

# News from Asia

## Rohingya or Bengali? Revisiting the politics of labelling

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THE SECTARIAN VIOLENCE that erupted in Rakhine (Arakan) state in Myanmar has prompted heated discussions over ethnicity, citizenship and belonging. Subsequently, in an effort to determine accurate numbers, a fortnight-long registration exercise was conducted by government authorities in Pauktaw Township in Rakhine state in November 2012.

However, the Rohingya reportedly 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 Rohingya's claim to being a bona fide ethnic group of Myanmar, and hence their claim 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 assert that the Rohingya are, in fact, illegal migrants from Chittagong in Bangladesh who crossed into Burma in the nineteenth century.

The classification of ethnicity in the registration exercise may be inaccurate, but it is not accidental. The Rohingya's refusal to be labelled 'Bengali' highlights their acute awareness of the politics of labelling, and is a way of resisting state-imposed definitions and manipulations of ethnicity, and thus criteria of belonging.

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. The census does not include the ethnic group 'Rohingya', thereby erasing them from the official register. This effectively means statelessness for the Rohingya – with its attendant aggravations, discrimination and persecution. As a result, countless Rohingya men – and more recently, women and children – have taken to the seas in search of employment possibilities in other countries.

One may argue that the registration exercise is just that, a way of counting the number of people in a specific location. 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

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 such as language, religion, political allegiance, beliefs? Or do we use 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 broader than 'race', which refers to subspecies and derives from paradigms of biology. But 'race', which has fallen out of popular use and has mostly been replaced by 'ethnicity', also at one time included the social and cultural characteristics of a population. For example, the British, who carried out extensive censuses in their colonies, based racial classification on both physical and cultural markers. However, the indigenous diversity in their colonies combined with a myriad of immigrant groups confounded their neat categories of race.

The difficulty stemmed from the underlying assumptions of nineteenth-century European paradigms, 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 interpenetrating zones of power and influence, as argued by Edmund Leach. In addition, while studying the Kachin, he showed that ethnic categories can usefully be regarded as roles vis-à-vis other groups. Moreover, ethnic identity is often defined in contradistinction 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 are recognised as such by the Burmese state. It has also been argued that conflict generates ethnicity, in that community divisions, the struggle for control of natural resources, the interventions of foreign governments and de-contextualised media descriptions of war, combine to ethnicise socio-political issues. Yezid Sayigh takes this a step further, arguing that conflict and acts of armed struggle actually contributed to the formation of Palestinian identity.

### Criteria are diverse

Edmund Leach contended that what set 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. This gives credence to the observation that 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 Indian, are used by the media and some sectors of society to describe them) are employed as markers 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. 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. Thus, ethnic classifications 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

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'. In a census, individuals find themselves firmly fixed as members of a particular dimension and substance. In time the new ordering of society created by the census acts to reshape that which the census sought merely to describe. This phenomenon was demonstrated by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson who conducted an experiment in a school in 1960s America. They labelled one class slow learners and the other fast learners. The 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 they had all been randomly allocated to their classes at the beginning of the 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 that 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.

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 points to the importance of political and economic structures in the creation and maintenance of ethnic inequality and ideology. Dominant groups may 'create' or negate ethnic labels and ideologies to justify political power or economic exploitation. Thus, the group with the authority to create and impose ethnic categories, and to decide who fits into these categories, (re)constructs reality. As the incident in Pauktaw Township showed, 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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