

## History of Muslim Minorities in Myanmar Revisited

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### Abstract:

This research aims to analyze the historical development of Islam as a minority religion in Myanmar, focusing on the role of the Muslim community, which has existed since the 9th century through maritime trade routes. The method employed is a literature study by collecting relevant books and academic writings. The research follows four steps: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The findings reveal that Islam was introduced to Myanmar by Arab, Persian, and Bengali traders who settled in the Arakan coastal region (now Rakhine State). The Muslim community comprises various ethnic groups, including Bamar, Kamein, Panthay, Malay, and Rohingya. The historical relationship between the Arakan Kingdom and the Bengal Sultanate in the 15th century significantly strengthened Islamic influence in the region and shaped the Rohingya identity as a community with deep cultural and historical roots. Although the Muslim population assimilated into local culture, they faced escalating challenges post-Myanmar's independence in 1948 due to restrictive citizenship laws. The situation deteriorated with acts of violence in 2012 and 2017, leading to a humanitarian crisis as thousands of Rohingya sought refuge in Bangladesh. This research contributes a historical perspective on the social and political dynamics influencing Myanmar's Muslim minority and highlights the complexities of the Rohingya crisis.

**Keywords:** *Arakan; citizenship, Islamic history; Muslim minority; Rohingya.*

## INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, or the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, also better known as Burma, is a country in the Southeast Asian region. When this country succeeded in gaining independence from England (British) on January 4, 1948, its name was the Union of Burma (Gutman & Hudson, 2023). Then, after the Myanmar military junta eliminated pro-democracy groups in September 1988, the country's official name was changed from "Union of Burma" to "Union of Myanmar" on June 18, 1989. Then, in 2008, it was officially published that the country changed its name to "Republic of the Union of Myanmar" or Republic of the Union of Myanmar with the original name "Pyadaungsu Socialist Thamada Myanma," the capital city "Rangoon" became "Yangon." This change was intended to make ethnic non-Burmans feel part of the country (Asep, 2023).

Around the 1st century AD to the 12th century AD, maritime trade began between India and China. Judging from the geographical location between these trade routes, it is estimated that there was contact between the Myanmar people and these traders, especially with traders from India, which then resulted in cultural contact. Cultural contact between the people of Myanmar (Burma) and Indian culture occurred along the coast of Myanmar (Croissant, 2022). Many Indian traders established small kingdoms along the coast. It was through these kingdoms that Indian culture entered Myanmar, as well as making the Myanmar people enter a historical era because they began to become familiar with the writings they learned from Indian languages, including the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism. In subsequent developments, Buddhism became dominant in Myanmar (Asep, 2023).

Myanmar is a country in Southeast Asia with the majority of the population being Buddhist, while Islam is a minority religion adhered to by around 4% of the country's total population (Lubina, 2024). The history of the arrival of Islam in Myanmar has long roots, starting from the arrival of Muslim traders in the 9th century to the development of Muslim communities in various regions, especially on the Rakhine coast (Arakan) and urban areas such as Yangon and Mandalay. Despite the longstanding presence of Islam, Muslims often face challenges in maintaining their identity and social rights amidst the political and social dynamics that exist in Myanmar (Aung-Thwin, 2008).

## METHOD

The type of research used is library research because it is a literature study examining historical books related to research. Library research is an activity related to collecting research library data that utilizes library sources to obtain research data by carrying out reading, processing and recording research materials (Ishaq, 2017). This type of library research does not require conducting research to go directly into the field, only collecting several book references needed in the research. Apart from that, source criticism is also used, namely reviewing the sources used, interpreting the data, and finally, historiography or writing up research results (Rahman, 2025).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Process of Islam Entering Myanmar

Islam is believed to have entered Myanmar in the 9th and 10th centuries via sea trade routes. Arab, Persian and Bengali traders played a major role in the spread of this religion on the coast of Arakan (now Rakhine state). Arakan is an important point because of its strategic location along the trade route between the Islamic world, India and Southeast Asia. According to historical records, interactions between Muslim traders and local residents were peaceful and gave birth to Muslim communities that assimilated into local culture (Smith, 1999).

Some historians believe that Muslims first landed in Myanmar (Burma) in the Ayeyarwady River Delta, Tanintharyi and Rakhine coasts as sailors and traders in the ninth century AD (9th AD), before the founding of the first Kingdom of Burma (Myanmar) in 1055 AD by King Anawrahta of Bagan (also read as "Pagan") (Isa, 2020). The beginning of the arrival of Muslims in Myanmar (Burma at that time), the formation of Muslim colonies (Muslim settlements) and the spread of Islam among the people of Myanmar (Burma) in the ninth

century AD have been widely documented by Arab, Persian, European (Portuguese) and Chinese travelers (Asep, 2023).

