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▶ **To cite this version:**

François Robinne. To be Burmese is Not (Only) Being Buddhist. Renaud Egreteau et François Robinne. Metamorphosis. Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar, NUS Press, 2016, 978-9971-69-866-9. https://nuspress.nus.edu.sg/products/metamorphosis-studies-in-social-and-political-change-in-myanmar . halshs-01447047

HAL Id: halshs-01447047
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01447047

Submitted on 3 Sep 2018

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chapter 13

To be Burmese is Not (Only) Being Buddhist

François Robinne

Culpability of the Kala

"Being Burmese is Being Buddhist", declares the title of the opening article by Guillaume Rozenberg, published in the first volume of *Contemporary Burma* (2008). This paradigm is widely shared among Burmese Buddhists but is refuted by non-Buddhists. When asked about their nationality, Muslims describe Buddhists as "Bama" (Burmese) and themselves as "Muslim". This process, in turn, bases the identity after ethnic ties (*taing-yin-tha*)[1] for the former (Bama) instead of on customary ways of living and religious affiliation (*badhaye*) for the latter (Muslim).[2] In Christian communities, Protestants use a similar kind of approximation by combining the ethnic and the confessional, which does not substitute nationality for the religious denomination but instead links ethnic identifiers with religious ones (as seen in the case of the Zomi Baptist Convention, Kachin Baptist Convention, Lisu Baptist Convention and so on).

[1] See Judson 1966 [1853]: 723 who defines *badhaye* as "language; mode of practice, customary way; a particular system of faith and worship", therefore conflating the religious and the cultural, as the Muslims of Burma nowadays do.

[2] The literal meaning of *taing-yin-tha* is "son close to the territory", a term that designates the population of the highlands as peripheral to the central plain of the Irrawaddy.

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In the same article, Rozenberg incorporates the idea that a racial identifier matters in the country, and distinguishes it from ethnic groups by explaining how the former has a tendency to "classify, hierarchize, and explain" (2008: 30). Moreover, he argues "that the notion of race differentiates itself from the idea of an ethnic group, insofar as that while both include a biological component, the latter also involves a cultural element that [...] does not lead to hierarchy of groups" (2008: 35). Yet through this distinction, ethnicity is once again reduced to a biological and cultural dimension that, it was hoped, had long disappeared from the anthropological debate. Carried away with his controversial "argument", Rozenberg does not correlate, at any time, the concepts of "race" and ethnicity with the two decades of civil war that followed independence, or the similar recent violence between Buddhists and Muslims.

But even though this form of racial reasoning has reinforced itself in recent times, it is far from new. The vernacular terms *lu-myo* ("type of people") and *taing-yin-tha* ("sons close to the territory") are translated to English in a variety of ways including "nations" or "inhabitants" (Sangermano 1966 [1833]: 42), "races" (Enriquez 1933 [1923]) or even as "hill tribes". More recent literature describes these terms as referring to "ethnic groups" or "indigenous people". In particular, the expression *taing-yin-tha* stands in opposition to the phrases *Yangon-tha* or *Mandalay-tha*, which signify "sons of Yangon/ Mandalay" and refer to the people of central Burma, who are mostly Burmese and Buddhist. Significantly, the Burmese term *taing-yin-tha*, mentioned in constitutional texts, is translated to English as "races". Moreover, the utilization of the word "races" amongst English-speaking Burmese is so common that, despite the fact Burma is a country in transition, it has at no time been challenged.

All through the successive Government of Burma Acts passed by the colonial administration (*The 1947 Constitution and the Nationalities* 1999: 19, 29), the country was divided on an ethnic-racial basis.[3] This

[3] The Burmese version of the first constitutional text of 1947 contains the term *tain-yin-tha* (son close to the territory) alongside *naingnan tha* (son of the nation) and *naingnan physical mhu* (citizenship) (*The Constitution of the Union of Burma* 1947 [1958]: 2).

started with the first Constitution of 1947, was strengthened by the second Constitution of 1974 and was ratified by the controversial National Convention text of 2008, which now serves as the de facto Constitution. The 2008 text, in addition to confirming the seven Burmese-dominated existing administrative divisions (*taing-detha-kyī)* and the seven peripheral states (*pyi-nay)* that already had an attached ethnic dimension, legalizes the existence of six new ethnic groups and assigns each a self-administered zone (*Ko Paing Oak Kyup Khwin Phyu Daytha*). The Naga, Danu, Pao, Palaung, Wa and Kokang are now counted as ethnic groups to the same degree as have so far been the Kachin, Kayah, Karen (Kayin), Chin, Môn, Arakanese (Rakhaing) and Shan (Constitution of the Union of Myanmar 2008: 17–8). By making those differentiations between groups perennial, the ethnic divide of the country becomes significantly reinforced, with the modus operandi of communal nation building remaining a potentially explosive issue. Burma is burying itself in a fight that belongs to another era—as seen through the resumption of violence between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which was supposed to have become a border patrol—and setting the country back decades. Under the guise of building a nation-state, Burma is retreating once again into the contradictions of an "ethnic-groups nation", strengthening the development of an ethnic state rather than contributing to the emergency of a nation-state. Through its ability to tap into a stock that it feeds on, renews or reactivates depending on the circumstances, the junta has mastered the art of generating its own enemies (Callahan 2003). The question, therefore, is to what extent ethnic and religious elites are ready to break this conflicting communitarian dynamic.

