


‘Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps’: Burmese fascism and the origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38

MATTHEW J. BOWSER 

Northeastern University
Email: Bowser.m@northeastern.edu

Abstract

In light of the current Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, this article investigates the emergence of Islamophobia in colonial Burma. Focusing on the under-examined Islamophobic riots that broke out countrywide in 1938, my research reveals that a nascent fascist movement used Muslims as a scapegoat for political and economic crisis. The colonial agribusiness economy had collapsed during the Great Depression, while the vast contract labour system of the Indian Ocean had brought millions of low-wage Indian migrants to Burma, causing a glut in the labour market. Burmese socialism provided a popular response to these issues. To compete, Burmese fascism emerged to appeal to a rising sense of nationalism, racially scapegoating Indians and the religion of Islam as the exploiters, colonizers, and invaders behind Burma’s problems. Using the racialized term *kala* to conflate the ideas of colonizer, Indian, and Muslim, Burmese fascists inflamed hatred against Indian Muslims, Indian Hindus, and even indigenous Muslims, such as the Rohingya. By revealing the origins of this racialization, this article both deconstructs the lasting Burmese perception of the Rohingya as ‘Bengali immigrants’ and provides a generalizable case study into how races and racisms develop from specific historical factors and political movements. It also argues that the British amplified fascist ideas in Burma by focusing repression on movements that directly challenged their material control, such as socialism and communism. Therefore, it highlights how ruling classes often prefer nationalistic movements because they redirect popular unrest from the project of overthrowing structural factors to that of eliminating scapegoated minorities.

Introduction

Burma is a Buddhist country. Peoples professing other religions come to Burma, the country of the Buddhist, without hindrance... they have been eating the flesh and sucking the life-blood of the Burmese... seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives, causing dissension in order to create such communities as

Dobama Muslim [We Burmese Muslim]
(*Sayadaw U Paduma*, 'Bama Thway [Burmese Blood]', 25 July 1938)¹

BUDDHISM HAS BEEN INSULTED. TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS
(Daily Headline, *Thuriya*, 23–26 July 1938)²

In 1931, a scholarly religious argument broke out between Buddhism and Islam in Burma. A Burmese Buddhist named Maung Pan Nyo published a book called *Moulvi-Yogi Sadan*, featuring a dialogue between a *moulvi* and a *yogi* in which the *yogi* 'proved' that Buddhism was the superior religion. Shortly thereafter, a Burmese Muslim schoolteacher, Maung Shwe Hpi, responded with *Moulvi-Yogi Awada Sadan*, in which the *moulvi* won the argument for Islam over Buddhism. In 1936, a man named Maung Htin Baw published a reprint called *The Abode of a Nat*, which included both books as well as additions by other religious thinkers. This religious debate went almost entirely without public notice. However, on 14 July 1938, *The Abode of a Nat* was suddenly distributed to all of the major Burmese nationalist newspapers and to all the major *kyaungs* (Buddhist monasteries) in Rangoon. Led by the radical newspapers *Thuriya* (*The Sun*) and *New Light of Burma*, the nationalist press depicted Maung Shwe Hpi's book as 'an insult to the Burmese nation as a whole' and called for immediate action to 'protect the Buddhist religion' in Burma.³ A mass meeting was held on 26 July at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, the symbolic and religious centre of Burmese nationalism. It was attended by no fewer than 10,000 Burmese. For two hours, 12 *sayadaws* (abbots) gave speeches that escalated into calls for violent action to protect the Buddhist religion from 'Muslim invaders'. The meeting developed into a march to the Indian quarter of Rangoon, which then rapidly became an anti-Muslim riot. Riots engulfed the entire city of Rangoon for weeks, lasting until September and causing the death and injury of hundreds. As the late-July issues of *Thuriya* and *New Light of Burma* reached the districts, riots broke out there as well, leading to a constant state of violence against Muslims across the entire country until well into December.⁴

¹ U Paduma, 'Bama Thway', *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 25 July 1938. All translations from Burmese/Myanmar in this article are done by the author.

² *Thuriya* [Burmese], 23–26 July 1938.

³ *Thuriya* [Burmese], 19 July 1938; *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 19 July 1938.

⁴ Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 12–42. IOR/V/26/262/16.

The publication of *The Abode of a Nat* and the violent calls to action in the press in July 1938 were not spontaneous events that led to an unexpected outbreak of anti-Muslim violence. They were a planned, concerted effort to mobilize a fascist movement: a Burmese *Kristallnacht*. This article argues that the riots of 1938 mark the beginning of a fascist movement in Burma. I assert that the economic shock caused by the global Great Depression and the subsequent failure of the British colonial government to alleviate dispossession, debt, and impoverishment in Burma led to radical political responses from the Burmese on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Burmese socialism, in the form of the social-democratic policies of Dr Ba Maw's *Sinyetha* (Proletarian) Party and the industrial action of grassroots networks such as *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burmans Society), posed a powerful and popular opposition to British, Indian, and Burmese capitalism. Socialists aspired to leadership of the anticolonial movement in Burma, challenging British rule through boycotts, strikes, and non-cooperation. To compete, a ruthless political operator named U Saw took inspiration from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi rise to power in Germany to provide a template for his campaign to undermine, outmanoeuvre, and ultimately eliminate his socialist rivals. His backers and financiers were the Burmese business class and Japanese imperialists. The platform of his political party, *Myochit* ['Love of Race'], was explicitly fascist by all the metrics established by scholars—ultranationalist, authoritarian, corporatist, violent, paligenetic—and it was complete with a paramilitary wing of Blackshirts, the *Galon Tat*.⁵ Key to U Saw's programme in particular was his scheme to win the Burmese subaltern classes away from the socialists and other nationalists by creating a racialized scapegoat on which to blame Burma's socio-economic tensions.

While several scholars have covered Indophobia (anti-Indian prejudice) in colonial Burma, Islamophobia and the riots of 1938 have always

⁵ I contrast 'ultranationalism' with 'nationalism' through ultranationalism's focus on the exclusion of 'foreign' communities. Robert H. Taylor made a case against calling U Saw's movement fascist. According to Taylor, Liberal Western historians had labelled U Saw as fascist because they did not understand the need for aggressive tactics in the independence struggle. While I agree in that regard, Taylor almost entirely ignores the atrocities and racial scapegoating that characterized U Saw's movement. See Robert H. Taylor, 'Politics in Late Colonial Burma: The Case of U Saw', *Modern Asian Studies* 10(2) (1976): 161–193; classification of fascist ideology based on definitions provided by Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 19–37; Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 1–27; Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3–31.

appeared only as a short paragraph or a footnote.⁶ In fact, Islamophobia was central to U Saw's project to steal power from leftists and moderates, and it fed directly into pre-existing Burmese Indophobia. In his rise to power in Germany, Hitler weaponized pre-existing animosity against Jews to transform them into a racialized scapegoat for all of Germany's problems; U Saw's movement did the same with the idea of Islam in Burma. Its scapegoat was an imaginary group that encapsulated the concepts of Indianness and Islam in the term *kala*.⁷ So Indian Muslims, Indian Hindus, and Burmese Muslims were all racialized, or made into a race, as *kala*. By having such a broad category, U Saw's fascist movement was able to use the Burmese nationalist press, such as *New Light of Burma* and U Saw's personal newspaper *Thuriya*, to depict the *kala* as responsible for the problems in every matrix of Burmese society: the political, the religious, the cultural, the gendered, and the class-based. Most importantly, the *kala* was tied to British colonialism. By making the *kala* agents of colonialism and the colonial state their protectors, Burmese fascists could present the struggle against them as the key to liberation. In reality, by shifting anticolonial hostility from the colonial state to a racialized minority, Burmese fascism actually

⁶ I define 'Islamophobia' as the modern political articulation of anti-Muslim prejudice. Muslim populations were persecuted sporadically in precolonial Burma, but concerted political action and rhetoric against 'Muslims' as a group began in 1938. See Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972). Due to the recent Rohingya crisis, scholars have begun to re-examine the issue but focus almost solely on the postcolonial period: Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing, 2017). For anti-Indian prejudice, see Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora, 1960); Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

⁷ *Kala* is roughly regarded as the Burmese equivalent of 'South Asian descent', but the etymologically contested nature and elusive origin of the term make it untranslatable into English or other European languages. The meaning of the term has changed over the historical periods, especially through the rise of Indophobia in the colonial period when it began to be used in a derogatory way. My assertion is that U Saw's movement reshaped the term to mark out a racial-religious Other, utilizing both Indophobia and Islamophobia to create a seemingly homogenous scapegoat. Usage remains contested today, but it has since manifested this derogatory racialized usage in the Indophobic and Islamophobic resurgence of the 1980s onward. See Renaud Egrettau, 'Burmese Indians in Contemporary Burma: Heritage, Influence, and Perceptions since 1988', *Asian Ethnicity* 12 (2011): 33–54.

garnered the support of the British ruling class. Despite the embarrassment caused for the British government in the Indo- and Islamophobic pogroms of the late 1930s and 1940s, the British assisted U Saw's rise to power because he would accommodate their rule, jail his more radical rivals, and uphold the capitalist system in Burma.

Scholars have not yet addressed this fascist movement for two primary reasons. First, the growth of this political movement was cut abruptly short with the Japanese invasion in 1942. After the war, with the rise of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League to political hegemony in Burma, it seemed that these historical threads had been lost. They were not. In fact, many of the racial ideas developed in the late 1930s and early 1940s—especially those regarding the Rohingya Muslim minority—came to be deeply embedded in postcolonial Burmese nationalism. Second, since the postcolonial turn, Burma scholars have hesitated to place Western labels on the Burmese nationalist and anticolonial movements. This tendency is a reasonable reaction to a generation of Western scholars between the 1940s and 1970s, many of them former colonial officials-turned-historians, who tended to depict Burmese politics as a crude, not-yet-civilized imitation of European politics.⁸ However, with the global turn, scholars have begun to re-examine the transnational connections that shaped local conditions and vice versa, and the existence of fascist symbols and tropes has generally been overlooked by scholarship on Burma.⁹

This article serves as a generalizable case study for demonstrating the pathologies of nationalism as a tool to fight domination. It shows how, in times of socio-economic crisis, working-class majorities often seek radical, revolutionary ideologies such as socialism and nationalism (and ultimately fascism as a form of ultranationalist ideology) in order to resolve pressing social problems. It highlights the fact that ruling classes, such as the British in Burma, often prefer nationalist-based movements because these movements effectively misdirect popular rage from the project of overthrowing dominant structural forces to that of eliminating

⁸ See G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824–1942* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), 73–92; J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 427–428; F. S. V. Donnison, *Burma* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 109–121.