There are five theories offered to explain the arrival of Islam in Myanmar (Burma), namely the Arab-Persian theory and the Turkish-Mongol theory, the Chinese theory, the Indian theory and the Malay theory. These five theories are based on travelers' accounts and chronicles (Burmese, Arabic, Chinese, and Malay) as well as other news from contemporary Islamic historical writers (Asep, 2023).

According to Thomas W. Arnold, after Islam spread around the coast of India around the 7th century AD, Muslim traders began to spread the religion in Myanmar (Nuraisah et al., 2023). 102 From their bases in Bengal, they traded with Myanmar and Malabar, Sri Lanka and Malacca. 103 Even so, Yegar said inside *"The Muslim of Burma"*, their main destination was the coast of Arakan and Lower Burma circa 9th century AD (Haque, 2018). According to Din Muhammad Abu al-Basyar, Islam had come to Arakan since the first century of the Hijrah through Arab traders who came to Akyab, the capital of Arakan, by sea to carry out trade transactions and preach Islam (Asep, 2023).

In the records of Arab and Persian travelers, such as Ibn Khordadbeh, Sulaiman, Ibn Faqih and al-Maqdisi, it is stated that Islamic trade activities in the Myanmar region began in the 9th century AD and became increasingly active in the 10th century AD (Roy, 2020). It is believed that in the 9th century AD, Islamic colonies were found in the Pegu area because at that time, Islamic sailors often stopped at the coast of Arakan, Pegu and Tenasserim. 107 It was mentioned in Arab chronicles from 800 AD that an Arab sailor named "Bago" had come to the port of Burma in the 10th century AD and also that Arab travelers from Madagascar to China had stopped at the ports of Thaton and Martaban, 108 It is also said that Muslims of Persian origin arrived in Myanmar (Burma) first in the north, on the border of China (Yunan) as recorded in the *"Chronicles of China"* in 860 AD (Asep, 2023).

The second theory, Islam came to Myanmar through the Mongolian Turkic people. It is known that in 1277 AD, Kublai Khan's army consisting of Islamic Turkic (Tartar) people attacked Myanmar (Burma) from the north (Atwood, 2023). This Islamic army was led by Nasser ed-Din, son of the Governor of Yunan. During this attack, Islamic troops succeeded in conquering the kingdom of Burma (Myanmar) and destroyed the city of Pagan in 1285-1287 AD. At that time, many Islamic soldiers married local women, as a result, adherents of Islam in Myanmar increased, 116 and formed their own communities (Asep, 2023).

The third theory is the Chinese (Muslim Panthay) theory, meaning that Islam was spread by Chinese Muslims known as "Hui" from Yunan through trade routes, and together with the Mongol army (from the Yuan-Chinese Dynasty) in 1277 AD. Then, when the British took control of Burma (Myanmar) in the 19th century, many Chinese people from Kuantung (including "Hui") were brought in to become manual laborers in the tin mining company owned by the British. Apart from that, many Hui Muslims fled China after the Dugan rebellion, where Sultan Sulaiman of Yunan was defeated by Qing troops with the help of French artillery in 1973 AD (Xu, 2021). To avoid the oppression carried out by the Qing Emperor, many Hui Muslims (Panthay Muslims) fled to the Burmese region in 1885 AD. Then, they founded a small Islamic city, namely Panglong City. Therefore, it is not strange that to this day in Myanmar, there are groups of Chinese Muslims belonging to the Hanafiah sect, who are popularly known there as "Panthay Muslims" (Asep, 2023).

The fourth theory is the Indian theory, meaning that Islam was spread from the territory of India and spread by Indian Muslims of the Shafi'iyah sect. It was stated that. Yegar said that a Russian trader named Ahanasius Nitikin had noted that in 1470 AD, the port of Pegu was busy being visited and inhabited by Islamic traders from various known countries throughout the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries AD. In Myanmar, there were many colonies of Islamic traders around the port city called "Indian Dervishes" (Hall, 2022). Apart from that, Ralph Fitch, an English traveler, in his notes in 1586-1587 AD, said that the ports of Dela and Cirion in Myanmar were often visited by Islamic trading ships from Mecca, Malacca, Sumatra and Java (Asep, 2023).

Fifth, the Malay theory, meaning that Islam was brought and spread in Burma (Myanmar) by the Malays. For approximately two hundred years, the Malays lived on the border between Myanmar and Malaysia in the Tanintharyi region. Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, which is a chronicle or chronicle that tells the history of the Kedah Sultanate, mentions that they came from the kingdom. Kedah is now one of the states of Malaysia. The Kedah Sultanate, at one time, was a large kingdom that dominated trade on the coast of what is now Indochina. His power stretched from the Malay peninsula in the north to Myanmar in the south (Nuraisah et al., 2023). It was for trade that the Malays from Kedah spread to the region. The name Tanintharyi itself comes from the Malay pronunciation of "Tanah Sari". The Burmese tongue has a hard time pronouncing the name and pronounced it in their tongue as "Tanintharyi." Europeans used to call it "Tenasserim". Most of the

Myanmar Malays in Tanintharyi live in Kawthaung District, one of the most multicultural districts in Myanmar (Asep, 2023).