Ethnic groups are generally referred as *taing-yin-tha*, an allusion to the peripheral regions they dominate. They are neither true nationals nor strangers, but rather a kind of alter ego watched over by the armed branch of the nation. To designate this more distant other, Buddhist Burmese usually invoke the concept of the "stranger". The most common Burmese expression for stranger, relatively neutral in connotation, is *naingnan khya*, which literally means "of [another] country" but which does not apply to all foreigners. In fact, it is typically used to designate Muslims of Indian origin, who are, in the same way, called "Kala".

The broad and evolving semantic field of this word is indicative of a rampant xenophobia that consists of stigmatizing the other—whether black, Indian or Muslim—through exclusive terms, as seen by the very negative connotation of Kala, rather than through inclusive, or even at least neutral, terms. Found commonly throughout Southeast Asia, "Kala" is a term of Sanskrit origin that could refer to Pataikkhaya: a place located in the Indian district of Tippera, northeast of Chittagong (Than Tun 1978: 12; Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960 [1923]: 98).[4]

The expression refers metaphorically and pejoratively to a general "abroad". The Burmese linked the term, probably during the 19th century in the wake of the British colonization of the country, to the adjective "white", Kala *phyu*,[5] which is a de facto counterpart to the association between Kala and blackness. The Burmese also use the expression "*negroe*" to describe any dark-skinned person. People of Indian origin, without prejudice to their religious affiliation, have always been seen as the ultimate Kala. In 1978, Ne Win succeeded in imposing, without a coup, the nationalization of private property and wealth, causing a mass exodus of the Chinese population as well as of all the other communities that would have been described as Kala, including Sikh, Hindu, Christian and Muslim communities. It was only recently, under the leadership of the nationalist monk Wirathu, that the term became explicitly equated with "Muslim". This kind of discourse and stigmatization comes in the wake of the administrative discrimination Muslims now face, whether when trying to enrol in universities or even, as 2012–3 showed, when attempting to obtain an identity card.

Nationality, officially recognized through an identity card, is a useful indicator in understanding how Burma's policy towards minorities, especially non-Buddhist minorities (such as Christians and

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[4] Pe Maung Tin and Luce (1960 [1923]: 98) mention that "Anarathaminsaw was a king full of glory, might of arm, and dominion, and these were the boundaries of his kingdom: westward, the Kala country of Pateikkara …"

[5] Yule and Burnell (1989 [1886]: 495) define *Kula*, *Kla* as follows: "Burmese name for a native of Continental India; and hence misapplied also to the English and other Westerners who have come from India to Burma; in fact used generally for a Western foreigner." Judson (1966 [1852]: 194) gives a similar definition: "One whose race is distinctly marked, a caste person; a native of any country west of Burma; a foreigner." The term *amyo* descends from the word *lu myo* (type of people).

Muslims), has evolved. By examining expired identity cards, I have been able to establish three distinctive post-independence periods. The dates below should be understood as being approximated for successive periods corresponding to different criteria for Burmese citizenship.

From 1948–56, non-Burmese would receive a certificate of citizenship called *pyi ton su Myanma naingan daw*, *naingnan tha pyumhu laykmhat*, whose literal translation is "to make (*pyu*) son (*tha*) of the country (*naingnan*)". I was able to examine two rare copies of these. The certificates had been made for Haji U.P., a descendant of one of the first Panthay families to settle in Mandalay, and Haji U.K.,[6] who had been born in Kengtung in Shan state. The latter certificate stated "Chinese" (*tayut*) for nationality (*lumyo*), with "Muslim" in parentheses. Both specified whether the men spoke the Burmese language or not. Moreover, the fact that the origin of both subjects was specified should be seen as linked to the creation of the country's first post-independence state constitution, which distinguished three ethnic states—Kachin, Karen and Chin Special Division—within Burma.

From the late 1950s up until 1990, a *thethaykan* identity card (meaning "life death") was attributed in the name of the Union of Myanmar (the full name being *pyi tonsu Myanma naingnandaw thayk the kapya*). Besides the bearer's name and the name of his or her father, the card specified the bearer's gender, height, specific physical attributes, blood type, occupation and marital status. No mention was made of either the bearer's origin or religion. That period encompassed an economic struggle against entrepreneurs, who were for the most part Indian and Chinese, as well as a religious struggle opposing Christians and Muslims to Buddhists. It was in this context of exacerbated political instability, by then extending all over of Burma, that the citizenship law was amended in 1982. Even today, the fact that this amendment was made without being approved by parliament remains extremely controversial.

