

Michał Lubina

Jagiellonian University (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-3342-1763

e-mail: michal.lubina@uj.edu.pl

A Collective Voice of the Rohingya

Book Review: *Ronan Lee, Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech*, New Delhi 2021, pp. 320

The plight of the Rohingya people, a Muslim group living in Myanmar's western province of Rakhine (or Arakan) and the refugee camps in Bangladesh, is now well-known globally. Although repressions against Rohingya span decades, the 2017 refugee crisis attracted global attention to the misfortunes of the “most persecuted minority in the world”, as Rohingya are often called. The crisis made the world aware of the long-lasting problem of this unrecognized Muslim group. However, the 2017 crisis was just the tip of the iceberg. The Rohingya issue within Burma/Myanmar seriously started as early as 1978 (during the first exodus of the Rohingyas), though effectively it originated in 1942 (the start of WWII's communal violence between Muslims and Buddhists), if not even earlier (Muslim colonial migration to Arakan). Widely disliked, if not detested by Burmese society, the Rohingya people, after decades of neglect, found much sympathy and publicity in the West. From 2012 onwards, the plight of the Rohingya dominated international media coverage of Myanmar, culminating during the 2017 exodus. The major media narrative in the West, influenced by NGOs and other activist groups, has been about “the most persecuted minority in the world,” treated inhumanly and denied rights and eventually expelled by the Burmese army amid crimes against humanity, if not genocide, from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

When we move beyond the headlines and the moral media perspective, the Rohingya problematique gets more complicated. There are only two indisputable facts about the Rohingya. First, they are Muslims: it is a rural Muslim community from Rakhine state, with a small percentage of workers and lower middle-class people such as petty traders among them. The majority of them are now exiled to Bangladesh. Second, they are repressed.

The rest of the data about them is disputed and (deeply) controversial. Furthermore, the most disputed part is their ancestry. The Rohingya – depending on the point of view – are/are accused of being/claim to be descendants of pre-colonial Muslims of Mrauk-U kingdom and/or colonial immigrants from Chittagong and/or legal and illegal immigrants from East Pakistan/Bangladesh after 1947. It might be a bit confusing (no surprise here: Myanmar is one of the most complex countries in the world), but it all has serious political consequences. Given the (unfairly) rules of the political game in Myanmar, only those ethnicities that could claim their ancestry back to 1823 (a year before the beginning of the colonial conquest of Burma) can be recognized as *taingyintha*, or the indigenous peoples of Myanmar. To simplify – only *taingyintha* can enjoy full citizenship. Rohingya are not considered *taingyintha* and do not have any rights in Myanmar (most of them do not have neither full citizenship nor associate citizenship or even naturalized citizenship; most of them are stateless).

Due to *taingyintha* politicized ethnicity's logic, ancestry matters in Myanmar. The Burmese perception of Rohingya is that they are descendants of colonial Bengali immigrants or Bengali immigrants themselves. The Rohingya claim their ancestry back to the Mrauk-U kingdom (it lasted between the 15th and 18th centuries and was the most important kingdom in Arakanese history) or even earlier. That makes the disputed ancestry of the Rohingya the core issue, at least from the Burmese perspective.

It is also one of the most important issues in academic discourse on the Rohingya in Burma studies. While no serious academic denies the horrors inflicted upon the Rohingya (that would be not only counterfactual but also morally outrageous), the dominant view, influenced by scholars (e.g., Jacques Leider) and non-academic intellectuals (e.g., former diplomat Derek Tonkin) alike, has been of the Rohingya as a pretty recent group: a “political nation” constructed since the 1950s. Of course, these skeptics are not the only ones: a more understanding approach toward Rohingya claims is found in the texts of the older generation of scholars (e.g., Moshe Yegar) and those coming from contemporary ones (e.g., Michael Charney). However, it is rather the critical approach that sets the tone in academia, as evidenced by the choice of dr. Leider to write the entry on Rohingya for *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Asian History*. Against this dual background of the unspeakable tragedy of the Rohingya and the academic disputes about their ancestry comes the new book *Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech* by Ronan Lee.

Lee is a former Australian politician (he was a successful MP) who turned to academic activity and pursued genocide studies, defending his PhD and becoming a research scholar at International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary's University, London. He has written no small amount of articles about the repressions of Rohingya (e.g., about the destruction of Muslim heritage in Rakhine) and about other Burmese issues (e.g., about Aung San Suu Kyi). Now he comes out with a book published by Bloomsbury. The monography is the result of his almost-decade-long study on the Rohingya that included many trips to Myanmar, to refugee camps in Bangladesh, and interviewing Rohingya elites (within Myanmar and emigre).