### **Muslim groups in Myanmar**

Over a long period of time since the 7th century AD, Muslims have come to the Myanmar region through various routes and in various capacities (Aktar, 2024). They were present as traders, sailors, travelers, preachers, prisoners of war, as well as workers or employees who served local authorities. The arrival of these Muslims took place from the period of local kingdoms, the colonial era of British Burma (England), until the formation of the nation-state in 1948. During this period, the Muslim community in Myanmar developed into several Muslim ethnic groups known as the Burmese Muslim group. They do not live in one homogeneous area but are spread out and form communities based on certain ethnicities and lineages. Each of these groups has a different social and cultural status in the structure of contemporary Myanmar society (Asep, 2023).

What is worth paying attention to is the Bamar Muslim group, namely the Muslim community originating from the original Burmese ethnicity (Wahyono et al., 2024). They converted to Islam during the reign of the Bamar (Burmese) kings and identified themselves as "Pure Bamar Muslims". Among the people of Myanmar, this group is known as "Zerbadee" or "Zaydabayi". The Bamar Muslim group is the oldest Muslim community living in Myanmar, so they have a very strong historical attachment to the development of local society and culture. The majority of them live in the Swebo region, an area that is geographically close to the capital of the Bamar kingdoms before the British colonial period (Asep, 2023).

Historically, the Bamar Muslim group (Zerbadee) was formed from a mixture of workers, traders and guards who came from the western region, especially from the northern region of India. They were imported in the 13th and 14th centuries AD to serve the Burmese Kingdom, especially as royal soldiers. This mixing process resulted in a generation of Muslims born from Indian Muslim fathers and native Myanmar mothers (Moe, 2023). Interestingly, in terms of language, customs, appearance and way of dressing, the Bamar Muslim group is very difficult to distinguish from the Buddhist Myanmar community. They have experienced a very deep process of cultural assimilation, so that culturally they are integrated with the local community. However, they still maintain their religious identity as Muslims. In a demographic context, the Bamar Muslim group is the largest Muslim community in Myanmar and covers more than half of the total Muslim population in the country (Asep, 2023).

The presence and existence of the Bamar Muslim group shows how Islam, as a minority religion, can be integrated into the socio-cultural framework of the majority community in Myanmar. This reflects the adaptability and resilience of the Bamar Muslim community amidst complex historical and political challenges (Sanchez Molano, 2023). On the one hand, they succeeded in building a dual identity that reflects a combination of Islamic values and local culture. On the other hand, they also face political and social dynamics that often position them in an ambiguous status, especially regarding issues of citizenship and civil rights.

Another important factor that strengthens the existence of the Bamar Muslim group is their involvement in regional trade networks. As a group that has historically engaged in cross-regional trading activities, they have access to economic resources that allow them to survive and thrive. This involvement also strengthens their ties with other Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, including in the coastal region of Arakan (Rakhine), where other Muslim communities, such as the Rohingya, also live (Roy Chowdhury & Abid, 2022).

In the contemporary context, the Bamar Muslim group often acts as a bridge between other Muslim communities and the majority Buddhist group. Due to their high level of assimilation and deep understanding of local culture, they can play a mediating role in reducing tensions between groups (Sanchez Molano, 2023). However, their ambiguous status in Myanmar's citizenship system remains a major challenge, especially when the state tightens definitions of ethnicity and national identity that do not accommodate ethnic and religious diversity in an inclusive manner (Asep, 2023).

From a social anthropology perspective, the Bamar Muslim group shows that ethnic and religious identities are not rigid entities but rather social constructions shaped by history, social interactions, and power dynamics. The "Bamar Muslim" or "Zerbadee" identity reflects a long process of dynamic and adaptive identity formation, which is continuously negotiated in changing social and political contexts (Anwar et al., 2023).

The second is a Kamein Muslim group. The Kamein Muslim group in Myanmar is an integral part of the long and complex history of relations between the Islamic world and the Southeast Asian region, especially in the Arakan region, now known as Rakhine State (Wildan, 2021). This group has deep historical roots that

reflect not only human migration and mobility but also the political and military dynamics of the 17th century involving the Mughal Empire in India.

The term "Kamein" or "Kaman" comes from the Persian word meaning "bow," and the name is believed to refer to the military skills of the group's predecessors, especially as archers in military units. Officially, the Myanmar government recognizes the Kamein as one of the seven Muslim ethnic groups recognized in Rakhine State, distinguishing them from other Muslim groups, such as the Rohingya, whose citizenship status remains questionable by the government (Islam & Khatun, 2024).