[6] Given the continued violence and climate of fear in the country, I have chosen, for the first time in my career, to preserve the anonymity of my sources. They will recognize themselves and I thank them for their trust.

Between 1990 and 2003, a "National Certificate Register", called *naingnan tha sisikye katpya*, was created, with holders now needing to specify their nationality and religion. For the sake of succinctness, I will illustrate the consequences of this in the context of the Panthay community. Basically, it signified that if you declared yourself to be Muslim, you could not be considered Burman. It meant that if you were Burman, you were necessarily a Buddhist. In other words, if you considered yourself Muslim, then you became de facto Burmese plus Indian, or Burmese plus Chinese, or Burmese plus Shan Chinese. Officially, Burmese and Muslim could not coexist as one identity. How the decision to include Chinese or Indian on the identity card was made remains mysterious, since the nationality of both parents would not have been mentioned in the identity records of previous eras. If no document specified that you were "Chinese", you then automatically would be considered "Indian", and did not belong to one of the other minorities. On some occasions, "India" is even inscribed twice before "Burma" as place of origin, so as to leave no room for doubt for the Burmese authorities.

The consequences of the citizenship law amendment of 1982 are felt even today. In particular, Article 4 of the amendment empowers the State Council to decide people of which ethnic group will be considered citizens of the state, or nationals. Besides the Rohingya community, citizens of Indian and Muslim identity also fear the upcoming national census realized in 2014. This new census serves as the basis on which access to citizenship is defined in anticipation of the 2015 presidential elections. Since the 1982 amendment was not made through parliamentary means it is increasingly judged unconstitutional, and voices from various spheres of civil society are demanding a return to the citizenship law of 1948 as the sole source of constitutional legitimacy.

Tensions are therefore high amongst target communities trying to obtain an identity card; applicants compare the process to an endurance test. Two different identity cards are currently issued: one is valid up to the age of 18, while the other is valid for life. Members of ethnic and religious minorities face extreme difficulties in obtaining correct identification. Many of them actually write their religion as

"Buddhist" so as to avoid administrative peril. Thus they are forced to lie about or renounce (at least outwardly) their actual faith, even to their relatives, which is a painful process. The Chinese origin of the Panthay Muslims can therefore be denied by the mere fact that, for the Burmese government, being Muslim is tantamount to being Indian, that is to say, being Kala.

The increasingly complex issuance of identity cards is in itself indicative of a state of mind where the stigma surrounding the religious tends to overshadow ethnic antagonism, except when the two are combined. In this delicate period of political transition, the focus should not be so much on how to decipher and identify evidence of the reasons for inter-communal tension. After all, the tendency to exacerbate identity, stigmatization of the other in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional, rise of nationalism and appropriation of wealth in the context of globalization are nothing new. None of this is sufficient to explain the resurgence of sectarian violence—ethnic in the past and religious today—which has been plaguing the country since independence. The recent violence against Muslims is just one more incarnation of these conflicts. To understand and be able to abandon the dualism of Burmese or non-Burmese, Buddhist or non-Buddhist is therefore important in comprehending why the enunciation of the ethnic and the religious is applied differently within Christian and Muslim denominations.

Christianizing Local Cultures

Ethnic minorities are estimated to constitute about 30 per cent of the total population, and about 15 per cent of the total population is non-Buddhist, including: ± 5 per cent Christian, ± 4 per cent Muslim, ± 0.5 per cent Hindu (Sunquist 2001: 574). Outside of the fact that these percentages clearly need to be updated, they are reductive in many ways. Burma's linguistic, social and religious diversity is far more complex than mere numbers can show.

The hold of Christianity is stronger on moving deeper into Chin state. The road leading to Hakha is lined with headstones topped with crosses, there are churches with bell towers in most villages, and

house doors and walls are covered in white chalk graffiti praising Christ. Even shop signs often showcase the owner's faith. In Tedim, for example, there are two grocery and hardware stores called, respectively, the Adventist Store and Mother Theresa Boarder, snack bars called Amen Coffee Shop and Alleluhia Tea Shop, and the hut of a betel seller bears a sign stating "Bethel Assembly of God". Baptist Presbyterian, Pentecostal and Catholic churches litter the area, frequently displaying a surprisingly wide range of denominations. Some churches also regularly have tiny local branches in the area with names like The Church, The Church on the Rock, Yahwa of God or Theocratic Christ Baptist Church. While such local churches were created by small groups of families whose influence generally does not extend beyond the village limits, they are nonetheless supported covertly by much larger mother churches, usually in the USA or elsewhere in the West. Even the churches that have seceded from larger movements face, within their ranks, other smaller secessionist enterprises or the establishment of independent churches. A notable example is the Pentecostal Movement which separated from the Gospel Movement (itself the result of a schism from the Full Gospel Church) that had seceded much earlier from the Baptist mother church. The region is thus, unsurprisingly, seeing an active wave of proselytism, with recently introduced churches booming and expanding, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Believers Church of Jesus Christ.