⁹ I take particular inspiration from Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, the Gambia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Heather Streets-Salter, *World War One in Southeast Asia: Colonialism and Anticolonialism in an Era of Global Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

scapegoated 'national enemies'. Adding to the existing literature on fascism, it not only provides an example of how this ideology is global and can arise in a non-Western and anticolonial context, but it also makes the larger theoretical argument that 'race' and therefore racism often emerge directly from such movements.¹⁰ As such, this article also provides an interdisciplinary case study into the process and function of 'racialization' or the process of transforming a group of people into a 'race' with essentialized characteristics.

Building on a century of critical race theorists, historian Patrick Wolfe argued in *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* that all racializations performed the function of justifying and maintaining a relationship of domination. The specific ways a population has been racialized were, he theorized, 'trace[s] ... that mark out and reproduce the unequal relationships into which [dominators] have co-opted these populations'.¹¹ My argument adds to this theoretical framework and to critical race literature to show that, rather than arising naturally out of economic or social tensions, the racialization of an ethnic or religious group is often the direct result of specific nationalist movements and their specific goals. Therefore, nationalist and fascist movements do not simply stand for a pre-existing national group and racialize a pre-existing minority group, but in fact seek to reconstitute those groups, to delineate their new boundaries, and to reinvent their essential characteristics for their own purposes. The racialization of Indians and Muslims in Burma as *kala*—colonizers, invaders, exploiters—performed the function of scapegoating all of Burma's ills onto one group. Indians symbolized the immigrant invader who had come to steal Burmese jobs (classed) and women (gendered); Muslims symbolized the replacement of Buddhism with Islam politically, culturally, religiously, and ethnically. In depicting the normative Burma as Buddhist, the urge to erase Burmese Muslims and their political voice—especially the large indigenous Rohingya community in Arakan (present-day Rakhine State)—was also a major factor.

On 27 August 2018, the United Nations fact-finding mission dispatched to study the Rohingya crisis recommended that the International Criminal

¹⁰ Other scholars have recently begun to identify other colonial fascist movements. See Benjamin Zachariah, 'A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Indian Perspectives towards a Non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism', *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2014): 63–100. On nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 5–7.

¹¹ Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 9.

Court officially investigate the Burmese military for genocide and crimes against humanity.¹² Since 2012, Rakhine Buddhist nationalist movements, bolstered by Buddhist monks (*pongyis*), have carried out a series of Islamophobic pogroms against the Rohingya people in an attempt to drive them out of Rakhine State. In late 2016, these pogroms escalated into full-scale ethnic-cleansing campaigns led by the Burmese military. The organized mass killings, sexual violence, and arson in these campaigns led approximately 671,000 Rohingya to flee as refugees into neighbouring Bangladesh, most of whom remain there to the present day. Although these genocidal campaigns against the Rohingya are new, the systematic exclusion, discrimination, and repression of the Rohingya have continued under successive Burmese governments since the colonial period.¹³ Notably, Burmese civilian and military officials—even Nobel Peace Prize laureate and current Burmese head of state, Aung San Suu Kyi—have studiously refused to use the term ‘Rohingya’, instead referring to the group either as ‘Bengalis’ or as *kala*.¹⁴ This racialized classification of the Rohingya lies at the heart of Burmese officials’ denial of the indigeneity of this group, and provides a useful roadmap to its origins. While the most recent violence against the Rohingya began as a result of Rakhine anxieties around Burma’s democratization in 2010, this article demonstrates how and why the Rohingya came to be racialized as part of the *kala* racial category. In so doing, it reveals why postcolonial Burmese nationalist groups continue to find value in perpetuating this category.

Burmese socialism and Burmese fascism

Burma faced a plethora of socio-economic issues in the 1930s, many of which were local and many of which were global. The colonial agribusiness economy, fuelled by the monocropping of rice, had

¹² Marzuki Darusman et al., ‘Myanmar: Tatmadaw Leaders Must Be Investigated for Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes—UN Report’, *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* (Geneva: 27 August 2018), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23475> (accessed 19 September 2018).

¹³ ‘Rohingya Crisis’, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya-crisis> (accessed 13 February 2020).

¹⁴ ‘Transcript: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Speech at the ICJ in Full’, *Al Jazeera*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/transcript-aung-san-suu-kyi-speech-icj-full-191212085257384.html> (accessed 13 February 2020).

collapsed due to the Great Depression. In addition, the exploitative Indian Ocean labour machine of the British empire—moving between 12 and 15 million Indians to Burma between 1840 and 1940—provided capitalists in Burma with cheap labour, driving down wages and causing a glut in the labour market.¹⁵ In responding to these issues, Burmese political figures turned to established Western radical ideologies that promised routes to political success and socio-economic revitalization. This was not simply a matter of copying the West, but rather a matter of convergent evolution. The entire world was experiencing similar crises of global capitalism in the interwar period, connected as it was by the globalized social models and economics of Eurocolonial domination. These connections explain both the development of similar political responses around the world as well as the sharing of the ideologies that proved to be the most politically effective. Burmese politicians developed home-grown political ideas unique to the Burmese condition, but nevertheless borrowed the practices, tactics, and ideological frameworks of global socialism, global fascism, and other ideologies.

A prominent activist named Dr Ba Maw spearheaded the Burmese socialist movement. He called his platform *Sin Yetha Winthanu* ('Poor Man's Nationalism'). In his own description of his *Sinyetha* platform, Ba Maw described a Burmese socialism that mixed elements of Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, and social-democratic ideas to serve Burmese ends.¹⁶ The *Sinyetha* Party published its manifesto broadly in 1936, laying out a radical framework for relieving Burmese poverty: agricultural tenant protections and rent control; rural tax reduction; making *thugyis* (village headmen) elected rather than appointed positions; restructuring village administration; compulsory free education; and the creation of government-subsidized mortgage banks for cheap, indigenous agricultural credit. Once the government had repurchased the agricultural land from non-agriculturalist investors, *Sinyetha's* intention was to run the agricultural

¹⁵ Ian Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–44; Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 104, 114–122.

¹⁶ *Sinyetha* was completely detached from international socialist movements. It met none of the criteria that the British considered most alarming about communism: receiving funding from the Soviet Union or communicating within the Comintern. Still, British officials extended their hatred of communism to Ba Maw and his party. For them, any instance of socialist thinking was a sign of dangerous subversion. See, for example, Michele Louro, "'Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins': The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33(3) (2013): 331–345.

economy on a state tenancy system, in which the government would own the land and charge a low, fixed rent to all agriculturalists.¹⁷ In the colonial general election in 1936, Ba Maw became prime minister, forming a coalition government with Burmese moderates and the European, Indian, and Karen reserved seats.¹⁸ As such, Ba Maw proposed a gradualist and reformist social-democratic platform, in line with British Fabian socialists like John Sydenham Furnivall, in the hopes of getting his policies passed through a colonial British government.¹⁹

A rising nationalist and labour organization called *Dobama Asi-Ayon*, or *Dobama Asiayone* ('We Burmans Society') complemented Ba Maw's elite socialism at the grassroots level. During the organization of secondary and collegiate students across Burma, *Dobama* members began to use the term *thakin* ('lord, master') as part of their names. Like *sahib* in India, the British used *thakin* as a mandatory form of address from their Burmese subjects; by co-opting the term, *Dobama Asiayone* challenged and subverted British claim to mastery in Burma. The result was that *Dobama Asiayone* members came to be referred to simply as the 'Thakins'. The Thakins quickly established themselves as an ardent and powerful nationalist organization in Burma that was directly connected with the urban Burmese and Burmese working class in a way that the Western-educated elite craved.²⁰

The Burmese left was a threat to the real structures of domination in Burmese society—the colonial state and the capitalist class—and provided the most realistic option for the Burmese people to gain both economic solvency and political independence. By contrast, the right-leaning nationalists, who had coalesced into a league of political parties called *Ngabwinsaing* ('Five Flowers Alliance'), were more

¹⁷ Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1–7; 'The Hon'ble U Ba Maw, M.A., PhD, Bar-at-Law, Education Minister', *The University College Magazine* 26(1) (1934–35) in U Kyaw Min, U Myint, U Thet Tun, et al., *Adhipati Dokta Bha Mo (1893–1977)* (Yangon: Pancagam Ca Pe, 2013), 165–166; *Rangoon Gazette*, 5 October 1936, 1.

¹⁸ *General Election in Burma of 1936* (1942); Government of the United Kingdom, *Government of Burma Act* (1935), 8–17. IOR/V/8/226.

¹⁹ He indicates that these tactics were necessary in his memoirs: Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 15.

²⁰ Government of Burma, *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 43–44. IOR/V/26/262/15; Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Notes on Thakins, Do-Bama Asi-Ayon (We Burmans Association) and Kindred Societies, 8 Apr 1938–5 Jun 1939* (1939), 3–5. IOR/M/5/9.

concerned with gaining a 'Burma for the Burmans' and personal political power in the short term more than anything else. Their primary activity in the legislature centred on the 'Burmanization' of all sectors public and private; immigration reform; passing of laws protecting Buddhist values and Buddhist law; and harassing, obstructing, or otherwise impeding the work of the leftists and moderates.²¹ The political lines here are blurred, of course. The Thakins also fought for 'Burma for the Burmans' and many among their ranks were right-wing nationalists. Indeed, as Kei Nemoto's work has shown, many on the Burmese 'left' emphasized ethno-religious tensions as much as those on the 'right'. Still, *Sinyetha's* and *Dobama's* tactics mainly focused on labour organization and strikes, both student and industrial, rather than on repressing minorities.²²

It was during the rise in popularity of Ba Maw's *Sinyetha* and *Dobama Asiayone* in 1936 that opportunists on the far right began to formulate a strong political challenge. The central figure and architect of Burmese fascism was U Saw. Unlike many of his elite Western-educated colleagues, he only reached sixth standard and never matriculated at university.²³ U Saw's political career consisted of an aggressive, pugnacious, and unscrupulous pursuit of his goals. In a strictly confidential memo to Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the governor of Burma in 1941, C. S. Stewart, the director of the Burma Defence Bureau, gave the following analysis of U Saw's political activities:

He appears to have been impressed by the arguments used by Hitler and said that the methods laid down in 'Mein Kampf' for the attainment of National Socialism were excellent and he would like to follow them. It is considered by those who know him that he has consistently followed, so far as he has been able to do, the Hitlerian method of advancing to power All my informants agree, independently, that U Saw wishes to become the first Dictator of Burma if and when British rule comes to an end.²⁴

²¹ They essentially state these goals explicitly during a vote of no confidence against the Speaker near the end of the first House of Representatives session on 24 March 1937. Government of Burma, Burma Legislature, *Proceedings of the First House of Representatives (BHRP)*, Vol. 1: February–March 1937 (1937), 750–785. IOR/V/9/4087.

²² Kei Nemoto, 'The Concepts of Dobama (Our Burma) and Thudo-Bama (Their Burma) in Burmese Nationalism, 1930–1948', *The Journal of Burma Studies* 5 (2000): 1–16.

²³ Anonymous, 'Rangoon University Strike' (1958), 6–7. Mss Eur D1066/2.