The origins of the Kamein group can be traced back to the reign of the Mughal dynasty in the Indian subcontinent. In 1660 AD, Prince Shal Shuja, brother of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, fled to the Arakan region after internal conflict within the Mughal royal family (Numata & Sugiyama, 2023). Shal Shuja was the son of Emperor Shah Jahan, a builder of the Taj Mahal, and had great political ambitions. However, a power struggle among Shah Jahan's sons ended in the victory of Aurangzeb, who then ascended the throne. Shuja's defeat made him flee with his family, elite troops, and followers to the Arakan region, which at that time was an independent kingdom and had diplomatic relations with various regional powers (Sakib, 2025).

Shal Shuja's presence in Arakan brought with him hundreds to thousands of followers, including troops trained in Mughal military tactics (Nag, 2023). These followers became the forerunners of the Kamein Muslim community. After the tragic death of Shuja and his family, who were believed to have been killed on the orders of Arakan's rulers due to political conflicts and diplomatic tensions, his followers remained in the region and gradually blended into local society (Chakraborty, 2025). In the process, they maintained their religious and cultural identity as Muslims but experienced a process of cultural acculturation with Arakanese society, including aspects of language, clothing and customs.

As a group that comes from a military background, Kamein has a reputation as a disciplined and organized community. In subsequent history, many of them were involved in local administration and defense of the Arakan region. Official recognition of the Kamein by the Myanmar government places them in a relatively safer social position compared to other Muslim groups, especially the Rohingya. Kameins are considered "legal citizens" under the Citizenship Law of 1982, as they can show historical evidence of their ancestors' presence in Myanmar long before the colonial period (Zarni & Cowley, 2014).

However, official recognition does not completely eliminate the challenges this group faces. In Myanmar's political dynamics dominated by Bamar-Buddhist ethnonationalism, Muslim identity remains a subject of suspicion and marginalization. Although Kamein did not experience mass expulsion like the Rohingya experienced, they still faced discrimination in the economic, educational and access to public services (Singh, 2022). In addition, social and political pressures often force them to hide their religious identity or adapt their religious practices so as not to cause conflict with the majority of society.

From an anthropological perspective, Kamein's existence reflects how diaspora communities can maintain their original identity while adapting to complex local conditions (Raguparan, 2025). In the Myanmar context, Kamein occupies a unique space between formal acceptance by the state and social limitations resulting from their religious identity. They are living witnesses of the cross-cultural and geopolitical historical interactions that have shaped the face of Southeast Asia for centuries.

Furthermore, Kamein's group also shows the importance of understanding minority history within a broader global framework. Connectivity between great powers such as the Mughal Empire and local kingdoms such as Arakan opened up space for cultural, knowledge and religious exchanges (Fuad & Dadan, 2022). The traces of this group show that migration flows are not a new phenomenon but rather part of a complex and ongoing historical dynamic.

*Third* is an Indian Muslim group. The Muslim group is the descendants of Indian Muslims who came during British colonial rule in Myanmar. They came in the nineteenth century AD. At that time, the British had made Myanmar (Burma at that time) a part of the colonial administration in India until 1937 (Fuad & Dadan, 2022). During this period, the British brought Indian traders, manual workers and laborers to Myanmar. For this purpose, the British colonial government provided a place for Indian migrants in the city of Yangon and its surroundings. Around the 1930s, this group of Muslims of Indian descent reached a third of Myanmar's Muslim population. They live in big cities and involve themselves in trading activities (Asep, 2023).

The British colonial government viewed the migration of the Indian population to Burma as a strategic step to meet labor needs, increase economic activity, and strengthen trade networks in the colonial region (Aktar & Habiba, 2024). Indian Muslim groups who migrate generally come from North and South India, such as Bihar, Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Hyderabad. They were brought in to play roles in various sectors of life, from unskilled



laborers, port workers, and craftsmen to traders. Many of them settled permanently, forming rapidly growing communities, especially in urban areas such as Yangon (formerly Rangoon), Mandalay, and several other port cities (Jaiswal, 2021).

The colonial government not only opened the door to migration but also provided facilities for these Indian migrants. They are given access to special residential areas around the city of Yangon, as well as opportunities in the economic sector, especially trade and services. The availability of land, facilities and administrative support from the colonial government facilitated the process of integrating this group of Indian Muslims into the social and economic life of colonial Burma. In the following decades, especially around the 1930s, the Muslim population of Indian descent in Myanmar experienced significant growth, reaching around one-third of the total Muslim population in the country (Doble et al., 2023).

The presence of Indian Muslim groups has an important influence on social, economic and religious life in Myanmar. In the economic field, they play a major role in strengthening the trade and services sector, as well as connecting Myanmar with regional trade networks in South Asia (Shahriar, 2022). They opened shops and food businesses and established business relationships with local communities and with traders from abroad. Their existence helped accelerate Myanmar's economic integration into the regional and transnational British colonial economic system.

Socially, this group of Indian Muslims forms a solid community by maintaining their cultural and religious identity. They established mosques, madrasas and religious social institutions in various large cities, which became centers of religious activity and Islamic education (Tomalin et al., 2024). In Yangon, for example, a number of large mosques were built by this community, which are not only places of worship but also symbols of their existence and contribution to wider society. This group's religious life is maintained even though they are in a multiethnic and multireligious environment, and are often faced with socio-political challenges (Abu-Ras et al., 2022).