However, while Christian proselytizing is still very dynamic, nowadays the conversions do not really go much beyond the already converted Christians. Competition is actually very tough amongst denominations. Based on a July 2005 trip to six villages in the region of Hakha, a place of worship served, on average, 30 houses, though sometimes the number was as low as 10. More significantly, the six villages included 22 different denominations, or 24 if we count Hindu and Buddhist temples. Surveys conducted in November of the same year in other villages confirmed the wide diversity of existing Christian denominations in one place, with similar findings being made in the regions of Falam and Tedim. The general trend is, therefore, towards the development and concomitant fragmentation of religious congregations.

Table 1. Christian Pluralism in the Hakha Region

Congregation / Villages	Zorkhua (Hakha)	Chuncung (Hakha)	Nabual (Hakha)	Hniarlawn (Hakha)	New Sakta (Hakha)	Old Sakta (Hakha)	Surkhua (Hakha)
Assembly of God	1	1	1	-	1 (Established in 1998)	1 (18 households)	1
Baptist	2	1	1	1 (Jubilee in 1999)	1	1 (50 households)	1
Catholic (RC)	-	1	-	-	1	-	-
Church of Jesus Christ	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Gospel	-	1	-	1 (Split from Baptist in 1995)	-	-	-
Revival (RV)	-	-	1 (Split from Baptist in 2003)	-	-	-	-
United Pentecostal Church	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Seventh-day Adventist Church	-	1	-	1 (3 households)	-	-	-
The Church	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Jehovah's Witness	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Buddhist Temple	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL (Places of worship/households ratio)	4 churches 180 households (1/45)	7 churches & temple 360 households (1/51)	3 churches 53 households (1/17)	4 churches 190 households (1/47)	3 churches 100 households (1/33)	2 churches 68 households (1/34)	4 churches 253 households (1/63)

Source: F. Robinne, field work, 2005.

Table 2. Christian Pluralism in the Falam Region

Congregation / Villages	Lungpi (Falam)	Sunthla (Falam)	Mangkheng (Falam)	Taishon (Falam)	Notes
Assembly of God	1	-	-	-	
Baptist	2 (55 households)	1 (57 households)	1 (70 households)	1	
Believers Church of Jesus Christ	1 (9 households in 2001, 20 in 2005)	-	1 (Approx. 7 households)	-	
Catholic (RC)	-	-	1 (12 households)	-	
Church of Jesus Christ	-	-	1 (Approx. 5 households)	-	
Evangelist Baptist Church	1	-	-	-	Split from Baptist in 1987
Gospel	-	1 (16 households)	-	-	
Presbyterian Church	1	-	-	-	Originated from India
Revival Church	-	1 (15 households)	-	-	Split from Baptist in 2003/2004
Reform Church	-	1 (13 households)	1 (Approx. 20 households)	-	
Hindu Temple	1	-	-	-	Gurkha community
Buddhist Temple	1	-	-	1	
TOTAL (Places of worship/ households ratio)	8 churches & temples 100 households (1/12)	4 churches 101 households (1/25)	5 churches 120 households (1/24)	2 churches & temples 118 households (1/59)	

Source: F. Robinne, field work, 2005.

Table 3. Christian Pluralism in the Tedim Region

Congregation / Villages	Gawnmual (Tedim)	Tualzang (Tedim)	Saizang (Tedim)	Mualbem (Tedim)	Tek Lui (Tedim)	Notes
Assembly of God	1 (Built in the 1980')	- (Built in the 1980')	1 (Built in the 1980')	1 (Built in the 1980')	- (Built in the 1980')	Mualbem: 3 members and 2 households in 1981
Baptist	1	1	1	1	1	Created circa 1935
Catholic (RC)	-	1	1	1	1	
Christian Baptist Church of Myanmar	1	-	-	-	-	
Evangelist Baptist Church	-	-	1	-	-	Split from Baptist in 1987
Evangelist Church of Christ	1	-	-	-	-	
Full Gospel Baptist Church	-	-	1	-	-	
Presbyterian Church	1	-	-	-	-	Originated from India
United Pentecostal Church	1	-	-	-	-	
7th Day Adventist Church	-	1	-	1	-	
Theocratic Christ Baptist Church	1	-	-	-	-	
Yahwa of God	1	-	-	-		
Yahweh Church	-	-	-	1	-	
Zomi Baptist Convention of Myanmar	-	2	-	-	-	Split from Baptist in 2003
Lai Pian	1	1	-	1	1	
Siang Sawn	-	1	1	1	1	Split from Lai Pian in 2005
Pau Cin Hau Jesus Pawlpi	-	-	-	1	-	
Buddhist Temple	-	1	-	-	-	
TOTAL (Places of worship/ households ratio)	9 churches 86 households (1/9)	8 churches & temple 93 households (1/11)	6 churches 370 households (1/61)	8 churches 250 households (1/31)	4 churches 130 households (1/32)	

Source: F. Robinne, field work, 2005.

