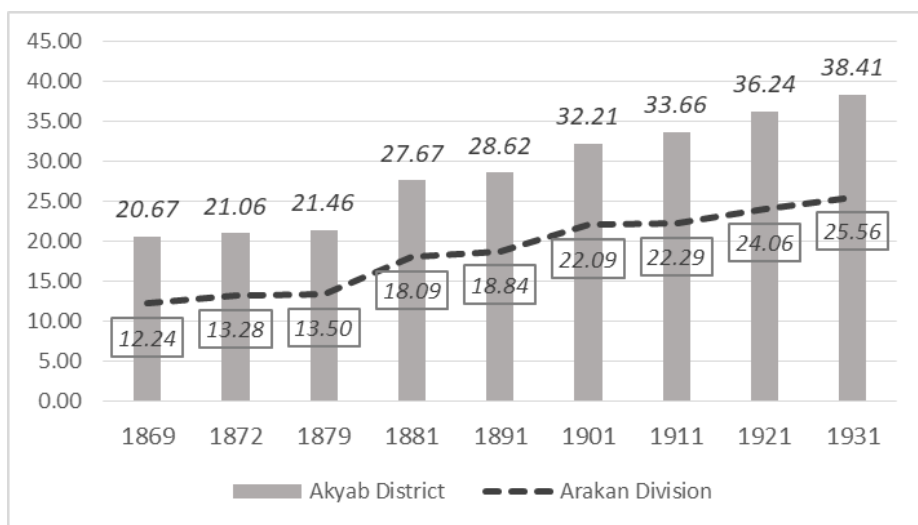
<sup>91</sup> The 1921 and 1931 census differentiate between indigenous and immigrant Chittagonian and Bengali Muslims. The growth of the tiny Muslim communities in Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway was essentially due to migration.

Muslim population started to fall to some extent from its peak of 98 per cent. This may confirm, as I would assume, the increasing impact of immigration on the Muslim communities in the districts of Kyauk Phyu and Sandoway.



**Graph 2: A comparative view of Muslim population growth in Arakan division and Akyab district.**

The share of Muslims in the total population of Arakan division grew under colonial rule. Muslims formed 12.24 per cent of the general population in 1869 and 25.56 per cent in 1931. In Akyab district, the percentage of the Muslim population went up from 20.67 per cent in 1869 to 38.41 per cent in 1931. These developments are represented in Graph 3. The surge appearing from 1879 to 1881 has already been explained as a statistical deviance due to the different dates of the census in 1872 and 1881. The increase during the 1891–1901 decade confirms the observations made by British administrators of a rise in Chittagonian settlers. The rise of the population in Naaf township then led to the creation of a new township to the east of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, which absorbed one-third of the former population of Rathedaung township and was included for the first time in the 1911 census.



**Graph 3: Percentage of Muslims in the total population of Arakan division and Akyab district**

The graphs underscore the demographic importance of Akyab district and its population dynamics within Arakan division. A remarkable rise of the percentage of Muslims in the Akyab population took place from the late 1860s onwards with a decade of fast growth after 1891.

### 6.5.2. A Majority Muslim Society in North Arakan: The Case of Maungdaw and Buthidaung

To understand the territorial aspect and the social implications of the demographic increase of one group in comparison to the other, research needs to focus on the data at township level. Akyab's townships counted each between approximately 48,000 and 140,000 people in 1931. At the end of the colonial period, the percentage of Muslims in each of the nine townships of Akyab district varied between 4 per cent in Ponnagyun and 80 per cent in Maungdaw township. Buddhist-Muslim relations and communal cohabitation evolved in different shapes and contexts.

In Akyab township (the provincial capital including the port and surrounding villages), the Muslim percentage gyrated around 50 per cent between 1891 and 1931 with a population that did not substantially increase. Ponnagyun did not see any major percentual change of the Muslim share either. However, in Minbya and Pauktaw, there was a significant increase, from 7.2 per cent in 1891 to 14 per cent in 1931 for Minbya, and

from 7.8 per cent to 12.8 per cent in Pauktaw. This may seem small, and absolute numbers are indeed small, but as the author has suggested elsewhere, it is this localized, but perceptible increase in combination with other factors, like a lesser availability of agricultural land and simultaneous Buddhist population growth in these townships of central Arakan, which could contribute to an explanation of the outbreak of the communal riots of 1942 in these townships.<sup>92</sup>

We lack a detailed record for Maungdaw township before 1891 when the census records included for the first time the provincial tables with details on the composition of its population. Chittagonian migrants formed already 70 per cent of the population of Maungdaw in 1891 and their uncontested domination was confirmed throughout the next forty years with a further steady increase. As mentioned above, prior to 1911, Maungdaw was called Naaf township, taking the name of the river separating Arakan from Bengal. Naaf/Maungdaw township was and remained by far the biggest township of Arakan division. It had nearly 100,000 people in 1891 and about 140,000 in 1931.