However, the presence of the Indian Muslim community also creates its own dynamics in Myanmar's social structure. On the one hand, they enrich the ethnic and religious diversity of the country, as well as making real contributions in the economic and social fields (Bagh & Das, 2022). On the other hand, their existence sparked social jealousy, especially among local Burmese people who felt economically marginalized by the dominance of Indian groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Anti-immigrant sentiment began to grow in Burmese society, which was exacerbated by colonial narratives that tended to favor migrant communities for the sake of stability under British rule.

These tensions peaked in the 1930s, when anti-India riots occurred in Yangon and other cities, targeting Muslim and Hindu communities of Indian descent (Bowser, 2021). This conflict marked a new phase in relations between India's Muslim community and local society, where religious and ethnic identities became the main drivers of social tension. This event was also the beginning of changes in the fate of the Indian Muslim community in Myanmar, which began to experience social and political marginalization, especially after the country became independent in 1948 (Beyer, 2024).

After independence, the Myanmar government began to adopt nationalistic policies that emphasized a "Burmanized" identity and narrowed space for minority communities, including Indian Muslim groups (Egreteau, 2022). The naturalization and citizenship process has become extremely restrictive, with many of Indian descent, including Muslims, not being recognized as full citizens, despite having lived in Myanmar for generations. They are often considered "immigrants" or "foreigners", and experience discrimination in various aspects of life, such as employment, education, and access to public services (Joseph, 2024).

From a historiographic perspective, the presence of Indian Muslim groups in Myanmar shows how colonial policies created complex social dynamics, where migration, economics and religious identity were intertwined to shape the structure of society (Sanchez Molano, 2023). The history of this group also reflects how important it is to understand the colonial context in explaining the conflict and discrimination experienced by minority communities in the postcolonial period. Thus, the study of the Indian Muslim community in Myanmar is not only relevant for understanding local history but also provides insight into minority dynamics within the framework of globalization and colonialism.

Ultimately, Muslim groups of Indian descent in Myanmar are an integral part of the historical mosaic of Islam in Southeast Asia. They represent the dynamics of migration, assimilation, and resistance to marginalization, and are evidence of how religious and ethnic identities can survive amidst the ever-moving currents of political and social change. Despite facing challenges and pressure, the legacy of this community

lives on in the form of culture, institutions and collective memory of Muslim communities in Myanmar to this day (Beyer, 2025).

*Fourth*, is a Panthay Muslim group, namely a group of Muslims of Chinese Muslim descent who have lived in Myanmar for a long time. The majority of them are from the "Hui" tribe who migrated to Myanmar. They are one of the largest groups of Burmese Chinese, most of whom live in the northern region of Myanmar, directly bordering Yunan-China Province (formerly known as Upper Burma), especially in the regions of Tangyan, Maymyo, Mandalay, Taunggyi and Shan State (Asep, 2023).

The Panthay Muslim group constitutes an important part of the diverse Muslim community in Myanmar, which historically has a unique ethnic and geographical background. Panthay is a term that refers to a group of Muslims of Chinese descent, especially the Hui tribe, who have long migrated and settled in the northern region of Myanmar (Li, 2024). Migration of this group mainly occurred from Yunnan Province, China, which directly borders Myanmar, making this migration process not only a demographic event but also part of cross-border cultural and economic interactions that have been going on for centuries (Shwin et al., 2024).

The Hui tribe is one of the largest Muslim ethnic minority groups in China, historically spread across various regions, including Yunnan Province (Prahysadap & Suetair, 2023). Their migration to Myanmar was triggered by various factors, both economic and political, including tensions that occurred in China's long history, such as the Panthay rebellion in the 19th century, which led to the mass flight of Hui Muslims to the region now known as Myanmar. The name "Panthay" itself is believed to originate from a local Burmese term referring to the Hui people of Yunnan. The Panthay identity in Myanmar is unique because it is a combination of Chinese culture, Islam and local Myanmar elements (Than & May, 2022).

In a demographic context, the Panthay group is one of the largest Burmese Chinese communities clearly identified as Muslim. They generally settled in strategic areas in northern Myanmar, such as Tangyan, Maymyo (now Pyin Oo Lwin), Mandalay, Taunggyi, and Shan State (Rhoads, 2023). These locations have historical significance as they are on important trade routes and close to the Chinese border, allowing Panthay to maintain economic and cultural ties with the Hui communities in Yunnan (Venker, 2023). In these areas, the Panthays are known as a group that is active in trade, especially in the fields of spices, textiles and other consumer goods. Their expertise in trading allows them to have an important economic role in local society.