Kachin state shares with Chin state a strong Christian pluralism: the city of Myitkyina has a total of 33 churches within its limits (and had 157 churches in 1982). It is unlikely that the number has increased significantly since ceasefire was signed, in the mid-1990s between ethnic armed groups and the Burmese junta, because the agreement forbids the construction of any non-Buddhist places of worship.

The Kachin Baptist Convention is arguably the most influential church, not only among the Jinghpaw, the main Kachin subgroup, but in the whole state. Beyond its evangelizing function, it views itself as having a unifying mission, and spearheads the pan-Kachin movement. Significantly, the church has actually been developing outside of Kachin state: in Mandalay, where youth of all minorities converge, as well as in Kokang, at the northeastern edge of Shan state and near the Chinese border, where an evangelical college was created. While it is the premier Christian institution in Kachin state, it must now deal with Protestant movements that wish to emancipate themselves from its influence and consider the Kachin Baptist Convention as unacceptable for the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Kachin subgroups.

On the one hand are those who joined the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) and thereby participate in ecumenical meetings held once a year. This is particularly true of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Kachin Baptist Church Jinghpaw majority of the Karen Baptist Church, Lisu Baptist Church and Independent Christian Mission, among which the unity has proven difficult to maintain. On the other hand, there are the many groups that have broken off all contact with the other Christian congregations. Among these is the Mawyin Baptist Church, which was the first to leave the ranks of the Kachin Baptist Convention after objecting to the presence of Western missionaries in the 1960s, followed by the fundamentalists who seceded in two stages: first in the early 1970s from Bhamo, and then in the 1980s from Myitkyina.

The tenuous link between ethnic category and religious category is not new (Roy 2008). In 1859, the Baptist Missionary Union, headquartered in the USA, decided to restructure the Burma Baptist Convention in order to centralize it (Maung Shwe Wa 1963: 253).

Around local places of worship—which had been at first, during the first wave of the Christians missions in the first half of the 19th century, quasi-autonomous due to being located in difficult-to-access mountainous areas—a larger grouping was made around bigger linguistic units headquartered in the lowlands. This led to the creation of Burmese, Karen and Shan places of worship.

This process of ethnic and religious bipolarization thereafter continued concurrently with the process of political centralization. Following the Burmese of 1962 and the removal of the Shan Sawbwa, the Kachin leaders decided to dissolve the fragmented chiefdoms in order to avoid a similar fate. The creation of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its armed branch, the KIA, ended the traditional political system as it had existed and created a centralized military command that opposed the Burmese junta.

The 50 years of civil war that came to an end in the mid-1990s, led to the need for ethnic minorities to find, during peacetime, the identity coherence that the war had artificially helped prevail in their communities. On one hand the civil war contributed to give consistency to a pan-Kachin movement transcending—within the limits of political divisions—clan and ethnic belonging; on the other hand, the idea of belonging to a common group of identity was considerably weakened after the ceasefires, everyone tending to assert their confessional, clan and nationalist prerogatives at different levels of scale. Where years of war appeared to impose a common ideal—with sometimes a return to shamanistic rituals through which soldiers of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), mostly Christians, drew strength and courage—the years of peace have undermined the pan-Kachin ideology opposed to local interests. In the same way, the building of a nation-state is undermined by the limits of an ethnic state and its potential conflictual dynamics (Robinne 2007: 101). Moreover, it obliged the Burmese central power to sanction the establishment of a united and consensual constitution. It was in this context of general destabilization that the Baptist elites appropriated for themselves, in the 2000s, the concept of a "holistic mission", the stakes of which would be just as nationalist, but which would combine in a new and unique way the "ethnic", with a totalizing

approach to religion.[7] This concept of a "holistic mission" was relatively new among evangelical Christians. It dates back, however, to the 1968 Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches, while the semantic field of "Christian mission" was redefined at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (Padilla 2005). The original doctrinal orientation, which maintains that the being disappears behind total evangelical truth, was revised as regards the definition of the concept of "mission", which added an internal proselytizing dimension, indicating that the holistic message will be preached to followers.

Overall, when interrogated, informants found the large semantic value of the "holistic mission" to be incomprehensible and immediately had strong reservations towards the totalitarian and racist risks associated with the excesses of the holistic message. "Purification" is, for instance, a term that comes up frequently, but it is often referred to without consideration of its racial and totalitarian connotations. However, others, whose demand for anonymity I will respect, believe that democracy will never allow the holistic mission to reach its ultimate goal, their discourse being the fruit of a conceptualized ideal pan-Kachin policy that aligns itself with Burmese-Buddhist otherness.