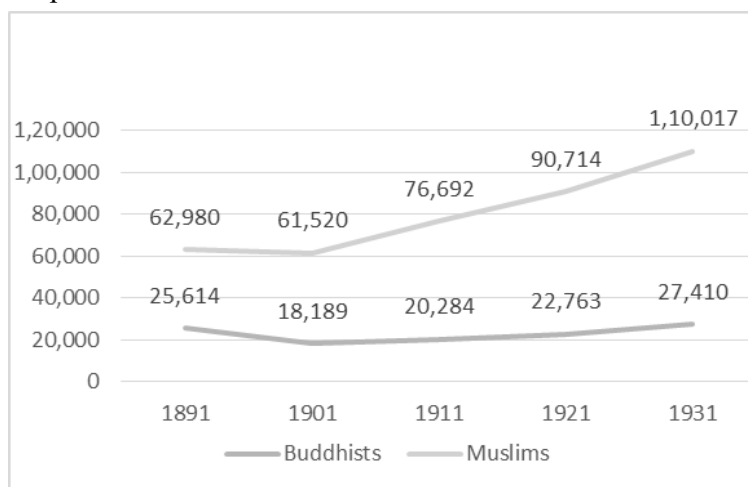
With the exception of Buthidaung (90,000 people in 1931), Maungdaw counted much more than the double of the population of any other township (having an average of 55,000). When land became scarce in Maungdaw, settlers moved over the Mayu Range into the Mayu and Kalapanzin River valleys where Buthidaung township was formed in 1908. Buthidaung had a majority Muslim population of nearly 60 per cent after World War I. Its territory had been cut off from Rathedaung township, as the Muslim-majority part of the latter. Rathedaung is situated further south on the eastern Mayu River side and any regional comparisons need to include this township. After the creation of Buthidaung township in 1911, Rathedaung's Muslim population fell back to a fifth of its total population, its level in 1891.

The following tables show the respective development of the Buddhist and Muslim populations in Maungdaw, Rathedaung and Buthidaung. When the 1890s saw an increase in migration, Maungdaw's population did *not* grow; it even receded. Buddhist Arakanese moved away under the migrant pressure, as the British administrators noted. But the Muslim population did not grow much either. However, in the Mayu Valley, the population of Rathedaung steeply increased, both the Buddhist (30 per

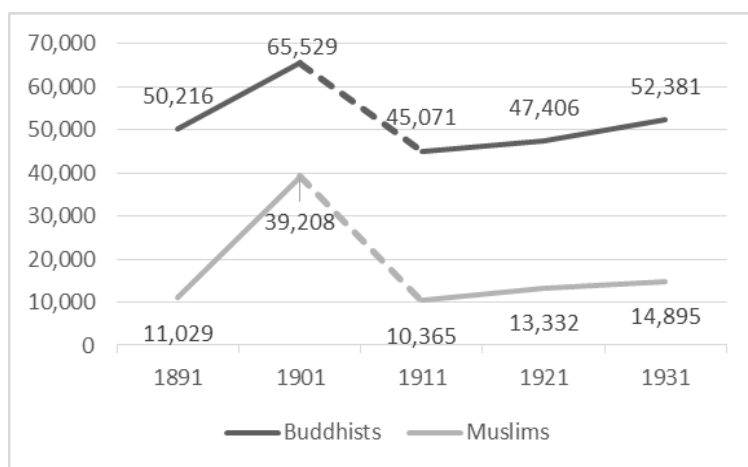
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<sup>92</sup> Leider, 2020, see above note 47.

cent) and the Muslim (255 per cent) communities grew, though at widely different speed.