From a cultural and religious perspective, the Panthay have demonstrated success in maintaining their Islamic identity in the midst of a Buddhist-majority environment in Myanmar. They founded mosques, madrasas, and other social institutions to support their religious life (Prasse-Freeman, 2023). One of the famous mosques which is the center of the Panthay community is the Panthay Mosque in Mandalay, which not only functions as a place of worship, but also as a community center and a symbol of the existence of Panthay in Myanmar. This community adheres closely to its religious traditions, including the celebration of Islamic holidays such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, as well as religious education for the younger generation (Saimuma & Talukderb, 2022).

However, Panthay's existence in Myanmar is not free from challenges. As a double minority group—both religious and ethnic—Panthay often face discrimination and social exclusion, especially in tense political situations (Rifai, 2021). Despite having long historical roots in Myanmar, their citizenship status is often questioned, especially after the enactment of the Citizenship Law in 1982, which categorized citizens based on ethnicity recognized by the government. Groups like the Panthay, who have migrant backgrounds and non-Bamar ethnicity, often experience difficulty in proving the legality of their presence in the country (Sadan, 2024).

Despite facing these challenges, Panthay continues to play a strategic role in building economic bridges between Myanmar and China (Jeong, 2023). In the context of increasingly close Myanmar-China bilateral relations, Panthay's existence is an important asset in cultural and economic diplomacy. Their ability to speak Mandarin and familiarity with Chinese culture make them effective mediators in cross-border business activities (Wang, 2025). This also provides an opportunity for the Panthays to improve their position in Myanmar's social structure, especially in the areas of trade and investment.

From a social perspective, Panthay is known as a community that tends to maintain high internal cohesion and solidarity. The social and economic networks they build are close, allowing them to survive amidst political and economic pressures (Rifai, 2021). This community also tends to maintain good relations with other Muslim communities in Myanmar, such as the Rohingya, Kamein, and Malays, despite differences in ethnic and geographical backgrounds. This cooperation is mainly manifested in religious and social activities, including humanitarian assistance and solidarity in the face of discrimination (Panakkal, 2024).

From a historical perspective, the existence of Panthay is also an integral part of the long history of relations between China and the Southeast Asian region (Putri et al., 2024). Hui migration to Myanmar is part of a massive wave of migration triggered by China's internal conflict and transregional economic needs. In this regard, Panthay can be seen as a historical actor who played an important role in regional integration and cultural exchange. Further study of Panthay will open new insights into migration dynamics, ethno-religious identity formation, and the role of minorities in the construction of nationalism in Myanmar (Kokaisl, 2025).

Fifth is a group of Rohingya Muslims or Rohingya people. Most likely, the term "Rohingya" refers to the pre-colonial state of Arakan. The word Rohingya also contains the meaning of "Rohang people", namely the early Muslims in the Arakan region. There are also those who say that the word "Rohingya" emerged from British colonial and pre-colonial terms in Myanmar, from the words "rooinga" and "rwangya". In Myanmar, they are called "rui hang gya"; in Bangladesh, they are called "routuk". Meanwhile, the Rohingya themselves call themselves "*ruaingga*" (Asep, 2023).

The Rohingya are a Muslim generation descended from intermarriage between Arab and Persian traders and local women in the seventh and ninth centuries AD. During the British colonial period, they had a good life (Uddin Md Zahed & Jenkins, 2022). The Rohingya's loyalty to the British during the Japanese occupation resulted in this group receiving opposition from the Buddhist Myanmar community. This event was the starting point of the deportation of the Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh. Besides the Rohingya community, there are also Bengali Muslims who migrated to Myanmar during the British rule. After the British rule until now, the Rohingya Muslim group is the poorest Muslim group and the most severely oppressed by the military junta government (Asep, 2023).

Sixth, the final group, the Burmese Malay Muslim Group, locally known as "Pashu," is a minority community that has long and complex historical roots in the southern region of Myanmar. The term "Pashu" itself actually refers to Malay people regardless of their religion, both Muslims and non-Muslims (Ahmad, 2022). However, in this context, the term is specifically used to refer to a group of Muslims of Malay descent who live in the Tanintharyi area, the southernmost region of Myanmar, which directly borders the Andaman Sea and the Malay Peninsula.

Historically, the presence of Burmese Malay Muslims began with the migration of the Malay population, especially from the state of Kedah in Malaysia and parts of Kelantan, Patani in southern Thailand (Ghani & Hasrah, 2022). The geographical proximity of these areas to the southern coast of Myanmar has made this migration process something logical and continuous since the 19th century. One important record regarding the initial wave of migration occurred in 1865 when a group of Arab-Malay people led by Nayuda Ahmed undertook a sea voyage to collect marine products around the Mergui Islands, a strategic group of islands in the southern waters of Myanmar (Joll, 2022). During this trip, this group decided to settle in the Victoria Point Bay area, which is now known as Kawthaung.