A senior official of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) defined for me, in 2006, a "holistic mission" as the convergence of body, mind and soul before adding: "This is why the KBC uses culture to worship God. The culture needs to be modified or adapted to the Bible." The holistic mission, therefore, affirms itself as a prism that is designed to systematize into a whole politics, culture, education and religion, insofar that the religious is deemed to be a part of the whole and the whole at once. In the case of Kachin, it means that this evangelical message transcends everything (and is above everything) and that all that is related to religion is not solely the

[7] The Christian acceptance of the holistic concept that argues that the religious is at once in all things and above all things, needs to be distinguished from the anthropological approaches of holism that see the latter as being connected to a wider cultural and structural Whole, as well as to a broader social Whole that it exceeds (Otto and Bubandt 2010).

domain of the Baptists. Although Baptist elites are the only ones—to my knowledge—to commonly use the term "holistic mission", the religious dimension is constitutive of more than just a social, political and cultural order: it is a directive that must be accepted by all Christians as simultaneously being above and encompassing all things.

If being Burmese is to be Buddhist, being Kachin or Chin or Karen is, for a large part of the population, synonymous with being Christian, regardless of the religious denomination. Attacking Christian interests in Kachin state means de facto taking the risk of alienating the civil (the KIO), religious (Kachin Theological College) and military factions (the KIA). After almost 50 years of civil war, the recent renewed conflict between the Burmese army and the KIA shows how ceasefire remains weak in this unstable period, but that Christian minorities are spared from Buddhist condemnation and popular outrage. This is not the case for Muslims, at whom is now targeted hatred for the other.

Islamizing the Muslims of Burma

If the number of churches is difficult to count due to the fragmentation of Christian denominations, the number of mosques is known: there are 86 solely in the city of Mandalay. Similar to Christian denominations, Muslim movements and religious schools are remarkable for their propensity to multiply. Moreover, both Christian and Buddhist denominations are extremely dynamic when it comes to proselytizing and preaching, but mostly limit their activity to the wider community of believers. There can also be observed a similar tendency, though a few decades apart, towards uniformization as advocated by both Christian and Muslim elites. Notably, the holistic Christian discourse of purification—an acculturation or assimilation of local (and already Christianized) cultures—is comparable to the Islamization strategy of Burmese Muslims advocated in the mid-1970s by the Tabligh Association. The great migratory waves of the 19th century, which were undertaken by some groups in the wake of the colonial administration, and by others following the defeat of the Sultanate of Tali in Yunnan,

are now long past; the expansion of Islam in Burma has mostly been through demographic development and Islamic laws on marriage and filiation. Proselytizing is itself mostly limited to within the Muslim community and is the domain of the Preaching Association (called "*tabligh*" in Bengali).

Created in the 1920s in the Mewat region of northwest India, the Tabligh Association was only recently introduced into Burma, during the country's pivotal post-independence era. U Nu, the Burmese Prime Minister at the time, was committed to a policy of transforming Buddhism into the state religion and lobbied two Muslim politicians—ministers Rashid and U Khin Maung Lat—to dissolve the Bamar Muslim Congress parliamentary group (BMC), better known in Burma by its acronym Burma Ba-Ma-Ka (Yegar 1982: 122). After losing its parliamentary group status, the BMC would go on to lose all legal recognition in 1975. Meanwhile, Muslims were forbidden any right of association, and some associations, like the Bar Street Free Muslim Dispensary and Scholarship which had been major recipients of private donations, were killed off. Nowadays, charitable missions that help develop a "modern inter-operation of Muslim ideology" are accomplished indirectly through non-denominational NGOs or associations.

Two important Muslim faith-based organizations, which exist without parliamentary representation, were created during the same era that saw Ne Win taking power by coup in 1962. These are the Committee (Jimiatul) Ulama of Religious Studies (*Awlama sasana pinyashin mya aphway*), which deals exclusively with religious affairs, and the Religious Council on Islamic Affairs (*Islam Sasana Kaunsi*), which inversely takes strong political stands. Both are, to this day, the most influential Muslim institutions in Burma.

The Tabligh Association succeeded in establishing itself in Burma through successive stages, notably by infiltrating different Muslim religious groups, to whose fragmentation it contributed. While relations between the Ulama Committee and the Religious Council on Islamic Affairs were, from the start, confrontational and competitive, the antagonism between the two was due to the development of the Tabligh Association. Having first been turned down by the Ulama

Committee, whose members it had tried to recruit, the Tablighis turned their interest to the Religious Council. The Tablighis' growing influence in Burma at the time cannot be understood without considering the political context of the era and, especially, the 1964 nationalization of private capital. The latter led to a massive exodus of entrepreneurs of Chinese and Indian origin. The ones who decided to stay included many Muslims, who then turned to the Tablighis as a source of reliable support. But it was from 1974 on, at the height of the civil war and when the country was inaccessible to foreigners, that the Tabligh missionaries (who were mostly from India) really succeeded in holding sway in Burma. This occurred first at an individual level and then through the Religious Council, which had agreed to host them within its ranks. With their rapid rise, the Tabligh Movement was integrated as well within the Ulama Committee in 1976, and its overall influence has continued to grow ever since.