²⁴ Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Visit of Premier U Saw to UK: Invitation and Biographical Notes 31 Jul–21 Oct 1941; Reports of Death of U Saw and denial 8 Aug–1 Sep 1942* (1942), 21–22. IOR/M/3/1113.

Stewart was not exactly in an unbiased position to analyse U Saw. However, not only were Stewart's informants quite clear on this information, but also the Secretary of State for India and Burma, Leopold Amery, Governor Dorman-Smith, and Stewart himself all agreed that U Saw was 'trustworthy', loyal, and indeed quite valuable in repressing leftist elements in Burmese politics.²⁵ Despite U Saw's clear ambitions, his utilitarian view of power meant that he would not risk his position of authority to revolt against British rule. The British found him to be much more amenable to work with than leftists like Ba Maw. After recounting U Saw's ruthless methods in explicit detail, Dorman-Smith nevertheless concluded that '[he] realizes that co-operation is the best card to play at the present time'.²⁶ Therefore, it was not in the interests of British officials to taint the name of their man. They only ever spoke of his fascist tendencies in confidential correspondence.

Following the end of the pre-monsoon session of the Legislative Council in March 1935, U Saw hit his political stride. He headed to Tokyo on behalf of *Thuriya* newspaper, ostensibly to research Japan's rise as an industrialized Asian Great Power. With U Ba Pe as commanding shareholder and Senior Editor, *Thuriya* had long been an expression of Burmese nationalism. U Saw had first associated himself with the newspaper at the start of his political career in the late 1920s.²⁷ In Tokyo, U Saw quickly made acquaintance with top officials—especially the right-wing ultranationalist, imperialist elements of Japanese politics—by joining *Kokuryūkai*, or the 'Black Dragon Society'.²⁸ Now taking the opportunity to expand into Burma, *Kokuryūkai* provided U Saw with significant funding, in at least the tens of thousands of British Indian rupees, for him to establish the Burmese branch of the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁷ Kyaw Min, *The Burma We Love* (Calcutta: Bharati Bhavan, 1945), 29–30; regarding the nature of *Thuriya* under U Ba Pe, see Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *Burma Legislative Council: Proceedings on Motions Concerning Separation Issue; Conclusions of Government of Burma 3 Jan 1933–7 Jun 1933* (1933), 305. IOR/M/1/46.

²⁸ The society, also known as the Amur River Society (*Kokuryūkai* in Japanese), was a jingoistic, imperialist, Pan-Asianist organization dedicated to building the 'living space' of the Japanese empire: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. They had established a robust international network of contacts, including Sun Yat-sen of China, Emilio Aguinaldo of the Philippines, Resh Behari Bose and Rabindranath Tagore of India, and pan-Islamist activist Abdurresid Ibrahim in the Soviet Union. Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 56–57.

society as well as to transform *Thuriya* into a pro-Japanese mouthpiece. When Rs 40,000 of shares in *Thuriya* went onto the market, U Saw used his newfound wealth to buy them all and became primary shareholder. Replacing U Ba Pe as Senior Editor, U Saw transformed the newspaper over the next couple years into his personal political propaganda machine.²⁹

After winning the Henzada North seat in the 1936 parliamentary elections under *Ngabwinsaing*, U Saw established his own party, *Myochit*, which was usually translated as the ‘Patriots’ Party’ but more literally meant ‘Love of Race Party’.³⁰ At the helm of this party, U Saw set about building a Burmese form of fascism. I follow Federico Finchelstein’s recent expansion of Robert Paxton’s seminal definition, which classified fascism as ‘[a] modern counter-revolutionary formation ... ultranationalist, antiliberal, and anti-Marxist It aimed to create a new and epochal world order through an incremental continuum of extreme political violence and war’.³¹ Like European fascism, Burmese fascism centred on an obsession with tradition, cultural revival, and ultranationalism. The Burmese articulation of these elements meant essentially capturing the millenarian spirit that undergirded the Saya San Rebellion, including a return to the autocratic tradition of the Burmese kings; the revival of religious and cultural rituals such as astrological superstitions and tattooing for invulnerability; and, most importantly, the reincorporation of the Buddhist *Sangha* into the state apparatus. Also like fascists in Europe, the economically conservative U Saw preferred to gather power from the capitalist and professional classes. U Saw’s hostility to British and Indian capitalism was not born of a hostility to capitalism per se, but originated from his alliance with the large Burmese landlords and the Burmese Chamber of Commerce. U Saw respected the enormous wealth generated by capitalism in Burma and he did not wish to overthrow this system, but rather wanted to appropriate it for the

²⁹ Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Visit of Premier U Saw to UK*, 21–22; Kyaw Min, *The Burma We Love*, 30–31.

³⁰ *Myochit*: *amyo* (Race, Nation, Religion, etc.) *chit* (Love). I translate *amyo* with the nuance of ‘race’, despite its multiple meanings that do not map directly onto the Western conception of ‘race’, because, as this article shows, U Saw’s political party was clearly focused on the advancement of what it considered the Myanmar ‘race’ and its attendant religious (Buddhist), national (Burma), and cultural (Burmese) associations. *General Election in Burma of 1936* (1942); *BHRP, Vol. 4: August–September 1938* (1938), 798. IOR/V/9/4090.

³¹ Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, 14–15.

Myanmar ethnic group from the British, Indians, and the other ethnic minorities.³²

For the Myanmar majority and for a number of the other ethnic groups as well, especially the Rakhine Buddhists of Arakan, Burmese nationalism revolved around the protection and propagation of the Buddhist religion. The maintenance of Buddhism on Earth, *sasana*, had been carried out by the Burmese monarchs prior to British colonial rule in their role as *sasana dayaka* ('protector/promoter of *sasana*') through building pagodas and making charitable endowments for the *Sangha* (the Buddhist religious establishment).³³ U Saw presented himself as the champion of the Burmese people who would destroy secular colonial rule and serve as the new *sasana dayaka* by dubbing himself *Galon U Saw*.³⁴ In Burmese mythology, Galon, based on the Hindu eagle god Garuda, was a millenarian hero who would defeat the serpent, Naga, in the end-times; by analogy, U Saw was also presenting himself as the slayer of Naga or, in this context, the British colonial state. U Saw built a private paramilitary from his diehard supporters called the *Galon Tat*, or 'Galon Army'. The black-shirted, jackbooted militia of the *Galon Tat* fit neatly into the 'rainbow of shirts' of the global fascist movement in the 1930s.³⁵ To express the unique blend of European ideas of fascism and palingenetic ultranationalism specific to Burma, leftists in Burma began to refer to U Saw's movement collectively—including the *Myochit* Party as well as its political allies in the *Sangha* and in other Burmese political parties—as Galon-Fascism.³⁶

³² On U Saw's use of tradition, symbols, religion, and so on, see Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, 5–7; Kyaw Min, *The Burma We Love*, 28–36; on U Saw's alliance with Burmese landlords, see *BHRP*, Vol. 6: *August–September 1939* (1939), 1–26, in Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, 'Legislation: Burma Land Purchase Act, 1941' (1942). IOR/M/3/995; Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, 14–18, 31–42.

³³ Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 1–2.

³⁴ When U Saw became prime minister of Burma in September 1940, he stated as much in his statement of policy and programme before the Burmese House: 'this Government shall consider it to be its sacred duty to play the role of the *Sasana Dayaka* ... it is necessary to usher in a religious revival to strengthen and purify the foundations of the social order.' *BHRP*, Vol. 8: *August–September 1940* (1940), 1351. IOR/V/9/4098-4099.

³⁵ U Saw's usage of 'Galon' was borrowed from Saya San's usage in the 1931–32 rebellion. Government of Burma, Burma Intelligence, 'Burmese Political Activity, and Political Parties and Associations 24 Apr 1937–31 Aug 1938' (1938), 2. IOR/M/5/48. Regarding the global fascist movement and the 'rainbow of shirts', see Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, 18, 36–40.

³⁶ Ratana Sein, 'The Way of the World', *New Burma*, 5 July 1939.

Far from misleadingly applying a European ideology to a Burmese phenomenon, Galon-Fascism was both a self-conscious appellation and a description ascribed to the party by its contemporary indigenous leftist rivals. While some scholars continue to reject the idea that fascism could exist outside of the European context, world-historical scholars have recently provided a framework for understanding non-European versions of fascism. Instead of looking for a ‘fascist minimum’ (a litmus test of specific policies and actions for defining parties as fascist), Benjamin Zachariah, a scholar of Indian fascism, has suggested looking for a ‘fascist repertoire’ that could involve a variety of contexts and origins outside of Europe. This fascist repertoire, built on critiques of Liberalism and on recognition of the political utilities of ultranationalist ideology, emerged for unscrupulous political operators in the colonial world in the same ways as it did for those in Europe. Federico Finchelstein, in suggesting a transnational definition of fascism, wrote of Zachariah’s case: ‘Zachariah cogently argues for the need to rethink fascist transnational connections as processes of convergent evolution and mutual recognition, rather than as top-down “diffusionist” Eurocentric frameworks.’³⁷ U Saw built his platform in part from his personal study of Nazi ideology, but primarily it represented indigenous Burmese analogues of European fascist ideas. Put another way, Galon-Fascism weaponized Burmese nationalism, culture, and historical memory; its techniques were sometimes borrowed from European fascism but its content was rooted in the Burmese situation.

To augment *Myochit’s* political wing, U Saw used his controlling presence at *Thuriya*, which was by far the most popular newspaper among the Burmese, to produce sensationalist articles about all manner of affronts to the Myanmar race and the Buddhist religion.³⁸ He used mass racial violence as a tactic in his rise to power. The anti-Muslim riots of 1938 were the culmination of U Saw’s campaign to whip up support for *Myochit’s* brand of Burmese ultranationalism by fixating on an Indian-Muslim racial other.

³⁷ Zachariah, ‘A Voluntary Gleichschaltung?’; Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, 55. For an example of a strict definition of fascism as a solely European phenomenon, see Sternhell et al., *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*.

³⁸ The next sections will abound with examples, but the key one would probably be the article entitled ‘Town Meeting Needed to Protect *Sasana*’ on 23 July 1938 that transformed a relatively obscure book critiquing Buddhism by a Burmese Muslim into the *raison d’être* for the 1938 anti-Muslim riots. *Thuriya* [Burmese], 23 July 1938.