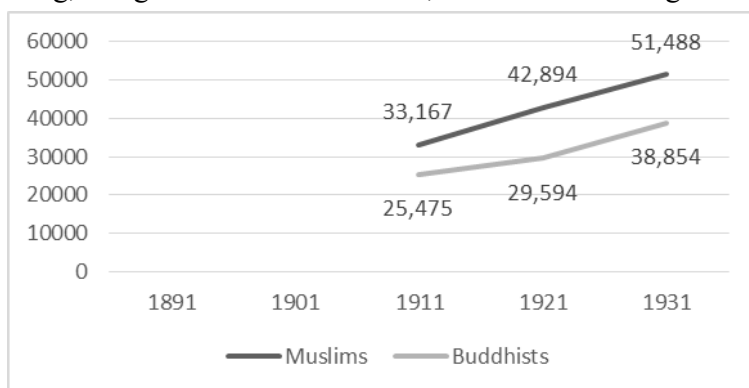
**Graph 4: Growth of the major population groups in Maungdaw township (1891–1931).**



**Graph 5: Growth of the major population groups in Rathedaung township (1891–1931).**

After 1901, Maungdaw's Muslims confirmed their regional predominance while the growth of its Buddhist population became disconnected from the rapid Muslim increase. Both in Rathedaung and Buthidaung, domestic migrants contributed to the growth of the Buddhist

population after World War I. This growth was more marked in Buthidaung, an agricultural frontier zone, than in Rathedaung.



**Graph 6: Growth of the major population groups of Buthidaung township (1911–1931).**

Like Maungdaw, Buthidaung became the site of extreme communal violence in 1942 and 1943. Buddhists in Buthidaung first resisted Muslim aggressions that had been provoked by the explosion of anti-Muslim violence perpetrated in Minbya, Pauktaw and Myebon. But they were driven out of Buthidaung by campaigns in May 1942 and in the wake of the First Arakan campaign (December 1942–April 1943).<sup>93</sup> As an area where both Buddhist and Muslims competed for the ownership of land and the return on agricultural investment, the demographic balance (60:40) reflects a picture where no group would likely give in to pressure.

### 6.5.3. ‘Arakan Mahomedans’ and Chittagonians

The acculturated community of Arakan Muslims (‘Arakan Mahomedans’) was well described in the 1872 census and occasionally described by later colonial administrators.<sup>94</sup> Though it was a small group spread nearly all

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> The census of 1872 gives a valid description for the entire colonial period, contextualizing the group of local Muslims with regard to the immigrants:

The Mussulman population of Akyab, however, is not, as elsewhere in the province, alien, as they have for the most part been settled in the province for many generations, and, as the Commissioner of the division says, have little to distinguish them from the Arakanese, except their religion. These, and they are probably more than three-fourths of the Mussulmans of the district, have of course, their wives and families with them, and the examination of the distribution of the people according to age in the succeeding chapters shows that the disparity between the sexes is confined to the ages

over Arakan, its existence since pre-colonial times was never in doubt. They were the descendants of those Bengalis who had been deported by the Arakanese kings during war campaigns in Lower Bengal in the early seventeenth century and settled on royal lands in the Kaladan and Lemro Valleys, in the vicinity of Mrauk U (colonial ‘Myohaung’), the former capital, and Kyauktaw.<sup>95</sup> However, being bundled together with other Muslims by the colonial administration and speaking an East Bengali dialect like the Chittagonians, they became nearly invisible statistically in the census from 1872 to 1921. The 1931 census introduced a racialized classification which drew a line between Chittagonian Muslims and Arakan Muslims; this enables a numerical differentiation of the two groups at township level. The present section will focus on the analysis of these data and the resulting profile of the indigenous Arakan Muslims.

With the formation of British Burma in 1862, bringing together Arakan, Tenasserim and Lower Burma, the administration of the colony was unified. The annual *Report on the Administration of the Province of British Burma* was first published for the year 1861–62 and the series ran until 1935–36, including occasionally brief ethnographic notes. As the British administrators had noted the presence of indigenous, acculturated Muslims in several ports along the coast, from Tenasserim to Arakan, they referred to these Muslim people as “Mahomedans of Burma”. The annual reports of the 1860s classify around five per cent of the total population in Arakan as “Mahomedans of Burma”; the remaining seven per cent were categorized as “Indians”, meaning recent immigrants.<sup>96</sup> In fact, this accul-

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between 20 and 50 – that is to say, to the prime of life, – and is accounted for by the able-bodied immigrants who bring no families.

See Burma Census 1872 Report, p. 16, see above note 62. Regarding their origins, the report noted:

There is one more race which has been so long in the country that it may be called indigenous, and that is the Arakanese Mussulman. These are descendants, partly of voluntary immigrants at different periods from the neighbouring province of Chittagong, and partly of captives carried off in the wars [...].

*Ibid.*, p. 30. See also Webb, 1912, p. 98, see above note 37.