The establishment of a Malay Muslim community at Victoria Point Bay marked the beginning of a permanent Malay presence in the region. Not only did they settle in Kawthaung, this group also spread to Bookpyin Township and a number of small islands in the southern part of the Mergui Archipelago (Keiko, 2021). This migration process does not just bring people from one region to another but also brings with them Malay culture, including language, customs, and, of course, Islamic teachings. In this context, the spread of Islam in southern Myanmar is closely related to maritime mobility and maritime trade networks, which have long been characteristic of Malay society (Awang, 2021).

The Burmese Malay Muslim community has its own characteristics that differentiate it from other Muslim groups in Myanmar, such as the Rohingya, Kamein, Panthay, and Bamar Muslims. The Malay identity that is strongly attached to this community can be seen from the use of the Malay language in daily conversations, as well as the preservation of Malay cultural traditions such as traditional ceremonies, traditional clothing and performing arts (Bowen, 2021). In religious practice, they also maintain the Shafi'i school of thought, which is the dominant school of thought among Muslims in Southeast Asia. This strengthens cultural and spiritual ties with Muslim communities in Malaysia, Indonesia and Southern Thailand.

From a social and economic perspective, the Burmese Malay Muslim community generally works as fishermen, traders and gatherers of marine products, such as pearls and fish. The location of their settlements close to the coast and islands supports a maritime lifestyle that has been going on for generations (Pattanasatoporn, 2021). Apart from that, this community is also known to have a fairly extensive trading network with the surrounding areas, including traders from Malaysia, Thailand and even India. This condition



shows that the presence of Burmese Malay Muslims is not only important in a demographic context but also in regional economic networks (Hale, 2023).

However, despite having settled for more than a century, the Burmese Malay Muslim community continues to face various challenges in Myanmar's socio-political context. One of the main issues faced is related to citizenship status. In many cases, Muslim minority groups often experience discrimination in legal recognition and state administration, including access to education, health services and political participation (Raj, 2022). Although discrimination against Burmese Malay Muslims is not as intense as the Rohingya group, there are still certain restrictions that make their position vulnerable in the structure of Myanmar society, which is dominated by Bamar ethnicity and Theravada Buddhism.

From a cultural perspective, Burmese Malay Muslims also face challenges in maintaining their ethnic and religious identity amidst the dominance of the majority culture. In unstable political situations, minority groups are often subjected to marginalization, even in the form of bans on their cultural and religious practices (Shah, 2024). However, the strength of this community lies in its internal solidarity and strong kinship relationships, which enable them to maintain their survival as a complete and organized community.

The presence of Burmese Malay Muslims in Myanmar's social history also opens up space for understanding the complexity of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the Southeast Asian region. This community is a clear example of how the movement of people across regions can create rich diversity, while also showing how this diversity can become a source of social tension if not managed fairly (Shah, 2024). Therefore, further study of the Burmese Malay Muslim group is very important in order to explore the dynamics of social integration, cultural identity, and the relationship between minorities and the state in Myanmar.

In the context of international relations, the existence of Burmese Malay Muslims also has its own significance. Their historical and cultural ties with Malaysia and Southern Thailand open up opportunities for cross-border cooperation, in the fields of culture, education and human rights protection (Iquitos, 2024). The governments and civil society in these countries have a potential role in fighting for the rights of the Burmese Malay Muslim community through cultural diplomacy and ASEAN regional cooperation. This international support is crucial, especially in facing the discriminatory policies implemented by the Myanmar military regime against minority groups (Amornpradubkul, 2023).

Thus, the Burmese Malay Muslim or "Pashu" community is an integral part of Myanmar's history and demography, especially in the southern region. They carry a rich cultural and religious heritage while showing how ethnic and religious identities can survive in challenging socio-political conditions (Gray, 2024). Through a historical approach, we can understand the important role of this community in shaping the face of diversity in Southeast Asia, as well as the importance of recognizing and protecting their rights in order to create a just and inclusive society.

### **Islam in the Arakan Region & Rohingya Islam**

Arakan, or Rakhine, is one of the states in Myanmar that directly borders Bangladesh. The region extends along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal from the Naf River on the Chittagong border to Cape Negarise. This region is located between the Arakan Yuma range and the Bay of Bengal. As a natural physiographic unit, the entire Arakan region is separated from the rest of Myanmar by the Yuma range stretching from north to south. The total area of Arakan is approximately 13,540 square miles (Asep, 2023).

Islam was first introduced to Arakan through sea trade routes in the 9th and 10th centuries. Muslim traders from Arabia, Persia and the South Asian region often stopped at the port of Arakan on their way to Southeast Asia. Through economic and cultural interactions, Islam began to influence local society and was accepted by some of Arakan's population. This region became an important point for trade routes connecting the Islamic world with Southeast Asia, thus enabling the peaceful spread of Islam (Yegar, 1972).