The making of an Indian-Muslim race

All foreigners in Burma had accumulated some level of resentment during the rise of Burmese nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. The Europeans, however, were off limits. Any assault against an Englishman was punished by many orders of magnitude out of proportion, usually on the level of collectively fining or imprisoning entire villages. In addition, most Europeans did their best to interact as little as they could with the Burmese, preferring to rule from the offices of the secretariat and spend their free time in their whites-only clubs. While the Burmese almost certainly harboured violent resentment against them, the Europeans were safe as long as their hands held tightly onto the reigns of the coercive power.³⁹ The Chinese, the next most populous diasporic population after the Indians, held almost no capital or political power, and numbered far too few to be a viable scapegoat for the nationalists. Even the Karens, a minority despised for supposedly being ‘patsies’ of the British, were nevertheless indigenous and remained majority Buddhist. Therefore, they could not convincingly be portrayed as outsiders.⁴⁰

The Indian population was the scapegoat of choice for the Burmese nationalists. The British empire’s Indian Ocean labour network had ensured that Indians entered Burma in huge numbers, with about 1 million settling permanently by 1931.⁴¹ As inquiry commissions found at the time and scholars have argued since, Burmese concerns about Indians driving them out of the labour market or threatening to numerically overwhelm the Burmese (whose numbers were closer to 13 million in 1930) were almost entirely overblown.⁴² But the perception of

³⁹ U Saw himself described these authoritarian practices during the Saya San Rebellion in *The Burmese Situation: A Letter to the Right Hon’ble William Wedgwood Benn, M.P., Secretary of State for India from U Saw, M.L.C. for Tharrawaddy South, Burma* (Rangoon: The Burma Guardian Press, 1931), 6, in Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *The Burma Rebellion, General File* (1934). IOR/L/PJ/6/2020; For a quasi-autobiographical account, see George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934).

⁴⁰ For a full discussion of the dynamics between the majority Myanmar and the various indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic minorities in colonial Burma, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 27–90.

⁴¹ Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 104, 114–122.

⁴² H. R. Searle, *Reports and Notes on Indian Immigration into Burma* (Rangoon: Reforms Department, 1935). Mss Eur E252/38; James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1941). IOR/V/27/820/20; Brown, *Burma’s Economy*, 19–41.

Indians as colonizers in Burma was not entirely a nationalist fantasy. The problem was that Burmese nationalists, and the scholars who followed, neglected to differentiate between the classes of Indians in Burma. The members of the Indian working class, the majority by far, were migrants merely making a living for themselves and for their families; their presence alone did not necessarily cause disruption in the Burmese economy.

It was the Indian capitalists who were responsible for the issues blamed on the migrants as a whole. The Chettiar moneylenders of Madras, while their interest rates were fairer than many scholars have given them credit for, still ended up gaining ownership of over 25 per cent of cultivatable land in Burma by 1940. They had gained all this land, albeit unintentionally, primarily due to mass foreclosures from indebted Burmese smallholders during the height of the Great Depression, transforming an agricultural petit-bourgeoisie into a tenant proletariat overnight. Indians who had settled permanently, about 1 million by 1930, also dominated the administrative and industrial sectors in Burma. The Indian Civil Service (and later, the Burma Civil Service), the dockyards, the factories, the mills, the plants, and the oilfields were all primarily staffed by Indians (often with percentages as high as 80 per cent).⁴³ But again, the racialized staffing policies were crafted by the owners of these industries. Utilizing the Indian Ocean labour network guaranteed a constant replenishment of desperate workers from India willing to take low wages for long hours of work.⁴⁴

With the proper regulations, these problems could have been solved. Basic labour protections and a minimum wage would have disincentivized the importation of workers from India and would therefore have solved the glut in the Burmese labour market. Indian nationalists, Indian labour activists, and even British officials on both sides of the Bay of Bengal had been calling for those precise regulations for decades.⁴⁵ In the case of the agricultural crisis, land-alienation acts and tax cuts could have poured liquidity into the agricultural small-holding class, just as had been the case in Punjab and other

⁴³ Brown, *Burma's Economy*, 19–41.

⁴⁴ Searle, *Reports and Notes on Indian Immigration*, 14.

⁴⁵ Government of Burma, *Report of the Burma Land and Agriculture (U Pu) Committee 1937–39. Part II: Land Alienation* (Rangoon, Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 43–45. IOR/V/26/312/4; Sir Herbert Thirkell White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* (London: E. Arnold, 1913), 296–297; Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 101–141.

provinces of India suffering from comparable problems.⁴⁶ The problem in Burma was the power of the Indian capitalists in Burma to affect policy along with the British ruling class.⁴⁷

None of this explains why Islam in particular came to be associated with this scapegoat identity. What motivation did Burmese nationalists have for associating the Islamic religion with the concept of the Indian ‘colonizer’? The settled Indian migrants were almost evenly split between Hindu and Muslim (565,000 Hindus versus 453,000 Muslims in 1931), so Burma was not ‘under threat’ of Islamicization any more than Hinduization.⁴⁸ In addition, modern Islamophobia appeared as a mainstream element of Burmese nationalism suddenly in the mid-1930s without political movements significantly advocating for it beforehand. While anti-Muslim prejudice had existed in precolonial Burma and certainly during the earlier colonial period, I argue that the popularization of Islamophobia in Burma was almost solely the product of U Saw’s Galon-Fascist movement.⁴⁹ I have narrowed down their political targeting of Muslims to three primary reasons.

The ‘Marriage Problem’

The first reason has been extensively discussed by scholars due to its prominence in the political landscape of colonial Burma. The ‘Marriage Problem’, as it was known to the colonial state at the time, marked the crossover between ideas of gender and ideas of race in the construction of the Myanmar-Buddhist ethno-religious national identity.⁵⁰ This so-called ‘Marriage Problem’ was the perceived increase

⁴⁶ Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 4–5; Brown, *Burma’s Economy*, 19–41.

⁴⁷ I have argued that Indian capitalists were ‘co-colonial’ in practice in 1930s Burma, using European racial hierarchies and colonialist language to maintain a relationship of economic and administrative domination in Burma. See Matthew J. Bowser, ‘Partners in Empire? Co-Colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2020), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03086534.2020.1783113> (accessed 28 September 2020).

⁴⁸ Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, 120.

⁴⁹ The definitive work on this subject is Moshe Yegar’s *The Muslims of Burma*. He agrees that precolonial and early colonial anti-Muslim prejudice in Burma was relatively unorganized and localized before the late 1930s. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, 25–28.

⁵⁰ See Chie Ikeya’s excellent work on this topic: *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 1–13. For the following

in marriages between Burmese women and ‘foreign’ (non-Burmese, non-Buddhist) men. In reality, there was not a significant surge in ‘mixed’ marriages in the interwar, but rather a growing *stigmatization* of them.⁵¹ Millions of young, often unmarried men from eastern India came to Burma in the first four decades of the twentieth century, over a million of whom had settled permanently or semi-permanently in Burma. While the British empire’s labour machine also brought men from other parts of the world, especially China, the focus of Burmese political groups was on Indian men due to their overwhelming majority in the immigrant population. Burmese women who married Indian men were viewed as ‘marrying down’. They did not even get the honorific for a married woman, ‘*gadaw*’, but rather were simply called *kala ma*, ‘*kala* female’.⁵²

The *kala ma* represented an existential threat to Burmese culture and ‘traditional’ Burmese gender roles. For conservative groups such as *pongyi* associations and the *Wunthanu Konmariyi Athin* (Patriotic Women’s Association), women served as the carriers of civilization in their roles as mothers and housewives. In ‘selling out’ by wearing foreign fashions and marrying foreign men, *kala ma* were also selling out the Burmese race, culture, and religion to colonialism and Westernization.⁵³ These ideas also found their way into the nationalist press, best encapsulated in the following passage from the 1938 article ‘Burmese Women Who Took Indians’ in the magazine *10,000,000*:

You Burmese women who fail to safeguard your own race, after you have married an Indian, your daughter whom you have begotten by such a tie takes an Indian as her husband. As for your son, he becomes a half-caste and tries to get a pure Burmese woman. Not only you but your future generation also is those who are responsible for the ruination of the race.⁵⁴

discussion, see also Tharaphi Than, ‘Nationalism, Religion, and Violence: Old and New Wunthanu Movements in Myanmar’, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13(4) (2015): 12–24.

⁵¹ The British census report of Burma in 1931 shows that mixed marriages rose in a predictable manner commensurate with the rate of increase in the Indian immigrant population. A seemingly precipitous increase in Burmese-Indian children (*Zerbadees*) is attributed to improvement in recording this category between 1921 and 1931. Government of India, *Census of India (Vol XI: Burma): Part I, Report* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1933), 211, 294–297. IOR/V/15/146.

⁵² Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, 133–136.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ ‘Burmese Women Who Took Indians’, *10,000,000*, 27 November 1938. Also quoted in Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, 135.

Therefore, the destruction of the Burmese race and the anticolonial struggle was laid at Burmese women's feet, defining patriotic masculinity as being anti-foreign politically and patriotic femininity as being anti-foreign sexually and domestically.⁵⁵ Of course, these gender politics were hotly debated and, originally, these were only the views of conservative women's groups and more conservative factions among the *pongyis*. A number of strong feminist movements existed contemporaneously in Burma and their primary goal—after winning women's right to vote in 1922—was to be allowed to hold elected office. During the 'Ladies of Burma' deputation to the Indian Statutory Commission, the lawyer Miss Coomee Dantra pointed out that women in Burma 'have no caste system, no *purdah*, we are not illiterate ... there are no personal disabilities attached to women in Burma except this one'.⁵⁶ As part of the international feminist movement, these women fought against restrictive ideas such as the conservative interpretations of masculinity and femininity put forth by groups such as the *Winthanu Konmaryi Athin*.

However, as in the politics of race, the drive for unity in the anticolonial nationalist cause pushed the politics of gender to the right. Nationalist newspapers across the political spectrum from U Saw's *Thuriya* to the leftist *New Burma* all pushed the 'Marriage Problem' as a serious issue.⁵⁷ The 'Marriage Problem' became a central issue for the Galon-Fascist movement in particular because it hoped to gain support from its supposed protection of Buddhist women from *kala* men. Framed in terms of Wolfe's theory of racialization, the Galon-Fascist movement depicted *kala* men as rapacious Muslim invaders in order to fulfil two key goals of domination and control. First, by depicting the *kala* as a viral infection—claiming that Indian Muslims were coming to steal Burmese-Buddhist women, convert them to Islam, and ultimately to replace Burmese Buddhists with Indian-Muslim children—the movement could gain support as the vanguard of driving out this 'infection' of Burmese society.⁵⁸ And, second, by arguing for the need to protect Burmese-Buddhist women from the *kala*, the Galon-Fascists could justify

⁵⁵ See Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Evidence* (1929), Tenth Meeting, 3. IOR/Q/13/1/33, Bur-0-10; Great Britain, Burma Round Table Conference, *Proceedings of the Committee of the Whole Conference* (London: 1932), 65–68, 81. IOR/V/26/261/45.

⁵⁶ Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Evidence* (1929), Tenth Meeting, 3. IOR/Q/13/1/33, Bur-0-10.

⁵⁷ *Thuriya* [Burmese], 16 July 1938; *New Burma*, 2 August 1935.

