

Singapore | 10 Dec 2012

Rohingya or Bengali? Revisiting the Politics of Labelling

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INTRODUCTION

The sectarian violence that erupted in Rakhine (Arakan) state in Myanmar in the middle of this year has prompted heated discussions over ethnicity, citizenship and belonging. Subsequently, in an effort to determine accurate numbers for the different communities living in Pauktaw Township in Rakhine state, a fortnight-long registration exercise was conducted by government authorities in November.

However, the *Irrawaddy Magazine* reported that the Rohingya in the township refused to register because the authorities erased the term “Rohingya” from completed forms and replaced it with “Bengali”. The Rohingya fear that, once registered as “Bengali”, they would be declared illegal immigrants by the authorities and summarily deported from the country.

The legitimacy of the Rohingya’s claim to being a bona fide ethnic group of Myanmar and hence to citizenship is steeped in controversy. They assert that they have been living in Rakhine state for thousands of years, even before the Burmans conquered the Arakan kingdom in 1748. This is disputed by the government and certain sectors of Myanmar society who declare that the Rohingya are, in fact, recent migrants and/or descendents of migrants from Chittagong in Bangladesh who crossed into Burma in the nineteenth century. As such, they are living and working illegally in Myanmar and hence have no legitimate claim to citizenship.

The Rohingya’s refusal to being labelled “Bengali” highlights their acute awareness of the politics of labelling and is a way of resisting state-imposed definitions and manipula-

tions of ethnicity, and hence criteria of belonging. Ethnicity, a highly contentious and politically charged issue in Myanmar, is used by the state either to include or exclude certain groups of people.

This is not just a matter of discourse.

Ethnic exclusion has been codified in law – citizenship laws exclude the Rohingya rendering them stateless – and institutionalised in the administration of the country – the census does not include the ethnic group “Rohingya” thereby erasing them from the official registers. Thus, the classification of ethnicity in a census or a registration exercise may be inaccurate or even arbitrary but it is not accidental. The creation and selection of some categories but not others and the criteria used to differentiate among ethnic classifications reveal the nature of ethnic relations in Myanmar society.

While we may believe that a rose by any other name is still a rose, in the politics of ethnicity and citizenship, the stakes are high for those who are labelled to their disadvantage or, indeed, not labelled at all. Exclusion from official existence means statelessness for the Rohingya with its attendant aggravations, discrimination and persecution. They are denied civil documentation, face movement restrictions, are required to ask for permission to marry risking imprisonment if they do not comply, and their children are not registered at birth.

As a result, scores of Rohingya men have taken to the seas in search of employment possibilities in other countries – Thailand, Malaysia and as far afield as Australia - risking their lives in dangerous sea crossings, rejection by immigration authorities and incarceration in detention centres. They have become the boat people of our time.

One may argue that the registration exercise being carried out is just that, a way of counting the number of people in a specific location and of obtaining information, such as age, ethnicity and religion, about them. However, this comes up against two stumbling blocks: first, ethnic classification is a flawed and inconsistent science and second, labels are not created or used in a social vacuum.

ETHNICITY INSTEAD OF RACE

First, let us consider how ethnic classification is carried out. How do we decide if someone is Rohingya, Karen or Kachin? Do we use ‘objective’ criteria and indicators, as colonial administrators did based on nineteenth century paradigms of race – size of nose and head, colour of skin, curliness of hair – and/or other less physical characteristics – language, religion, political allegiance, beliefs? Or do we use subjective self-identification provided by those who subscribe to a particular group identity?

The term ‘ethnicity’ is often used to refer to selected cultural, social and physical characteristics of groups of people. It is a broader term than ‘race’ which refers to subspecies and derives from paradigms of biology. In this form, ‘race’ has fallen out of usage and

has mostly been replaced by 'ethnicity'. However, 'race' has also been used to include the social and cultural characteristics of a population. For example, the British, who carried out extensive censuses in their colonies, based racial classification on physical and cultural markers. However, the indigenous diversity in their colonies combined with a myriad of immigrant groups – European settlers, African slaves and Indian and Chinese indentured labourers – confounded their neat categories of race. In 1932, the census commissioner in Malaya wrote:

It is in fact impossible to define the sense in which the term 'race' is used for census purposes; it is, in reality, a judicious blend, for practical ends, of the ideas of geographic and ethnographic origin, political allegiance, and racial and social affinities and sympathies.

The difficulty stemmed from the underlying assumptions of nineteenth-century European paradigms of race: that fixed and mutually exclusive boundaries could be set up around each race, and that racial identity was the only significant factor in determining political allegiance. This ran counter to how group identification actually operated in the colonies, particularly Burma.

Instead of mutually exclusive ethnic and geographical demarcations, polities in Burma were characterised by 'overlapping influences and interests, interpenetrating political systems and populations that did not 'belong' to one zone only'. Edmund Leach's seminal work on the Kachin in Burma, showed that ethnic categories can usefully be regarded as roles vis-a-vis other groups. He observed that people shift ethnic identities in accordance to the context. For example, if a Kachin person wanted to change his/her political role within the larger society, he/she would adopt, either temporarily or permanently, cultural attributes (such as dress, speech or religion) of another group without abandoning all the items of his/her Kachin cultural heritage. Thus, ethnic identification is fluid, flexible and relational.