<sup>95</sup> Stephan van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD” PhD, Leiden University, Leiden, 2008; Thibaut D’Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>96</sup> One may compare this total of 12 per cent with the 15 per cent indicated by Arthur P. Phayre 20 years earlier when he was the commissioner of the province; see Arthur P. Phayre, “Account of Arakan”, in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1841, vol. 2, pp.

turated group was already identified much earlier among refugees and deportees from Arakan following the Myanmar conquest of 1784. Francis Buchanan identified such Muslims from Arakan in Burma's capital Amrapura (who used an East Bengali expression for Arakan, "Rooinga") during a visit in 1795, while the Reverend J.C. Fink, who missionized among the Arakanese refugees in Chittagong in the early-nineteenth century, called them "Mugh Mussulmans", "Mugh" being a common Bengali term for the Arakanese.<sup>97</sup> Besides, we may note that, not unlike British perceptions of the Arakanese, the colonial gaze first fixed the indigenous Arakan Muslims as "a hard working industrious race ... too well known to need any description", while later, their cultural assimilation with the Arakanese made them suspect as being "sapped of their vitality" to do hard labour.<sup>98</sup>

In 1921, the census categorized Muslims in Arakan with greater detail than before. People could identify, for the first time, as 'Arakan Mahomedans', or as belonging to any of these four categories: (1) Chittagonian Mahomedans born in Burma, (2) Chittagonian Mahomedans born outside of Burma, (3) Bengali Mahomedans born in Burma, and (4) Bengali Mahomedans born outside of Burma.<sup>99</sup> In the end, the number of 'Arakan Mahomedans' looked suspiciously low as it turned out to be the same as the estimation of their number in 1872. It confirmed to some extent the confusing indications found in earlier census. In 1911, for example, the estimation of their number was below 5,000. In 1931, on the other hand, Muslims identifying as 'Arakan Mahomedans' counted over

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679–712. The 1872 census report contains inconsistent statements on the part of indigenous Muslims among the Muslim population as a whole. On page 3, we are told that between 24,000 and 25,000 "Arakanese Mahomedans" differ from the Buddhists "in little besides their religion". However, on page 16, it is suggested that three quarters of the total of Muslims in Arakan must be indigenous, and on p. 30, it is stated that there were 64,000 "Arakanese Mussulmans". This confusion can be amended with the help of the data of the 1860s, which make clear that 24–25,000 is the reliable figure. Some 64,000 was the total of Muslims in Arakan in 1872. The "three quarters" guess is an error, see Burma Census 1872 Report, see above note 62. I am grateful to Derek Tonkin for pointing out this issue.

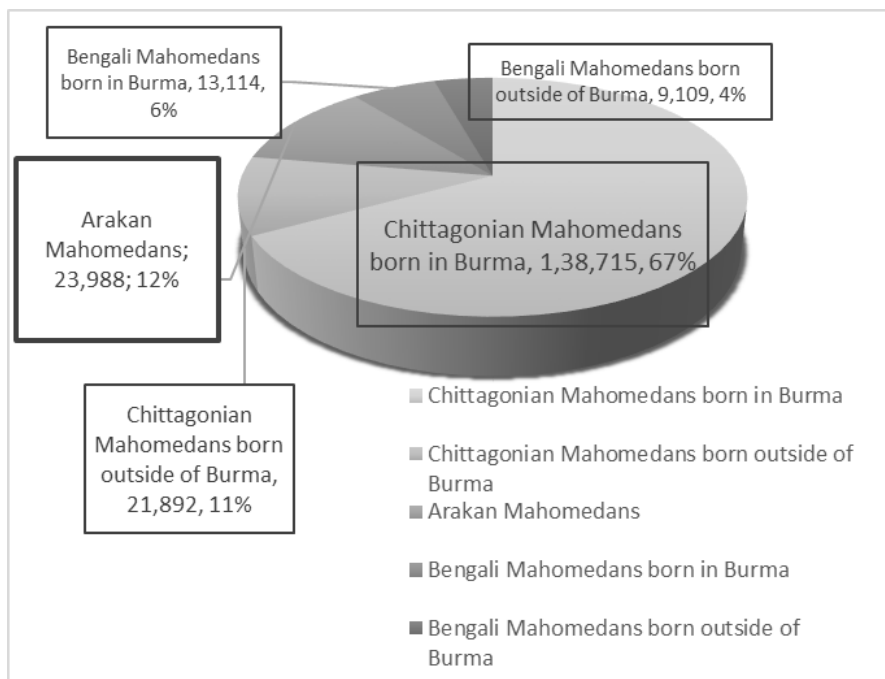
<sup>97</sup> Robert Robinson, *Among the Mughs or Memorials of the Rev. J. C. Fink, Missionary in Arracan*, The Light Press, Calcutta, 1871, pp. 79–80; Francis Buchanan, "A comparative vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burma Empire", in *Asiatick Researches*, 1798, vol. 5, pp. 219–240.