⁵⁸ These claims are the subject of the next section. This article opened with an example of this rhetoric: U Paduma, 'Bama Thway'.

establishing state control over Buddhist women's sexual choice and to govern their marriages, thus establishing themselves as the protectors of *sasana*, champions of traditional Burmese-Buddhist culture, and pleasing conservative groups such as *Winthanu Konmariyathin* and *pongyi* associations. Indeed, in 1937, a bill was proposed to protect the 'Buddhist rights' of women in mixed-religion marriages in the Burma House of Representatives, the Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Secession Bill, and the Galon-Fascists made it one of their chief political goals. The bill overtly required that Buddhist law govern all mixed-religion marriages and that Buddhist wives could not be converted to the religion of their husbands. The bill was ultimately passed in 1939, receiving support even from the leftists. The 'Marriage Problem' had been so effectively shaped as an issue of nationalist import that not supporting it would risk political suicide.⁵⁹

The *kala* in this 'Marriage Problem'—the racial other that posed such a threat to Buddhist Burma—was not only implicitly an Indian, but also took on a nuance of Islamophobia. So, to return to the question at hand: why Islam? Taking Burmese nationalists at their word, the problem was specific to the problem of Buddhist versus Muslim law. Customary Buddhist law in Burma, *dhammasat*, established marriages in which women were equal to men and assets were divided evenly upon divorce, including joint custody over children. According to the nationalists' stereotyped perception of *shari'ah*, they believed that Islamic law forbade marriage to *kafir*, non-Muslims, and mandated *pardah*: female subordination to men and their seclusion from public by having separate rooms and dressing in burqas.⁶⁰ The nationalist press and politicians endorsed the narrative of transforming free Buddhist women into slaves of Muslim men. In the 1936 article 'Muslim Women' in *New*

⁵⁹ Government of Burma, *The Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Secession Bill 1939* (1939). NAM 1/15(B) 792 1939 1E-5 18 36. On the bill being brought forward, see *BHRP*, Vol. 2: *August 1937* (1937), 378–382, 474–480. IOR/V/9/4088. On *Myochit* support, leftist support, and the bill's passage, see *BHRP*, Vol. 5: *February–April 1939*, 616, 601–620, 1032–1075, 1553–1606, 1721–1725, 1740–1747. IOR/V/9/4091-4094. The centrality of the 'Marriage Problem' to U Saw's programme is demonstrated again in 1941 when he made it an uncompromising plank of his Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement, which was a major point of contention between the British governor of Burma and viceroy of India. 'Telegram from Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma' (12 December 1941) in Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Immigration: Indian Immigration into Burma* (13 February 1941–21 November 1944). IOR/M/3/1108.

⁶⁰ *BHRP*, Vol. 2: *August 1937*, 601–620.

Burma, the author, U Ka, argued that Muslim women must partake in the 'custom of hiding women at home' and spend all their days at home waiting for the orders of their husbands, while 'young Buddhist women graduate with bachelor and master degrees. They become administrators, doctors, teachers, members of councils, and municipal representatives'.⁶¹ Importantly, Burmese women who converted to Islam to marry Muslim men did not even practise *purdah* on average, but this fact did not stop these accusations.⁶²

The 'problem' of Burmese Muslims

Of course, the Galon-Fascists were also opposed to Hindu/Jain/Sikh-Buddhist marriages, European-Burmese marriages, Chinese-Burmese marriages, and other 'miscegenation'. The second reason that Muslims in particular were targeted is fundamentally tied to the first and provides a reason why Muslims were so over-represented in the marriage debates: the existence of a significant Burmese Muslim population. The offspring of unions between Indian-Muslim men and Burmese-Buddhist women were called '*Żerbadees*' in Burma.⁶³ To Burmese nationalists and *pongyis*, *Żerbadees* represented the literal embodiment of the replacement of Buddhism with Islam; Burmese political rhetoric in the 1930s obsessed over the increase in the number of *Żerbadees* between the censuses of 1921 and 1931 from 94,316 to 122,705.⁶⁴ Indeed, there was no comparable Burmese Hindu population. The conclusion reached by the colonial state was that Indian Hindu men must have married Burmese-Buddhist women less often due to concerns such as marrying within caste. This explanation seems unlikely considering that Indian Hindus outnumbered Indian Muslims by more than 100,000 and that unmarried men came in almost

⁶¹ U Ka, 'Muslim Women', *New Burma*, 1936, 49–52. Quoted in Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, 139.

⁶² *Burma Evidence* (1929), Tenth Meeting, 9.

⁶³ According to J. A. Berlie, the Burmese word *jer bha di* originates from the Persian name 'Zavier'. J. A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2008), 7.

⁶⁴ See, for example, U Thein Maung, *The Immigration Problem of Burma* (Rangoon: New Burma Press, 1939), 19–24; *New Burma*, 2 August 1935; *Thuriya* [Burmese], 25 July 1938; *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 25 July 1938; *BHRP, Vol. 4: August–September 1938*, 112, 122–272. For the statistics, see Government of India, *Census of India*, 211, 294–297.

identical proportions for both religions.⁶⁵ On the contrary, Hindu men not requiring their wives and children to convert made Hindu-Buddhist marriages almost invisible to the colonial census, and therefore to Burmese nationalists and *pongyis*. The census's perception of a huge increase in *Zerbadees* was also flawed because census questions attentive to race improved between 1921 and 1931.⁶⁶

But, in examining the Galon-Fascist movement through the lens of Wolfe's theory of racialization, there were two clear political motivations to focus on *Zerbadees* and Burmese Muslims. First, the growth of the *Zerbadee* population provided a way to present the 'Marriage Problem' as a genocidal conspiracy perpetrated by the *kala*: Indian-Muslim men were marrying and converting Burmese-Buddhist women to produce Muslim offspring and gradually replace the Buddhist Burmese with Muslim *kala*. In July 1938, *Thuriya* and *New Light of Burma* published articles warning that Indian Muslims were marrying Burmese-Buddhist women for these sinister genocidal purposes. In the *New Light of Burma* piece, a Buddhist *sayadaw* named U Paduma argued that Indian-Muslim men were 'seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives ... in order to create such communities as Dobama Muslim [We Burmese Muslim]'.⁶⁷ This rhetoric was rooted in previous Indophobic tropes in Burmese nationalist circles that had been borrowed from British imperial race pseudoscience about Indian Muslims, especially Bengalis, as both 'effeminate' and sexually aggressive. Even the left-leaning *New Burma* published an article in August 1935 which argued that: 'Muslim

⁶⁵ The offspring of these unions were labelled 'Indian Buddhists' by the colonial state and their numbers increased from only 7,155 in 1921 to 12,600 in 1931—a far lower number and percentage of increase than those for Burmese Muslims. In addition, virtually all Hindus registered in Burma were Indian. Government of India, *Census of India*, 211, 294–297; comparisons between Hindu and Muslim unmarried male immigrants show them to be essentially identical: see Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, 138. The lack of Burmese Hindus is also noted by the Indian Statutory Commission in *Burma Evidence* (1929), Eighth Meeting, A-9. IOR/Q/13/1/33, Bur-0-8.

⁶⁶ '*Zerbadees*' were often reported simply as Indians before 1931. In fact, Lord Burnham revealed during the deputation of the Burma Muslim community just how abysmal the classification of the *Zerbadees* was, in that, when a census official asked a person of Indian descent what his name was, 'if he says Abdulla he will be classed under the category of Indians but if he gives his name as Maung Gye he is put in under Zerbadis'. Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Evidence* (1929), Seventh Meeting, 48. IOR/Q/13/1/33, Bur-0-7. This process was finally corrected with more specific questions in the census of 1931: Government of India, *Census of India*, 296–297.

⁶⁷ U Paduma, 'Bama Thway'; *Thuriya* [Burmese], 25 July 1938.

men are voracious Is it any wonder that the Zerbadis are increasing so fast?⁶⁸ The Galon-Fascist movement fed on and propagated this rhetoric in order to depict itself as the protector of the Myanmar-Buddhist race and, by implication, Burmese women who were expected to carry it on, from *kala* invasion. In so doing, it hoped to court the support of the *Sangha* and the larger Burmese nationalist movement.⁶⁹

Second, depicting all Burmese Muslims as *kala* allowed the Galon-Fascist movement to court the Rakhine nationalists that dominated the western region of Arakan. The Akyab district of Arakan, which included most of the populated lowlands of the region, was the only district in Burma where the Muslim population was at a high enough percentage (38 per cent) to truly challenge the Buddhists in political representation. Contrary to the Rakhine nationalists' perception, this significant Muslim population was not merely due to Indian immigration. The artificial colonial borders imposed by the British on Burma from 1824 onward obscured the fact that the western district of Arakan was an independent kingdom until it was conquered by the Konbaung Burmese kingdom in 1784. Arakan's culture and population were far closer to India than to Burma for most of history, and its borders often included neighbouring Bengali regions, especially Chittagong. The 1931 British census of the capital district of Akyab (present-day Sittwe) recorded 186,327 Chittagonians and 210,990 Indians in total—more than any other single district except for Rangoon, at 212,929. Compared to most of the Indian population of Burma—which skewed single, male, and 15–30 years of age being made up mostly of labour migrants—this Chittagonian population almost perfectly reflected the age, sex, and civil condition distribution of the indigenous population of the district, save for some discrepancy indicating that some were still new immigrants. These population numbers indicate that these Chittagonians had been settled in Arakan since at least the nineteenth century, unlike most other Indian groups in Burma. In addition, Akyab Chittagonians were 97 per cent Muslim.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *New Burma*, 2 August 1935. On British imperial racialization, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997).

⁶⁹ U Saw made these intentions explicit in his statement of programme and policy as prime minister in September 1940: *BHRP, Vol. 8: August–September 1940*, 1344–1351.

⁷⁰ Chittagonians in Akyab had a sex ratio of 56 male:44 female versus the Indian average of 67.7 male:32.3 female. These data were gathered from Government of India, *Census of India (Vol XI: Burma): Part II, Tables*. IOR/V/15/146.

Along with the Chittagonian Muslims, an indigenous Muslim community existed in the region—made up of a mix of descendants of Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Pathan settlers with Chittagonians—that called itself ‘Rohingya’ after the historical names of the region (Rohang, Rosango-Dhess, and Rekkhapura). This evidence runs contrary to the present-day Myanmar government’s insistence that the Rohingya were Chittagonian migrants who entered Arakan after British rule was established in 1824.⁷¹ The British census of 1931 recorded a group called the ‘Arakan Mohammedans’, which numbered 51,615. This group matched the description of the Rohingya because they were deeply incorporated into Rakhine communities but, as the census recorded: ‘They are recognized locally as a distinct race and they dress differently from the Arakanese [Rakhine] and Chittagonians.’ The census officials also wrote that all the censuses before 1931 had recorded most Arakan Mohammedans as Chittagonian because census-takers did not have another category to put them in; it is quite likely that the same happened in the 1931 census and that an uncertain number recorded as Chittagonian were actually Rohingya.⁷²

At 192,647, the Muslim population of Arakan made up about 43 per cent of the total Muslim population of Burma. As such, Rakhine nationalists were fixated on ensuring that Buddhist political representation in Arakan trumped Muslim representation. Therefore, it was in their interest not only to discriminate against Indians, but also to deny the indigeneity of the Rohingya and to identify them with *kala* invaders. If the voice of their representatives in the 1936 House of Representatives was any indication, Rakhine nationalists were obsessed with undermining Rohingya power and social position. U Tun Aung Gyaw (Akyab Town), U Aung Zan Wai (Akyab East), and U Saw Hla Nyo (Kyaukpyu North) in particular were some of the most outspoken members of the House and constantly demanded Burmanization of the private and public sectors. They made these demands in almost every single meeting of the House.⁷³ What they meant by Burmanization was the imposition of mandatory quotas for indigenous Burmese, including Rakhines, in all positions; in Arakan, this policy would naturally be at the expense of the Indians and the Rohingya, the latter of whom were

⁷¹ Mohammad Mohibullah Siddiquee, ed. *The Rohingyas of Arakan: History and Heritage* (Chittagong: Ali Publishing House, 2014), 14–17, 25–36.