Today, the five Muslim organizations that receive official governmental recognition are, in order of importance: (1) the Ulama Committee; (2) the Religious Council; (3) the Muslim National Affair Organization (*Ma-Aha-Pha*), created after the events of 1988 by Sayar Chal, a former teacher and member of the National Council, who had been close to Ne Win; (4) the Committee of Myanmar Muslim Youth (*Myanma Muslim Lu-ngay Aphway*); and (5) the Malawi League (*Malawi Aphway Akhyup*), whose influence is marginal.

The primacy of the Ulama Committee is heavily due to the presence of Tablighi members within its ranks. As a local informant told me in May 2013, "If Ulama is the head [it is because] the Tablighis are the body." Locally, the Tabligh is defined as an orthodox proselytizing organization—the term "missionary" is not used because its entire process is based on a principle of invitation (*dawah*)—with its members hailing from the Deobandi Hanafi School. Moreover, the Islamic orthodoxy that it advocates is sometimes described as fundamentalist. The Tablighis are therefore Islamizing the Muslims of the country by "de-Burmanizing" them. They follow *fiqh* or jurisprudence and impose a strict dress code including white garb, a turban and a beard for men, and veils and—though still very limited—the chador for women.

Regardless of their origin, the vast majority of Muslims in Burma are Sunni, with 90 per cent following the Hanafi school. A subdivision of this school of thought consists of two branches: (1) the Brailawii, known in the country under the name Gawrana, an influential minority that counts 100,000 followers in Mandalay, Shwebaw and Yendin in Central Burma, and accompanies its rituals with musical instrumentation (which is considered unacceptable by the other Muslim trends); and (2) the Deobandi, composed of Tablighis, along with another group that differentiates itself by ignoring certain Tabligh-imposed rules like meeting at night in the mosque.

A discussion of Islam in Burma would not be complete without mentioning the Mu'tazila Association, which was introduced into the country through the Muslim Aligarh University in Uttar Pradesh in northern India. Its members represent, worldwide, a very marginal share of Islam and consider themselves neither Sunni nor Shia. They base themselves on a theology of reasoning and consider the esoteric practices of Sufism as a "conspiracy of Islam" against rational thought. They receive revelation through extended thought and reflection, and believe that it is through reason and rationalism that the transition to modernity occurred. The core of the movement in Burma is in Yangon at the Su-Taung Pyait Mosque, known also as the "59th Street Mosque".

The message of "Islamizing the Muslims of Burma", propagated by the Tabligh, is insufficient, even in its radicalism, to explain the growing stigma against the Muslim population or the recurring issue, in recent years, of the Rohingya. This is despite the fact that nowadays, during discussions on Islam in Burma, being a Muslim is seen as synonymous with being Rohingya—the latter being a unique case that combines ethnic revendication, religious belonging and trans-border community issues. It should therefore be treated as such, especially when persecutions against the Rohingya have such a high potential for leading to further violence and radicalization across the country (Dovert and Madinier 2003). Moreover, there has been no direct relationship between the abuses committed against the Rohingya—which are more akin to a trans-border dispute—and the stigmatization of being considered the other in Myanmar, of which the Muslims are,

after a succession of many others (Indians, ethnic groups, opposition party), the most recent victims.[8]

While there have been, in the past, policies prejudicial to Muslims, they were part of a wider pattern of discrimination to the same extent as policies against Chinese or Muslims interests. When the first instance of anti-Indian violence started in the 1930s, it was due to the fact that the Indian community, whether pawnbrokers, land developers or officials, was seen has having enriched itself significantly during the colonial era, to the detriment of locals. The Indian population became a de facto scapegoat[9] for the Burmese nationalist movement *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burmans Association), during its fight for independence (Smith 1999 [1991]: 53–4). During the World War II, some 500,000 Burmese Indians therefore began a second exodus, fleeing both the Japanese army and the Burmese Independent Army. However, while this resentment against the Indian community is rooted in history and has affected the broad concept of Kala (including how Europeans and Chinese are seen), it is not specifically relevant to the current treatment of Muslims. The third Indian exodus occurred in the 1960s, after Ne Win's coup and the nationalization of private enterprises and collectivization of land. It led to at least 300,000 Indians and 100,000 Chinese fleeing Burma en masse (Smith 1999 [1991]: 98). The degree of involvement of the Muslim community in this tidal wave of forced migration out of Burma was therefore more of an indirect consequence, as the primary objective had been the appropriation of foreign capital in the country (held in part by the Indians and Chinese).

[8] It should be added that of the Muslim ethnic religious groups, only the Kaman in Arakan state are among the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups: they are referred under the code n° 702 in the 2014 census formular. All the other Muslim ethnic subgroups—Rohingya, Panthay, Pashu, Myaydhu, Pathi (totalling eight officially recognized ethnic Muslim subgroups known as Kyiliya, Surathi, Bengali, Magaw, Kaka, Pathein, Nasapuri and Hindustani)—are attached to the code n° 914 attributed to all non-officially recognized minorities.