Relations between the Arakan Kingdom and the Bengal Sultanate in the 15th century strengthened the influence of Islam in the region. At that time, the Arakan kings had close relations with the Sultan of Bengal and often adopted Islamic titles in their names, as well as introducing several elements of Islamic culture into the palace and local community life (Fuad & Dadan, 2022). Raja Min Saw Mon (1404-1434), one of the kings of Arakan, received military support from the Sultan of Bengal to regain his throne and as a form of respect, he adopted the title Muslim in his leadership (Fuad & Dadan, 2022).

The Muslim community in Arakan, which became known as the Rohingya ethnic group, developed and assimilated into local culture. Despite being Muslim, the Rohingya have a different language and culture from Muslims in other parts of Myanmar, most of whom are descendants of immigrants from India during the British

colonial era. The Rohingya identity developed as a community that has strong historical and cultural ties to Arakan. During the British colonial period (1824–1948), Muslim migration from Bengal to Arakan increased, which strengthened the Muslim population in the region (Leider, 2016).

There are several meanings of the word "Rohingya". Among other things, it refers to the definition of a pre-colonial Arakan state. There are also those who connect the word Rohingya with the word "Rohang", namely the early Muslim population in Arakan. The word Rohingya is also often associated with the words "*rooinga*" and "*rwangya*", which are words that refer to ethnicity in Arakan in pre-colonial and British colonial times in Myanmar (Asep, 2023).

Based on the description outlined in this sub-topic, the origins of the Rohingya people in Arakan can be traced back to the 7th century AD, to the British colonial period in Myanmar. All these descriptions lead to the name Rohingya as a Muslim ethnoreligious identity in North Rakhine State, Myanmar (formerly Burma). The term became part of public discourse in the late 1950s and became widespread following reports of human rights violations against Muslims in Northern Rakhine State during the 1990s, and again after 2012 (Asep, 2023).

After Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948, issues of citizenship and minority rights became important topics. The Myanmar government refuses to recognize the Rohingya as a native ethnic group and considers them to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. In 1982, Myanmar's Citizenship Law tightened the criteria for citizenship, causing many Rohingya to become stateless. This policy led to the systematic exclusion of Rohingya, limiting their economic, educational and other civil rights (Cheesman, 2017).

Thus, the position of Muslims during the British colonial period was better than after Myanmar (Burma) became independent in 1948. During British colonial rule, many Arakanese people received higher education and became government employees, banks, trade agencies, coastal ship managers and others. "Panthay" Muslims (a term for Chinese Muslims of Yunan origin) and Gujarati and South Indian Muslims dominated trade in Myanmar at that time (Asep, 2023).

Myanmar has seen a rise in anti-Muslim campaigns in recent months. In November 2015, in anticipation of the 2016 Myanmar elections, Ma Ba Tha issued a 12-point statement inviting potential voters to support the campaign to protect race and religion (Bünté, 2023). Ma Ba Tha is also campaigning for a ban on wearing the hijab and the ritual of sacrificing cows during Eid al-Adha. Myanmar's military leader General Min Aung Hlaing, issued a statement that now is the time to complete "unfinished business", namely the "clearance of the Rohingya", an issue that has been a problem since the Second World War era (Asep, 2023).

For decades, the Rohingya have faced widespread discrimination and violence. In 2012, ethnic tensions escalated into major violence between the Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya communities, leaving thousands injured and thousands of homes destroyed. The situation worsened in 2017 when a massive military operation was carried out in Rakhine, killing thousands of people and causing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. The UN called these actions "ethnic cleansing" (Council, 2018).

The persecution and oppression of Muslims in the name of religion and race in Myanmar is nothing new, nor is it a contemporary historical event. The first persecution and oppression in the history of Myanmar (Burma) that could be proven for religious reasons occurred during the time of King Bayinnaung (1550-1589 AD), namely the King of the Tounggo Dynasty (Asep, 2023).

Currently, many Rohingya live in refugee camps in Bangladesh and other countries. They face difficult living conditions, including limited access to education, health services and employment. Meanwhile, Rohingya who remain in Myanmar still experience strict restrictions on movement, as well as difficulties in obtaining basic rights as citizens. Although various international organizations and other countries have provided support, the future of the Rohingya remains unclear without significant changes in Myanmar's policy (Ibrahim, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, the development of Islam as a minority religion in Myanmar since the 9th century began with the role of Arab, Persian and Bengali traders who formed Muslim communities in the coastal region of Arakan. The interaction between the Arakan Kingdom and the Bengal Sultanate strengthened the spread of Islam and shaped the Rohingya ethnic identity with deep cultural and historical ties. Despite having assimilated into local culture and being part of Myanmar's ethnic diversity, the Muslim community faces systemic challenges, especially post-independence in 1948, which was characterized by exclusive and

discriminatory citizenship policies. These political and social tensions culminated in large-scale violence against the Rohingya in 2012 and 2017, triggering a humanitarian crisis and a mass exodus to Bangladesh. This study makes a significant contribution to understanding the historical dimensions of ethno-religious conflict in Myanmar and urges the need for inclusive policy approaches and the protection of minority rights within a human rights framework.

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