⁷² *Census of Burma, Part 1: Report*, 230.

⁷³ *BHRP, Vol. 3: February 1938* (1938), 350–370, 877–913, 1100–1155; *BHRP, Vol. 4: August–September 1938* (1938), 112–161, 191–232.

classified as either Chittagonian or 'Arakan Mohammedan' by the British, neither of which was considered indigenous. U Saw Hla Nyo made his feelings clear on the inclusion of Muslims in political representation in the debate over the 'Marriage Problem' in March 1939 when he stated: 'It is left to us to save our Burmese Buddhist ladies, otherwise the hon'ble members of this House, who are the representatives of Burma ... [will] see these Muslim children in our midst.'⁷⁴ Another demand they consistently made was for Rakhine vernacular schools to be established to replace Anglo-vernacular schools, which Indian members complained would exclude Hindus, Muslims, and other groups who benefit from using English as a *lingua franca*. U Saw Hla Nyo argued, with frequent interruptions from U Saw in support of his comments: 'We are all Buddhists. We are not Christians, we are not Mohammedans ... Burma is a Buddhist country.'⁷⁵ The desire to erase Burmese Muslim identity loomed large in these comments.

It is important to note that average Rakhines did not share these hostile views toward the Rohingya with their elite nationalist representatives prior to the Second World War. Their villages had been mixed for hundreds of years; the Rohingya were neighbours, friends, and family.⁷⁶ However, as the Galon-Fascist political association of Indians, Islam, and colonialism intensified, these blurred communal lines came into far sharper focus in the early 1940s. This gradual racialization of the Rohingya as *kala* came to a head in the 1941 census, when the deputy commissioner of Akyab, a Rakhine nationalist named U Kyaw Khine, changed the classification of 'Arakan Mohammedans' to 'only those who bear Arakanese [Rakhine] names or wear Arakanese clothes or adopt Arakanese customs'. All Muslims in Arakan who did not fit these requirements were to be classified as 'Chittagonians'. The Rohingya held a mass meeting at Maracan's Mosque in Bumay village, just outside of Akyab, on 16 February to protest the change. In their resolutions, they noted their 'grave concern' at the reclassification of Muslims who 'have permanently settled in this District from time immemorial' as 'Chittagonian migrants' despite their 'definite and bona fide assertion to the contrary'. The resolutions were forwarded to the governor, the ministers, the superintendent of the census, the district commissioner

⁷⁴ BHRP, Vol. 5: February–April 1939 (1939), 615.

⁷⁵ BHRP, Vol. 1: February–March 1937 (1937), 397.

⁷⁶ U Kyaw Min writes of this camaraderie, in contrast to political rhetoric, existing as late as the 'Long March' in 1942. Kyaw Min, *The Burma We Love*, 4–6.

of Arakan, the deputy commissioner of Akyab, all House of Representatives members for Arakan, a variety of other individuals and organizations, and the press. Their pleas went entirely ignored, not only by the British state, but also by the press, with *New Burma* being the only newspaper to publish their resolutions (and, even then, in an unremarkable space between advertisements on the last page of the issue).⁷⁷ The reclassification remained in the British census of 1941.⁷⁸ This reclassification, and the Rohingya response published in *New Burma*, was direct evidence that Rakhine nationalists actively attempted to erase the indigeneity of the Rohingya. The war sowed even more doubt about the Rohingya identity as separate from Chittagonians, because ethnic cleansing between the Buddhists and the Muslims drove both the Indian and indigenous Muslim communities into northern Arakan.⁷⁹

The Rohingya, along with other Burmese Muslims including the *Zerbadees*, the Kaman, the Myedu, and the Pathi, consistently fought their racialized association with Indian migrants throughout the 1930s and 1940s. A memorandum 'on behalf of the Burma Muslim Community' to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1929 included the Burma Moslem Society of Rangoon, the Young Muslims' Union of Mandalay, and Rohingya elders as signees. Amidst the other memoranda taking part in the fierce debate over the separation of Burma from India, the Memorandum of the Burma Muslim Community stood out for simply calling for the British colonial government to recognize their community's indigeneity, to provide them with proper representation, and to provide safeguards for them as a minority community. The memorandum began with a telling insistence:

The Burma Muslim Community ... is not only an influential community but also one with historical connections with the past The whole country side bears testimony to this fact inasmuch as there are villages and other areas in various parts of Burma where exist people professing our religion and claiming descent from Muslim ancestors—immigrant traders, warriors and others who had settled in this, our homeland, centuries ago.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ 'Arakan Mohamedans Protest Against Census Definition: They Resent Classification as Chittagonians', *New Burma*, 28 February 1941.

⁷⁸ Government of Burma, *Census of Burma 1941, Provisional Tables* (1941). IOR/V/15/226.

⁷⁹ Michael D. Leigh, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma: Analysing the 1942 Colonial Disaster* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁸⁰ Maung Bah Oh, *The Memorandum of the Burma Muslim Community to the Royal Statutory Commission*, 1, in Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7, E-Bur-977.

The Burmese Muslims found themselves being racialized as *kala* by the Galon-Fascist movement and the Rakhine nationalists despite their indigeneity. They pointed out that the rising calls for ‘Burma for the Burmans’ appeared to mean ‘Burma for the Burman Buddhists’ and that Burmese people ‘professing the religion of Islam have begun to be thrown outside the pale comprised in the term “Burman”’.⁸¹ As such, they argued that the British government needed to recognize their community as a legitimate minority for their own safety. In the 1919 Government of India Act, the British had given other minorities such as the Indians and the Karens communal representation on Legislative Councils. By ignoring the Burmese Muslim communities as legitimate minorities, the British unintentionally amplified Galon-Fascist rhetoric that had racialized Burmese Muslims in a category together with Indian immigrants as *kala*.⁸² This reclassification of Burmese Muslims demonstrated the political utility of the *kala* racialization as Wolfe’s theory predicted; they came to be associated with Indians due to their Islamic religion so that political representation could be denied to them.

Indian Muslims and the British empire

The Burmese Muslims’ battle for communal representation in Burma did not occur in a vacuum; British officials, most of whom had served or would serve in ‘India proper’, were intimately familiar with the issue. The third reason that Muslims became the scapegoat for the Galon-Fascist movement was due to the larger political struggles of Muslims in India and in the rest of the British empire. In the 1930s, the British state in India was just beginning to understand the full damage that separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims in Indian provinces had done in Indian politics. With the struggle between Hindu and Muslim nationalists in India growing increasingly violent, British officials looked on Burmese Muslim claims for political representation with mistrust. During the Indian Statutory Commission’s deputation of the Muslim interests in Burma in 1929, Mohamed Auzam, president of the Muslim League of Burma, stated that, if the Burmese Muslims were going to get reserved seats, then all constituencies should have separate electorates for Muslims in general (Indian and Burmese). The chair,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Lord Burnham, was clearly opposed to the idea and, to undermine this proposal, he asked, ‘You will admit that the relationship between Hindus and Muhammedans in this province has been very cordial?’, to which Auzam replied ‘Yes’.⁸³ In getting this response, Lord Burnham implied that the government should not damage this positive relationship by politically separating the communities as it had done in India.⁸⁴

Since the 1857 Indian revolt, the British had taken care to cultivate their relationship with their Muslim subjects; in fact, by the interwar period, the British empire was demographically and geopolitically the world’s foremost Muslim power, with over half of the world’s Muslim population under its jurisdiction. The British funded, staffed, and protected the Indian Ocean network of steamship routes—routes that had maintained the precolonial connections of the Muslim world from Hong Kong to Cairo—not only to surveil, control, and prevent disease in mass movements such as the *hajj*, but also to facilitate these mass movements in a (futile) attempt to gain legitimacy as a Muslim power like the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals.⁸⁵ This, along with the British insistence of separate electorates and reserved seats for Muslims in India, led Hindu nationalists to perceive Muslims as collaborators with British colonialists.⁸⁶

In Burma, where Burmese fascists considered Indians to be colonialists and collaborators, Hindu nationalists had a vested interest in imparting

⁸³ *Burma Evidence* (1929), Seventh Meeting, 46.

⁸⁴ British concerns about communal representation in Burma are discussed in Government of the United Kingdom, *Indian Round Table Conference: Joint Select Committee; Papers Regarding Amendment of Police Powers, Paragraphs Dealing with Special Branches and Agents, 8 Dec 1932–29 Nov 1934* (1934). IOR/L/PO/6/85; when a Hindu-Muslim riot did break out in Burma in 1939, Sir John Clague, I.C.S., confided to Under Secretary of State, David Monteath: ‘The Hindu-Muslim riots are an example of the kind of trouble which an Indian community is apt to give its hosts.’ Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *Indians in Burma: Annual Reports of the Agent of the Government of India in Burma* (1943), 14. IOR/L/PJ/8/212.

⁸⁵ John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865–1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1–2. See also Eric Tagliacozzo, *Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Islam, Movement, and the Longue Duree* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸⁶ A good recent discussion of this appears in Chapters 6 and 7 of Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

their Islamophobic mentalities, especially as anti-Indian feeling escalated in the late 1930s. History has preserved tantalizingly little on the communications between right-wing Hindu nationalists and right-wing Burmese nationalists, but the colonial state was aware of them. Under Secretary of State for India and Burma, David Monteath, wrote in 1940 that ‘the Hindus have shown a propensity to claim that there is an affinity between Hindus and Buddhists and that Burman Buddhists should therefore rally to the aid of Hindus’.⁸⁷ Indeed, Hindu nationalists were successful in convincing Burmese fascists that they were brethren in their mutual struggle against Islam and its supposed attempts to divide communities. This argument appeared as early as 1929 with the Separation League accusing Indian Muslims of bringing ‘communalism with all its evils’ and it was repeated until U Saw was stating it as a well-known fact in 1941.⁸⁸

The kala race

All of these factors—the ‘Marriage Problem’, the ‘problem’ of Burmese Muslims, and the larger politics of the British empire—contributed to the creation of the Indian-Muslim race, the *kala*, in the 1930s. This *kala* was neither simply Indian nor simply Muslim, but was rather the union of the Indian race and the Islamic religion to contrast with the union of the Myanmar race and the Buddhist religion. The term *kala* took on this specific nuance so that its use invoked not just Indian Muslims, but also other Indians, Burmese Muslims, and all entities that could be construed to align with them (the *Kala* government of the British, for example). Therefore, Indians and Burmese Muslims came to be racialized as *kala*, meaning that the Burmese right recruited the Western

⁸⁷ David Taylor Monteath, ‘Minute Paper B2336/90’ (1940), 1, in Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Hindu-Muslim Riots in Rangoon 27 Jan 1940–27 Aug 1940* (1940). IOR/M/3/989; U Pu confirms this connection in a House of Representatives debate, saying: ‘I tried to separate the Burmese people from the Hindu community because some Hindu elders were trying to rope in the Burmese people.’ *BHRP*, Vol. 5: *February–April 1939* (1939), 991; see also Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 188.