<sup>98</sup> Revenue Settlement Operations Report 1867–68, p. 83, see above note 23; Smart, 1917, p. 15, see above note 25.

<sup>99</sup> "Bengali" denoted people from Bengal who were not Chittagonians.



50,000. This last result was annotated with the comment that census officers on the ground had spent more time explaining the concept of ‘Arakan Mahomedan’ identity before recording the answer. In 1921, we are told, certain people who fit the profile of ‘Arakanese Mahomedans’ had in fact identified as ‘Indians’.



**Graph 7: Muslim groups in Arakan according to the census of 1921.**

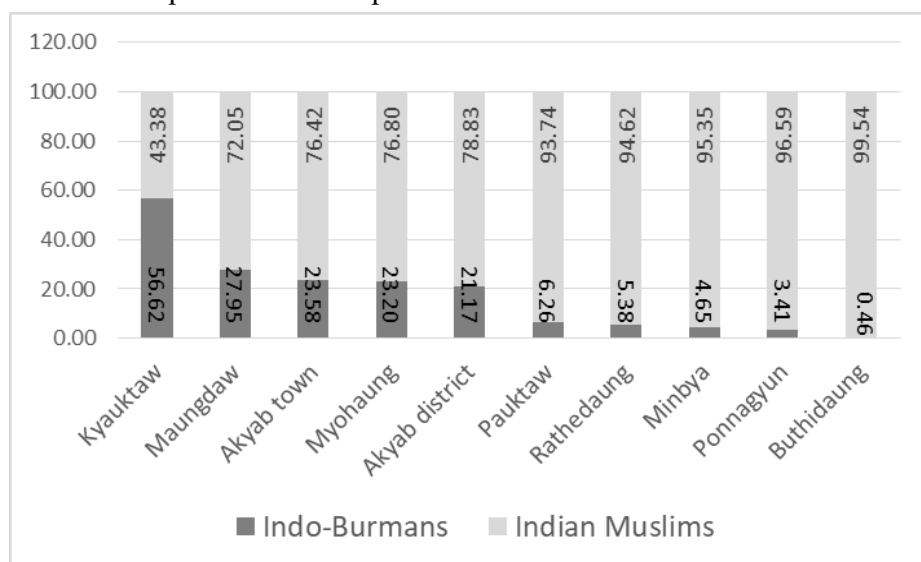
While the colonial administration wanted to get closer to a definition of the supposed *racial* identity of its subjects, conditions and contexts of identity formation kept on changing.

The 1931 census further racialized the classification of people, and created novel categories. Immigrant Chittagonians and their descendants were “Indians” as belonging to the “Indian race”, while local Arakan Muslims having mixed with the local population, belonged to the newly forged “Indo-Burman race” category. The fact that Indians were classified as foreigners, while mixed races were perceived as having historical roots in the country, produced a politically significant split.

The 1931 classification broke a line of continuity in numbering and grouping people so that the use of the 1931 census figures in comparison

with earlier statistics needs some adjustments with inevitably imperfect results. The 1931 racial categories were as follows: (1) Burmese, (2) Other Indigenous, (3) Chinese, (4) Indian Hindu, (5) Indian Muslim, and (6) Indo-Burman races (referred to as “Others” in the provincial tables). In comparison with the religious groups of the previous census, Arakanese Buddhists and the hill tribes, formerly summed up separately as “animists”, fell under the single “other indigenous” category in the imperial tables, while the Chinese emerged for the first time as a separate group. The racial difference between indigenous and foreign Muslims became a relevant criterion for classification which it had never been before.

As the 1931 census tables present the distribution of both Muslim groups at township level, we obtain a detailed picture to what extent Muslims identified as ‘Arakan Mahomedans’ and where they mostly lived. The result is presented in Graph 8.