This long perspective is admirable. Lee is not a parachute writer who just happened to come to Myanmar for the first time and writes a text afterward. When reading the book, one can feel Lee was in Myanmar long enough to understand the reality. The reportage parts of the book are some of the best. I enjoyed most the one about Lee's observing key 2015 elections not in Yangon but in Rohingya's strongholds of Buthidaung and Maungdaw (this non-obvious, excellent choice reveals his great journalist instincts).

Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide is also very good in terms of style: Lee's book is highly readable: he knows how to write, catch and keep the reader's attention in most parts. Moreover, Lee's argument can convince many readers by choice of wording, rhetoric devices (skillful repetition is the mother of teaching!), and good literary style. *Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide* is simply following the best Anglo-Saxon tradition of combining academic content with readable form (something not so evident in Continental Europe). Good for Lee – and good for us.

Although the book is conceived to be for all readers, especially those new in the field, there are some things seasonal Burma scholars can appreciate, too. I enjoyed the Author's intriguing own observations, such as his hypothesis that the north-south division (before the last expulsion of the Rohingya, the ethnic dynamics in Rakhine was that the Buddhists dominated the south and the Muslims the north) might have led to the universal Burmese conviction about Muslims immigrating to Northern Rakhine. Or that the Burmese society used to be multicultural (in the contemporary understanding of the world; not in Furnivall's "plural society") and only later hatred poisoned intra-ethnic relations. Or that the division line before 2012 in Rakhine used to be between Bamar (Burmans) and Rohingya, not between the Rohingya and the Rakhine (Arakanese).

In terms of academic value, this book has two trump cards. The first one is the new Buchanan source, and the other one is the interviews with Rohingya leaders. I will start from the latter as it requires less explanation. Lee has done an excellent job interviewing over 20 top Rohingya leaders in Myanmar and abroad (plus, he interviewed ordinary Rohingya people in the camps). This collective portrait of the elites of the Rohingya community is precious: it is the first collection of its kind in a monograph form.

As for the former (Buchanan's source), a small background must be presented. As mentioned, there is a dividing line between two positions on the Rohingya ancestry within Burma studies. The Rohingya themselves (and the scholars supporting them) to back their claims quote a text from 1799 by a British physician, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, a member of the British emissary mission to the Burmese court. Buchanan mentions "Rooinga" among inhabitants of the Arakan, and this "Rooinga" note remains the core argument in favor of the pre-colonial ancestry of the Rohingya. The critics of this approach (the majority of the Burmese and Arakanese as well as scholars supporting their position) argue that in between 1799 and the 1950s, the name was not used; hence they claim that the Rohingya identity had been constructed politically only in the 1950s and that this Buchanan's "Rooinga" was used in this nation-building. This review is not a place to decide who is wrong and who is right:

this is not the purpose of a review (Lee has a very clear position on it, as have the critics). What matters here is that Lee has found a new Buchanan text: his private, unpublished notes (“Journal of Progress and Observations During the Continuance of the Deputation from Bengal to Ava in 1797 in the Dominions of the Burma Monarch”) where the “Rooinga” pops up again. Although I doubt this new source (as well as overall Lee’s argumentation) would convince the critics (the first critique of Lee’s line seems to confirm my doubts), his achievement stands: Lee has found a new source. From now on, the Rohingya have two Buchanan quotes to back their claims instead of one.

As a reviewer, I am not only pleased to indicate strong points of the book; unfortunately, I am also obliged to point out more debatable aspects of Lee’s book. I am unconvinced by the Author’s acceptance of Rohingya’s sources (e.g., writings of Ba Tha), which presented such claims as Islam’s arrival to Arakan 7th century (p. 21), Min Saw Mon’s conversion to Islam (p. 22), or Mrauk-U being a Muslim kingdom (p. 23), as facts. There is no evidence to back these claims; by the current state of knowledge, these are only speculations with varying degrees of probability. Furthermore, I do not share Lee’s confidence in Paton’s estimations (19th century), and I do not understand why the Author excluded Comstock’s estimations (which were contradictory to Paton’s) about the number of Muslims and Buddhists in early 19th century Arakan. I am also unconvinced by Lee’s argument about colonial censuses. Finally, I am surprised why Lee has not mentioned the debate about the “elder” Muslims of Arakan and “younger” colonial immigration in the early 20th century (a debate “whom assimilated whom”, with Moshe Yegar arguing the former assimilated the latter and Jacques Leider claimed otherwise). Here, and in some other parts of the book, I feel that the line between the academic approach that seeks to discover the truth and the political position that wants to improve the world has been blurred.

That being said, the book is well worth a read. It is an important voice in the debate: in terms of archives, it adds one more important source (Buchanan’s diary). In terms of contemporary aspects, it presents the collective image of Rohingya elites’ views. It is much more than books usually achieve.