[9] The concept of a "scapegoat" was developed by the French philosopher René Girard (1982) but should not be used to describe the antagonism between the Burmese central government and the ethnic central powers, even though the "mimetic rivalry" that both have generated against rich Indians would seem to be operational.

Without reducing the scope of these forced migrations, which affected the broad category of Kala, those abuses cannot be put at the same level as the atrocities that have been committed against a category of Kala reduced to only target Muslims. In particular, 2013 was marked by anti-Muslim revolts of a different nature, as the conflicts reached a more extreme degree of brutality (Physicians for Human Rights 2013), and were repeated incessantly across the country through the year: for instance, April 2013 in Okan (1 dead, 9 injured and 70 homes burned); March 2013 in Meiktila (43 dead); May 2013 in Lashio (a vandalized mosque); August 2013 near Sagaing (several dozen houses burned), and the village of Htangon in Sagaing Division (several shops and houses looted and burned). Everything suggests that the upcoming presidential elections will only amplify this return to terror.

Moreover, some threats were not reported in media. In December 2012, residents of Muslim districts of Mandalay were warned by local authorities that armed men would come to attack the neighborhood. The residents fled, with the exception of a few courageous ones who stayed, armed with sticks and machetes to protect their homes. This exodus ended a week later with their return to the neighbourhood. However they, like many across the country, continue to live in fear of going out into the street due to the risk that the slightest incident involving any individual could transform the entire neighbourhood into a target. As during the worst days of the dictatorship, fear has settled back into the country.

Ecumenical movements have been set up here and there to try to stop the Islamophobic excitation, but have had little success or significance. It was in Yangon's 59th Street Mosque that Buddhist monks were invited to meet with the Muslim community. The event was on the cover of the 27 May 2013 issue of *The Voice,* a weekly Burmese journal, which is not evident from the English title. The cover photo showed a monk dressed in saffron robes standing in front of the mosque (*mihrab*), facing the white-clad Muslim community. Despite the intensity of the image, the coverage of *The Voice* received a far-from-consensual reaction. The meeting was held two days after the violent events that led to the sack of the mosque in Lashio (Shan state), mentioned as a "place of worship" in the paper.

Some believed this meant the meeting took place too late, while others asserted that a prayer room was an inappropriate meeting place. Overall, the dubitative Muslim reaction was matched by the indifference of the Christian community.

Christians have also put in place, over the years, several ecumenical movements: the most effective one meets annually for a week throughout numerous churches of different denominations. Every day, two host churches belonging to two different congregations invite their coreligionists of other Christian denominations. For example, a Lisu Baptist church and Catholic church the first day, a Kachin Baptist church and an Anglican church the following day, and so on for seven days. The turnover process from one church to another is extended to the structure of each religious office, as for example: if a Lisu Baptist church is in charge to host the office, a member of a Kachin Baptist church will be in charge of the preaching, a member of an Anglican church will be in charge of the Biblical readings, a member of the Independent Christian Mission will be in charge of the hymns and a member of a Catholic church will be in charge of the prayers. Only a few congregations exclude themselves from the ecumenical movement, among which are the Fundamentalist Baptist movement and most of the evangelical churches such as the Assemblies of God. Aside from that, the general principle of the ecumenical offices is to ensure that the four constituent parts of the Christian ritual comprise the ethnic and religious diversity (Robinne 2007: 262–4).

There have been other initiatives. Notably, the Mandalay Methodist College has opened its courses to students of all nationalities and denominations, though most come from the different components (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.) of the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) or, alternatively, of churches that have stayed apart such as the Evangelical Church. The school principal sees "ecumenism as meaning to the level of the Christians", which is why he refuses monks' requests to join the Christian theology courses. As for Muslims, no contact with them has been established. But when the discussion turns to anti-Muslim conflicts, the principal speaks of a relationship without ostracism because "charitable Christian associations do not discriminate in any way". Yet responding

to violence in a concerted manner is not a priority for him, since "violence, while not normal, is also not so much religious, as born of the political context". However, Christians know as well that they represent a potential target and have therefore tried to stay away from public exposure.

What is changing today is not so much the forces at play—even though a civilian government has replaced a military one—nor the reification of different community identities (despite the risks of engendering further conflict), or the fact that while ceasefire has put a precarious stop to the conflicts, this has been due more to the combatants' fatigue as the peace agreements remain largely lacking. What is changing today is not either the resilience of an ethnic state, based on an essentialist vision of the nation, with its underlying tensions between communities that prevents the emergence of an integrated and pacified nation-state. Instead, what has been changing in a country still trying to reconstruct itself, and where sectarian tensions are both forcing the dictatorship's hand and undermining the ongoing changes, is the choice of the community targeted.

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