⁸⁸ The Separation League, *Memorandum Submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission*, iv; U Saw, *Burma after Separation: Address by the Hon. U Saw, M.H.R. (Prime Minister of Burma) at a Meeting of the Study Committees of the Empire Parliamentary Association, Held at the House of Commons, Westminster, on 22nd October, 1941. The Rt. Hon. L.S. Amery, M.P. (Secretary of State for India and for Burma) in the Chair* (London: Empire Parliamentary Association, 1941), 4–5.

pseudoscience of race biology to transform their prejudices and political beliefs about these otherwise separate groups into inborn characteristics. As Patrick Wolfe has argued, all racializations performed the function of justifying and maintaining a relationship of domination. The specific ways in which a population has been racialized could provide traces into what function their racialization served.⁸⁹ The Galon-Fascist racialization of the *kala* had a number of functions.

U Saw and his *Myochit* Party promoted the racial ideology of the *kala* as the foreign invader, the colonizer, and the destroyer of the Burmese-Buddhist race and culture. This racialization performed the function of strengthening the idea of an essentialized Myanmar-Buddhist nationalism in virtually every matrix: the religious, the cultural, the gendered, and the material. By emphasizing the threat of Indian-Muslim invaders, the Galon-Fascists could position themselves as delivering a return to the imagined past of the precolonial Burmese kingdom by promising to protect the religion from the threat of Islam, to fund and strengthen the *Sangha*, and to unify *Sangha* and state. By lamenting the growth of *kala ma* who married *kala* men and produced *Zerbadee* children, the Galon-Fascists championed conservative, 'traditionalist' interpretations of Burmese gender and cultural norms that supposedly preserved a precolonial Burmese culture. And, by placing the blame for Burmese poverty, lack of social mobility, homelessness, unemployment, and emasculation solely upon *kala* and promising to remove them from Burma, the Galon-Fascists provided a seemingly easy outlet for the struggles of the Burmese working classes. The *kala* provided a singular scapegoat into which all of the complex and confusing realities of industrial society could be condensed. Their message spread best when it utilized space as a weapon, constantly using the press to invoke the image of invasion:

Kala at Pan Shop; Kala at bayagyaw shop; Kala at big hosiery stores; Kala at spiking the soles of shoes; Kala at the undervest factory; Kala at vendor of sand soap; Kala at vendor of toilette; Kala at lending money; Kala, Kala, every where Kala; Kala as durwans; Kala as judge of High Court; Kala as vendor of powder; Kala as doctors; Kala as jemadars; and Kala as jailors.⁹⁰

By using space in this way, the Burmese right intended that each sighting of an Indian or a Muslim would immediately invoke the ideas of the

⁸⁹ Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 9.

⁹⁰ Ng Thein Pe, 'Indo-Burma Conflict' in NAI, Department of Education, Health and Lands, Overseas Section, 92-1/38-L&O. Also quoted in Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 188.

replacement of the Burmese race, its culture, and its religion with that of the *kala*. But the success of this fascist ideology was not guaranteed. It was one of many competing ideologies in Burma in the 1930s and it faced fierce competition from other ideologies, especially socialism. The latter also promised to eliminate colonialism and capitalist exploitation, and it offered a more inclusive vision of nationalism that championed Burmese culture and religion while also celebrating the promise of ‘modern society’, portraying the automobile, medicine, the *kala ma*, and ethno-religious diversity as positive developments.⁹¹ In order to compete with this vision, U Saw and his allies made their gambit in the Islamophobic riots of 1938.

The riots of 1938

In March 1938, U Saw set about destroying the Ba Maw government by painting it to the Burmese as traitorous to the nationalist cause and to the British and Indians as incapable of maintaining law and order. He began working on his friendship with the powerful grassroots student organizations of Rangoon University and the Thakins. For their part, the Thakins viewed U Saw as an uneducated buffoon, but sought an alliance of convenience to make use of his resources, militia, and political position, and to take down what they viewed as a sycophantic constitutional government.⁹² 1938 was 1300 in the Burmese calendar and 13 was an auspicious number in traditional Burmese astrology; the Thakins took the opportunity to call for an ‘Auspicious Year Revolution’.⁹³ From January to April, Thakins initiated the largest oil strike in Burmese history at the Burma Oil fields of Yenangyaung. The Burmese oil workers ceremonially marched 516 kilometres (320 miles) south to the Shwedagon Pagoda, crossing most of Lower Burma in the process to galvanize the villages along the way.⁹⁴ Capitalizing on this

⁹¹ ‘Beginning of Socialism in Burma’, *New Burma*, 22 September 1937.

⁹² Anonymous, ‘Rangoon University Strike’, 6–7. During the Rangoon University student strike of 1936, the students make fun of U Saw when he comes to speak to them, fixating on his flimsy grasp of the English language. Whenever his name came up, the students would start chanting ‘KOM-MITE’ for his mispronunciation of ‘committee’.

⁹³ Smith, *Burma*, 54.

⁹⁴ Government of Burma, Burma Intelligence, *Notes on Thakins*.

ferment, during the monsoon season of 1938, U Saw pushed forward his personal project for his rise to power.

In July, *The Abode of a Nat* was published and copies were immediately sent to all the major nationalist presses of Rangoon as well as *pongyi* associations such as the Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas' Association headquartered at Shwedagon's *kyaungs*.⁹⁵ Although there is no hard evidence to suggest that *Myochit* was behind this sudden re-emergence and dissemination of this inflammatory text, U Saw certainly took quick advantage of its contents. Between 14 July and 26 July, U Saw's *Thuriya* launched an unprecedented press blitz against the Muslims in Burma. On 16 July, in anticipation of the furor over the book, *Thuriya* summoned the marriage and *Zerbadee* controversies, citing a fantastical conspiracy in Delhi to make Burma a Muslim country by sending Muslim men to marry Buddhist women and father Muslim children.⁹⁶ *The Abode of a Nat* hit the press on 19 July: *Thuriya* published a 'resume of objectionable passages' and called for 'urgent action to protect the *sasana*' from imminent danger, and the *New Light of Burma* called the book 'an insult to the Burmese nation as a whole'.⁹⁷ On 21 July, both newspapers included an announcement by *Sayadaw* U Paduma that the Rangoon *Sangha* was organizing a meeting at Shwedagon Pagoda to undertake 'strong measures' to censure Islam in Burma; in the same issue of *Thuriya*, an article called on all Burmese to denounce Islam as a 'false religion'. It argued that Muslims clearly wanted the destruction of Burmese Buddhism, since they have now attacked it even though they had already 'taken possession of the wealth of the Burmese people and also their daughters and sisters'.⁹⁸ Finally, on 23 July, *Thuriya*, the *New Light of Burma*, and *Progress* announced a mass meeting at Shwedagon Pagoda to take place on the 26th to undertake 'necessary action'. Starting on this day and continuing until the 26th, *Thuriya* published in large bold letters the headline: 'BUDDHISM HAS BEEN INSULTED. TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS'.⁹⁹

On 24 July, *pongyis* travelled throughout Rangoon distributing over 20,000 pamphlets calling on all true Buddhist patriots to attend the mass meeting. That night, they drove through the Kemmendine

⁹⁵ Government of Burma, *Final Report*, 2–7.

⁹⁶ *Thuriya* [Burmese], 16 July 1938.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 19 July 1938.

⁹⁸ *Thuriya* [Burmese], 21 July 1938; *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 21 July 1938.

⁹⁹ *New Light of Burma* [Burmese], 23 July 1938; *Progress*, 23 July 1938; *Thuriya* [Burmese], 23–26 July 1938.

neighbourhood announcing the meeting with megaphones. According to the official report of the Riot Inquiry Committee, the meeting at Shwedagon Pagoda was attended by no fewer than 10,000 people, of whom 1,500 were *pongyis*.¹⁰⁰ At the mass meeting were representatives of all the major nationalist presses of Rangoon, the heads of the *kyauangs* of Rangoon, and the Thakins; U Saw himself was conspicuously absent. From 13:00 to 15:45, 12 *sayadaws* made speeches that dwelled inordinately on the 'Marriage Problem', the idea of Muslims replacing Buddhists in Burma, and the call to boycott all Muslim businesses. The speeches 'developed in a crescendo of vituperation and abuse against Muslims in general'. The final speaker, U Kumara, president of the Rangoon Central Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas' Association, took advantage of the build-up of collective rage to call for a procession to the Sortee Bara Bazaar 'in order to show the real blood of the Burmese people who would not tolerate an insult to their race and religion'. Thousands of protesters marched down the pagoda hill and into the city shouting 'Burma for the Burmans' and 'Kala-kala, yaik-yaik [Assault the *kala*]'.¹⁰¹ By the time the procession had arrived at the Bazaar, its numbers had dwindled to about 1,000 of the most radical, about half of whom were *pongyis*. They immediately began to destroy the Bazaar's shops and to assault Indian shopkeepers. As the violence began, the police—who had followed the procession closely and many of whom, incidentally, were Indian—charged and violently dispersed the crowd in a melee that lasted several minutes, leading to the grievous injury of hundreds of Burmese protesters and *pongyis*. At this point, the protest escalated into a city-wide riot.¹⁰²

The police did their best to block the major roads and respond to reports of rioters over the course of the next couple of days, but reports of assaults on Indians by violent gangs throughout the city confounded the ability of the police to respond to all of them in a timely manner. Depending on how large or equipped a contingent of police was, the rioters often attacked the police themselves when they arrived, leading to the death of at least one Indian constable, Gurbat Singh, and the injury of many others. By the 27th and 28th, groups of Indians had begun counterattacks. Reports of atrocities pervaded these days of violence in Rangoon: murdered Indians, especially women, had 'fearful

¹⁰⁰ Government of Burma, *Final Report*, 12.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 12–15.