**Graph 8: Percentage of ‘Indian Muslims’ and ‘Indo-Burman Muslims’ in the townships of Akyab district (Census of Burma, 1931).**

The highest percentage of self-declared indigenous ‘Arakan Mahomedans’ was found in Kyauktaw, where Muslims formed 35 per cent of the total population. This reflects the ancient presence of Muslims near the royal capital Mrauk U (called Myohaung during the British

period). Myohaung's substantial share of 23 per cent of Arakan Mahomedans calls for the same explanation. The lowest percentage (less than half per cent), on the other hand, is found in Buthidaung which had been created and evolved mainly as a township of new migrants, both Muslims and Buddhists. Nearly a quarter of Akyab's fishermen and traders claimed an indigenous identity as well which causes no surprise as the port at the mouth of the Kaladan River looked back on centuries of history.<sup>100</sup> In Pauktaw, Rathedaung, Minbya and Ponnagyun, four townships with smaller Muslim communities, the part of 'Arakan Muslims' was small, too.<sup>101</sup>

It is Maungdaw's 28 per cent of self-identifying Arakan Muslims which might at first come as a surprise. In the early-nineteenth century, Maungdaw was a tiny Buddhist village. A hundred years later, it was the centre of the most densely inhabited township of Arakan division. As shown above, both textual and numerical evidence underscore Maungdaw's rise as a settlement of immigrant Chittagonians. However, Maungdaw's society was, in comparison to Buthidaung and other townships, a society of first settlers and old residents and was not anymore, in the 1930s, the frontier region for agricultural entrepreneurs it used to be before 1900. One aspect of Maungdaw's Muslim society in the 1930s was its gender balance (male/female ratio) confirming its more

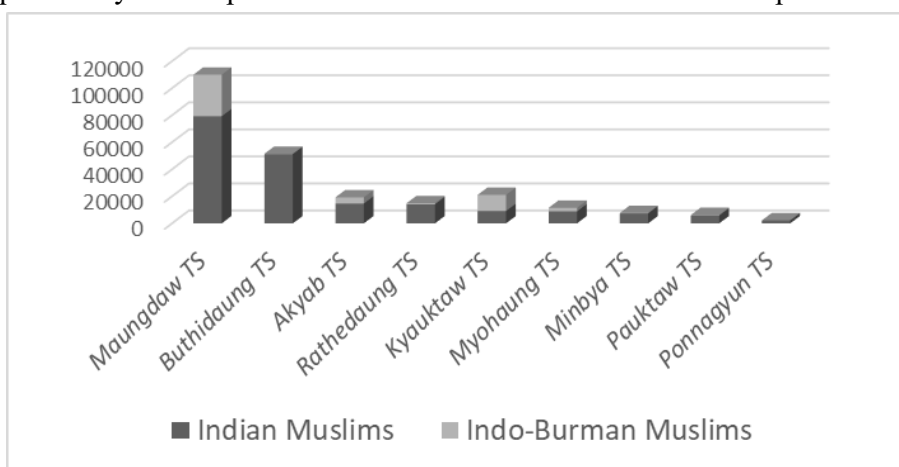
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<sup>100</sup> Muslims accounted for 38 per cent of Akyab's population (Buddhists, 39 per cent, Hindus, 22 per cent). Akyab became the provincial capital in 1830, leading to the transformation of a village site into a rice-exporting port. The fact that nearly one quarter of the local Muslims identified as Arakanese Muslims – keeping a memory of ancient, pre-colonial roots in Arakan – underscores the historical presence of the Muslim fisher-village. Little is known in fact about Akyab's older history. Its religious composition barely changed during the late colonial period. In 1881, Muslims accounted for 40 per cent, Buddhists 38 per cent, and Hindus 19 per cent of the population (Christians and other religious communities counting for 3 per cent). See 1881 census report, p. 91, see above note 54.

<sup>101</sup> In Rathedaung township, 625 women identified as Arakan Muslims besides 176 men in the 1931 census. The male/female ratio is surprising. One possible explanation could be that these women were born as Buddhists, married Muslim men, converted to Islam and saw themselves as properly speaking Arakan Muslims. Inter-religious marriages are a subject that raises more questions in practice than can usually be answered with reference to the available sources. In general, the number of adult women was inferior to the number of male adults in both Buddhist and Muslim society in Arakan. So, it would seem unlikely that there were many interreligious marriages initiated by immigrant Muslim men. The legal situation of Buddhist women, who had converted to Islam, in family and inheritance disputes became a hot topic in colonial Burma's Buddhist society and remained so until today; it fed anti-Muslim polemics and was a matter of concern for the colonial rulers.

settled character; it did not have, like other townships, communities dominated by young Muslim males belonging to the 20–40-years cohort, typical for emerging and temporary migrant communities elsewhere.

This is a significant insight with regard to the interpretation of social and political trends which emerged under the onslaught of World War II and civil war conditions escalating in 1949. Kyauktaw and Myohaung Muslims could claim a distant Muslim heritage, but their numbers were few in comparison to Maungdaw's Muslims (see Graph 9). Calling oneself an 'Arakan Mahomedan' made clear that one did not want to be seen as a recent immigrant from across the border. The claim of belonging expressed by the adoption of 'Arakan Mahomedan' was due to expand.