Moreover, ethnic identity is often defined in contra-distinction to other groups. Ronald Renard notes that there are almost no references to the Karen before the nineteenth century, and that the term was originally a Mon-Burmese one referring to various 'forest peoples' often at war with each other. However, the Karen now define themselves as an ethnic group (and have done so at least since the nineteenth century), and are recognised as such by the Burmese state. It has also been argued that '[c]onflict generates ethnicity', in that community divisions, the struggle for control of natural resources, the interventions of foreign governments and de-contextualised and de-historicised media descriptions combine to ethnicise socio-political issues against the backdrop of war. Other scholars take this a step further; Yezid Sayigh argues that conflict and acts of armed struggle actually contributed to the formation of Palestinian identity.

CRITERIA ARE DIVERSE

The contention also is that geography may have had more influence over identity in pre-British Burma than language, religion or dress. The lowland wet-rice agriculturalists almost always lived in states, whereas upland swiddeners were beyond the reach of the states and were considered wild and uncivilized by these states. Leach contends that what sets people apart had less to do with their language and culture than their framework of political ideas and this was greatly influenced by the altitude they lived at and hence the hold that the state (and its political and cultural influences) had over them.

Finally, ethnic identification may be subscribed to despite diversity in language, religion and political affiliation. The different ethnic groups in Myanmar are composed of subgroups of people with diverse religious, cultural, geographical and even language backgrounds, subscribing to a myriad of political allegiances.

Given the great variation in intra-group characteristics, the maintenance of ethnic boundaries often depends on whether the physical and cultural markers attributed to an ethnic group are aligned with other ideological, social, and economic divisions in society. For instance, religion and language can be especially strong factors in maintaining divisions that reinforce cultural definitions of ethnicity.

In the case of the Rohingya, their religion (Islam) and darker skin (derogatory terms such as "Kalaa", meaning black, are used by the media and some sectors of society to describe them) are used to emphasise their difference in a predominantly Buddhist country. Nonetheless, even these indicators of difference are subject to change. For example, after the end of Dutch rule in Malacca in the early nineteenth century, the Dutch (Protestant) Eurasian community had converted to Catholicism and been absorbed into the larger Portuguese Eurasian population within a few generations.

The fact is that there are no universally agreed classifications of ethnicity. Ethnic identification is relational, contextual and evolving. Physical and cultural markers that are used to differentiate one population from another can be ambiguous and are subject to change across time. Moreover, characteristics that are considered major signifiers of ethnicity in one society may be considered minor ones in others. For example, in the United States, people are classified 'black' as long as they have some African ancestry, regardless of their physical traits. In Latin America, on the other hand, skin colour is viewed as a continuum and considered along with economic and cultural criteria in the social hierarchy.

Ethnic classifications are unable to condense all these nuances and complexities into a label. Instead, they are best understood as fixed and simplified descriptors which help us to make sense of a world that is often messy, dynamic and indefinable.

LABELS HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN

However, the problem with labels is that they tend to take on a life of their own. The act of ethnic categorisation inscribes labels in our social world, and is the process by which a certain view of the world comes to be socially established as 'reality'.

Individuals find themselves firmly fixed as members of a particular dimension and substance. Thus the census imposes order and order of a statistical nature. In time the creation of a new ordering of society by the census will act to reshape that which the census sought merely to describe.

This has a significant impact on the way we interact with the world and with one another. Labels have been shown to exert power over our actions. In the 1960s, two American researchers randomly allocated a cohort of primary school students to one of two classes. One class was labelled slow learners and the other fast learners. Their teachers were also informed of the label given to each class. By the end of the year, the students' test results showed that they had performed in accordance with the label applied to them, even though in the beginning of the year, they had all been randomly allocated to their classes irrespective of their test scores in the previous year.

Labels also assume politicised meanings and may compel us to act in accordance with them, particularly when they determine our eligibility for and access to resources. Research on deviance has shown that once labelled as criminals or mentally ill, people are placed in circumstances which make it more difficult for them to continue with 'normal' life and may provoke them to turn to 'abnormal' actions (such as when a prison record makes it difficult for people to get a legal job and they subsequently turn to illegal ones). It has also been observed that people who have been given an administrative label, such as 'refugee', change their behaviour and story to fit the 'case', in order to meet the administrative criteria for eligibility.

In short, labelling has the power to change how we view and respond to the world. Charles Keyes has noted that almost every theory of ethnic relations, from Marxist to pluralist, points to the importance of political and economic structures in the creation and maintenance of ethnic inequality and ideology. Dominant groups may "create" ethnic labels and ideologies to justify political power or economic exploitation and use ethnic criteria to restrict competition for privileged positions. Thus, the group that has the authority to create and impose ethnic categories and ideologies and to decide who fits into these categories (re)constructs reality.

While these ethnic labels may create and foster a sense of national or group identity, they may also, in the case of the Rohingya, legitimise exclusion and discrimination.

The census, a 'taxonomic system derived from the ethnographic surveys of the age of scientific exploration' has since evolved into an administrative tool to make legible the 'motley crowds' and to facilitate governmental control of the population. As the incident in Pauktaw Township shows, both the Myanmar authorities and the Rohingya are keenly aware of the power of labels.

However, the Rohingya have decided that, for now, it is better to remain unlabelled than unfavourably labelled, an understanding borne out of bitter experience and prudent intuition.

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