injuries' that indicated both torture and sexual assault, and, in one incident, Burmese rioters chased a large group of Muslims into Myenigon Mosque and set it on fire. The majority of deaths occurred in early September when the riots had led to armed clashes between organized groups of Burmese and Indians. Assisted by military police, the police managed to end the riots in Rangoon by 5 September only through a complete lockdown of the city.¹⁰³

But, in early September, the riots spread to the rest of Burma and lasted for months. The government's Riot Inquiry Committee correlated the outbreak of riots in each district with the arrival of the 26 July and 27 July issues of *Thuriya* that reported on the Shwedagon mass meeting and included grisly images of the police attacking protesters and *pongyis*. In the districts, the rioting took the form of large protests and marches in villages, augmented by gangs of protesters looting Indian shops, burning the homes of prominent Indian families, and assaulting groups of Indians in the streets. Here in particular the indiscriminate nature of the *kala* category was clearest: Indian Hindus and Burmese Muslims were 'mistaken' for Indian Muslims and were the targets of attacks on their homes, businesses, or persons. While the large gatherings and flagrant street fights gradually dissipated going into October and November, reports of assaults on Indians—usually cases of individual Indians being caught unaware in the middle of the night by gangs of Burmese—continued consistently until December.¹⁰⁴ At the final count, the Riot Inquiry Committee found that the countrywide riots of 1938 resulted in the deaths of 204 people, the serious injury of 875, and property damage in excess of 2 million British Indian rupees, which translates into roughly £10.33 million in 2019.¹⁰⁵ Like any state estimates, these were the minimum estimates based on what was officially reported to the Committee, which meant that the real numbers were likely far higher. For property damage, the Indian estimate was almost triple, at Rs 5 million (£27.26 million in 2019). For deaths and injuries, one must take into consideration the fear of

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 12–42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 45–222; Government of Burma, *Fresh Outbreak of Indo-Burmese Riots, September 1938* (1938). NAM 1/1(A) 5764 1938 815D(M) Pt. 5 325 7.

¹⁰⁵ Government of Burma, *Final Report*, 281–286. The British estimate of Rs 2,063,802 would have roughly come out to £154,785.15 in 1938. The Indian estimate of Rs 5,444,460 would have been £408,334.5.

reprisals for talking to the Committee. The intimidation of witnesses was almost certain.¹⁰⁶

The conclusions of the Riot Inquiry Committee on why the riots happened came tantalizingly close to the truth. However, the Committee lacked hindsight, a sufficient understanding of the complexity and gravity of Burmese politics, and impartiality, since its members were agents of the British state. Its *Interim Report*, drafted hastily to brief the governor and his staff on immediate action, found the agricultural crisis, excessive Indian immigration, the 'Marriage Problem', and the irresponsible press as the primary causes of anti-Muslim hatred. While the Committee was correct that these issues were behind the riots, they presented Indian immigration and 'mixed marriages' as real problems rather than the invention of Burmese nationalists for political advantage. Likewise, the Committee discerned that the press incited the riots simply to 'embarrass the Ministry' by making the Ba Maw government responsible for violently repressing Burmese protesters and *pongyis*.¹⁰⁷ They missed the fact that, for the riots' architect, U Saw (whose name went unmentioned in the report), Islamophobic sentiment and violence were ends in themselves in building an fascist base, as I have argued in this article.

U Saw was ultimately successful in his aims for the 1938 anti-Muslim riots. Dr Ba Maw's government lost virtually all its Burmese support in the legislature. It survived the vote of no confidence on 26 August 1938, slipping by only through the support of the British, Indians, Karens, and other reserved seats (66:61).¹⁰⁸ When the riots continued until December along with large civil disobedience campaigns, the British lost their confidence in the ministry's ability to maintain law and order. Ba Maw's ministry fell 70:37 in the pre-monsoon session of 1939, having retained the confidence only of his own government and the Karens (the Indian constituencies abstained).¹⁰⁹ Even more important than overthrowing Ba Maw's ministry, however, was the growing dominance of U Saw's brand of anti-*kala* fascism in Burma. The riots of 1938 were not just the end of a long build-up of anti-Indian and Islamophobic ideas in Burmese nationalist thinking, but the beginning of a far more

¹⁰⁶ 'Daily Situation Report on Communal Troubles in the Districts Dated the 5th September, 1938' in Government of Burma, *Fresh Outbreak of Indo-Burmese Riots*.

¹⁰⁷ Government of Burma, *Interim Report*, 11–48.

¹⁰⁸ *BHRP*, Vol. 4: August–September 1938, 331–333.

¹⁰⁹ *BHRP*, Vol. 5: February–April 1939, 425–427.

virulent scapegoating of the so-called *kala* population that would eventually catapult U Saw into power in September 1940.

Conclusion

In September 1941, the Burma Office requested that the governor of Burma, Dorman-Smith, and the secretary to the governor, C. F. B. Pearce, give their opinions of Prime Minister U Saw. In light of U Saw's upcoming visit to London to meet with the British government, Whitehall wanted to know the personality of the man the governor and his secretary had chosen to lead the wartime Burmese government instead of calling the long-needed general election, especially after the fall of two ministries: those of Dr Ba Maw and his successor, U Pu. They explained that a general election ran the risk of putting the anti-war socialists back into power and that U Saw was extremely useful to the British war effort. U Saw had taken full advantage of the Defence of Burma Rules, which had suspended habeas corpus for 'seditious anti-war activists'. Within a year, he had arrested virtually all of his political opposition, which suited the British well. Pearce wrote:

When I once twitted him after he became a Minister on his unforgivable action in stirring up communal trouble in the riots of 1938-39, [U Saw] replied with a smile that, if one was in opposition, anything that would embarrass Government was justifiable, but if his political opponents thought they could do the same to him, they would find themselves in jail. This prophecy seems to have been fulfilled!¹¹⁰

To the British administration, U Saw's strong 'law-and-order' policies and his friendliness to colonial officials greatly outweighed the danger of his fascist techniques. When former Governor Archibald Cochrane had asked U Saw to form a ministry in September 1940, he knew that the man had used fascist methods to overthrow both the Ba Maw and U Pu governments. In the end, what mattered most was that U Saw's brand of 'anti-colonial resistance' did not challenge the colonial state. *Myochi's* anti-Indian and Islamophobic violence was embarrassing for the British administration, to be sure. But what they feared even more

¹¹⁰ C. F. B. Pearce, 'Letter to J.C. Walton, Esq., CB, MC, Burma Office, London' (15 September 1941) in Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Visit of Premier U Saw to UK*.

was the truly anticolonial and socialist agitation of *Sinyetha* and the Thakins. It was *Myochit* that was putting those threats in prison without the unpleasant need for the British to do it themselves.¹¹¹

In order to achieve personal power and his vision of Burmese liberation, U Saw utilized a fascist, ‘Hitlerian’ method to rise to power and to undermine, outmanoeuvre, and eliminate his political rivals. He did so by appealing to nationalism itself, so often lauded as the force of liberation in colonial contexts, and by identifying a racialized enemy on which to place all the dysfunctions of the Burmese socio-economic context. Through a unique mix of ethnic, gendered, religious, and class-based factors, the *kala*—the colonizer, the invader, the exploiter, and the usurper—became the Indian Muslim and all those that could be associated with Indianness and Islam. The Galon-Fascist movement in Burma propagated this racial mythology and took advantage of the critical mass of violent popular unrest that had come with the desperation of the Depression and the exploitative model of the colonial agribusiness economy.

This situation was not unique to Burma. Failure of the capitalist socio-economic structure in the 1930s led to mass appeal for radical ideologies in every affected country in the world. Burma’s Western colonial ruler, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America managed to prevent either of these political ideologies from gaining hegemony only by committing to surgical changes to their economies. Colonial rule stripped Burma of that choice. With socialism or any other radical change posing too much of a threat to the entrenched forces of British, Indian, and Burmese capitalism, a paranoid colonial state sought to choose the option least threatening to its own survival. U Saw introduced fascism and Islamophobia into Burma; it was the British colonial regime that pushed these ideas into dominance in the late 1930s and early 1940s by helping him to suppress his leftist rivals along with other competing ideologies. The irony should not be lost that it did so while the larger empire claimed to be fighting to the death ‘on the beaches, on the landing grounds’ against fascism. These policy decisions also demonstrate that the Western imperialist preference for nationalist decolonizations over socialist or communist ones long predated the containment policies of the Cold War and that

¹¹¹ Government of the United Kingdom, Burma Office, *Subversive Activities in Burma: Arrest, Prosecution and Detention of Dr. Ba Maw and Others under Defence of Burma Rules; Interpretation and Exercise of Powers of Detention* (1942), 17. IOR/M/3/897.

it was rooted more in concerns over maintaining imperial power and capitalist domination than in encouraging liberal democracy.

The result has been lasting, though it was far from inevitable. In fact, after the war, Aung San, a fervent socialist and ‘Father of the Nation’, was by far the most popular politician in Burma. His political party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), had almost universal Burmese support. He was committed not only to the tearing-down of structures of political and economic domination, but also to the fundamental equality of all people; to the acceptance of other people, cultures, and religions; and to internationalist cooperation.¹¹² But, on 19 July 1947, U Saw sent a group of his dedicated followers to assassinate Aung San and the other members of the provisional government’s executive council at the British secretariat in Rangoon. U Saw was executed for the crime, but his goal had ultimately been achieved. Without Aung San’s cult of personality to deter rivals, U Nu, his replacement, succumbed to the demands of the nationalists in the AFPFL, such as restricting citizenship to an extremely limited category of people and excluding the Rohingya, Indians, Chinese, and all other groups not fitting the officially accepted definition of ‘indigenous races’.¹¹³

The Rohingya faced a steady increase in discrimination and violence in the years between 1948 and the present. This continued discrimination was contingent and based on historical events that developed since Burmese independence, but the *kala* racialization provided a ready-made scapegoat to be reactivated by any political group willing to exploit it. The military junta utilized it during the 1970s recession and again after rejecting democratic elections in the 1990s, bolstering the regime’s legitimacy by stirring fears about dangerous insurgent groups. When democratic elections were finally held in Burma in 2010, the return to democracy prompted Rakhine nationalists to try to drive the Rohingya out of Burma once again, reflecting colonial-era fears about being overruled in elections by Muslims. The anti-*kala* riots of 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2016 followed a familiar pattern as established in this article, both in terms of rhetoric and in practice. For each new persecution, the *kala* racialization developed by U Saw’s movement

¹¹² Aung San, ‘Presidential Address Delivered to the First Congress of the AFPFL’ (20 January 1946) in *Burma’s Challenge* (South Okkapa: Tataetta Sarpay, 1946), 62, 79, 82–84.

¹¹³ Constituent Assembly of Burma, *The Constitution of the Union of Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947).

proved to be an incredibly effective tool and has remained remarkably unchanged in its content. Understanding the original political motivations for the *kala* racialization is the first step in debunking racist beliefs about the Rohingya, and in debunking similar beliefs about other racialized minorities around the world.