**Graph 9: Quantitative levels of Muslims identifying as Chittagonians ('Indian Muslims') or Arakan Muslims ('Indo-Burman Muslims') (1931 Census of Burma).**

Graph 9 illustrates the demographic ranking of Akyab's townships in terms of the total number of their Muslim population. It should be obvious that the two townships where Muslims formed a substantial majority were to play a dominant role among Akyab District's Muslims, due to their sheer demographic weight. Forty-five per cent of all Muslims in Akyab district lived in Maungdaw. The claims for the creation of an autonomous Muslim frontier zone were first raised in Maungdaw (in 1947) and Maungdaw's communal leaders (and, during the 1950s, its students at Rangoon University) played a pivotal role in the Rohingya movement. Neither Akyab's nor Kyauktaw's Muslims were critically involved in the

rise of Arakan's Muslim sub-nationalism, which engulfed the region when the shackles of colonial rule loosened.

### **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter makes sense of the Chittagonian seasonal, temporal and permanent migration during the second half of the British colonial rule in Arakan (Rakhine State). It shows that the migratory flows from Bengal followed different dynamics. The settlement migration had a major social and economic impact, as it profoundly transformed the north of Arakan's Akyab district. Maungdaw and Buthidaung became densely cultivated and inhabited areas, which formed a stark contrast with the Buddhist majority areas further south.

The settlement immigration from Chittagong was not a chimera, and it cannot be confused with the seasonal migration and its symbiotic relationship with Akyab's rice production cycle. However, in the context of Bengal's colonial administration, seasonal and permanent migrations to Arakan formed, in quantitative terms, a minor phenomenon, and did not retain the attention of colonial administrators. Still, from an historical and economic perspective, the Chittagonian settlements in Arakan should not be isolated from their geographical origins. In the context of the Bengal-Arakan border region, the migratory flow matched the southward expansion of an agricultural frontier.

The investigation confirms that Muslim communities in Arakan were not a homogenous body, but formed a multi-layered and multi-sited religious group. The percentages and quantitative assessments derived from the 1931 census should not be essentialized or unduly extrapolated, because they offer just a snapshot of identities that were affected by changing circumstances. The erratic data of the pre-1931 census reports should not lead to the conclusion that 'Arakan Mahomedans' did not exist, came to exist lately, or appeared as a mere late trend to re-identify and shed off an immigrant profile. Our observations confirm the weakness and arbitrariness of colonial classifications. Yet, despite the indifference of the colonial apparatus to ethnic change, inconsistent and discontinuous classifications, and late colonial obsession with racial profiles, the records that were generated offer data which can be explored, re-examined, critically reviewed, and interpreted in respect of our own questions.

An attempt has been made to contextualize rather than interpret the data with regards to the later historical experience and the history of the

‘now’. What this chapter contributes to research on the ethno-genesis of the Rohingyas, is the need for a greater awareness of complex and evolving Muslim identities during the colonial period. Studying the Chittagonian settlement migration is not in contradiction with the study of the Rohingyas and cannot be construed as conflicting with the sequential order of events. Understanding the rise of the modern Rohingyas means to understand another profound social and political transformation of the Muslims of north Arakan, inseparable from the colonial past. The socio-political process which conditioned post-colonial Muslim identities in Arakan was indebted to the radical breaks of World War II and the sequence of collective violence it ignited. This is an important chapter not included in this investigation. However, this process was rooted in the tension which was built up during the late colonial period and on which the administrative sources are mute. Nonetheless, the author suggests that demographic change was likely an important driver of these tensions which exploded with the communal riots of 1942. The question how Buddhists and Muslims were increasingly put into competition with each other for the control of land and resources calls for further analysis. How predictable was communal violence? How do colonial wrongs correlate with post-colonial injustice? It is against this background that the present investigation may function as an antidote to the ‘confirmation bias’ which has pervaded media dealing with the Rakhine State crisis since 2012, effectively preventing a transparent and balanced discussion of historical matters.

What the present research did not do is a comparative examination of the development of *both* population groups, Buddhists and Muslims. Identity formation among the Arakanese (Rakhine) Buddhists was similarly evolving as they did not exist as a homogenous group either, and were never categorized as uniformly such. The investigation also did not extract from the census data information on the composition of the population, age-cohorts and fertility, and did not pursue the question of male/female ratio. Such research would considerably flesh out the results presented here. It would notably show the influence that social habits of the majority population had on the minority group, and underscore the north-south divide in Arakan division which persists until today. Isolating the study of Buddhists and Muslims from each other is a methodological weakness, and while partial narratives feed victimhood narratives, they do not promote an understanding of the social and political gaps which came to divide the communities. The lack of demonstrating such underpinning

complexity in this chapter is regretted. In view of broadening the social and political analysis, the role of Muslim and Buddhist rural and urban elites (political, administrative and educational) may be indicated finally as a relevant area for further research.

Publication Series No. 40 (2020):

## **Colonial Wrongs and Access to International Law**

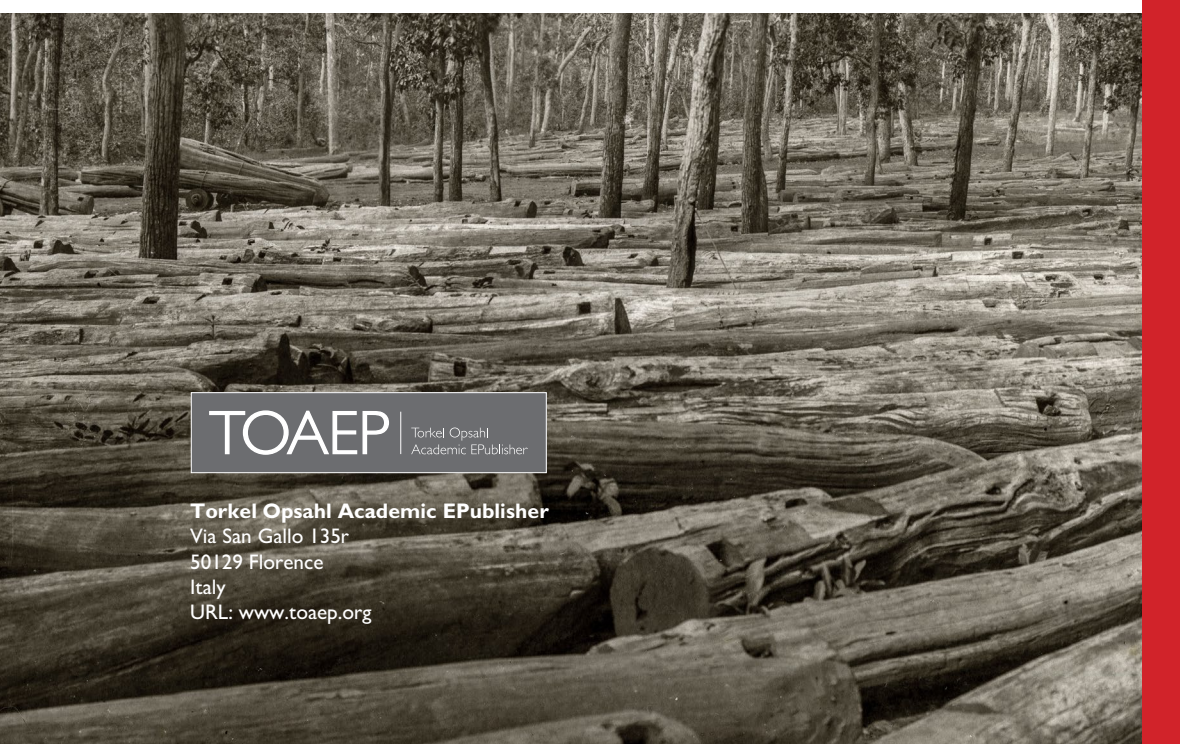
Morten Bergsmo, Wolfgang Kaleck and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (editors)

This eye-opening book invites careful reflection on how we should respond to colonial and post-colonial wrongs from the perspective of international law, in particular international criminal law. In addition to a dozen case studies, the book offers analyses based on legal concepts such as subjugation, *debellatio*, continuing crime, and transfer of civilians, as well as on the discourses of Third World Approaches to International Law and transitional justice. It contains a number of practical suggestions for what can be done to enhance a sense of access to international law in connection with colonial wrongs.

The book has eighteen chapters organised in five parts, addressing the context of the discussion on colonial wrongs and access to international law, legal notions, Colonial Burma, other former colonial territories, and indigenous populations. You find contributions by Morten Bergsmo, Joshua Castellino, Kevin Crow, Christophe Deprez, Shannon Fyfe, Gregory S. Gordon, Brigid Inder, Wolfgang Kaleck, Asad Kiyani, Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Jacques P. Leider, LING Yan, Christophe Marchand, Hugo van der Merwe, Ryan Mitchell, Annah Moyo, Mutoy Mubiala, Matthias Neuner, Narinder Singh, Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Derek Tonkin, Crépine Uwashema and YANG Ken.

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